

Ye Are Full

At the time the Apostle labored, Corinth was a thriving metropolis of wealth, luxury, commerce and corruption. This is the background of the Corinthian ecclesia, and it is to some extent reflected in the epistle.

Paul gives indications that the ecclesia there was well-to-do, and in good standing with the world. "Ye are full," he says, contrasting them with himself, "Ye are rich, ye are honorable."

And as is almost inevitable in such circumstances, they gave too much thought to worldly wisdom, to imposing appearance, to polished eloquence, to the meaningless husks of worldly convention. Because of this they did not grow in the Truth, they remained vacant-minded babes when they should have been growing into men. They lost their hold on spiritual values with sad results to their conduct and course of life.

Envy and contention sprang up; immorality was being tolerated; greediness and reveling disgraced their solemn assemblies; spiritual gifts were prostituted to a confused babble of vain glory and pride; elements of the Truth were in danger, and the Apostle who had begotten them in the faith was openly despised for his poverty, his rude speech and his unpretentious simplicity.

So it was with a heavy heart that Paul took up his pen to address them. "Out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears," he reveals to them later (2 Cor. 2:4). His thoughts would revert to that happier time when for 18 months he had fervently labored among them, gathering believers and establishing a lightstand in holy zeal and purity.

Now, for fear of mutual sorrow and embarrassment, he hesitates to visit them (2 Cor. 1:23). But still he writes with a nobility and grandeur that befits his position and relation to them. They may have forgotten the height of their calling, but he has not.

His salutation is remarkable. Many grievous rebukes and corrections are to follow, but of these it gives no hint. They are still the Church of God that is at Corinth, called to be saints, separated and sanctified in Christ Jesus, the temple of God, and custodians of the Holy Spirit—so far the lightstand is still there. And so he addresses them, in an effort to appeal to all that is good in them, and to impress them with the need of prompt corrective action.

He goes further. He thanks God for the grace and blessings they have received and by which they are enriched in all utterance and knowledge. He reminds them that in this respect, no ecclesia has been more highly favored. His inference is clear—"Where much is given, much is required."

And then he looks forward in hope to that time when in the mercy of God he is confident that they will stand approved at the judgment seat of Christ. He does not condone or minimize their errors, but in his love he is sure they will heed his rebuke.

It is noteworthy that, in discussing the things he has heard of them, he frankly names the source of his information. "It hath been declared to me by them of the house of Chloe." No thought of concealment or subterfuge. No anonymous accusations. The mind of the spirit is open and straightforward at all times.

His reference to their being babes in knowledge, though true, would perhaps fall a little unwelcomely upon their ears, for obviously they considered themselves intelligent and wise and mature. It is to this angle that he applies himself in the remainder of the first two chapters, stressing a vital principle of divine truth.

His exposition of the relation between the mind of the Spirit and the mind of the flesh is lengthy, but he sums up thus:

"The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (2:14).

"They are SPIRITUALLY discerned." They are entirely out of the realm of the natural. The two cannot be reconciled, any more than two people can carry on a conversation who do not know each other's language. They have nothing in common. Between them there is a great gulf fixed.

The world, man in his natural state, all his wisdom, all his knowledge, all his science, all his learning, all his accomplishment—are NOTHING. That is Paul's basis. There is no arguing the point. There is no debate over the merits and claims of such things as evolution, or any other elaborate theory of man's invention. The whole thing is dismissed with one word—FOLLY.

Why? Because "the world by wisdom KNEW NOT GOD" (1 Cor. 1:21). And this is equally true today.

"The FEAR OF THE LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding" (Prov. 9:10).

The wisdom of the world is in many respects profound, but to all practical purposes it is useless, because it knows not God. It does not come to grips with the basic realities of life. The one important fact in the universe—the existence and revelation of God—it either denies or ignores.

On every other subject it has assembled vast multitudes of facts and even vaster multitudes of fancies. But to what end? What if one man could gather within his own mind all the world's wisdom, what good would it be to him when the time came to yield his breath? But if he faithfully lays hold of the simple elements of GOD's wisdom, eternity is his.

"The Jews," Paul says (1 Cor. 1:22), "require a sign; the Greeks seek after wisdom." They lay down their own conditions. They are the authorities. Their questions must be answered. And any revelation, to be considered by them, must conform to their conceptions. "Science"—that magic word—"Science" says so and so. Nothing that contradicts it dare even be given serious attention.

This is why the teaching of these first two chapters is so important. With one sweep it strips "science" of all its bluster and pretensions, and reveals it standing in naked shame as the pitiful little "mind of the flesh," blind to all eternal realities.

A discussion of science on its own merits is fatal, because it is endless. There is so much truth and so much error interwoven, so much fact and so much speculation inseparably entwined. But it all belongs to a passing order. "The fashion of this world passeth away" (1 Cor. 7:31). Where the mind of man and the mind of God conflict, we do not argue, we simply choose.

Saving truth, the knowledge that brings life, is in a different category altogether. Worldly knowledge is of no assistance in acquiring this, but rather the reverse. This is spiritually discerned—it is learned through the medium of a meek and humble and Godly lowliness of mind, and NO OTHER WAY.

The more a mind is cluttered and obsessed with self-gratifying worldly wisdom, the harder is its task of complying with the divine requirements.

"If any man seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise" (3:18).

God makes deliberate choice, Paul says, of those that are foolish and base and weak and despised, wherewith to accomplish His purpose, that no flesh should glory in His presence. We can understand why. All flesh is insignificant before His glorious and perfect majesty. "In my flesh," Paul says (Rom. 7:18), "dwelleth no good thing." Therefore, pride is ignorance and self-approval is presumption.

To illustrate his reasoning, Paul cites his own conduct while among them. Now Paul was as well qualified as any to display worldly knowledge. But, he says, I determined—I made a special point—NOT to do so. He deliberately divested himself of any personal persuasiveness and appeal.

As is recorded of Christ (Phil. 2:7—original), he emptied himself—he made himself of no reputation—that he might be a suitable and faithful vessel for the use of God. He did not look upon worldly wisdom with benevolent tolerance. He did not regard it in any way as of value in the work of God. He knew that it was incompatible with this, and that to use it would confuse an issue that must be kept clear.

Men must be persuaded to forsake reliance on the natural workings of their own minds and the accumulated "wisdom" of their fellowmen, and seek humbly for God's wisdom through the operation of the Spirit. There is no other way to God's favor than humiliation and meek reliance. All this is contrary to the mind of the flesh, and the world's standards.

In the eyes of most people, Paul destroyed his effectiveness by this course. To the natural man, he had no appeal. He displayed none of the qualities that attract the worldly mind. But Paul's mission was not to persuade the world, but to take out from them a people for the Lord.

He did not want to appeal to the majority, because he knew they were not the material God wanted. He was seeking those, and those only, that had a sympathetic affinity with the mind of the Spirit. Any who might be attracted from any other motive only cumbered the ecclesia, and were sure to prove later a source of trouble and anxiety.

"Wisdom is the principal thing," declares Solomon (Prov. 4:7)—

"Get wisdom...Cry after knowledge, lift up the voice for understanding, seek her as silver, search for her as for hid treasures" (Prov. 2:3-4).

"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6).

If we do not learn to make this yearning for knowledge and wisdom and righteousness our MAIN CONCERN in life, then we can confidently assure ourselves that we, at least, are not numbered among that very, very few elect—that we are but worldlings, outside the scope of the Spirit's transforming power. Let us be among the wise!

The Lord gives wisdom, we are told, only to those that love Him. Only to those whose love is true and strong enough to control their conduct. If we love Him, He says, we shall do the things that please Him. That is the test. And there is no other force on earth that can overcome the terrible and relentless power of the flesh—only a fervent love.

Only a burning, personal love for God and His warm, irradiating goodness, engaging the whole heart, mind and strength, is strong enough to prevent us following the selfish, fatal course that ends in death. Love gives energy and enthusiasm and vitality. It makes the meanest task pleasant. Nothing is too much trouble for it. No labor too great. No vigil too long. Without it the path of duty is insufferable drudgery. Love gives life a purpose and an incentive, a radiant glow that nothing can dim.

This is the fire that Paul is trying desperately to rekindle in the hearts of those at Corinth. They had all the machinery, but the driving force was lacking. They weren't progressing—they were drifting downstream and bickering among themselves.

In his enthusiasm he is eager to discuss with them the deeper mysteries and glories of the Kingdom, but there is no intelligent response—only a vacant stare. They are carnally-minded, they are babes, they cannot comprehend, AND HE DOES NOT EXCUSE THEM.

They have consumed their precious time with foolish dissention:

"There is among you envying and strife and contention" (3:3).

Envy was at the bottom of it, as it often is. The Scriptures have much to say about envy. It is the inevitable weed that grows in ground barren of love. It feeds on self-pity. It is the most despicable and malicious of all the corruptions of the human mind:

"Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous: but who is able to stand before envy" (Prov. 27:4).

Elsewhere (Pr. 14) it is called cancerous rottenness of the bones.

Envy displays itself in many ways. It is the reaction of the wicked to the righteous, seizing upon small points of mean criticism. It was for envy, we are told, that the Jews hated the perfect man and delivered him to be crucified.

Are we so free from these things that we need not be concerned about them? James asks (4:5)—

"Do ye think that the Scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?"

This warning is meant for all. It is a warning against the natural reactions of the natural mind, which seem so good and right to the mind that conceives them. That mind, of course, does not recognize or admit

these things as envy. But we are clearly warned that unless we humbly seek to be taught of God, we have no hope of even knowing what is right, much less performing it.

"Love," says Paul, "envieth not." Either we choose this course, or we don't. There is no use trying to reason with the mind of the flesh—it will justify everything, and confuse the issue where it cannot justify. It must be abandoned.

All that the world regards as fine—brilliant worldly intellect, strong passion, fierce animal courage, self-esteem, animal beauty, ambition, assertiveness, and envy in its many deceptive forms—all these must be seen in their true and ugly light, and resolutely repudiated. Christ, we are told, emptied himself. These were the natural desires and tendencies which he overcame and rooted out. Paul describes them as filthiness—natural filthiness of flesh and mind.

All this demands self-abasement, a bitter recognition of the uncleanness and corruptness of our animal natures and thoughts, a clear conception of the deceptiveness of the flesh.

To counteract the envy and strife with which they are destroying themselves, Paul urges them to a consideration of the holiness of their calling, of its gravity and solemnity:

"Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (3:16).

"None of us," he reminds the Roman brethren (Rom. 14:7), "liveth to himself and no man dieth to himself." We have assumed obligations; we have made promises; we have entered a covenant. We walk on holy ground; we do well to remember it.

"Ye are the temple of God"—you have entered God's dwelling—take heed how you conduct yourself. Remember the sharp lesson of Uzzah; remember the careless sons of Aaron. It is little enough we can do—let us do that little earnestly and well.

"If any man defile the temple of God, HIM SHALL GOD DESTROY; for the temple of God is holy."

Is any lesson more strongly or repeatedly taught throughout Scripture? Is any more necessary to weak creatures of dust?

"I have laid the foundation," Paul says (3:10), "let every man take heed how he buildeth thereon." Then in direct connection with this warning of defiling God's temple, Paul returns to the theme of worldly wisdom:

"Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise."

The wisdom of the world is obnoxious to God—it has no place in His temple. Above all do not glory in men and their wisdom and accomplishments. Take a broader view. If you are worthy, all things are yours, and these men are but a means to that end, supplied and equipped by God for your benefit. Give God the glory, if any is due.

"All things are yours," he says—"the world, life, death, things present, things to come—ALL ARE YOURS!" How incongruous to fret and scheme for the temporary possession of an insignificant fraction of our inheritance when in due time, if we are worthy, all will be given us freely! The earth is ours eternally—surely we can withdraw from the mad worldly scramble for a few years and conduct ourselves in patience and faith and obedience!

All things are yours! Everything is subservient to your interests. All things are working together for your good. The present international tensions and conflicts, the life-and-death struggles of mighty nations are just pre-arranged details of God's plan of the ages centering around His elect. If we could only get this conception permanently ingrained into our outlook, we should never be tempted or dismayed by any events. All is as sure and planned and necessary as the expert movements of the surgeon's knife.

As Paul turns from this grand conception, it is easy to understand his next words, "With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you." The issues were too big to permit anxiety over man's judgment. He knew that the time was coming for judgment. He knew that man's opinion mattered nothing.

He fervently hoped and prayed that they would rise to justify their early promising beginning when all was love and zeal, but if they did not, he had done his best. There were millions who would not heed the call. His principle concern was with those few who would. His foremost duty was to the true church of God. Christ has said that not one of such would be finally lost. Paul besought the Corinthians with tears that they should not receive the grace of God in vain, but he knew that many would.

And so he early decided to "know no man after the flesh" (2 5:16). He knew some would come and go like ships in the night. Many brethren, too, he knew were walking as enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18). Toward the end of his ministry, he had to write from prison with an aching heart that "All they which in Asia be turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15). Demas, his fellow-laborer, his trusted companion, at the same time unbelievably chose the attractions of this present evil world to the glories of the Kingdom (2 Tim. 4:10).

But still he could say, "None of these things move me." The purpose of God stood sure. Paul's duty lay clearly before him. In the end all the elect would be gathered: not one would be missing. All the rest would be swept away with the things they had loved best. "It is a very small thing that I should be judged of man's judgment."

"Do I seek to please men? If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10).

"So we speak, not as pleasing men, but God. Neither at any time used we flattering words, nor of men sought we glory."

Men are such insignificant things—GOD is the one to please and consider. Yet he says in this epistle we are considering:

"I please all men in all things" (10:33).

And to the Romans (15:2):

"Let every one please his neighbor for his good to edification."

Is there contradiction? We know there is not, though many things recorded by the mind of the Spirit seem contradictory to the mind of the flesh. Paul was "all things to all men" (1 Cor. 9:22). He pleased all whenever possible. In nothing would he cause offence if self-denial and self-abasement on his part could prevent it. In this sense he "pleased all men." But he sought no man's favor; he sacrificed no principles. Desertion did not move him; ingratitude did not embitter him; contempt did not trouble him. For he was confident; he said, that—

"The Lord, when he comes, will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart: and then shall every man have his due praise of God" (4:5).

Until that time he was content to wait:

"He that is spiritual discerneth all things, yet he himself is discerned of no man" (2:15).

Then, chiding them for glorying, he says,

"Who maketh thee to differ from another? What hast thou that thou didst not receive? If thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory?" (4:7).

How much easier and more natural it is to take pride in our privileges and abilities than to faithfully realize and discharge the obligations they impose upon us! Paul reverses the world's judgment. Ability is not an asset—it is a liability. It has been given us. It is charged to our account, and it must be accounted for. Favor is never divorced from justice. If we seem highly favored, correspondingly more is required of us. God has no idle favorites.

"Men will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself."

The natural man is so incredibly warped in his outlook. In the sight of God such a man is a common thief, abusing a sacred trust and using his Lord's goods to his own ends. The mind of the flesh is a treacherous guide.

There is little said about the personal circumstances of the Apostles in the New Testament records, but Paul here, because of the Corinthians' attitude, is moved to mention his own position briefly.

The Corinthians, we have observed, were apparently well-to-do. Verses 8 and 10 of this 4th chapter support this observation. This led unconsciously to a false and superficial viewpoint regarding Paul. Of himself he says,

"We both hunger and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place; we are reviled, persecuted, defamed, made as the filth of the world and the offscouring of all things" (4:11-15).

For Christ, he told the Philippians, he had suffered the loss of all things, even to the barest amenities of life, and the ordinary respect of his fellowman. In poverty, despised, and unattractive in appearance, he was everywhere the object of amused contempt; a common vagabond; the filth and offscouring of the world; a spectacle to angels and to men.

How many today, punctilious about the washing of cups and the dictates of fashion, would recognize the messenger of life and hope in such a disguise? Little wonder the prosperous and worldly-wise Corinthians had outgrown his crude and embarrassing plainness. God's ways truly are not man's. God chooses those things that are weak and base and despised.

"I write not these things to shame you," Paul assures them, "but as my beloved sons I warn you,"—I warn you to judge carefully and wisely according to spirit and truth. Give less thought to outward appearance and material possession. What consideration would the blind and empty-minded world give to this homeless and ill-clad outcast?

Our minds irresistibly turn to another such solitary figure, dwelling alone in the wilderness, in the humblest of circumstances. "But what went ye out into the wilderness to see?" Christ asked the perplexed multitude (Matt. 11:8). "Did you expect to find a man clothed in soft raiment—some imposing fashionplate?" Did John's rough appearance dismay you?

And someone else was recognized throughout all Israel for similar disregard of worldly standards—even John's own prototype —"A hairy man and girt with a girdle of leather" (2 Kings 1:8).

And there is yet another homeless wayfarer, another unknown, lonely wanderer; rejected, unesteemed; no form or comeliness, no beauty that we should desire him; no attractive or imposing appearance; no visible dignity or grandeur—lowly, humble, reviled and despised—yet the Son of God and the light of the world, the way of life and the door of hope.

Him we meet to remember, though the world by wisdom knew him not. Judge not according to outward appearance, but judge with wisdom and discernment.

"He that is spiritual discerneth all things."

Bro. G.V. Growcott