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Self, 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:7

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Introduction

- 1 Cor. 3:19 sums up well the intentions that I had going into writing this series, "...the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."
 - I want to look at the major (personal) problems that we face today and see how the Bible's solution is the opposite of the world.
 - Therefore, you can make the problems worse by following what our culture says, or you can surrender those things to God.
- Today, we're looking at an issue that is at the very center of much of our current culture wars: the self and ego.

The Problem with the Ego

- Paul's purpose in this section is to guard them against arrogance in themselves.
 - They had tribes formed around whom they were disciplined by...
 - Their self-identity was based on "Paul's disciple" or "Apollos's disciple."
- Let's take a quick journey tracing the path to where we are today...
 - Historically, too much ego was considered to be a bad thing. It was called "hubris."
 - Then in the late twentieth century, we saw the rise of the self-esteem movement.
 - Today we have something entirely unique: you can define your self-identity.
 - Your well-being is dependent on others affirming your chosen identity.
- What's the result? Absolute chaos and despair.¹
 - We have a society full of empty people trying to show that their existence matters.

- Philip Cushman: “The empty self is filled up with consumer goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathetic therapists... [The empty self] experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning... a lack of personal conviction and worth, and it embodies the absences as a chronic, undifferentiated, emotional hunger.”²
- I find this nomenclature of “empty self” interesting because it echoes what Paul said.
 - The “pride” or “arrogance” he warned them of carries the nuance of “bloated,” “overinflated,” and “swollen.”
 - He says that this is the condition of the natural human ego.
- **Point:** The problem with the natural ego is that it is swollen and empty.
 - First, it is *empty*. A self-identity built on something other than God is artificial. You will not find a source of significance large enough to fill the void.
 - Second, it is *painful*. You don’t notice something until there is a problem... (toes, elbows, car transmission). When you have an overinflated ego, it will hurt.
 - People often say, “My feelings were hurt.” No, you’re feelings are fine. They are telling you the ego is hurt.
 - Third, it is *busy*. The inflated ego is busy trying to fill the emptiness by comparing or boasting.
 - Fourth, it is *fragile*. Whether you have an inferiority complex or a superiority complex, they are both empty and require being filled up. And anything can threaten that.

The Christian Ego

- Compare this fragile, empty self with what Paul describes (4:3-4).
 - What does that mean?
 - When people say that today they are referring to themselves. But Paul clearly excludes himself. The word he uses is “verdict.”
 - He knows who the real Judge is and the verdict that he has passed...

- But Paul also considered himself the worst of sinners! It's because he knew that he belonged to Christ and that his verdict was *justified*.
- **Point:** The Christian's self-identity is secure in Christ.
- Consider what that does to your self-identity.
- Will you be arrogant? Absolutely not.
- Will you be self-hating? You cannot.
- Can anyone take it away? No, it's God's decree.
- Can pain and suffering threaten it? No, Christ finished the work.

End Notes

¹ See the following for data on deaths of despair: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Top Ten Leading Causes of Death in the U.S. for Ages 1-44 from 1981-2019,” February 11, 2021, accessed December 28, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/animated-leading-causes.html>. Lora Korpar “3 States Saw Large Increase in Overdose Deaths, Which Topped 100K in U.S. Over Last Year,” *Newsweek*, November, 17, 2021, accessed December 23, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/3-states-saw-large-increase-overdose-deaths-which-topped-100k-us-over-last-year-1650365>. Maria Luisa Paul, “A youth mental health crisis was already brewing. The pandemic made it worse, surgeon general says.” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2021, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/07/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health/>.

² Philip Cushman, “Why the Self Is Empty,” *American Psychologist* 45 (May 1990): 600.