

"Avoiding Self-Deception" 1 Corinthians 3:18-23

Introduction

- There was once an emperor who loved clothes more than anything else. Unlike other emperors he cared nothing for his soldiers or dancing or the theater. The only thing that made him truly happy was a new suit of clothes. He had a different outfit for every hour of the day. And whenever anyone asked where the emperor was, the reply was almost always, 'he is in his dressing room.'
- Now, one day two swindlers arrived at the city where this emperor lived. Having heard how much the emperor loved clothes, they let it be known that they were weavers and that the cloth they wove was the finest in the world. Not only were the colors and patterns extraordinarily beautiful, but clothes made of this cloth had the remarkable quality of being invisible to anyone who was a fool or unfit of the office he or she held.
- Soon the emperor heard about this amazing cloth. 'It must be wonderful stuff indeed,' he thought. 'Why, if I had a suit made of it I should learn which of my ministers were unfit for their positions. I should know who is clever and who is not! I must order a suit of this wonderful cloth at once!' So he summoned the swindlers to his palace that very day, ordered them to begin work at once, and paid them with a big bag of gold.
- The two men set up their looms in a large room in the palace. They ordered the finest silk threads. They then pretended to settle down to work. But actually they only hid the thread and did nothing at all. After a time, they called for more silk and threads of silver and gold. Now they pretended to work even harder and were seen bending over their empty looms late into the night.
- 'I wonder how the cloth is coming,' the emperor thought one day. Then he remembered that the cloth would be invisible to anyone who was unfit for his office, and that made him rather uneasy. Of course, he was sure that he was fit to be emperor, but even so, it might be better to have someone else look at it first. 'I'll send my honest old minister to see the weavers,' the emperor decided. 'He is certainly not a fool, and he knows his office better than anyone in the land.'
- So the trusted old minister went to the room where the swindlers sat pretending to weave their wonderful cloth. 'Good heaven!' the minister thought when he entered and saw the empty looms. He opened his eyes wide and then even wider, but still he could see nothing.
- The swindlers begged him to come closer. Pointing at their looms, they asked him about the marvelous colors and the splendid pattern. The minister did not know what to say. 'Can it be that I am really a fool?' he thought. 'I never would have believed it! Or could I be unfit for my office? That would be dreadful! I must not let the emperor know this!'
- 'Have you nothing to say?' the swindlers asked him. 'Oh yes!' replied the minister. 'I am just so overwhelmed, you understand! This is the most wonderful cloth I have ever seen! What an exquisite pattern! What brilliant colors! I will tell the emperor at once!'

- 'We were sure you would like it,' the swindlers replied. Then they described the colors and the pattern to him. The old minister listened closely so he could be able to repeat everything to the emperor.
- Soon everyone in the city could talk of nothing but the marvelous cloth. At last, the emperor decided he must see it for himself. Surrounded by his courtiers, he went to the room where the two swindlers labored over their empty looms. 'Is it not exquisite?' said the minister who had been there before. 'What splendid colors! What an amazing pattern!' Then they pointed at the empty looms, certain that all the others could see the wonderful cloth.
- The emperor put on his spectacles. Then he stared and stared. 'How can this be?' he thought. 'I can see nothing! Oh, this is the worst thing that has ever happened to me! Can it be that I am a fool or unfit to be emperor? I must never breathe a word of this!'
- 'I must thank you,' he said out loud, turning to the weavers with a gracious smile. 'I have never seen such cloth in all my life!' The emperor's courtiers, who like him could see nothing, all agreed. The cloth, they said, was 'exquisite,' 'magnificent,' and 'surely the most beautiful in all the world.'¹
- Look at the words of 1 Corinthians 3:18. *Do not deceive yourselves*. I think, just like the emperor his minister and his courtiers, the Corinthian church was so concerned about looking foolish they swindled and deceived themselves. They cheated themselves. Paul says they're deceived. The Corinthian church is Hans Christian Anderson's *The Emperor's New Clothes* repackaged.
- You know what? I think it happens all the time nowadays. We deceive ourselves. I think we as Christians are so concerned about appearances and having it all together and looking good in front of others we miss out. We work hard at spit polishing our image, we learn the right Christian lingo, we mold ourselves to the culture around us so that nobody really knows that we can't see the clothes. We deceive ourselves and in deceiving ourselves we deceive others. I dream of a different kind of church, don't you? Where we can all take off our masks and admit who we really are and find that grace is still available.
- The deception in the Corinthian church, the one Paul was most concerned about dealing with related to their understanding of spiritual maturity. The Corinthians were deceived. They bought the new-fangled clothes of the swindlers. They tricked themselves into thinking they were spiritually mature and yet the reality was they were infants in Christ. I can't overstate the irony of 1 Corinthians enough. The Corinthians thought of themselves as mature and spiritual and yet Paul labels them as infants.

Transition

I think the goal for us this morning is to rethink what it means to be spiritually mature. Have we deceived ourselves, deluded ourselves into thinking we are spiritually mature? Let's take off the mask.

Proposition

- **The goal this morning is that we might see ourselves as we really are**

Transition

¹ Hans Christian Anderson's *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

We have a mirror in our basement bathroom at home. The lighting is poor. The mirror is old. And when I look at myself in that mirror it's easy to think, "Wow, I look pretty good." Then I come upstairs where it's bright, the mirror is newer and I think to myself "what in the world was I thinking." You can see every little imperfection and flaw. May this passage this morning be the kind of strong light and clear mirror that we need to see ourselves as we really are.

- Let me ask you a question. What kind of spiritual maturity do we value here? If you were to poll people here this morning and ask them "Grace Community Church believes a person is mature when...." and then have them fill in the blank. What would people say? What would you say? Grace Community Church believes a person is mature when they come to church regularly. Grace Community Church believes a person is mature when they attentively listen to sermons. Grace Community Church believes a person is mature when they read their bible every day. Grace Community Church believes a person is spiritually mature when they give financially to support the ministry. Grace Community Church believes a person is spiritually mature when they are busy with church things. Now hold the mirror to your face and ask yourself? What makes a person spiritually mature? May God help us to see ourselves as we really are this morning.

Transition

I want to share with you from 1 Corinthians 3:18-22

Organizational Sentence

- **Two deceptions about spiritual maturity**
- The Corinthians were into posturing and looking good. Image with no substance. And Paul wants them and us in turn, to guard against self-deception. May we, with God's help, see ourselves and our church as we really are.

Transition

Two deceptions about spiritual maturity. Look at [verses 18-21](#). Listen. *Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; 20 and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." 21 So then, no more boasting about men.* The first deception. **Spiritual maturity is not about who you know.**

Main Points

- It's so easy to think that because we may have rubbed shoulders with the right kind of people that somehow spiritual maturity has rubbed off on us. My brother is a pastor. My sister is a missionary. My parents were this. I went to school with so and so. I used to attend his church. I read the latest book by you know who. And somehow that makes us mature. We're good at name dropping aren't we? You know what? God doesn't care one bit about who you know, who you grew up with or what your parents did. You don't gain any standing with him because of those things. Don't deceive yourself. Spiritual maturity is not about who you know. It's about what you're willing to become.

- The Corinthians were name droppers. I'm of Paul. I'm of Apollos. I'm in the Peter party. They boasted about who they knew and what they knew because of who they knew, [verse 21](#). They counted themselves mature because of their connections and affiliations. Paul says of that attitude. Don't be deceived. If anyone thinks himself wise...of course they do. That's the point. We all think ourselves wise. And the Corinthians thought themselves *wise by the standard of this age*. For most of you here the way it works in the world is by who you know. The way you get ahead in your career and in the community is by who you know. You know the right people, you make the right social connections, you play the right cards, take advantage of the right opportunities, you get in with the popular kids at school and life is good. But in God's economy, in the church, that's not how it works. That kind of thinking is foolishness to God, [verse 19](#). Church politicking and schmoozing to get ahead is a trap, it's pointlessly futile. It's not who you know that counts. It's what you're willing to become. *If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise.*
- What counts to God is what you're willing to give up for his glory. It's becoming a fool. Are you willing to be a fool for Christ? A Jesus freak? Someone who cares more about what God thinks than what other people think? It's completely foolish to live like that. At least the world thinks so. The world around us says you advance by who you know. God says you advance by what you become, what you're willing to give up, by how low you're willing to go. But not in some schmoozing kind of way as if that's what really pleases God. You might give all you possess to the poor, you might even be willing to give up your life as a martyr but if you don't have love, you gain nothing. What God is calling each of us to is a life of foolish Christian living. It's a life of faith that won't make sense. It's a life of humility and service and love for one another. It means a radical abandonment of self for the sake of the kingdom. What does it mean to be spiritually mature? *Philippians 2. If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.* Don't be deceived. May we see ourselves as we really are. May we see our church as it really is.

Transition

Look at the rest of verse 21 to the end of the chapter for the second deception about spiritual maturity. It's this. **Spiritual maturity is not about doing good things it's about gaining good gifts.** Listen. *All things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future--all are yours, 23 and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.*

- Every time I read these words they shock me all the more. You'll see why in a second. God calls us to play part of the fool, to live like Christ but not because this somehow pays God back for what he's done for us. It's easy to slip into the following mentality. "God has done so much for me, now I must pay him back somehow." Or "He gave his life, now I must be willing to give to Him." That's so worldly to think like that. That's a "you scratch my back;

I'll scratch your back mentality." God does something for us and we do something for him. But that's not how it works in God's economy. There's no place for that in the church. Spiritual maturity is not about doing good things per se; it's about gaining good gifts. Let's be up front with one another. There is nothing you or I could ever do to repay the debt we have incurred to God through the cross of Jesus Christ. [John Piper](#) said it like this. "Good deeds do not pay back grace; they borrow more grace." Think about that for a second. It requires more and more grace to give more and more. The more you give up for his glory, the more grace is required to make the sacrifice. We will never pay God back. I think he kind of likes it like that. We are eternally indebted to him. Forever dependent upon the grace that comes to us through Jesus Christ.

- Instead, spiritual maturity is about living in the reality of the good gifts God has given us. God gives and gives and gives. Again, every time I read verse 22 and 23 I'm blown away by what they say. Listen carefully. *All things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future--all are yours, 23 and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.* All things are yours. All things are yours. Somebody has given us some things. All things. And they are ours. What is Paul saying? What has God given us?
- Paul lists five things in these verses—he certainly could have listed more. The world, life, death, the present and the future. All these things are ours. For those who belong to Christ, these things and more—they are our inheritance. They are God's gifts to us. What's interesting, as [Gordon Fee](#) puts it, is that these five gifts are the ultimate tyrannies of human existence.² Apart from Christ these things are not gifts but tyrannical. For instance. The world. We are shaken by what we see happening in the world around us. Just think 9/11 and Virginia Tech. Life. We are wearied by life. Death. We are scared of death. The present. It holds no peace for us. The future. We shudder at what the future might bring. That is apart from Christ. But for those who are in Christ, God has redeemed all of those things for us. And he's given them to us as gifts. Oh that we would truly understand what God has given us through the cross of Jesus Christ. All things are ours. The more you mature in Christ, the more you understand what we've been given. Oh that we might understand what we've been given.
- For the Christian. The world. What we see happening in the world does not shake us because we know God is sovereign. Life does not weary us because we've been given the abundant bread of life. Death does not scare us because Christ has defeated death. The present is a joy to us because we've learned to walk in his presence. The future does not panic us because the end has already been determined. The cross changes everything. All of life is different because of the cross. And through Christ, God has given us good gifts. Far more than we could ever pay back. And he wants us to see our own spiritual impoverishment in light of his eternal, unending good gifts. **Oh that we might see ourselves as we really are and God for who he really is.** How gracious he is. How indebted we are. The riches and depths of his love for us are unfathomable. And he is forever to be praised.

Conclusion

- "The emperor, followed by his court, went to the swindlers' workroom. When the emperor and his courtiers strode in, the swindlers held up their arms as if holding something and said,

² Fee, p. 154.

'Look! Here is the jacket!' and 'Look! Here are the trousers!' and, 'Look! Here is the waistcoat! And here is the elegant train. Each one is as light as a feather so that one does not feel one is wearing anything at all! That's the real beauty of these clothes!'

- 'Yes, indeed!' all the courtiers agreed. 'Now if your majesty would please take off your clothes,' the swindlers went on, 'we will dress you in your new suit!' They led the emperor to a large looking glass. After he had undressed, the swindlers pretended to put on his new suit piece by piece while the emperor studied his reflection from all sides. 'How well these new clothes suit you!' everyone cried. 'What a perfect fit! That pattern! Those colors! Never have you worn anything so magnificent!'
- It was time for the procession to begin. The servants who were to carry the train now stepped behind the emperor. They lifted their hands as though they were holding something. After all, they did not want to appear to be fools, or worse still, unfit for their positions. Then the emperor began marching at the head of the great procession right through the city. People lined the streets and leaned out of windows to watch, and when they saw him all cried, 'Isn't the emperor's new suit magnificent? What a gorgeous train! What colors! What a pattern!' No one dared admit that he could see nothing, for then his neighbors would know that he was a fool or unfit for his position, and *that* would be dreadful. Never had any clothes of the emperor's been so admired.
- At last a child peered through the crowd and cried, 'But the emperor has no clothes!' The mother tried to hush the child, but then she looked again. 'Oh no!' she said. 'Can it be true?' Everyone began to whisper what the child had said. Then they all began to cry out together, 'But the emperor has no clothes!' The emperor heard them, and his ears turned bright red. He knew that they were right, but there was nothing he could do. And so the emperor lifted his head higher still and kept on walking. Even if he had no clothes, he would still carry himself as an emperor should. And his servants followed behind him, looking even more dignified than before, carrying in their hands a train that did not exist."

Who are you trying to fool? God sees. Don't be deceived. Look in the mirror. Quit playing the charade. Take off the mask. Stop being phony. Admit your shame. Be transparent. Be real before God and in front of each other. Let's be a church of real people with real hurts and real lives and real struggles and together let's clothe our nakedness with the dazzling white clothes of Christ.