

1 Cor. 4:6-21

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[0:00] So, as you're all aware, Father Ife has been doing a sermon series through the book of 1 Corinthians.

! And the Corinthian church, they had a couple problems. I won't mention them all, but they suffered from divisions. They had divisions in the church. And another problem they had was they got puffed up.

And Ife has been emphasizing that the wisdom of God is different than the wisdom of the world. The wisdom that Father Ife has been talking about is Christ crucified. It's centered on the cross in the message of the crucified Christ, which is in contrast to the wisdom of the world, which puffs up, which is like a lot of hot air blowing up a balloon.

And what it does is it takes away our focus from the gospel that was given to us by the apostles. The gospel where Jesus said, If anyone comes after me, let them pick up their cross and follow me.

[1:16] The Corinthians had blended the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of their day. And they were kind of getting away from that cross message a little bit.

Kind of getting away from the suffering and the hardness of the message. And instead focusing on wisdom. As if they had a more evolved, advanced gospel.

It was only subtly different from Paul's gospel. I mean, after all, they still did believe in Jesus and the message. But they had wisdom. They were going to add to it. And the benefit of this wisdom is it would make things a little bit easier because it wouldn't emphasize the hardships that sometimes afflict the life of the Christian.

The crosses and the trials. Then last week, Bishop Day, as he preached to us, he reminded us that we are called to be servants and stewards for our Lord Jesus Christ.

And he reminded us from the word, It's the Lord who judges us. Because we just said the Apostles' Creed, The Lord will come back to judge the quick and the dead.

[2:28] That's us. And at this time, when the Lord judges, He's going to reveal the contents of what's in our heart. And everyone else's hearts. Therefore, He'll judge a righteous judgment.

So, bringing us today's passage, verses 6 through 21 in chapter 4, it kind of serves as a reality check. And what Paul subtly does is, He doesn't mention people leading factions in the divisions in church by name.

He doesn't name names of people espousing this new wisdom that they've added to the cross. But what Paul does is, He takes the Corinthian problem, and he applies it to himself and Apollos.

So, it's a very subtle, loving way to deal with a problem without singling anyone out, by putting the solution on yourself first, and then letting the receivers of the message connect the dots.

It was very gracious and loving of the Apostle Paul. So, if we look at verses 6 and 7, 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.

[3:58] And the verses that I read after this, they cut through the Corinthians' wisdom like a knife. Because, we ask ourselves the question, what does it mean to go beyond what is written?

What is written? It's the Word of God. And the specific message that Paul was referring to here was just the simple message of Christ crucified for our sins.

Because remember what Jesus said. He said, Blessed are those who hunger after righteousness. They will be satisfied. What had happened to the Corinthians is they started hungering after a wisdom that wasn't based on the practical application of God's righteousness.

Their wisdom wasn't seeking the practical righteousness that we all need as believers for our daily walk. It was seeking a more worldly, easier way. Kind of a polished up gospel, so to speak.

One that maybe was a little bit less bloody and maybe a little bit more shiny. More appealing to ourselves and to the world. And then in the verses that follow, there's a little bit of sarcasm there. [5:13] You know, Paul says, You guys are like kings. You're reigning. And then there's a very abrupt transition that hits home really hard. And they even go on to mention that they were doing work with their hands.

And they meant like physical work. Like Paul was a tent maker. And the reason why this is significant is in these days, hard physical labor was reserved for slaves. You didn't do that. You didn't mention in polite company what was the work that slaves were doing. That was just impolite. Because that was hard. It got sweaty. It got dirty. And Paul says that we and the other apostles were working with our hands.

Like servants. Or slaves. So this begs the question, How did the Corinthians get to this point where this reality check was needed?

And the answer is the same answer that afflicts many of us and many churches over time. The answer is pride. Because pride is the antithesis or antithetical to a thirst for righteousness.

[6:30] Because we have no righteousness in and of ourselves. Our intellect, our wisdom, our wealth, our families, our treasures, our things. As far as obtaining the righteousness of God is concerned, all our works are completely useless.

The world's wisdom is completely useless. There's only one place we can get this righteousness.

And that's from God. And as we walk through this life, this is where we have to stay focused.

And this is what Paul was talking about when he said not going beyond what was written. The message of the gospel and the cross is very simple. Anyone can read the gospels and pick it up.

You don't need an advanced theology degree. Anyone can do it. Anyone can emulate it if they follow Christ as Lord and Savior because they receive the Holy Spirit. But the Corinthians, they got a little bit more sophisticated and they decided to modify the formula.

You know, we've heard the phrase seeker sensitive. We want to admit some of those hard aspects because, well, you know that whole guy dying on the cross, that's kind of offensive, isn't it? Let's not focus on that.

[7:43] Let's just focus on the teaching and the wisdom. We'll make the gospel more appealing. More people will come into the pews. We'll have a bigger church. Things will be easier.

We won't have to agonize over our sins as much. We won't have to repent as much. Sounds good, doesn't it? But that's not the answer.

And Paul, very subtly, when he asks these questions, he says, Already, you have all you want.

But before that, he says, Who sees anything different in you? Are we different than anyone else?

We're all the same at the end of the day, right?

We're sinners. There are sinners who've received grace and sinners who have not received grace.

But one thing we have all in common? We're all sinful people. And what do you have that you do not receive?

[8:50] You think about your life, everything that you own, your parents that you have, your family, your jobs, your cars, everything you can name and list all about you.

You received everything. Now, did you receive these things because of your own power, efforts, and goodness? Or at the end of the day, did we receive everything from God because it's he who gives light to our eyes?

Jesus is the light of the world. He gives life to all of us. If Jesus isn't giving life to all of us, none of us can receive anything, can we? So at the end of the day, everything we receive, we receive from God.

And here's the flip side of the question. If you then received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? Have you ever seen anyone boast in their spiritual gifts?

I speak in tongues. Oh, you're not right with God until you speak in tongues. I have the gift of healing. Oh, you don't. I have the gift of wisdom, but you don't.

[10:05] I have the gift of discernment. You don't. It's too bad for you, isn't it? You see how centering on the gifts and not the giver of the gifts and the purposes of the gift leads to being puffed up like you're special, that you're more important than your brother or sister sitting next to you in the pew?

This is a hard question. Our spiritual gifts are given for a purpose. They are meant to build up the body of Christ until all reach maturity.

They're meant to serve. They're not meant to be bragging points. And then Paul goes straight to the heart of the matter.

Already you have all you want. Already you have become rich. Without us you have become kings. Isn't that passage smack of self-sufficiency?

Just a little bit? Or has any of us ever thought, Oh, you know, I'm healthy. I've got a good family. I've got a good job. I've got money in the bank.

[11:15] I've got good insurance plans. I've got my retirement going. I have everything I need. Maybe I'll take a vacation and relax.

Any of us ever been there? And in that little monologue I just recited, where was God in all of that? No mention.

No mention of my dependence on God. God. In fact, Paul specifically mentions, Without us, you have become kings. And would that you did reign so that we might share that rule with you.

And let's be honest. I mean, we all know about the promise of glory in the Christian faith. You know, when we're home with the Lord, we're going to get the version 2.0 body.

We're going to be glorified. And it's going to be great, right? Well, yeah. That's very, very true. But, in the Bible, it talks about Jesus began His ascent to the throne when He went to the cross.

[12:21] Because just prior to that, He said, Father, glorify Your name. And the Father answered that prayer at once. And in the next section of Scripture, He's betrayed into the hands of sinners.

So, Jesus began His glorification when He began that walk to the cross. That path to the cross included beating, humiliation, mockery, blood loss, pain, suffering.

All the things that sometimes we go through as Christians that we want to skip. Right? Because, if any of us have gone through prolonged periods of suffering, maybe like an illness or a bankruptcy, not being able to find a job, not being able to find a car, having to go without health insurance, watching a loved one die from cancer, you guys can all fill in the blanks.

Sometimes suffering in the faith can be prolonged. It can go on for years. So, it's only human to kind of think to ourselves, man, I wish I could just skip all of this and go straight to the glory part.

Wouldn't that be great? Or, when we see suffering in others, what are we tempted to do? I don't know about you, but I used to be tempted to run away.

[13:54] It's like, I don't want to catch their misfortune. It might rub off on me. Or, maybe when you're suffering, you're like the wounded dog. Because what does a dog do when it's wounded? Goes into the corner, all alone, and mopes.

We tend to retreat. So, it's like a double-edged sword. When suffering afflicts us, sometimes we can be isolated because we isolate ourselves, or others isolate themselves from us.

It can go both ways. But the idea is we want to run. We want to skip it. It would be a lot better to go to the glory first, right? But that's not the way.

That wasn't the way for Jesus Christ. And it isn't the way for us. And it wasn't the way for the apostles. I mean, this passage of Scripture is scathing, if you think about it.

Because they said, 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.

[15:07] Well, that sounds a lot like what happened to Jesus Christ, doesn't it? Jesus marched on a parade to His own death, carrying the cross for as long as He could.

Jesus was a spectacle to the world. He was crucified in public in the full view of the world. And the apostles are following His manner of life.

And look at verse 10. He says, We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. So what thought was Paul addressing there?

Ah, you remember the Corinthians? They picked up this wisdom thing, this little bit of wisdom from the world. They were going to script to the glory part. I'm wise. I'm in control.

I'm going to rule. We're not going to talk about that crucifixion stuff so much, because we're wise. Really? Really?

[16:11] And then he goes on to hammer him even harder. He says, We are weak, but you are strong. And if we pause here for a minute to think about suffering, like if we're in a lot of pain ourselves, or someone else is in a lot of pain, or your heart's broken, or someone else's heart is broken, it's weakness, isn't it?

It's the opposite of strength. But what does the word say? God's strength is perfected in our weakness. And Paul goes on to say that the weakness of Christ, weakness in parentheses,

submitting to the hands of men and allowing themselves to be killed, was the power of God at work. And it resulted in the salvation of all who believe. In Christianity, weakness is strength. And the strength and wisdom of the world is spiritual folly and spiritual weakness.

This righteousness that we are seeking, this righteousness that Paul is describing in his life and the life of the apostles, this is what we're supposed to hunger and thirst for.

We're supposed to thirst and hunger for righteousness. Not wisdom, not glory, but righteousness.

[17:41] Because to think about it, what is the one thing we need the most to stand in God's presence? Righteousness. His righteousness. So, let's look back over the past 2,000 years.

How has this gospel worked? Have those who have followed the gospel, who lived the gospel, and believed in the gospel, did they succeed in obtaining this righteousness?

Or, did they stray off the path and go another way like the Corinthians started to do before Paul corrected them and achieve success that way? I mean, ask yourself a hard question.

Is there another path to righteousness other than this one being spoken of here by the apostles in the gospel? In fact, if we look at the last 2,000 years of history, of philosophy, of wisdom, what's man trying to do?

Uncovering every stone, going down every path, trying to find a way to make people better without that God stuff, without that cross stuff, without that crucifix stuff.

[18:54] And how's it worked? How has the 2,000 years since the ascension of Christ, how's it gone for that search? Has man found an alternative to the gospel in the last 2,000 years?

No. No. And what's sad here for the Corinthians, the ink wasn't even dry in the New Testament, and they were starting to modify it just like people do today, before the ink was even dried on the scrolls. But this is a temptation we all face. It's a temptation for churches, and it tempts us as individuals. So we have it coming at us from both directions, individually and corporately, because the world wants to pull us away from this apostolic, Christ-centered wisdom.

We're okay preaching Christ as long as we do it the world's way. They'll put up with that. But look at this list that comes after this. We are weak, but you are strong.

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 hands.

[20:15] 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. Does this sound like the formula for our lives? I mean, ask yourself, do we always do this?

Do we endure hunger and thirst for the sake of the gospel, like the apostles did? Do we suffer being poorly dressed, buffeted, and homeless?

From the hardships of life for the sake of the gospel? Do we do things with our hands, wearing ourselves out to support ourselves or others? When we are cursed or reviled, do we always bless and return?

I mean, how un-American, right? This whole list is very un-American. In fact, I don't see the American dream in these lines here anywhere, do you? No. Do you bless when you're persecuted?

[21:30] When someone gives you a hard time, do you bless them in return? When you're slandered and your reputation is attacked, do you endure it and entreat?

Do you take the risk of becoming the scum of the world and the refuse of the world to follow Christ? Consider how Jesus was rejected by men. Jesus was rejected by his own people and he did what was right and he suffered for it.

These apostles, the reason why they were able to preach the gospel is they lived like Christ. They applied this formula to the need to acquire the righteousness that comes from God.

It's not catchy slogans, it's not catchy studies, it's not catchy programs. To get this righteousness from God after our conversion, it requires us to live a life of faith and it requires us to live like Jesus Christ and the apostles.

[22:46] If anyone asks you, what's the formula for spiritual growth? How do I become more advanced in the kingdom of God? This is the passage and it's not popular in today's world, is it?

In fact, we are investing all our time and effort to eliminate suffering from our lives and we think if we pass enough laws and rules and regulations, we can make everything safe.

Warning labels will deliver us all, right? We'll be protected from ourselves and hazards. But if we go down that path, aren't we going to be just like the Corinthians and miss the boat?

Jesus came so we could have righteousness, not indulge in the world's wisdom. Now, it would be unfair to think that Paul was using this hard example to shame the Corinthians.

That's not Paul's intent here and that's not my intent today. Because look at what he says. I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.

[24:03] For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ through the gospel. So, I'll just throw a question out there.

You don't have to answer it. You don't have to raise your hands. How many of you have led someone else to Christ? How many of you have led to Christ? When you lead someone to Christ, you're a father to that person in the gospel.

And if we're honest, when we look at the congregations that we see in the churches, are there a lot of fathers? No. However, the world is full of teachers and guides on how to follow Christ, aren't they?

Isn't it? Everyone's got a study, everyone's got a show, everyone's got a book. I mean, you go to the bookstore, man, there are tons of books on this, that, and the other thing on how to follow Jesus.

Right? YouTube videos, internet broadcasts, the whole nine yards. But how many of these speakers and authors are fathers to others in Jesus Christ through leading other souls to salvation?

[25:23] To Jesus. How many? That's why he's able to say what he says here in verse 16, I urge you then, be imitators of me.

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. So this is the same formula for everywhere, every church.

And Timothy was Paul's son in the faith because this is how Timothy lived. It wasn't just about what Timothy said. It was about how Timothy lived his life.

He lived his life like the apostles lived, as an offering for Christ. because Timothy was the type of person who would return blessing for cursing, would endure persecution, would accept being slandered in the loss of reputation, was willing to become like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

Timothy was someone who would do that, which is why Paul could trust him and send him to the church at Corinth to help them get back on track. Paul didn't want to admonish them and yell at them or make them feel bad.

[26:51] He just wanted them to get back on track, to pick up their cross and resume following Christ, and hunger and thirst for righteousness, not things of the world.

Because when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, that's hungering and thirsting for God and His ways, to become holy and sanctified. And by the way, holiness is a path to happiness.

The world would have you think holiness is like a killjoy of all things. Holy people never have any fun. That is a ridiculous myth. Because a couple sermons ago, Paul said, let's talk about these sins. sins of which are now ashamed. I mean, we can honestly say some sins have a temporary pleasure, right? Makes us feel good, makes some of our needs be met, right?

But, has a path of sin ever led to life? In fact, sin makes a lot of false promises.

[28:04] promises. All kinds of promises. Have they ever come true? I mean, let's be honest, sin corrupts, pollutes, destroys, causes conflict.

It's at the root of every problem in this world. And in the end, it kills. sin. So, so why would those of us who are in Christ, like Paul talks about in Romans, we are dead to sin.

It means that the power of sin to dominate us is broken because we have Christ and the Holy Spirit. It doesn't mean that sin is extinct in our life. When Paul says we are dead to sin, what he's talking about is the power of sin to dominate us is broken.

We can choose to live for God. Now, God knows we're weak. God knows we're prone to wander. But, remember that third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit was sent to help us because God knows we're weak. God knows we need help. But with a little bit of faith and some prayer and the help of the Holy Spirit, we can emulate the apostles who are emulating Jesus Christ.

[29:28] Every believer can do this. It doesn't take a divinity degree. It doesn't take a master's in Bible studies. It just takes recognition of the pattern that's in Jesus Christ's life.

And with the help of the Holy Spirit, we apply it to ourselves. That's all. It's really a very simple formula. Now, Paul was no fool.

In verse 18, he recognized, well, this all sounds really good and spiritual, but someone might say, you know what, I'm going to wave my finger at this one. So Paul said, 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 those arrogant people, but their power. So an apostle is someone sent by Christ.

they have power. They have power to plant. They have power to build up. But they also have the power of the Lord for correction. So I'm just going to take a little quick detour and go over to Acts 13 and read verses 9 and 11.

[30 : 39] Now you guys remember that in Acts, that sorcerer figure, he was a magician, and he thought, oh, I could buy this wonderful power that Paul is exhibiting.

And look what happens. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?

And now behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

This is what Paul is talking about when he talks about the rod of correction. And that's why when we get to the end of this passage that we're talking about today, Paul says, all right, these people who want to be arrogant and call into question this, it's not about words, it's about power.

Are you going to stand against God? Do you honestly think if you're in opposition to all of this and you think you're wiser and smarter than all of this, how do you think that's going to go?

[32 : 07] Who do you think is going to win the debate? But Paul didn't want to go there. That's why he ends this with a question, what do you wish?

Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness? sometimes parallel passages of scriptures are very useful for understanding other parts of scripture.

In the book of Revelation, there's seven letters to seven churches and one of them is addressed to the church in Laodicea. Now, they had problems in common with the Corinthian church, but they were not identical to the Corinthian church.

But, they did suffer from this feeling of self-sufficiency and they thought, I have everything, I don't need anything.

Listen to what the Lord has to say. And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write, the words of the Amen, the faithful and the true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

[33 : 19] I know your works, you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you are either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

Now, listen closely here. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich. rich. There's that word again. And white garments, so that you may clothe yourself, and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and solve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. So if this message is cutting through your thinking like it cut through the Corinthians thinking, hear what the Lord Jesus has to say.

I reprove and discipline, be zealous and repent. Why? Because he loves you. Jesus wants what's best for you.

[34 : 35] He wants you to hunger and thirst for righteousness, the practical righteousness that will govern your life, like it did the lives of the apostles and Timothy. Because this is what's best.

This is what's most needed. And this is the path to true happiness. The wisdom of the world that would take you away from the cross appears to be a path to happiness, but it's a lie.

Only following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and the apostles, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, can we find true happiness in God. A happiness that will never be taken away or destroyed or threatened.

Jesus says, Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit

with me on my throne.

So I come back to the passage in Corinthians about the whole rule and glory thing, the king thing. As I also conquered and sat down with my father on his throne, he who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches.

[35 : 51] You know, and this is the way of our Lord. He lovingly addressed these problems that the Corinthians had gotten themselves into. Like a loving father correcting his children, he brought them back to the way.

And it isn't amazing. Here it is, 2,000 years later, and this message to Corinth is just as avant-garde today as it was then.

Because truth be known, I mean, I've wandered down this path myself sometimes in my life, and I've needed to be corrected. And I suspect that it's probably true for many of you as well.

But hear the word of the Lord Jesus. He loves you. Be earnest. Be zealous. Be repentant. Get back on track. Because it's going to lead to much better things.

So when the apostle does come to visit, it'll be love, with love, and the spirit of gentleness. Thank you.