

1. Before preaching on this text read Acts 16:6-18:11. Paul was the first apostle to preach in Europe (Macedonia). In Philippi he had his joys and sorrows (16:14,19,23,33). Also in Thessalonica (17:4,5). Likewise in Berea (17:11-13). Also in Athens (17:18,32,34). 17:31 makes clear that he preached the Gospel. This turned the men of Athens off. Thence he went to Corinth. 18:1-11 tells of his joys and griefs. Here he truly becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles (18:6). And his despondency must have been so deep that the Lord appeared to him and comforted him (vss. 9-10).
2. When Paul became a Christian his former religion and great learning became mere dung to him. Php. 3:2-11. But he was not anti-intellectual. Our text does not condemn true learning. But it does condemn anything and everything which impedes the message of Christ crucified. Athens and Corinth were heathen cities. They admired philosophers and orators. Many of them were skilled in crooked and devious argumentation. In court cases argumentation often meant more than justice. Paul was fully aware of the fact that the Greeks considered Christ crucified foolishness. It is still that way today.
3. Vss. 1-6: Paul did not come to Corinth to impress the people with his great learning and clever argumentation. He came preaching. Some texts read vs. 1 as "testimony of God" while others have "mystery of God." The former means "what God testifies." The latter: "what God reveals." In either case it was not Paul's word but ONLY God's Word. On vs. 2 of our text cf. 1:23. Unconverted human nature considers the centrality of the crucified Christ in Christianity as an offense or foolishness. Furthermore, the Greeks did not even believe in capital punishment. They avoided mutilation of the body except in war. That's why *Paul* says "I DECIDED" because he knew that many hearers would object. Christ crucified was central to everything he said. Luther says here: "It is a wisdom which is powerful, secret, and hidden, and appears like nothing, because He was crucified and gave up all might and power of God head, hangs there like a miserable, forsaken man, and it seems as though God would not help Him; of Him alone I know to say and preach, says St. Paul." "Christ crucified" is the perfect summary of the Gospel. In vss. 1-2 Paul spoke of WHAT he preached. In vs. 3 he speaks of his CONDITION WHEN he preached. Paul suffered from illness but that did not stop his preaching. "Fear and trembling" occurs four times in Paul. I Cor. 2:3; II Cor. 7:15; Eph. 6:5; Php. 2:12. It is never fear of people but only fear of wanting to do what is right. It is a fear of living in sin and a fear of respect for Christ. Paul once said: "Our sufficiency is not of self but only of God." II Cor. 3:5. In vss. 4-6 Paul returns to WHAT he preaches. Mere human wisdom, though a gift of God, is contaminated by sin. Paul's preaching and teaching were divine wisdom brought by the Holy Spirit in human words. This kind of preaching and teaching bases peoples' faith on the power of God. Christian faith is grounded not in human wisdom but in the very power of God, the Gospel of Christ which is the power of God. Rom. 1:16. The word "wisdom" occurs seventeen times in I Cor. It is the Epistle of Wisdom, the wisdom of Christ crucified and the Gospel. It came only by direct revelation of the Spirit to the apostles. There are two classes of people: those who want mere sinful human wisdom and those who want the wisdom of the Gospel. Vs. 6 means: "we speak wisdom among those who accept it, the believers."
4. 3:5-6 hardly need explanation. Apollos and Paul (and all preachers) are only servants through whom people become believers.
5. 3:21-23: DO NOT BOAST IN PEOPLE, NOT EVEN IN ST. PAUL. To boast in people makes you spiritually poor. Everything is subject to Christ. And you are Christ's. Therefore, ALL THINGS ARE YOURS to serve you. Do not become a slave of anything or any man. All things are yours.

Theme: LET NO ONE BOAST IN PEOPLE

Introduction: Sinful human beings have a tendency to make gods of people. There are many examples of this in history. But it sometimes happens among Christians too. At the very beginning of this epistle Paul complains about the factions at Corinth. See 1:10-17. There was the Paul faction, then the Peter faction, then the Apollos faction. That's why Paul immediately speaks about the Gospel, 1:18-31. His final sentence: "Let him who boasts boast only in the Lord." Our text follows right after these words. And they occur again at 3:21: "Therefore, let no one boast in people".

I-Mere People Give Us the Wrong Message 2:1-5

A-They give us mere human wisdom. Paul was not opposed to anyone getting an education. He was not anti-intellectual. But he was opposed to those who came with a message which claimed would solve all the peoples' problems. Sinful human wisdom may help us for this life. But it cannot make us right with God and give us forgiveness of sins. It cannot give us eternal life. Mere human wisdom does not come by the revelation of God.

B-They give us a message which is devoid of power. Paul says in vss. 4-5 "My word and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom but in the showing forth of the Spirit and power so that your faith might not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." The most powerful message in the world is the preaching of Christ crucified for the sins of the world. That is offensive to Jews and foolishness to the Greeks but it is the very power and wisdom of God. It gives us the faith to rely on our Lord now and forever. It gives us the faith that after we die we shall rise again to life everlasting in heaven.

II-Mere People Want to be Our Masters 3:5-6

Sinful human nature is factious. Read vss. 1-4 of chapter 3. Paul says that owing to the party strife in Corinth people were proving that they were following their flesh. Some said "I am of the Paul party." Others said: "I am of the Apollos party." To this Paul says in our text: "Who then is Apollos?" "Who then is Paul?" He answers his question by saying: "They are only servants through whom you came to faith." Not even the apostles were masters. Surely pastors today are not masters. They are only Christ's servants. They are like Paul who described himself thus back at 2:3-4: "I came to you in weakness, in fear and in much trembling and my speech and preaching came not by persuasive words of wisdom but in the showing forth of the Spirit and power so that your faith might not be in human wisdom but in the power of God." Again and again Paul says: "Let no one be your master." And Jesus said: "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Mk. 9:35.

III-All Things Are Yours 3:21-23

In his most famous essay Dr. Luther said: "A Christian man is a totally free agent, subject to none and a Christian man is a dutiful servant, servant to all." The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of Christ and Him Crucified, give all things to me: Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, things present, things to come, all are mine. The point is that I am slave to none. I am a totally free agent. Only one is my Master and that is Jesus Christ. This is what we call the freedom of a Christian man. Do not boast in human beings. Do not be deceived by the philosophies of mere men. All things are yours in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion: Remember Jesus' words at Mt. 23:8-10: "Do not be called Rabbi, for One is your Teacher, Christ, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, Christ."