

## 1 Corinthians 4 – Paul’s Picture of Discipleship.

### Introduction

For those of you who are Christian, who would you say has been the most significant in modelling to you the Christian life?

- Maybe one (or both) of your parents?
- Maybe a friend that help lead you to Christ?
- Maybe a youth group leader or a pastor, or even a YouTube preacher who you really stumbled across online.

When I left home to study in Melbourne 19 years ago, I wrote on a piece of paper a list of around 10 names of men from my home Church who I thought were good Christian role models. The purpose of the list was to help me keep these people in mind as I began to live out my Christian life in a new and different context. I searched for and found that list recently and noticed I had written on top of the paper: “These are good blokes and don’t you ever forget it!”

Most of us get shaped by the Christian examples we have close to us. Now, as lovely as most of our examples are, it’s important to know that what we are learning from them *is* actually in line with *Jesus’* view of discipleship. As I reflected with 19 years of hindsight on the names I had written I came to the conclusion that while all of them were lovely men, I’m not sure *all* of them were the best examples of what is to be a disciple of Jesus as I’ve since come to understand that from the Bible.

It's good to have examples in our life. But they have to be the right examples.

And in tonight's passage, we are given an picture of Christian discipleship that we can all learn from and live by. The author of this letter, Paul, speaks of *his own* example and that of the other apostles as a means to show the Corinthians and us, what true discipleship looks like. Paul is inviting us to learn from him tonight.

In verse 6 he calls the Corinthians he says that: "learn from us". In verse 16 he calls them to "imitate me."

I've broken up this passage according to the three differing ways Paul describes his own pattern of living as an apostle.

1. The faithful "servant of Christ."
2. The humble "fool for Christ."
3. The loving "father in Christ."

We'll think about each one of these pictures that Paul paints of his own life as an apostle.

And as we do that we'll think about what we can learn from his example and teaching.

### **1. The Faithful Servant of Christ.**

First, the Faithful servant of Christ. Paul and the apostles lived to please and be faithful to their master. Look at verse 1:

*A person should think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God. <sup>2</sup> In this regard, it is required that managers be found faithful.*

Paul uses the expression “the mysteries of God” to describe God’s plan to save people through the death and resurrection of Jesus – a plan, which for ages past been hidden, but was now being revealed in the good news preached by Paul and the apostles.

But why does Paul feel the need to start speaking about his role in terms of faithfulness and service of Christ?

It’s because He wanted the Corinthians (particularly their leaders) to start thinking of *themselves* in similar ways. It would appear that a number of people/leaders in Corinth were more interested in popularity among *the people* than they were in faithfulness to Jesus and the gospel taught by Paul.

They were not people proclaiming the mysteries of God revealed in the saving cross of Christ, they were proclaiming the wisdom of the world, revealed in the intellect and style of various leaders and speakers.

And it would appear that these leaders were gaining traction. We know from chapters 1-3 that the Corinthian believers seemed to like this teaching with its focus on worldly wisdom. In verse 6, Paul implies the church is arrogant (puffed up with it), with people favouring one person over another.

Paul knew this about the Corinthians. And he knew that in the popularity stakes, he was bleeding numbers in Corinth because of his relentless focus on the cross over the wisdom of the world. But, notice how little he cares about this. It’s not the opinion of others he’s interested in, not even his own opinion about himself, but the opinion of the Lord Jesus.

Look at what he says in verse 3:

*<sup>3</sup> It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court.<sup>[a]</sup> In fact, I don't even judge myself. <sup>4</sup> For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me.*

Paul was not a people pleaser. He was a Jesus pleaser. He was committed to being a faithful servant of Christ and his gospel. If people were disappointed that he wasn't preaching the kind of wisdom teaching they wanted, if they were grumbling among themselves about Paul... He was not shaken by that, so long as he was convicted that he was faithfully discharging his duty as a herald of the gospel.

Like Paul, all believers are to operate on the understanding that Jesus alone will be the judge of our faithfulness to Him in our service of Him. Only Jesus knows the hidden motives and agendas of an individual's heart. That's what Paul says in verse 5:

*<sup>5</sup> So don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God.*

I think those of us in teaching or leadership positions really need to hear Paul's words in these verses – because, if we're honest, most of us do care about the opinions of others.

- When someone stops coming to our growth group and starts attending another one...  
It hits us.
- When someone tells us our program or study is a little dry – it hits us.
- When people don't give us the affirmation we would like – it hits us.

But Paul is telling us to serve for the praise of Jesus, not for the praise of people. Because people aren't always correct in their opinions, they don't always see everything, and they are not your judge anyway. Jesus, on the other hand, is your judge and He sees all, he knows all. Your faithfulness won't go unnoticed by Him.

On that last day Jesus won't be saying to his servants:

- “Well done good and *popular* servant – people loved you.”
- “Well done good and *successful* servant – you got results.”
- ‘Well done, good and *faithful* servant – you simply did what I wanted you to do! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. *Come and share your master's happiness!*’

When I did a traineeship at church 10 years ago, my trainer Andy, would often remind me that “I have an audience of one.” He wasn't telling me to ignore the people I was ministering to or the feedback that would occasionally come... He was simply reminding me, as Paul does here, that at a fundamental level we serve Jesus Christ – and he alone is our master and will judge us.

So I ask those of you who are in positions of leadership particularly: Are you seeking praise from God or from people?

And if you think, you're more prone to the people-pleasing side of things, what might it look like for you to grow in this? Let's take the example of a GG leader:

What do you do when someone emails you with a host of criticisms about your bible study? Is the answer to simply ignore it and say: “I’m serving Jesus not that person, delete!” No, I don’t think Paul is saying that.

As a faithful servant of Jesus you will listen to the feedback (knowing that you are not perfect), but you also don’t immediately seek to placate the person. You put all their comments through the filter of what Jesus wants of you – as a believer, as a leader.

- Maybe they say your studies don’t provide enough application – well, that’s a legitimate point – Jesus calls us to make disciples by “*teaching* them to obey” (Matt 28:20) – we need to teach, we need to show how obedience to His word plays out through thoughtful application.
- Maybe they suggest your group do topical studies rather than expositions of books of the bible.. On that point, you think about it but you’re convicted that Jesus wants people to understand his word in context and in depth... So, maybe you decide that while you’re group could do a helpful topical series at some point in the year, your bread and butter will remain expository teaching.

But maybe you get another email from another member of the group who says to you: “thank you for your great leading. I wouldn’t be where I am in my faith if it wasn’t for you!?” In that case, you remember that this person’s opinion of you is of little importance compared to Jesus your master – so, you don’t get too big of a head, redirect praise to Jesus and move on seeking to please Jesus.

Paul sought to be a faithful *servant* of Christ. And so should we.

## **2. The Humble “Fool for Christ.” (vv.6-13)**

But, the second way Paul describes himself is as a humble “fool for Christ.”

None of us like the idea of being thought of as a fool in the eyes of others. Quite the opposite! We love it when people think of us as wise and witty. Much like the Corinthians we often love to receive praise and affirmation regarding our intellect, successes and style. We don't like to feel shame or be thought of as a fool! This is what drives so many of those mini-debates you see between people on Facebook – you know those conversation threads where people go back and forward with each other over a range of social, political and theological issues. No one in those debates wants to be the one looking like the fool in the conversation. No one wants to be the person who just got schooled. We want to do the schooling! That why, I suspect, many people sit at their computers, research more stats to back up their online argument, mull over the best way to deliver their come back and then launch their retaliatory post. But it never really seems to end, because everyone wants to be the wise and witty person that comes out on top. No one wants to be seen as the fool.

And this is why this picture of humble and costly discipleship that we get from Paul in these next verses hit us so hard... It threatens our pride. Paul's example tells us that if we follow in his example we too may become “fools” in the eyes of many.

And like many of us, the Corinthian believers simply struggled to let go of their pride and embrace humble discipleship. They didn't want to be branded as the intellectual weaklings of society. They wanted to be known as the wise and strong ones – this is why, as we've seen in earlier chapters, that they were reluctant to embrace the message of the cross which they knew was *foolishness* to gentiles.

The Corinthians had instead opted for a focus on wisdom and intellect which they felt they excelled at and was a sign of their spiritual superiority.

What is Paul's response? He calls out their arrogant and exposes their misguided view of discipleship. You see this, in Paul's words in verse 6:

*<sup>6</sup>Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying: "Nothing beyond what is written." The purpose is that none of you will be arrogant, favoring one person over another.*

We don't entirely know what the saying "nothing beyond what is written" means but the purpose of the saying is clear – "Stop being so proud! You guys are looking at yourselves as the spiritually elite. You need to get a grip on reality and humble yourselves: Look at verse 7:

*<sup>7</sup>For who makes you so superior? What do you have that you didn't receive? If, in fact, you did receive it, why do you boast as if you hadn't received it?*

Paul is helping them to see that whatever gifts their church did have, came not from them but from God! And they did appear to have been given certain gifts - Paul has already spoken about them being enriched in their speech and knowledge (1:5)... But the point is that these things were God's *gifts* to the church – they were given and received, not self-produced.

It's like a kid with an ear infection who takes a course of antibiotics and then says to his parents: "look at how good my natural immune system is!" The kid didn't do it, the meds did. He just received what was given to him.

Paul is making the same point he made back in chapter 1: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Paul’s words here show us the ugliness of a Christian community that is arrogant and proud – where believers view themselves too highly.’

And this isn’t just a Corinthian temptation. We can fall into this way of thinking too... We can have our own version of spiritual superiority. I suspect one of the dangers for Presbyterians is to take pride in our bible knowledge – “Boy we are knowledgeable when it comes to scriptures! Those other churches, they just preach wishy washy topical stuff... But *we* preach expository sermons. We work through whole passages and books of the bible in our studies. We can give you a summary of God’s redemptive-historical timeline that runs through the bible. We’ve got people we favour too, don’t we? We have the likes of Tim Keller in our Pressie camp. We trace our heritage from the great theologian, John Calvin. We like to point to big and influential names and say “we’re in *their* camp!”

Pride can happen in every church community? A church community might take pride in their emphasis on outreach, or their community programs, or the presence of particular spiritual gifts. As good as these things are, no church can boast in the gifts they have been given – whether it’s our bible knowledge, our musical talent, our good works in the community, the gifted leaders we have, all these gifts are *received* from God – churches do not produce them by their own power.

The Corinthians believed they did have a reason to boast in themselves though. They believed they had arrived spiritually and that somehow many of the future promises of God's kingdom had already begun to fall upon them.

Now, sometimes it's hard in scripture to see when the author is using sarcasm, or being ironic. Paul doesn't signal his different tones with an appropriate emoji so that it reads:

*<sup>8</sup> You are already full! You are already rich! You have begun to reign as kings without us*  
[eye roll emoji]—

We don't have emojis, but we do have the context. And the context tells us that Paul is saying these things in an ironic way – to highlight how absurd and arrogant their inflated view of themselves is.

“You guys act like you're living in the glory and comfort of Heaven in the here and now!”

Don't misunderstand what Paul is saying. He's not implying in these ironic words that believers are somehow lacking – that is not full or enriched in Christ. In Ephesians chapter 1, Paul is very clear that we have *every* spiritual blessing in Christ – and in that sense we *are* full, and we *are* enriched through the forgiveness and new life we have through faith in Jesus.

But as believers we don't *experience* yet the full glory of our new life until Jesus returns –and we dwell with God in the perfection of the new Heavens and earth. Until *that* day, we live out our new life in costly discipleship. Like our Lord, we endure the shame, slander and rejection that comes with proclaiming and living out the message of the cross in a world opposed to that message. The Corinthians, it would seem, had forgotten this - Opting for

comfortable discipleship over costly discipleship. Emphasising an admirable message of wisdom, rather than the “foolish” message of the cross.

Just look at how differently Paul speaks about his life as a believer (as well as the other apostles) compared to the lives of the Corinthians. Verse 9:

*<sup>9</sup> For I think God has displayed us, the apostles, in last place, like men condemned to die: We have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to people.*

“Unlike you guys, the world looks at us and sees an embarrassing spectacle! They don’t see a people in glory but shame.” Paul uses the imagery of those ancient gladiator games in which condemned criminals were thrown into the public arena, and made a spectacle of before being killed in some shameful way for public entertainment.. It’s a picture of complete shame.

And Paul only ratchets up his contrast doesn’t he? He really wants the Corinthians to recognise the chasm that exists between their experience of discipleship (view of themselves), and the apostle’s experience of discipleship. Look at verse 10:

*<sup>10</sup> We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! <sup>11</sup> Up to the present hour we are both hungry and thirsty; we are poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless; <sup>12</sup> we labor, working with our own hands. When we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; <sup>13</sup> when we are slandered, we respond graciously. Even now, we are like the scum of the earth, like everyone’s garbage.*

Jesus described discipleship in these words:

<sup>23</sup> ... *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*

Who do you think was more reflective of Jesus’ understanding of discipleship? The garbage apostles? Or the glorious Corinthians?

Now if you’re not a Christina you might think following Jesus sounds depressing, but Jesus taught us that in losing our lives for him we actually save them. Jesus calls people to put their trust in Him for the unimaginable blessing of forgiveness and eternal life. But He also calls his followers to costly discipleship – where our lives are lived completely for Him, not matter what.

Our master denied himself for our sake. We are called to deny ourselves for his name.

What is your view of discipleship? Of being a Christian. Would you say your view is more in line with Corinthians or the Apostles? Is your view of discipleship comfortable or costly?

Now, I don’t think this passage is saying that believers won’t ever experience degrees of comfort or success or status in the lives and careers. I don’t think it’s saying that every faithful believers will necessarily be poor and complete outcast from society. What Paul is getting at here is the radical nature of Christian discipleship – following Jesus will always be counter-cultural – and where there is a clash with the culture, we must bear the cost. Whether it’s a cost to our plans, our reputation, our income, or relationships.

Have you seen any cost to these things in your life?

Is your view of discipleship comfortable or counter-cultural and costly?

I suspect most of us wrestle with this at some level. I do. I wrestle with the idea that I am being called to out of comfort and into cost for Jesus' sake.

I remember chatting with one of my neighbours who I was getting to know. Perched up against the fence he says to me: "What actually is it that you do? I'm sorry but I have no idea what a minister does."

It's in moments like this that I sometimes feel that clash between comfort and cost. The comfort side of me, didn't want him thinking less of me. Like the Corinthians, I wanted to be seen by him as something significant in that moment. "Couldn't I just speak generally about being a spiritual guide to people." Couldn't I point to the community work we do as a church? Couldn't I also slip in to the conversation that I learnt two ancient languages in my theological studies and therefore know a few things. A comfortable discipleship says "yes" to all that.

But a costly discipleship says "I'm willing to pay a reputational cost and be seen by this guy as a "fool for Christ." For my Lord suffered and died for me. My Lord rose from the dead and will come again and be revealed as the Lord of all. And my Lord actually helps me in this moment to do what he wants... And with that in mind, I imperfectly explained to Him that my job is to teach people, from the bible about the forgiveness of sins that comes through believing in Jesus."

Now, let's be honest, the cost in that moment was in many ways minimal – I don't think I expected this guy to revile me, or persecute me, slander me, or treat me like scum of the earth – just think less of me... But if we are going to believers who pay the bigger costs we first need to ask for God's help to pay the smaller costs so that we get used to that kind of discipleship.

Paul and the apostles humbled themselves and became fools for Christ in the eyes of the world – and we are called to do likewise.

### **3. The Loving “Father in Christ.” (vv.14-21)**

Third, Paul describes his relationship to the Corinthians like a loving “father in Christ.”

How do you think the Corinthians would be feeling at this point? Paul has just exposed their understanding of themselves as completely flawed. Imagine having your pride and comfort directly contrasted with a picture of cross-shaped humility and suffering. How would that make you feel?

A couple of year ago Ruth and I popped into a local community event promoting the value of reducing household waste. A lady at the event shared with Ruth and I all the things she had done to cut down on her household waste. After explaining this, she then asked, “are you both recyclers too?” To which Ruth and I sheepishly said, “there's probably room for improvement in that area.” In fact, little did that lady know, but we had literally that week, ordered a bigger bin for household waste... It's easy to feel ashamed in the face of such devoted commitment.

Is that the point of Paul's words to the Corinthians? Is he simply out to shame them? No, look at what Paul says, verse 14:

*<sup>14</sup> I'm not writing this to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children. <sup>15</sup> For you may have countless instructors in Christ, but you don't have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

Paul was in some sense like a spiritual father to these believers. He wasn't responsible for their salvation, but he was the one who first preached the gospel to them. He was present as they became born-again as followers of Jesus. Like a devoted and faithful Dad, He wasn't out to shame and humiliate them, but nor was he seeking to be their buddies (like other "instructors" may have been). He was primarily invested in their well-being. He didn't want them to have an unhealthy and incorrect view of themselves. He didn't want them to lose sight of the centrality of the cross in their lives. And that's why, out of love and concern for them he tells them to follow His example in life (something which he's already been showing them!). Verse 16:

*<sup>16</sup> Therefore I urge you to imitate me. <sup>17</sup> This is why I have sent Timothy to you. He is my dearly loved and faithful child in the Lord. He will remind you about my ways in Christ Jesus, just as I teach everywhere in every church.*

Paul is telling the church to follow his example, but also to remember his ways and teaching as an Christ-commissioned apostle – which applies to every church (including Corinth, including Bundy). This is why he sends Timothy to Corinth. And it's not until the final verses here that you see how necessary Timothy's visit is. Paul again refers to the church as arrogant (v.18) – living as though he were not coming back. Living as though they could now safely move on from Paul and his cross-focused teaching. But notice Paul's response:

*<sup>9</sup> But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk, but the power of those who are arrogant. <sup>20</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. <sup>21</sup> What do you want? Should I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?*

Now some have understood this to mean that the KOG is not a matter of sermons and teaching – all that “talk.” Rather, powerful displays of the spirit in other ways. But the power Paul has in mind here actually *is* a message, a teaching – not the worldly wisdom of Corinth, but the message of Christ Crucified that he says in Chapter 1 is the “*power of God to us who are being saved.*”

Many in Corinthian church had made the mistake of thinking they were ready to move on from Paul’s teaching about Christ and him crucified. They had mistakenly believed that they needed to move on from this message into some higher, more refined version of wisdom teaching. Paul, as a loving Father is saying: “Don’t do that.” The real power comes from the gospel message and it’s implications – which we apostles have been telling you about.

And it’s on this point of application that I want to bring things to a close. We’ve seen that true discipleship involves being a faith servant of Christ, a humble fool for Christ. But it also means we keep listening to the word of the apostles in the NT who teach us the ways of Christ. Paul is not our Father in the same way he was to the Corinthians.. But he is one of the apostles sent by Jesus to teach us about the gospel and what it looks like to live that gospel out in our daily lives.

It's not just the Corinthians who want to move on from Paul, we can do it too.. We can think of him and his teaching as out of date, or simply misguided on some issues of discipleship – things like marriage, or sexuality or submission to government. We can downplay his words in the NT believing them to be of less significance in light of say the words of Jesus in the gospels. You see this in the Redletter Christian movement – This group of believers put their primary focus on the words of Jesus spoken only in the gospels (often written in red). But by in doing they are essentially saying that the words of Paul and the apostles (spoken in the NT letters) are somehow less important, less powerful, less authoritative – But these are Jesus' apostles and they pass on *Jesus message*.

Paul Barnett helpfully says: “The modern problem with Paul is the Corinthian's ancient problem with Paul.”

Discipleship involves learning from the apostles, not moving on from them. And this is important to know as this letter starts to engage with a number of different matters of Christian living – how we think about our sexuality, what we do when we are in disputes with one another, marriage, singleness, divorce, among other things that matter to us. Jesus wants us to listen to what He is saying through Paul, about all of these things. That is why in our church services, in our GGs, in one-to-one meetings we will often give some portion of the year to hearing what they have to say to us – just as we are doing now.

*Discipleship* is marked by listening to the words of the apostles, not moving on from them.

## **Conclusion**

Friends, in speaking about his own life and ministry, Paul has modelled for us what Christian discipleship looks like.

It's marked by faithfulness, not people pleasing.

It's marked by humility, not pride.

It's costly, not comfortable.

And it holds to the powerful gospel-centred word of Jesus' apostles.

I'm going to pray now that that picture of discipleship will be reflected among us. Let's pray.