



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Third Sunday in Lent, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

**(I Corinthians 3:18-23)** One of the many things that continually deepens my confidence in the Bible as God's Word is its ability to lay bare the complex workings of the human mind and heart. The psychological wisdom of the Word of God is inexhaustible. It is always more relevant and up to date than the newest paradigm for interpreting emotional disorders. I Corinthians 3 provides another example of St. Paul's insight into the complex and seemingly contradictory workings of our hearts.

The main problem at Corinth that Paul has been dealing with is boasting; specifically, boasting in men—the psychological disposition to put oneself forward as noteworthy to get the praise of men, or, failing that, to hop on the bandwagon of some noteworthy teacher to get some share of his praise vicariously. The ugliness of this disposition is threefold: 1) It is ruining the souls of those who have it because their souls were made to exult in God not men. It's not what we were made for. Boasting is prostitution of the human soul. 2) It is rending the fabric of community life into factions because of jealousy and strife (3:3). The first community act Adam performed after choosing to be self-reliant rather than God-reliant was to blame his wife Eve for the trouble they were in. And that is the way it has gone ever since. Pride destroys relationships. 3) It is robbing God of his glory, because the boast that is going to man should be going to God.

So Paul says again (and not for the last time) in verse 21, "So let no one boast of men." And he surrounds this command with reasons why such boasting should stop. He gives one type of reasons before the command, in verses 18-20. And he gives another kind of reasons after the command in verses 20-23. When you begin to grasp these two kinds of reasons for not boasting and then ask how they relate to each

other, you start to see how deep and up to date Paul's psychological wisdom is.

The first set of reasons goes like this: Don't boast in men because man's wisdom is folly and God traps people who take that path (v.19). The second set goes like this: Don't boast in men because all things are yours (v 21).

The first set of reasons assumes, the root of boasting seems to be self-exaltation ("I am wise in the eyes of the world!" v.18). But now what is the root of boasting assumed in this second set in verse 21?

What's the root of boasting that I am trying to sever in saying that? What am I assuming—what's Paul assuming—about the cause of boasting when I say, "Don't you know that all things are yours? You don't need to boast in man"?

I think Paul is assuming that the root of boasting here is a feeling of insecurity. In other words, Paul pictures the boasters as people who feel threatened or endangered by hostile or hopeless circumstances. They feel that some other teacher besides their own might shine brighter and call some of their distinctives into question. They feel that the world and unknown future events and death itself are menacing. And so they try to shore up their security and by touting their own wisdom or the wisdom of their leader.

And so Paul says that the problem is that they don't realize the massive—and I mean massive—security of belonging to Christ. Why stoop to boast in men when all things—absolutely all things—are yours? Which I think means (on the basis of Romans 8:28 and 32) all things work together as your servants for your good.

Now let's try to put these two sets together. How do they fit? Keep in mind, these aren't two kinds of people in this text. They are one kind of people driven by two contrary forces. How can the same people be addressed as though the root of boasting were both cocky self-sufficiency and fearful insecurity? I think the answer is found in the first line of verse 18: "Let no one deceive himself!"

Cocky, self-sufficient people, who boast in the wisdom of men, have deceived themselves. How? By denying their deeply rooted insecurity. One force is a built-in sense of insecurity, and vulnerability, and fear in a world beyond their control and threatening to their happiness. This comes with our creaturehood and is compounded by our sin. Every one of us has it. The other force driving these boasters is the feeling that we have got things under control—that man is the master of his fate, that human wisdom will suffice to solve our problems, that we have got it all together—or we know someone who does!

And the glue that holds these forces together in one heart? Self-deception. "Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise."

So when Paul wants to dismantle the soul-destroying, community-rending, God-dishonoring pride at Corinth he must do at least two things not just one thing. He must overcome the deception of human self-sufficiency, and he must solve the problem of human insecurity. That is what he is trying to do here in this text.

Let me put it another way. Human pride is rooted in two kinds of self-deception. One is the deception that I can handle my own problems. And the other is the deception that nobody can handle my problems.

Or to put it another way, there are two ways for the pride of man to dishonor Christ. One is to feel no need for him. And the other is to feel your need is so great he can't meet it. The one says, I don't need a crucified Christ to help me. The other says a crucified Christ can't help me. The one looks strong. The other looks weak. Both are demeaning to the grace of God.

Why? Because the grace of God means these two things: 1) we do need help, let's admit it. And 2) the help is there, let's accept it. Grace always means these two things: humility, we do need help; and encouragement, the help is there. Indictment and deliverance! That's the work of saving grace! Indictment: "If you think you are wise become a fool!" Deliverance: "All things are yours!"

Watch Paul the master-pastor and counselor bring his counsel to a great God-centered end.

To the self-sufficient he says, "Your wisdom is folly. Give it up. Become a fool. Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God." And then to the fearful and insecure and threatened he says, "Boasting in men is a cheap substitute for inheriting the universe. Don't you realize that I have made all things to serve your joy. Every teacher exists for your benefit. The whole world in all its secular corruption conspires in vain against your soul, for Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33). The sting of death is gone your last enemy unwittingly must serve your entrance into glory. Nothing present and nothing future can separate you from the love of God. Those whom he justified he will glorify. 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not with him freely give us all things?'"

And just to make sure that we don't make this grace a ground for boasting in ourselves, Paul adds in verse 23: "And you are Christ's." In other words, the only reason any of these benefits comes to us is because we are his. Christ has made all the universe to exist for our joy, because we exist for his. Therefore let him who boasts boast in the Lord! Not in man.

But Paul the master-pastor and counselor is not yet done dealing with the problem of pride. He takes us out of our deception of self-sufficiency. He lifts us up to see the universe as our inheritance. He takes us higher yet to see Christ as the source and goal of it all. But there is one more step. The chapter ends with the words, "And Christ is God's."

In the end Jesus Christ will hand over the kingdom to the Father and God the Father will be all in all (15:28). "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever and ever (Rom. 11:36).

Boast not, and fear not. Be humble and be brave.

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***