

# 1 Corinthians 4:6-21 AM

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     The Christian faith is founded upon good news for all people. The Bible tells the story of a good God who is committed to save and redeem this broken world through sending and sacrificing his son to forgive our sins and to save all who believe in him.

I have heard this message since I was a child. I heard the gospel at church, at home, and even at school. It all seemed very reasonable and desirable, so I happily accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It seemed all benefit, no cost. I don't remember a day when I didn't believe the gospel. But that is where my faith ended. I believed it, but it had no bearing on how I lived.

I believed in the gospel with my head, but it had not reached my heart. I had a really strange dream when I was really young, probably nine or ten, where I was on a mountain trail, and right in front of me, blocking me from reaching my destination, was a young person, little older than me, who was radiating light and purity and gentleness and glory.

I remember knowing instantly in the dream that this was a messenger from God. This is what the Bible would describe as an angel. And they were lovingly talking to me, teaching me, but I was deaf to their words.

[ 1 : 4 8 ]     It's like they were on mute. They were speaking to me a message from God, but no discernible sound was coming out of their lips. I remember in the dream a deep sadness that I felt I wasn't able to hear what they were saying.

And then I woke up. And instantly I remember thinking that dream was special. I remember as a child getting out of bed and going to my desk and writing it down so I'd never forget it.

This was different from my other dreams. I was convinced I'd received a heavenly message, and I knew right away what God was trying to tell me. God was speaking to me in my life, but I was not listening.

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.

I realized that morning as a child that I believed the gospel, but I wasn't listening to God and how I should live. I wasn't moving forward in my faith.

[ 3 : 0 0 ]     I believed in Jesus, but I wasn't following him. My life looked no different than anyone else's around me. Jesus was my savior.

I believe he died for my sins, but he wasn't yet my Lord. I wasn't living my life to obey him. To serve him, to glorify him, and to follow him.

I was believing but not obeying. I had faith in Jesus, but I wasn't following Jesus. And this is what's happening in our Bible text today.

For four chapters, Paul has been writing about division and quarreling within the church in Corinth. And now in our passage, it's as if Paul is saying to this church that he founded.

You guys believe the gospel, but you aren't living it. I am living it. I am following Jesus faithfully. And you're embarrassed of me.

- [ 4 : 20 ] You ought to imitate me in living in the ways of Christ. That's really what the passage is about today. You believe, but you don't obey.
- You have faith in Jesus, but you refuse to follow him. Jesus is your savior, but he's not yet your Lord. And today's text, I think, is an invitation for all of us to hear the gospel.
- And then second, to respond by giving our lives to follow Jesus. So first, let's hear the foundation of our faith. This is in verse 7 of 1 Corinthians chapter 4.
- What do you have that you have not received? And if you then received it, why do you boast as if you didn't receive it? The Corinthian Christians are arrogant.
- They've heard that God saved them in Christ. And their response is to boast in themselves. Since God has chosen them, then surely they must be pretty awesome.
- [ 5 : 22 ] That's what they think. Maybe that's what you think. Pride prevents you from following Jesus. Pride puffs you up, verse 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? Paul's saying everything we have is a gift. God has freely given us everything in Christ.
- He's given us life. He's given us his patience as we constantly sin and separate ourselves from him. He gave us his son as the propitiation, the price to forgive our sins.
- In Jesus, God has given us salvation. But that's not all. He gives us now his Holy Spirit. He gives us new life and a new heart.
- [ 6 : 27 ] He's made us together his temple, his eternal home where he wants to dwell forever. He's united us with Christ to be his body on earth collectively. He's adopted us as his children.
- He's given us citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. He's given us eternal life and made us the very bride of Christ. In Jesus, we have been given everything.
- Every conceivable grace God could give, he has given. He has not held anything back. He has chosen to be merciful to people who do not deserve his mercy.
- 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 has given us everything in Christ despite deserving nothing but death and damnation.
- The only thing we bring to God is our sin. And so the only thing we actually deserve is his wrath. But despite that, he gives us grace.
- [ 7 : 34 ] He gives us his Son and his Spirit. He gives us everything. And it is impossible to be arrogant if you recognize the reality of God's grace in everything we have been given.
- Arrogance in a Christian or in a church is a symptom that reveals your faith is not built upon God's grace. Now, I think this is a particular danger for us at St. John's.
- Because we're a great church. We have much to be arrogant about. We have a global reputation. People come on pilgrimage to arrive where you now sit.
- We're known for great preaching. Most Sundays. A great Sunday school. Great training programs. Great pastoral care. A great university group. Great women's ministries.
- Great Bible studies. We have a great choir and musicians. We have a great youth groups. And once upon a time, we were known for having a great building as well. Do not be arrogant that you go to St. John's.
- [ 8 : 40 ] It's an easy mistake for us to make. So recognize that everything we have is grace. Everything we enjoy here is an undeserved gift from God.

All who follow Jesus follow him because he first followed after us. He chose us. Chased us. Called us.

Found us. He served us. He saved us. Because he loves us. And now by his spirit, he sanctifies us. The foundation for the Christian life, the base of the gospel, is the recognition that all we have is grace.

Everything is given. Nothing is earned. So there is no room for a speck of self-inflating arrogance. Your response to the mercies of God should be to joyfully give your life to follow Jesus.

To see all that he has done for you and respond in praise and obedience. To love his mercy and walk humbly with your God. To respond to the mercies of God by giving your life as a living sacrifice.

[ 9 : 55 ] Because it's holy and acceptable to God. See, grace propels us to follow Jesus joyfully in response to God and his grace, which he freely gives to all who turn to him.

This is the foundation of our faith. Everything we have has been given by the good, gracious God, who is mighty to save. And now for the rest of our text, Paul articulates what it has looked like in his life to follow Jesus.

Once you have received this grace, once you decide to follow Jesus, this is what you should expect. Paul describes himself in verse 15 as the spiritual father to the Corinthian Christians.

Because he's the one who first founded their church and shared the gospel with them. See, he's not just another teacher or another preacher or another pastor. He is their father in Christ through the gospel.

And so, in this unique role, he now gives fatherly advice to his children in faith. Teaching them what the life of following Jesus will entail. And Paul highlights two realities if you follow Jesus.

[ 11 : 03 ] The first, expect to endure unimaginable suffering. And second, expect to experience uncontainable power.

The life of following Jesus will expose you to suffering and to the power of God. So first, following Jesus involves suffering. Look at verse 9.

Let's pause there.

Paul uses the metaphor of the Roman arena to explain his experience of following Jesus. Remember, Paul is an apostle. He has had a personal, one-on-one experience with the risen, reigning Jesus.

Jesus himself revealed himself to Paul personally through this unimaginable encounter. And he then commissioned Paul to go and tell the world the good news about Jesus Christ. And the experience Paul has had of being a hand-picked global leader of Jesus' church, an apostle whose very words are now God's word to us through the inspiration and work of the Spirit, explains in verse 9 how being an apostle is like being the last act in a Roman arena, the final spectacle after a day of horrific, violent, escalating entertainment, where the prisoners and enemies of Rome were brought out onto the arena ground to be slaughtered for sport.

[ 12 : 40 ] That's the experience of an apostle. According to the Christian tradition, every apostle except John was executed for following Jesus and spreading the Christian faith.

Paul writes in verse 10 that they are seen as fools for Christ, weak, disreputable. In verse 11, they, this hour, are hungry and thirsty.

He's writing these words with an empty stomach. He's poorly dressed and beaten and homeless. Verse 12, he's forced to labor with his own hands. He's reviled and persecuted. Verse 13, he's slandered.

He's regarded as the scum of the earth, the refuse of all things. This is Paul's experience of following Jesus. And Jesus warned us this is how it would be.

If anyone would come after me, Jesus said, let them take up their cross and follow me. For whoever will save their life will lose it. Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

[ 13 : 42 ] When Christ calls a man, he bid him come and die, wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian pastor who was martyred in Nazi Germany. This is Paul's experience of following Jesus.

It is a road marked with suffering. And the Corinthians look at Paul, look at his example, and they 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. We would much rather believe and carry on in comfort. And this is why Paul says in verse 10 that the Corinthians are seen as wise when he's regarded as a fool.

They're strong when he's weak. They're held in honor and he in disrepute. 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 and what following Jesus entails?

[ 14 : 48 ] I would take the Corinthian way any day. Most days I do. The first thing Paul experiences following Jesus is unimaginable suffering. This should be the normal Christian expectation of a life following Jesus.

We must all count the cost of our allegiance to Christ. This leads to what I hope is a fairly obvious question. Why would anyone follow Jesus if this kind of suffering is what's to be expected?

The answer is because Paul doesn't just experience suffering. He experiences something else too. As Paul follows Jesus and endures suffering, he secondly experiences an uncontrollable supernatural power at work in his life.

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. He says, When reviled, we bless.

When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat. And we know from the early accounts of Paul's life in the book of Acts that this testimony is true.

[ 16 : 03 ] Paul endured unimaginable injustice and hardship. Once he was in a town called Lystra and he was preaching the gospel and the people hearing him dragged him out of the city and stoned him until they thought he was dead.

And then they left his body in the dirt. And upon awaking, not dead, his bloody, bruised, broken body got up and he went right back into the same town to continue his work and encourage the new disciples to continue in their faith.

I mean, who does that? What motivates this kind of living through unimaginable suffering? The answer is back in 1 Corinthians 2, verses 3 and 4.

Paul writes that he was with the Corinthians in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And his speech was not with plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

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

[ 17 : 25 ] Said another way, if you believe the gospel but you don't live it, then your faith is solely based on your own mental assent without any change of lifestyle.

And that means your faith is powered by yourself. It's based on your own effort, or mood, or strength of character. This is why believing without following causes arrogance.

Because your faith is based solely on you. It's powered by your own conviction. This is why in verse 19, Paul talks about power. His opponents, the arrogant leaders in the Corinthian church who have rejected Paul, are all words.

They have no power. But if you follow Jesus, you're empowered by his Spirit. This 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 grace of the gospel, resulting in a life of self-denial and following Jesus, then your faith is empowered by God's Holy Spirit at work and alive in you.

[ 18 : 29 ] If you're following Jesus, you should expect the Holy Spirit to empower you to live your life walking in the ways of Christ. That's what empowered Paul to live the life he lived, despite the suffering.

God's Spirit was given to empower Paul in his Christian life. Which, of course, further amplifies the reality that everything we have is a gift from God. Even the power to carry on to live following Jesus comes from God.

So in our text, Paul paints a picture of what it looks like to follow Jesus. It'll be a life of suffering. It'll be a life of power. And so now Paul gives his appeal to this believing but not behaving church in verse 16.

I urge you, be imitators of me. Or 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, I believe, is what God is saying to all of us this morning as well.

[ 19 : 41 ] 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 you follow Jesus?

What does this even look like in my life? Chances are this morning that most of us here know the gospel. We know about Jesus. But in truth, few of us are probably actually following him.

We're probably following our own way. Or we're standing still on the path, watching God speak but failing to listen and obey. Following Jesus, as Will said, starts with the realization that you are not moving along the path or you're actively walking in the wrong direction away from God.

This realization the Bible calls repentance. Repentance is first an awareness that you're not following Jesus. It's a recognition. And then it's a turning around and it's a first step in the right direction toward him.

This is what we do at the very beginning of our morning prayer service. We gather to worship but the first thing we do after praising God is we repent. All of us started this service by publicly confessing to God and to one another that we have not been following Jesus faithfully.

[ 20 : 59 ] As soon as we do this, we hear of the forgiveness that's offered to us through the cross. And so we pray again, O Lord, open our lips that our mouths will proclaim your praise.

O God, make haste to help us, empower us to follow Jesus faithfully. Then we sit and listen to God speak. A teacher explains what God has said and we respond by prayer, asking God to move his word from our heads to our hearts and from our hearts to our hands and our feet and our mouths.

And our service ends with all of us walking out to follow Jesus in our lives out there until we gather again next week to do the same thing. And if you are not a follower of Jesus this morning, this invitation to follow him is for you as well.

Paul once wasn't a follower of Jesus either. Neither were the Corinthians. Neither was I until God spoke his gospel into our hearts by his word and empowered us by his spirit to repent and receive and respond.

And maybe this is what God is doing in your life right now. And if it is, you need to take that first step of faith this morning. That might look like going for private prayer at the back at the end of the service or it might be opening up and taking a chance to the person next to you who you shook hands with and saying, I think God's speaking to me, asking me to accept his grace and follow Jesus.

[ 22 : 28 ] Your first step might be searching for a pastor to talk to you after the service and ask us to help you walk to Jesus. This is the absolute highlight of my work.

I would love to help you take those first few steps. Now for all of us, Paul gives one practical way to help us follow Jesus and I want to finish with it now.

Listen again to verse 16. 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.

One very practical way to follow Jesus in your life is this. Imitate other faithful Christians who are following Jesus. If you're a visitor today or a person who's struggling to get connected at St. John's, let me say this about our community.

The strength of this church, what sets it apart from every other in my experience, is not the preaching or the music or the Sunday school, although all those things are great.

[ 23 : 38 ] The strength of this community is found in the faithfulness of the average person in the pew. This room is full of incredible followers of Jesus whose lives of faithfulness along the road of following Jesus ought to be celebrated and imitated by all of us.

I have so many mentors in this room. So many people I am striving to imitate as they follow Jesus. Faithful, beloved Christians who are embodying Jesus in how they live and who they are.

Imitate them. get invited to their houses for dinner or go talk to them today over at Chile or grab coffee at the back.

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, to foster intergenerational relationships within the church where young people are watching how older Christians live out their faith faithfully.

So if you're a parent, invite some from this communion of saints over to your house for lunch or for dinner and make sure your kids are at the table and are involved in the conversation.

[ 24 : 57 ] My parents did this so well and I was exposed to so many older, wiser, faithful mentors that have sustained me in my faith.

The God of the universe speaks to us this morning. He tells us that in Christ he has given us everything he has. All grace, all mercy, all won by Jesus for you.

And God invites you to follow him. Following him will involve suffering. It will also involve being empowered by God's Holy Spirit. And ultimately it will end in 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 God invites all of us now to follow him. Thanks be to God. Amen.