

MESSAGE OF THE MONTH

Do Not Go Beyond What Is Written

A readable transcript of a special message
from W. Robert Godfrey



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It is a privilege for me, as always, to participate in the Message of the Month program. I want to extend once again our profound thanks to our Ministry Partners for all their help, making the work of Ligonier possible and fruitful in so many parts of the world. Of course, what we are seeking to do above all else is to get the Word of God and the truth of what God has revealed in the Scriptures out to people.

In this message, I'll turn to a passage that has long fascinated me and even left me a bit uncertain as to exactly what the Apostle meant when he wrote it. It is an attractive verse, but I was not initially sure how it fit in the context of what Paul was writing. I am talking about 1 Corinthians 4:6.

There are a lot of famous chapters in 1 Corinthians, and we turn to them for various teachings that are familiar to us. I think chapter 4 is not one of the famous chapters, but it has a really intriguing verse.

Let me read 1 Corinthians 4:6, where Paul writes, "I have applied all these things," obviously referencing what he has been talking about in the earlier chapters of 1 Corinthians. He says, "I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another."

CORINTHIAN QUARRELS

The last part of 1 Corinthians 4:6 is pretty clear, is it not? Paul is concerned about quarreling, divisions, and disagreements in the Corinthian church, and he says: "I don't want that. I don't want to see that anymore. I've written what I've written so that you won't be puffed up, so that you won't be proud and arrogant, and so that you will get along better."

First Corinthians, of course, is a letter about all sorts of problems in the Corinthian church. It is a letter where Paul answers questions the Corinthians have sent him. He knew the Corinthian church. He had spent eighteen months there as a missionary. And they knew him, so they felt free to write him with questions. From about chapter 7 on, he answers their questions on various topics, but he begins the letter by expressing his great concern about the divisions, feuding, quarreling, and problems in the church.

We might initially say: “Paul, why don’t you get onto the really important things? Teach us about speaking in tongues. Teach us about the Lord’s Supper. Teach us about the things that we often turn to the latter part of 1 Corinthians to learn about.” But Paul is clearly concerned in the beginning of this letter with the problem of divisions. He does not want Christian congregations to be full of controversy, internally full of bickering, jealousy, and people thinking they are better than others. In the early chapters, therefore, Paul turns very determinedly to that subject in order to try to convince these Corinthians that they need to pursue Christian humility.

CHRISTIAN HUMILITY

When we begin to look at the theme of humility, we find it repeated over and over again in the New Testament letters written by Paul and by other Apostles. We maybe have learned ourselves how difficult the cultivation of humility is and how difficult it is to really be able to listen to and learn from others and not try to lord it over others, especially when we know we are right, and they ought to listen to us.

Paul is trying to help us and help the Corinthians in all the ways he can think of to be peaceable with one another. In chapter 1, he talks a great deal about Christ and Christ crucified.

The reason he does that is to say: “See how humble the Son of God was? If anyone had a right to pride, if anyone had a right to boasting, it’s the Son of God. But He was humble, and He was humble even unto the cross.”

Then in chapter 2, Paul talks about the role of the Spirit in teaching humility and how we need to seek the help of the Spirit. Then he talks about leaders in the church that the Corinthians would have known. He talks about himself, he talks about Peter, he talks about Apollos, and he is bold enough to say, “We tried to be humble among you, and we hope that you’ll learn from our humility to be humble.”

Then Paul complains that the Corinthians have a lot yet to learn. They are too natural and too worldly, and they need to become more spiritual by thinking about Christ, thinking about the Spirit, and thinking about the leaders who have influenced them. Then he talks about how various Scriptures from the Old Testament also teach humility. He wants to make this sort of full-orbed attack on the pride and division of the Corinthians.

PAUL’S PROVERB

Paul’s attack on pride and division is what leads him to talk about not going beyond what is written in 1 Corinthians 4:6, but that still does not tell us exactly what he means. When we look at it carefully in Greek, we discover that our translators have not really caught the exact character of what Paul has written, because how we really ought to translate verse six is this: “That you may learn by us not to go beyond *the* that which is written.”

It is as if this “the” introduces a proverb, a quotation. They did not have quotation marks in ancient Greek. Paul is saying to them not just, “Don’t go beyond what is written,” but, “Don’t go beyond the proverb you have heard: Don’t go beyond what is written.”

That causes us to pause and ask, What is the proverb? It is not a proverb we find anywhere in the Old Testament. It is not exactly a proverb we find anywhere in the New Testament. We find statements that are close. Certainly, in Deuteronomy 8 and Deuteronomy 32, we have statements about sticking to the Word, not going beyond the Word, and being careful with the Word. But we do not have anything that is exactly what Paul says here. We do not know whether this is a proverb or a saying that Paul has come up with himself.

Some of you have been in churches where ministers become famous for certain statements. My pastor is very enthusiastic. For almost every text he preaches, he says, "This is my favorite text." The congregation smiles because it has become his favorite text since he spent a week studying it, but we are sort of tuned to hear that almost proverbial statement spoken out. That is what we have here with Paul.

I think he may have said to the Corinthians in the months he was there, "Don't go beyond what is written." Or maybe Paul heard Peter say it, or some other preacher or Apostle in the early church. But somehow, this expression has come into Paul's mind, and he expects the Corinthians will resonate with it, whether they have heard it before or are hearing it for the first time.

Paul presents it as a proverb that they should think about, which is how proverbs always work. They encapsulate in a few words a really important idea. For example, the book of Proverbs tells us, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). We have a whole collection of proverbs, or wise sayings, in the Bible that, when applied at the right time, help people live wisely and faithfully. That is what Paul is doing in this text. He is articulating a proverb that he wants the Corinthians to think about: "Do not go beyond what is written."

WRITINGS ON HUMILITY

We have to ask, If Paul is quoting this proverb, how is it supposed to become a practical help to the Corinthians? In what way is this proverb appropriate at this moment of Paul promoting humility?

I think we see the practical help when we look back and notice that leading up to this statement in 1 Corinthians 4, Paul has quoted six different Old Testament texts to support his idea that Christians need to be humble. I will not read them all to you, but we have quotations from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, and Psalms. Paul is showing that when he says to be humble, when Peter says to be humble, when the Spirit says to be humble, and even when Jesus says to be humble, they are not coming up with a new idea. This is something that God has always sought to inculcate in His people. As one example, Paul quotes from Isaiah 29:14, “Destroy the wisdom of the wise” (1 Cor. 1:19). Some of the Corinthians were big on wisdom. Paul says that already in the Old Testament, God is warning those who think they are wise that their wisdom may well be destroyed, and he goes through these six different quotations from the Old Testament.

As I was thinking about this and studying it, I thought to myself about a bad habit that some of us have—probably not you all, because I am sure you do not have bad habits, but there are bad habits that we can easily develop—that when we see a quotation from the Old Testament in the New Testament, we just sort of rush past it, as if to say: “We already know this. We do not have to pause over this. Yeah, yeah, yeah, quotations. Let’s move on. Let’s get to the real meat of things.” That is a particular mistake people make in this text. It is always a mistake. It is a really good principle of Bible study that when there is a quotation from the Old Testament in the New Testament, you should go back and read the whole chapter from which the quotation comes because you will be amazed at how relevant so many things out of that chapter are.

Leading up to our text in 1 Corinthians 4:6, Paul has quoted six different times from different sections of the Old Testament. He wants these writings of the Old Testament to be of practical help in showing God's people how to promote humility, how important humility is, how foolish the wisdom of the world is, how God's weakness is going to defeat the apparent strength of the world, and how we can have comfort and assurance in all of that.

Although Paul does not quote it, certainly Psalm 138:6 captures this so well, where the Psalmist writes:

For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,
but the haughty he knows from afar.

That is the essence of what Paul is trying to teach the Corinthians and us. We are slow learners. We like people who act like they know what they are doing. Paul is saying that it is the humble and the lowly to whom God really responds and about whom God prepared us to think so that we would understand Christ and His humility when He came. It is in that context, then, that Paul comes to write, "Do not go beyond what is written."

This is a proverb that Paul used in his preaching. It is a practical help to teach us to pursue humility. It also articulates an important principle that ought to guide us in our whole approach to Christianity. It is a principle we could be so bold as to declare the *Protestant* principle: "Do not go beyond what is written." That is true not just regarding the matter of humility. It is true not just as a proverb that the Corinthians may know. It is true not just as a practical help for this specific idea. This proverb rests in Paul's teaching and writing on the general principle he is upholding: God's people are a people who should not go beyond what is written.

THE SUFFICIENT WORD

Critics of my interpretation might say, “Paul is talking about the Old Testament, and he’s a writer of the New Testament, so isn’t he going beyond what is written?” My answer to that would be no. Paul is operating on the principle that our God is the God who speaks, and He causes His revelation to be written down. He caused it to be written down in the Old Testament for the old covenant people. Now, in the fullness of revelation that has come with the coming of Christ, He causes that to be written down for His new covenant people.

Paul is not contradicting himself. He is saying: “Do not go beyond what God has revealed. Do not go beyond what God has given His people.” In other words, that means we do not go beyond what has been written down and has been recognized as the revelation of God, as the canon of God’s Scripture.

Paul is articulating a principle here that in the Scriptures, God will tell us all we need to know for faith and life. The Bible does not tell us all we need to know for technology or all we need to know for various sophisticated skills of one sort or another. Reading the Bible does not make you a heart surgeon. But studying the Bible will tell us all we need to know for the faith once for all delivered to the saints and for the path of holiness in which we ought to walk. Paul is articulating this principle as something we can hold onto and that we need to hold onto, particularly in the world in which we live.

The principle Paul articulates here is challenged all the time, is it not? We can go beyond the Word when we doubt the Word or when we are not satisfied with the Word. We can go beyond the Word when we listen to voices that say, “We don’t really understand the Word, so we don’t really have to pay attention to it.” We can go beyond the Word when people say, “I’m not

following the Word; I'm following the Spirit." Paul would say in response that the Spirit never says anything contrary to the Word because the Spirit inspired the Word. You would have the Spirit contradicting Himself if He led you beyond the Word.

Going beyond the Word in following church traditions was one of the great issues of the Reformation. The Reformers, in criticizing the Roman Catholic Church of their day, said, "Look at all the things that happen in Roman Catholic worship services and in Roman Catholic theology that are not found in the Word of God."

When they challenged Roman Catholics on that, the Reformers found the response was, "God also speaks through tradition." It is a powerful argument until you look back at the Scriptures and find that those traditions very often are not just adding to the Word, but they are contradicting the Word. That is a very different matter, is it not? Rome teaches that Mary is a co-mediator with Christ, but the Scripture says, "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). The tradition about Mary is not just adding to what we believe; it is contradicting what we have been taught to believe by the Scriptures.

HUMILITY BEFORE THE WORD

"Do not go beyond what is written" is an important principle for us to pursue. How do we know what is true? How do we know God's will for His people? How do we know how to manage disagreements amongst Christians? We are right back to where Paul started with us in 1 Corinthians. We may have disagreements. Those who are hearing me speak today might have disagreements with me. I can assure you all I want that I am right and you are wrong, but that by itself may not convince you, and I do not want to pull authority.

The Christian attitude ought to be what Paul is teaching us here: If we have a disagreement, the thing to do is sit down,

open our Bibles together, and look at what the Bible says. You bring your best arguments for your point of view, and I will bring my personally reasonable point of view to bear, and we will try the best we can to figure out what the Word is actually saying. It may be that we will not come to a final agreement by sitting down with our Bibles open once, but what else should we do except continue to look together into the Word of God to find out His will with a proper measure of humility to say, “I just might be wrong”? I might think it is much more likely that you are wrong, but it is possible that I might be wrong. The only real way to find that out is to keep looking into the Word with the confidence that says, “Do not go beyond what is written.”

I have always been struck that when Jesus was tempted by the devil and the devil quoted the Bible, Jesus did not respond: “I wrote the Bible. I know what it means.” He did not respond to the devil with any claim of personal authority. He responded to the devil by saying, “It is also written” (see Matt. 4:5–7). The only way to answer an argument from the Bible is with another argument from the Bible. Jesus Himself there in His ministry did not go beyond what was written. He appealed to the Old Testament to demonstrate the truth of His teaching and the truth of who He is.

In my study, I have found this little verse, this little proverb in 1 Corinthians 4:6 to be very helpful and encouraging. It is an articulation not only of practical help for us but also a principle by which we ought to approach the truth of God and that ought to guide us in what we believe and how we live to His glory. Thank you so much for listening and letting me share some of my thoughts on this verse. Let me say to you, in the name of the Apostle Paul, do not go beyond what is written.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability.



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