

'Imitating Paul's Cruciform Life'

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[0:00] Well, I thought I'd start this morning with a bit of a clapping test that teachers used! to use at school to get students' attentions. So the idea is I clap a pattern and then you! imitate me. And so this is a congregational participation moment. Are you ready? Okay, here we go. We'll keep it. We'll start easy. Ready? Yeah, not too bad. Okay, let's make it a little bit trickier. Hey, you're all over it. Hey, well done. And it proves the point that people are good at imitating others, aren't they? In fact, there's a whole industry online amongst young people in particular called influencers. And they seek to try and get others to imitate them, whether for good or bad, actually. Well, today, the Apostle Paul is like the original influencer who encourages the

Corinthians and us to imitate him. And we see it most clearly in verse 16 of our passage where he says simply, therefore, I urge you to imitate me. Now, that might sound a bit arrogant of Paul to say, but as we'll see, he can say it because in the end, he imitates Christ who was crucified for us.

In other words, Paul seeks to live a cruciform or cross-shaped life, one of humble and sacrificial service like Jesus. Whereas it's actually the Corinthians who have a problem with arrogance, like when it comes to church leaders. And so they're to imitate Paul's view of leaders that he's been talking about in the last couple of chapters, which brings us to our point one, which will be our longest point this morning. So verse one, he begins, this then is how you ought to regard us church leaders as servants of Christ and of those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.

We're to view church leaders as servants, those entrusted with the gospel and given a job to do. Here, Paul simply repeats what we heard last week in chapter three, where he again says, what is a polis? What is Paul? Only servants are given a job or a task assigned to each by the Lord Jesus. And so he needs to tell the Corinthians this because they didn't have this view of church leaders as servants, but as people they could boast in to follow, to make themselves look good. I remember they were boasting last week about which leader they followed to make them look spiritually superior.

[2:58] And we see it again this week in down in verse six, where he says, then you will not be puffed up or literally arrogant in being a follower of one of us over against the other. You see, they were puffed up saying that this leader they followed made them spiritually superior. It's kind of like if kids say, oh, I went to this high school or secondary college. No, I went to this one to make themselves sound superior. Or I gave the illustration of me telling my friend last week, I gave this illustration about, you know, we were married by a minister who became the bishop. And then they said, well, we were married by the person who became the archbishop. In fact, last night, my daughter was at a friend's birthday party from Donvale Christian College. And apparently there was lots of pastors kids there. And she heard them saying, oh, well, my dad's a minister of this church. And my dad's a minister of this church. And she almost said, well, my dad's a senior minister.

Thankfully, she didn't, because that was Corinthian. That's what they were doing. Only in a Christian school would you hear that, by the way. But that's to put certain leaders up on a pedestal to make you look better. It's not a cross-shaped view of leaders as servants, is it?

Of course, as servants of Christ, leaders must prove faithful to the job they've been given by Christ. Verse 2, it's required that those who've been given a trust must prove faithful.

Not just faithful in teaching the gospel they've been entrusted to, but also faithful in leading the people they've had entrusted to them. And so if you, by way of application, if you lead some sort of ministry here that teaches the Bible, whether at a kid's church or Bible study, or even pastoral care as you open the word and so on, you need to be, make sure, we need to make sure that we are faithful to God's word and faithful to that role. Because there have been far too many church leaders who have not been faithful, haven't they? And that should not be the case. And so for those who've been given a trust, we must prove faithful. But as servants of Christ, it also means leaders will

ultimately be judged by Christ. Verse 3, Now the appointed time is clearly judgment day. And the judgment Paul is talking about, here is in terms of reward or not, for faithfulness, rather than judgment for sin. On judgment day, there'll be both. So Jesus will firstly put this world right by holding everyone accountable.

And that means people are paying for all their own sin, unless, like most of us here, I take it, we believe or they believe in Jesus. And his death then pays for all our sin. And so that we're saved from eternal death in hell to enjoy eternal life in heaven, and then the new creation. That's the big judgment. And that's why it's really worth believing in Jesus, isn't it? But there's also a smaller judgment for Christians in terms of reward for faithfulness, which is why at the end of verse 5, Paul says, at that time, each will receive their praise from God. Either way, it's talking about judgment day.

[6:47] And so it's talking about passing final judgment on someone, like leaders. The Corinthians, that's what they were doing. Passing final judgment, writing off one leader against another without knowing all the facts, like the motives of their hearts. It would be like people here saying at our church, oh, I love that new guy, James. He's the best preacher we have. The rest should just give up and resign. That's it. Not that I've heard anyone say that, by the way. Now, James may be the best preacher, but none of us have seen all his ministry, nor all the ministry of every other leader. And certainly no one knows the motives of everyone's hearts, do they? And so we cannot pass final judgment that's fair, can we? But Jesus can. He knows the motives of all our hearts. He knows all our deeds. And so he has all the facts and can pass final judgment that is fair. And so we're not to pass final judgment or write off any leader or any person for that matter, because we simply don't know all their deeds and certainly not all their motives, or even how God may change people in the future. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time, he says. But does this mean we should never judge? After all, it does say, verse 5, judge nothing. Let me spend a few minutes, which is why this point is going to be longer, just answering this question, because I think there is some confusion about this idea of judging. And in fact, in our society, there's even a push to judge nothing at all. My brother-in-law, who's a teacher in Sweden, has been told that he's not allowed to fail any student in his class, because that's judging them and it's bad for their mental health or something. Or if you've got teenage kids or grandkids, if you say something's right or wrong, sometimes they'll reply, well, don't be so judgy, because there's this culture of not judging anything. Now, yes, Jesus did say we're not to judge in terms of being judgmental, you know, looking down on others as though we're so much better. You know, trying to remove the speck of sawdust in someone's eye when we're actually got a big log in our own eye, if you remember that parable. And so we're not to be judgmental. And yes, here, Paul says we're not to judge past final judgment, do nothing in terms of passing final judgment on someone, because we don't know all the facts or even their future. But we are to judge in other ways.

It just depends on the context, often in terms of discerning things, like next week, where we had to discern what is right and wrong. And so Paul will say in the passage next week in chapter five, are you not to judge those inside the church in terms of discerning what's right and wrong?

Next week, there's someone who's doing something really bad. And they're meant to be able to discern that it is bad and not encourage the person to keep sinning, but encourage them to stop sinning.

Or the week after, are we told to judge in terms of discerning disputes, you know, trying to work out and resolve what's fair. Even when it comes to church leaders, we are still to judge in terms of discerning what's godly behavior or not, or whether their sermon matches God's word or not.

In fact, even in verse four, Paul judges himself in terms of discerning. He says, my conscience is clear. To be able to say that requires some self-assessment, doesn't it?

[10:38] He has discerned his ministry and he thinks, and his conscience is clear. It's just that he doesn't pass final judgment. So he goes on to say, that does not make me innocent because I may not know all the facts of my ministry. It's the Lord who will pass final judgment on me. And so last week, I mentioned a minister whose sermon was a bit of a dud that day, but God still used it to save someone.

If you were here last week, you might remember that story. And someone at church afterwards said, was I judging that minister? And you know, don't pass judgment on them. But we can still discern whether his sermon or my sermon or any sermon matches God's word or not. In fact, we should be doing that. It's why we put the verses on the screen or encourage you to look at the word,

because God's word is way more important than any minister's word, isn't it?

It's just that we cannot pass final judgment, you know, right off that minister because of one dad's sermon, because we don't have all the facts. And so the application here is not don't judge at all, rather it's to judge rightly. We are to judge in terms of discerning what's faithful and unfaithful in leaders, what's right and wrong behavior in us and others, or what's fair and just with disputes, but we're not to be judgmental in thinking we're better than others. And we're not to pass final judgment and write people off. And so Paul now goes on to apply this to Apollos and himself. He says, now, brothers and sisters, I've applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, do not go beyond what is written.

Then you will not be puffed up in what being a follower of one of us over and against another. Remember from last week what they were doing? You know, Paul's letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak. You know, he doesn't look good, the Corinthians said, and his speech is of no account. He don't speak good, they said. Whereas Apollos, he was an eloquent man, impressive preacher. They were passing final judgment, writing one off against the other. And so Paul applies that to themselves and says, no, you're not meant to pass final judgment on any of us.

But he does it not to protect himself, but rather for your benefit. What benefit? Well, so that they might learn not to go beyond God's word. That's what it means, not to go beyond what is written. In the New Testament, when writers say it is written, they usually then go on to quote or paraphrase the Old Testament, don't they? Like Paul did back in chapter one, where he said, therefore, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

[13 : 39] That was a paraphrase from our Old Testament reading today. And this is for their benefit, because God's word is good for us. It's good to boast in the Lord Jesus, who has died to pay for our sins and give us life eternal. No other church leader or no other person or thing has given us that. Indeed, Jesus is the one who gives us everything such that we cannot boast in anything.

Verse 7. He says, who makes you different from anyone else? Are you a special case? What did you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? Notice the repetition of the word receive. Everything we have is received as a gift from God through Jesus. We may have worked hard, but it's God who's given us the abilities and the opportunities to achieve anything. Whether our job, our home, our health, our family.

And this is especially true when it comes to our Christian life with forgiveness and God's spirit and God's family, not to mention life eternal. Did we earn any of that? Of course not. We received all of that. And so we're not to boast or find our worth in those things, but in the Lord Jesus who gives us all things. And so by way of application, I wonder who or what you attempted to boast in or find your worth in. For the Corinthians, it was boasting and finding their worth in an impressive leader they followed. I doubt it is for us, but it could be having an impressive job or an impressive car or an impressive house or an impressive appearance or an impressive children or grandchildren who are achieving lots of things. And we boast in and find our worth in them, you know, often live vicariously through them. When really we should all boast and find our worth in the Lord Jesus who gave us all these things. We're to imitate Paul's cruciform or cross-shaped view of leaders as servants rather than boasting in them. And we're to imitate Paul's cross-shaped way of life. Point to verse 8.

He goes on to say, already you have all you want. Already you have become rich. You have begun to reign and that without us. Oh, how I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you.

Here Paul mocks their high view of themselves. You see, the Corinthians were puffed up or arrogant, not just because they followed a particular leader, but because they thought they had achieved a particular status. In the ancient world, the wise and the super spiritual were revered as rich and reigning like kings. For example, in the ancient writings of Plutarch, Plutarch writes, the wise man is termed not only prudent and just and brave, but also an orator, a poet, a general, a rich man and a king. And so because the Corinthians thought they were so wise and super spiritual, they thought they'd achieved this high worldly status in their society and they took pride in it.

[17 : 03] But the problem was they'd misunderstood the nature of Christianity. It's not about getting glory now, but sharing in Christ's glory later when he returns. Which is why Paul says in verse 8, how I wish that you really had begun to reign, because it would have meant that Jesus had really returned and he could reign with them. The point is though, the Christian life is not about pursuing a

high worldly status to take pride in now. It's about living a cross-shaped life of humility that sacrificially serves others now and even is willing to suffer for Jesus now.

And so with some sarcasm, Paul contrasts his life with theirs in verse 9. He goes on to say, for it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of a procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you, you're so wise in Christ.

We are weak, but you are so strong. You are honoured. We are dishonoured. To this very hour, we go hungry and thirsty. We are in rags. We are brutally treated. We are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure it. When we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world, right up to this moment. Paul says the apostles are like the most humble of society. He's the lowest of the low, a fool, weak, dishonoured, the scum of the earth, like those at the end of a procession into the Colosseum, which were usually the prisoners who are about to die at the hands of gladiators.

He suffers for Christ, whether going hungry and thirsty or in rags and homeless or brutally treated. Yet he still serves others sacrificially, works hard with his hands. When he's cursed, he blesses. When persecuted, he endures. When slandered, he still answers kindly, which is all just like Jesus, isn't it? Especially as Jesus humbled himself to death on a cross. For at the cross, he wore less than rags. At the cross, he was brutally treated.

[19:33] And when he was persecuted, he endured it, didn't he? When he was mocked. When he was cursed, he blessed, saying, Father, forgive them. It's still extraordinary to me that he said that.

And he died on a cross which was reserved for the scum of the earth or for us. Here's the ultimate act of humble and sacrificial service. And this cruciform or cross-shaped way of life is what the Corinthians are to imitate. Verse 14. I'm writing this not to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children. Even if you had 10,000 guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For in Christ Jesus, I became your father through the gospel. Therefore, I urge you to imitate me.

Kids are especially great imitators of their parents, aren't they? Like this kid who's imitating his father building, or this kid who's imitating his father sleeping, or even this kid is imitating his father looking. In fact, I was told the other day that one of my kids imitates the way I drive, which I took as a compliment, even though I think it was meant as an insult. Well, here, Paul says he became their spiritual father because he led them to faith in Jesus. And as their spiritual father, he wants them to imitate him, to live a humble, sacrificial life that serves others rather than seeking worldly status. A life that even sometimes suffers for Christ. And so he writes not to shame them, but to warn them about pursuing a high worldly status and taking pride in that. And in fact, in verse 17, he's even going to send Timothy to remind them of his cruciform or cross-shaped life.

And so by way of application, what kind of life are we pursuing? A life that will give us a high worldly status that we can take pride in, or a life that follows in Christ's footsteps?

That humbly and sacrificially serves others as we have opportunity, and sometimes even willingly suffers for Jesus. As Jesus famously said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. And so rather than pursuing worldly status, we're to imitate Paul's way of life, who imitated Christ. And finally, we're to imitate Paul's talk about Christ, point three, verse 18. Some of you have become arrogant as if I were not coming to you, but I will come to you very soon if the Lord is willing. And then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power.

Here their arrogance continues, but this time it's not all of them, verse 18, notice the first word, it's some of them. And so this arrogance is not about, you know, boasting in leaders, that was all of them, or pride in worldly status, that was all of them. This time it's some of them and their talk.

Verse 19 refers to how these arrogant people are talking. Now it's hard to know exactly what they were saying, but I think it included two things. Verse 18, they were talking like

[23:09] Paul wasn't going to visit them. I kind of like kids who arrogantly talk when they think their parents are never going to come and find out. But secondly, and more importantly, in verse 19, it seems that their talk lacked power, especially because in verse 20, he adds the kingdom of God, both entering the kingdom and living as a Christian in it is not a matter of talk, but of power.

But what power? Well, it's the message of a crucified Christ. That's God's power. That's what we saw back in chapter one. But it's also that bit that looks foolish and weak to the world. And so it would have been that bit that they would have ignored. But it's this message that really is God's

power to save souls and change lives, to help people enter the kingdom and live as Christians in the kingdom.

I mean, what most powerfully motivates you to forgive others? Isn't it that at the cross, God has forgiven you? What most powerfully motivates you to live for Jesus? Isn't it that at the cross, Jesus died for you? I mean, even the Lord's Supper, out of all the things that Jesus could have instituted a sacrament for us to remember something about him, what is the thing that he wants us to remember? His death on a cross for us. But the talk of some seem to lack any talk of Christ crucified, which is God's power. While Paul's talk was cruciform or cross-shaped, he did speak of Christ crucified. For he knew this was both God's power to save souls and change lives. And so by way of our final application, does our talk include Christ crucified? That is, when we talk to God in prayer, for example, do we thank God for Jesus and his death for us? Or do we just pray about our earthly concerns, our health, our finances, our family? I mean, pray for those things too, but don't forget the thing of Christ crucified for you. And when we talk to others inside the church, do we encourage each other to keep following Christ crucified? Perhaps by sharing how God has been encouraging you to follow Jesus, or perhaps by offering to pray for them if they're finding it hard to follow Jesus? Or do we just talk about the weekend? And with those outside the church, when opportunity comes, and it doesn't come all the time, but when it does come, do we talk about how we're Christians because of Christ crucified, because Jesus died for us? That they might ask us more and be saved? Or do we just talk about the weather and how cold it is?

Because it's cold today, right? We can all imitate others. You proved it at the start with those claps. And so we're to imitate Paul's view of leaders, Paul's way of life, and Paul's talk about Christ. Let's pray we would. Let's pray.