

The ministry of power

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- [0 : 00] page 1148, and we're reading all of chapter 4 of Paul's first letters to the Corinthians.
1, 1, 4, 8. This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.
Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.
In fact, I do not even judge myself. I'm not aware of anything against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.
Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.
- [1 : 09] Then each one will receive his commendation from God. 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.
For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?
Already you have all you want. Already you have become rich. Without us you have become kings. And would that you did reign so that we might share the rule with you.
For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.
We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong.
- [2 : 32] We are held, sorry, you are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst.
We are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless.
When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat. We have become and are still like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.
I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers.
For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you then, be imitators of me.
- [3 : 34] That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.
Some are arrogant as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people, but their power.
For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love, in a spirit of gentleness?

Charlie, thanks very much for reading for us. Let me add my welcome. It's very good to have you with us this Sunday morning as we continue our series of talks in 1 Corinthians.

Just to say they're all on our website, and they very much follow on one from another. So if you've missed one, or if you've missed a growth group when we've been studying these passages in growth groups, then do please look online.

[4 : 44] Why don't I pray before we begin? Let's pray together. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power.

Heavenly Father, we long to be a church that is truly powerful. And we pray, therefore, this morning, please would you help us to hear your words, and to take it to heart.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Now I think our question for this morning, as we look at 1 Corinthians 4, the key question which this passage answers is what does a genuine Christian worker, a genuine Christian minister or leader, look like?

Now surprisingly, although it doesn't necessarily look like this, but actually surprisingly, it is one of the most important questions in the whole world. And that is because the message of Jesus Christ is proclaimed by people.

In other words, very few people become Christians by staying in a hotel somewhere, picking up the Bible that's in the bedside table drawer, and reading it, and putting their trust in Jesus there and then.

[5 : 56] Now most people become Christians because someone explains the message of Jesus to them. Which means that the life and character of the person who does that, the church minister, the Sunday club leader, the youth group leader, whoever it is, is important.

Because their life speaks. Not just what they say, but their life speaks. You see, imagine for a moment you go to a seminar on healthy living, and the speaker comes in on crutches and is struggling to catch their breath.

Or you go to a business seminar on how to run your own business, and the person speaking turns up late wearing a scruffy suit. You see, there's a mismatch, isn't there, between what they say and the way in which they are.

What does a Christian minister or leader look like? How can we distinguish between the fake and the genuine? Between the worldly and the truly spiritual?

I think it's fair to say that wrong decisions about which Christian leader to follow, which Christian leader to listen to, whose church to go to, probably cause more Christians to wander away from the truth than anything else.

[7 : 09] It is a very important question. While if you're here this morning looking in on the Christian faith, then for all the same reasons, then actually you need to be just as discerning.

After all, I hope one of the things we've grasped by now as we've been working through 1 Corinthians, both on Sunday mornings and in our growth groups, is that not all churches are the same. The church in Corinth adopted for a form of Christianity, which, humanly speaking, looked very impressive.

The kind of ministry that the surrounding culture applauded, but actually was worldly. A form of ministry which looked powerful, but actually, in terms of God's assessment, was really powerless.

It's the issue of power which has been at the heart of these first four chapters. So turn back just to chapter 1, verses 17 and 18, at the beginning of this section, chapters 1 to 4, chapter 1, verse 17.

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

[8 : 20] For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. And this issue of power is exactly how our section finishes.

Chapter 4, verse 20. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power. Now, last week, we saw that genuinely powerful Christian ministry looks foolish in this world and looks to the verdict of the next world.

And today, we see two more marks of genuinely powerful ministry, at which point, I need to encourage you to almost ignore the outline on the back of the service sheet.

It has gone through several revisions since it was sent off to Vicki on Thursday. The first heading will stick with that, but the rest of it, well, you'll see as we go along. So first of all, genuine Christian ministry imitates the Apostle Paul.

Genuine Christian ministry imitates the Apostle Paul. And what we do now, I think we get to the heart of what is going on between the church in Corinth and the Apostle Paul. It seems, in effect, they are wanting to turn their backs on Paul.

[9 : 29] Verse 3. They are judging him. It's a very small thing that I should be judged by you, says Paul. Verse 6. They go beyond what is written, which in Paul's writings always refers to Scripture.

Hence, in verse 8, the shock of verse 8, already you've become rich, and that's without us, without us apostles. In short, you see how Paul describes the Corinthians.

Verse 6. They are puffed up. Verse 18. Have a look at it. They are arrogant. As though I were not coming to you. You see, what are they saying?

Paul's not returning to Corinth. The church is ours. We can teach what we like. Verse 19. Again, arrogance. This, it seems, is the root of all the problems in the church in Corinth.

Let me just read a couple of sentences from Paul Barnett's excellent commentary on 1 Corinthians. The Corinthians had a faulty grasp of many things.

[10 : 37] For example, they compromised with pagan sexuality and idolatry, their love of law courts, their crass individualism, and their belief in the coming resurrection of the dead.

But these were just symptoms of a deeper illness, a refusal to submit to the authority of the apostle to the Gentiles, to the authority of the apostle Paul.

Because the truth is that Paul, as an apostle, had a unique authority. The gospel came to Corinth from Paul. Verse 15. For there you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers.

Now, may I say, I think one of the surprising and dare I say it, unnerving things about being a teenager is that you begin to discover what actually everyone else has known for years, and that is you are just like your parents.

You are like your parents, you look like your parents, your mannerisms are like your parents. I'm trying very hard not to look at anyone in particular. But I'm sorry if I am.

[11 : 51] Now, I guess the fact is you just have to get used to it, don't you? You just have to embrace reality. Children imitate their parents. It's what they do. Well, in the same way here, you see, Paul is saying, I am your spiritual father.

You heard the gospel through me. I am there to be imitated. Verse 16. I urge you then be imitators of me. Paul is a genuine apostle through whom the gospel came to Corinth.

He's their spiritual father. They are to imitate him. Why? Because to imitate Paul is to imitate the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 17. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach them everywhere in every church.

Paul's message, his teaching, his pattern of ministry came from Jesus himself. This is what Paul teaches everywhere. It's what he teaches in every church. This is genuine Christian ministry.

In other words, what Paul is teaching, what Paul is modeling, is not simply sort of one model of ministry amongst many, equally valid. No, it is the God-given way of doing Christian ministry.

[13 : 06] Paul says to the Corinthians, what makes you, Corinthians, think you're any different? that this doesn't apply to you. Do you see, rather like a boat that's kind of drifted away from its moorings, Paul is trying to bring the Corinthians back.

They are in serious danger. Paul is saying, verse 17, the core beliefs and core practices of churches are to be the same everywhere.

Yes, of course, styles of worship and ways of doing things will differ from culture to culture and age to age, but not the things that really matter. If the Corinthians or any other church are unwilling to imitate the Apostle Paul in the message that he proclaimed, in his teaching, in his way of doing things, in his manner of life, then what it demonstrates at the end of the day is they are unwilling to follow the Lord Jesus.

Isn't that very striking? And therefore, they are not really Christian at all. Now, sadly, the error of rejecting the authority of the Apostles and especially of Paul is just as common today.

Paul is accused of tampering with the message of Jesus. He is accused of being anti-women. He is accused of peddling a narrow sexual morality. There are plenty of people who call themselves Christians, but actually, who want to distance themselves from Paul.

[14 : 36] He is an embarrassment to them, just as he was to the church in Corinth. A friend of mine is on General Synod, the Church of England's governing body, and she was telling me over the summer that if she or others are making a point in the debate, she was saying, we can just about get away with quoting from one of the Gospels.

But quote from Paul or mention Paul, she said, and you can begin to hear the snorts of derision from some. The media invariably paint Paul as being on the extremist wing of Christianity.

But Paul's whole argument, and we've seen this, haven't we, in 1 Corinthians, has been that God spoke through the apostles. He's revealed himself, chapter 2, verses 10 to 16, through their writing.

And therefore, genuine Christian ministry places itself under the authority of the apostles. apostles. It must follow that those who refuse to do that are not genuine Christian leaders.

They may look like it. They may be intellectually respectable, but they are not the real thing. Now, I guess at this point it'd be easy to think, wouldn't it, well, do we have to be quite so sort of black and white about things?

[15 : 58] Do we have to be quite so clear-cut? Well, just listen to these very helpful words from J.C. Ryle, the 19th century Bishop of Liverpool, writing, he says, Beware of supposing that a teacher of religion is to be trusted, because although he holds some unsound views, he yet teaches a great deal of truth.

Such a teacher is precisely the man to do you harm. Poison is always most dangerous when it's given in small doses and mixed with wholesome food.

Genuinely powerful Christianity, Christian ministry, imitates the Apostle Paul. Now, I think, I take it, this is especially warning to us, if like the Corinthians, we are concerned about what other people think of us, and we value what other people think of us.

You see, if we like to be thought of as being wise and intelligent in our dealings with others, to hold to Paul's teaching is not popular, and we need to recognize that.

The great temptation for us, you see, will be to move away from Paul towards a different form of Christianity, which is really no Christianity at all. Genuine Christian ministry imitates the Apostle Paul.

[17 : 18] And then my second point, therefore, genuine Christian ministry is shaped by the cross. Therefore, genuine Christian ministry is shaped by the cross, verses 8 to 13.

And once again, we see how the church in Corinth were conditioned by their culture, by the success-orientated culture of Corinth. Verse 8, already, you have all you want.

Already, you've become rich. It's as if Paul is saying to the Corinthians, you Corinthians, you really are a cut above the rest, aren't you? You've managed to kind of zoom up to heaven and leave us apostles behind.

It's wonderful the tone of irony in which Charlie read these verses. It seems that the Corinthians have started to claim that all the promises about the future and the new creation can be experienced in the here and now.

That verse 8, they were already reigning with Christ. already sharing his rule, free from suffering and hardship. Indeed, when we get on to chapter 15 at the very end of the book, we see they've stopped believing in that future physical resurrection.

[18 : 31] Because you see, they think they're already living the triumphant, powerful Christian life now. It's why Paul asks those three questions in verse 7, for who sees anything different in you?

And of course, the answer is no one. They see a lot different in themselves, but no one else does. What do you have that you did not receive? Well, the answer is nothing.

If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? at which point Paul doesn't answer the question. He saves their blushes. I guess it would be rather like celebrating Christmas today on the 6th of December.

Imagine this afternoon you go off and buy your Christmas tree, you go off and buy your turkey, you come home, you throw the turkey in the oven, you put the Christmas tree up in your living room, you get all your decorations out, you decorate your tree, you're already well organized, so you've got all your presents, so you wrap them all up, you lay your dining table, it all looks beautiful, and then about sort of 6 o'clock this evening a neighbor just happens to pass by and rings the doorbell, I've got this for you, I meant to give it to you, a parcel that was delivered, and you say, would you like to come and celebrate Christmas?

Well, I guess they'd be a bit bemused, wouldn't they? It's the 6th of December, not the 25th. There's still a lot of waiting to do. Life on the 6th of December is not what it's going to be on the 25th of December.

[19 : 59] And life as a Christian before Jesus returns is not what life will be like once Jesus has returned. Yes, those who follow Jesus, we have much to rejoice in now, the confidence of forgiveness of sins, the presence of God's Holy Spirit with us, the promise of heaven, but we are not there yet, we are waiting.

It's why in verse 11, Paul says, to this present hour, we hunger and thirst, you see, because until Jesus returns, until Jesus brings in the new creation, genuine Christian ministry must not only continue to proclaim the message of Jesus, but also to share the experience of the cross of Christ as well.

So we proclaim the cross of Christ, and we share the experience of the cross of Christ, of Christ crucified. If we forget that, then inevitably, we will either fall for self-delusion or disappointment.

And therefore, with mocking, biting irony, Paul says, verses 9 to 13, for I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we've become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men.

We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute.

[21 : 30] To the present hour, we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless, when persecuted, we endure, when slandered, we entreat, we've become and still are, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

And I guess at this point, the Corinthians are left blushing with embarrassment. Perhaps this is how they saw themselves, or at least what they inspired, they aspired to be.

Rich, kings, reigning, wise, strong, honoured. Perhaps this is how they thought of Paul, foolish, weak, disreputable.

We apostles, says Paul, we are treated like prisoners of war. Verse 9, a picture of the military parade in Rome, when a conquering army returns to Rome with all the senior military officers at the front, the junior ranks behind, and then right at the very back, the prisoners of war being dragged along in the dust, about to face death in the arena.

That is how we feel as apostles, as genuine apostles, says Paul, like men destined for the arena. What's more, verse 12, we do manual labour, Paul the tent maker, so unsophisticated to aspirational Corinth.

[22 : 55] What's more, we repay abuse with blessing, he says, when reviled, we bless, when persecuted, we endure, when slandered, we entreat. We are like the scum of the world, literally, the scrapings, the stuff you scrape off your shoe when you've been for a walk in the park.

Why? Well, because this is how God wins, through suffering, and hardship, and weakness. These things are not accidental, they are entirely appropriate, an entirely appropriate vehicle for proclaiming the message of Jesus crucified.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah describes Jesus in these terms, Isaiah 53, verses 2 and 3. He had no formal majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised. And we esteemed him not.

Suffering and weakness, the very means God used to achieve his purposes, and to achieve glory for Jesus Christ who is now Lord and King, and to everyone will see his Lord and King on the final day.

[24 : 26] But this pattern of suffering and hardship then, from the lips of Jesus, becomes the pattern for everyone who should follow him. Mark chapter 8, verse 34 and 35, according to the crowds, he said to his disciples, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. You see, this is God's pattern. God's pattern for his son, God's pattern for the apostles, God's pattern for every Christian, everyone who should follow Jesus.

Cross-shaped, self-denying service now, and then glory in the future. And so you see, just as a conference on healthy living needs a speaker who looks healthy, just as a seminar on how to run a business needs a speaker who turns up on time and looks the part.

So the weak, unimpressive, foolish message of Jesus crucified needs weak, unimpressive messengers who are willing to look foolish. Now, I take it the point is that not every Christian should expect to suffer or will necessarily suffer as much as Paul did.

Many do, of course. Christians in India, many of whom are lower caste, poorly dressed, manual laborers. Christians in Syria, Christians in Iraq who we prayed for earlier who are homeless.

[26 : 01] Christians in China who are reviled and persecuted and slandered. But you see, the issue is about our expectations. Our expectations of what it's like to follow Jesus and to be a local church and individuals who are seeking to make Jesus known and proclaiming the message of the cross.

until the end of the age, those who follow Jesus will take up their cross, they will die to self-interest daily. And the less any society knows of that way, then actually the more it is those who follow Jesus will endure suffering and hardship and the more foolish they will look.

It's no surprise, is it, that the church in Corinth was wanting to turn away from proclaiming the message of Christ crucified and certainly to turn away from a lifestyle of taking up their cross.

Now I guess to some of us this morning this may all feel very, very alien and very, very strange. in which case I think we've got to ask ourselves the question, does our desire for approval now in this world outstrip our desire for approval from the Lord Jesus on the final day?

If you have never felt like this as a follower of Jesus or if you are unwilling to feel like this as a follower of Jesus such that you won't speak about Jesus and his crucifixion and you won't explain the gospel or you'll only explain part of the gospel and only go this far then is it because actually you are so in love with this world and so in love with what other people think that actually you are ashamed of the crucified saviour.

[28 : 05] But I hope too there'll be others for whom actually this will be a real encouragement because actually there have been times when this is just how we have felt perhaps at school mocked by others for following Jesus or perhaps at work you've tried to speak to colleagues about the gospel and you've been reviled or perhaps just in the last few days or the last few weeks you've been faithfully inviting people along to carol services and yes, wonderfully there are those who have said yes but also the host of indifference that so often comes with invitations like that and it makes you feel weak something of an outsider or being encouraged.

Can you see this is what genuine Christian experience experience is like? This is what genuine Christian ministry is like. And what about Christian leaders?

Well there's no point says Paul sitting around thinking how marvelous it would have been to be an apostle. No, we apostles are treated like vermin the scum of the earth.

If we want Christian leaders who are honored who are looked up to who are well regarded by society who are pillars of the establishment then we need to think again.

And yet wonderfully how does Paul finish this whole section in chapters 1 to 4? Well look again at verse 20. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.

[29 : 47] This is what truly powerful Christian ministry looks like. This is what a truly powerful church looks like. Let's have a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer.

Amen. I urge you then be imitators of me. Heavenly Father we thank you very much for the apostle Paul for his imitating of the Lord Jesus.

We thank you for Paul's message that he proclaimed the message of Christ crucified and his life and ministry so shaped by the cross the hardship and suffering he endured for the sake of making Jesus known.

And we pray Heavenly Father that as individuals and as a church family we likewise would be willing to imitate Paul.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake and that we would look forward to that well done good and faithful servant on the final day rather than to the applause of those around us.

[31 : 05] And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. And this Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.