

1 Corinthians 4:6-21 PM

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[0 : 00] The Christian faith is founded upon good news for all people. It tells the story of a good God who is committed to save and redeem this broken, breaking world through sending and sacrificing His Son to forgive our sins and to save all who believe in Him.

I've heard this message since I was a kid. Growing up, I heard the gospel at church, at home, and at school. It seemed very reasonable and very desirable.

It didn't really cost me anything, and I got all these benefits. So I happily accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ. I don't remember a day in my life when I didn't believe the gospel.

But that's where my faith ended. I believed it, but it had no bearing on how I lived. See, I believed the gospel in my head, but my faith had not reached my heart.

I had a very strange dream when I was really young, probably nine or ten. And I remember I was on a mountain trail, and right in front of me, blocking me from reaching my destination, was a young person, a little older than me, who radiated glory and light and purity and gentleness.

[1 : 34] I remember knowing instantly in the dream that this was a messenger from God, what the Bible would describe as an angel. And in the dream, they were lovingly talking to me, teaching me with a smile on their face.

But I was deaf to their words. It's like they were on mute. They were speaking to me a message from God, but no sound was coming out of their lips that I could discern.

I remember feeling a deep sadness that I couldn't hear what they were saying. And then I woke up. That was it. I remember as a child, lying in bed and thinking, what just happened?

I remember going to my desk, and I wrote on a piece of paper what happened, so I wouldn't forget. Because this dream felt special. It felt different from other dreams. It felt like I'd received a heavenly message.

And in my bed, I instantly knew what God was trying to tell me. What God was saying is that he was speaking to me in my life. But I wasn't listening.

[2 : 45] I was on the path that leads to life, that leads to God. But I wasn't moving forward. I was standing still. My faith was static.

It was stagnant. I remember, I realized that morning as a child, that I believed the gospel, but I wasn't listening to God in how I was living.

I wasn't moving forward in my faith. I believed in Jesus, but I wasn't following him. I was believing, but not obeying. I had faith, but I wasn't following.

In Jesus, I had a savior, but I hadn't yet let him be my Lord. And this is exactly what's happening in our Bible text tonight.

For four chapters, Paul has been writing about division and quarreling within this church in Corinth. And he's describing how different factions in the church are grouping behind different church leaders.

[3 : 48] And they're arguing with one another over which leaders the best, based primarily on their teaching and speaking abilities. And Paul, who is the founding pastor, finds himself having fallen out of favor at the church in Corinth.

Paul is seen as weak and unimpressive by the church he started and gave two years of his life to build at great personal cost. And now in our passage, it's as if Paul is saying, you know, you guys believe the gospel, but you aren't living it.

I am living it. I'm following Jesus faithfully, and you're embarrassed of me. You ought instead to imitate me in living in the ways of Christ.

Today's text is an invitation for all of us to first hear the gospel, and then second to respond by joyfully giving our lives to follow Jesus.

So first, let's hear the foundation of our faith. Let's look at verse 7. What do you have that you didn't receive, Paul writes?

[4 : 57] And if you then received it, why do you boast as if you didn't receive it? See, the Corinthian Christians are arrogant. They've heard this good news that God has saved them in Christ, and their response to the gospel is to boast in themselves.

Since God has chosen them and saved them, then surely they must be pretty awesome. Pride prevents you from following Jesus. Pride puffs you up, Paul says in verse 6.

It gives you a big head, an inflated ego. And so Paul, in verse 7, pops their self-inflated arrogance with the sharp reality of God's grace.

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you then received it, why do you boast as if you didn't receive it? In Christ, we have been given everything.

Every conceivable grace God could give, he has given. He has chosen to be merciful to a people who do not deserve his mercy.

[6 : 07] We have been given grace upon grace. The starting point in the Christian faith is receiving God's grace through the gospel. Seeing that God gives us everything in Christ, despite us deserving nothing except death and damnation.

The only thing we bring to God is our sin. And so the only thing we deserve is his wrath. So it's impossible to be arrogant if you recognize the reality of God's grace in everything he has given us. Arrogance in a Christian or in a church is a symptom that reveals your faith is not built upon God's grace. All who follow Jesus follow him because he first followed after us.

He chose us. He chased us. He called us. He found us. He served us. And he saved us. Loving us. And by his spirit now sanctifying us.

The foundation of the Christian life is a recognition that everything you've been given is grace. There is no room for a speck of self-inflating arrogance.

[7 : 24] If your starting point is being gripped by the grace of God and his gospel, then your response will not be arrogance or boasting or an inflated sense of self-importance.

Your response to the mercies of God will be to joyfully give your life to follow Jesus. To see all that he has done for you and to respond in praise and obedience.

To love his mercy and to walk humbly with your God. To respond to the mercies of God by giving your life as a living sacrifice because it is holy and pleasing to God.

And so having established that our faith is based exclusively on grace, Paul now articulates what it has looked like in his life to follow Jesus.

He highlights two realities if you follow Jesus. The first, if you follow Jesus, expect to endure unimaginable suffering.

[8 : 29] And second, expect to experience uncontainable power. The life of following Jesus will expose you to suffering. And also to the power of God unleashed in your life.

So first, let's look at suffering. Look at verse 9. Paul writes, 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. Paul uses the metaphor of a Roman arena. To explain his experience of following Jesus.

Paul, remember, is an apostle. He has had a personal one-on-one experience with the risen, reigning Jesus. Paul revealed, or Jesus revealed himself personally to Paul.

Through this encounter. And he handpicked Paul. He commissioned him to go out and tell the world about the good news of Jesus Christ. And the experience Paul has had of being a handpicked global leader of Jesus' church.

[9 : 35] An apostle whose very written words are now God's word to us. Through the inspiration and work of God's Holy Spirit. He explains in verse 9 how being an apostle is like being the last act in a Roman arena.

The final spectacle after a full day of horrific, violent, escalating entertainment. Where prisoners and enemies of Rome are brought onto the arena ground to be slaughtered for sport.

That's the experience of an apostle. It's unimaginable suffering. Paul writes, they are, verse 10, seen as fools for Christ.

Weak. Disreputable. Verse 11, they're hungry and thirsty. They're poorly dressed and beaten and homeless. Verse 12, they're forced to labor with their own hands.

They're reviled. They're persecuted. They're slandered. And then in verse 13, they're like the scum of the earth. The refuse of all things. This is Paul's experience of following Jesus.

[10:41] And Jesus warned us. This is how it would be. If anyone would come after me, Jesus says, let them take up their cross and follow me. For whoever will save their life will lose it.

And whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. Following Jesus along the path to eternal life is a road marked with suffering.

And the Corinthians see Paul and they see his example and they think, no thanks. I read about Paul and I think, no thanks.

We'll take the words of the gospel, the comforting story of salvation through faith, but we'll leave the life of suffering. We'll believe, but we won't obey. We don't want Paul's life.

We don't want to carry a cross to follow Jesus. I would much rather believe and then carry on in comfort. This is why Paul says in verse 10 that the Corinthians are seen as wise in Christ when he's regarded as a fool.

[11:44] They are strong when he is weak. They're held in honor, but he's in disrepute. See, their faith doesn't really cost them anything because they aren't living it out. And who can blame them when you look at Paul?

If that's what following Jesus entails, then I'll take the Corinthian way every day. The first thing Paul experiences following Jesus is unimaginable suffering.

This should be the normal Christian expectation of a life of following Jesus. All of us must count the cost of our allegiance to Christ. But Paul doesn't just experience suffering.

He experiences something else too. As Paul follows Jesus and endures suffering, he secondly experiences uncontainable supernatural power.

Look at verse 12 again. Paul is giving this ridiculous list of how terrible his life as an apostle is. But then he adds something interesting. When reviled, we bless.

[12:49] When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat. And we know this is true. You can read the book of Acts, which has a long section.

It's kind of like a biography of Paul. This is really what he did. But who does that? What motivates the kind of living that when someone insults you, your immediate response is to bless them?

The answer is back in 1 Corinthians 2, verses 3 and 4. Listen. Paul writes that when he was with the Corinthians, he was in weakness and in fear and with much trembling.

See, the power that enables Paul to live the life he lives, to follow Jesus faithfully through unimaginable suffering, is the power of God demonstrated by the Spirit of God at work in Paul and through Paul.

Said another way, if you just believe in the gospel but you don't live it out, then your faith is solely based on your own mental decision, your own mental assent, without any change in lifestyle.

[14:11] So your faith is powered by yourself. It's your own effort and mood and your strength of character and personal conviction. This is why in verse 19, Paul talks about power.

His opponents, these arrogant leaders in the Corinthian church, reject Paul. And he says they're all words, all talk, no power. But if you follow Jesus, you're empowered by his Spirit.

Which is why in verse 20, Paul writes that the kingdom of God doesn't consist in talk only, but in power. If your faith is based on the gospel of grace, resulting in a life of self-denial and following Jesus, then your faith is empowered by God's Holy Spirit, alive and at work within you.

And so in following Jesus, you should expect the Holy Spirit to empower you to live your life walking in the ways of Christ. This is what empowered Paul to live the life he lives, despite suffering.

God's Spirit was given to empower Paul in his Christian life. And in our text, Paul paints a picture of what it looks like to follow Jesus. It'll be a life of suffering and a life of power.

[15:27] And so he now gives his appeal to this believing but not behaving church. In verse 16, I urge you, be imitators of me.

Or in verse 17, imitate my ways in Christ. Don't be hearers of the word only, but doers. Don't just believe in Jesus, follow Jesus.

This is what I believe God is saying to us this evening as well. Don't just believe in Jesus, follow him. This is where the power of God will be made manifest in your life.

Now how do I follow Jesus, you might be asking. What does this even look like in my life? Chances are this evening that most of us here know what the gospel is.

We know about Jesus. But almost all of us are struggling to follow him. Many of us are probably following our own way. Or we're standing still on the path, watching God speak, but failing to listen and obey.

[16:35] Following Jesus starts with that realization that you aren't following him. It starts with the realization that you're either not moving in the way you are, or you're actively walking in the opposite direction.

The Bible calls this repentance. Repentance is first the awareness that you aren't following Jesus. It is a recognition. And then it's a first step in the right direction.

This is what we're going to do right after this sermon. We're going to pray, which is a step towards God. And then when we're preparing for communion, we are going to repent together.

Which is a public confession to God and to one another that we have not been following Jesus faithfully. And all of us will say that together. That's a first step towards him.

We hear of God's grace given through Jesus. Of the forgiveness offered to all of us through the cross, which will be enacted and remembered in Holy Communion. These are visible signs for us of an invisible grace.

[17:40] And then all of us who follow Jesus together are going to stand up and we're going to physically take a step. And then another until we're all at the front of this room, before the table, where we will receive the grace of God through this spiritual food.

That when received with faith, empowers us in our life of following Jesus. Right after the sermon, our service is structured to help us do what Paul is commanding the Corinthians to do.

Don't just hear the words. Don't just believe the gospel. But actually follow Jesus. If you are not a follower of Jesus today, this is an invitation for you too.

Paul wasn't a follower of Jesus once upon a time. Neither were the Corinthians. Neither was I. Until God spoke his gospel into our hearts by his word. And maybe that's what God is doing in your life right now.

And if it is, you need to take that first step of faith this evening. Which might be a prayer while everyone else receives communion. Might be going to the prayer station at the back.

[18:54] Might be searching for a pastor after the service. And help us walk with you towards Christ. But Paul gives one practical way for all of us to follow Jesus in our text.

And I want to finish with it now. In verse 16 he writes, I urge you then, be imitators of me. That's why I sent Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ.

As I teach them everywhere at every church. We learn how to imitate Christ. By observing faithful followers of Christ. Studies suggest this is one of the most important ways to engender resilient faith in young people in the church.

To foster intergenerational relationships. Where young people are watching how older Christians are living out their faith. If you're a parent, invite some of this communion of saints over to your house for dinner.

And make sure your kids are involved in the conversation. My parents did this really well. And I was exposed to many older, wiser, faithful mentors that have sustained me in my faith.

[20:06] The God of the universe speaks to us this evening. He tells us that in Christ, He has given us everything.

All grace. All mercy. All won by Jesus for you. And He invites you to follow Him. Following Him will involve suffering.

But it will also involve being empowered by God's Holy Spirit. And ultimately, it will end with us being with Him forever. Seeing Him face to face.

Experiencing intimacy with the Almighty. As His kingdom comes to earth. And all darkness is eclipsed by His light and His life. And He invites you now to follow Him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.