

A Great Christian

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[0 : 00] Thank you for having me here this morning as I interrupt your sermon series on the book of Esther and speak to you from 1 Corinthians chapter 4.! Again, a pleasure. Let me pray and then we'll get on the way.

! Well, when the movie Quantum of Solace came out in 2008, I was 21 years old and I saw it with my friends in the city because I am a huge 007 fan.

I thought, particularly Daniel Craig, was a really good James Bond. I loved the way he acted, how he talked, his walk, how sort of confident he was. And you may be familiar, if you are somewhat a fan of James Bond, that there's this phrase that people often use, that men want to be him, women want to be with him.

I can certainly attest to the beginning of that phrase, I wanted to be James Bond. And so after seeing the movie, I walked out of the theatre a little bit straighter, a little bit more confident in my stride.

I could hear the theme song in the back of my head. I was trying to even talk like him. And that's what we do, right? Humans, we're impressionable.

[1 : 34] We're social. We find people that we admire. We try to act like them. That's why people like celebrities get paid thousands of dollars to wear certain clothes so that their fans will wear what they're wearing.

That's why athletes have companies pay top dollar to put KFC on the back of their jerseys as if the athletes ever eat KFC to begin with. That's why companies pay top dollar, because we look up to the influential, to the rich, the powerful, and we seek to base our lives off them.

The only thing that's changed over the years is what it is that we think makes somebody great. See, we think these days that it's fancy clothes, influence, or as the kids at Chatswood High School call it, aura is what makes people important.

Now, in the first century, in Greco-Roman culture, of which the Church of Corinth was living in, it was rhetorical ability that made somebody popular.

Rhetorical ability, or basically the ability to speak well, to make an argument. The modern version would be the tick-tock philosopher, who lands one-liners, who completely shuts down arguments, who makes people who don't agree with them look like morons as they own or destroy their opponents with their clever logic and argument.

[3 : 08] You see, that's what the first century Greco-Roman culture thought made someone great. And that's what the first century church in Corinth was trying to be like. That's what they were looking for.

But here's the issue. Because that kind of greatness, it's not what greatness looks like in the kingdom of God. And so the Apostle Paul writes his letter to the church in Corinth, which has gone off track in many ways to remind them of what greatness in the kingdom of God looks like.

He's reminding them of a lot of things, as you read throughout the letter. But in chapter 4, he's thinking about greatness. Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate Christian greatness.

Not worldly greatness. But Christian greatness. And so as we look at 1 Corinthians 4, we see Paul talk about this. He'll identify for us what a great Christian is, what a great Christian looks like, and what to do with a great Christian.

But first, let's start with verse 1, where Paul talks about what a great Christian is. So verse 1, this then is how you ought to regard us, as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.

[4 : 33] Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. So who is Paul talking about here? Well, he's actually talking about himself and some of his co-workers.

You see, Paul established the Corinthian church some time ago. And one of his co-workers, a gentleman by the name of Apollos, had worked with the Corinthians also. He'd helped them to grow in Jesus.

But before Paul wrote this letter, the Corinthians had been dividing themselves into groups, into factions. See, they saw men like Paul and Apollos.

They recognized greatness in them, or Christian greatness anyway. They wanted to be like them. But rather than doing it together, they were starting to follow one over the other and separating into groups.

They were saying that one leader was better than the other. Now in the previous chapter, in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, Paul addresses this, saying, You are still worldly.

[5 : 33] For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not mere human beings?

And so to set the record straight, Paul identifies what he and Apollos actually are. Servants. Servants of Christ.

And this, Paul says, is what a great Christian is. A servant of Christ. But Paul doesn't mean slave. In other parts of the Bible, Paul will talk about being a slave for Christ.

But here he has more in mind a steward. Think the executor of a will. A butler. A house manager. Something along those lines.

Which is why he says that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. You see, in the ancient world, this likely meant sealed contracts or oaths, and it certainly meant proven service.

[6 : 42] For example, a servant who looks after the master's coin purse and at the end of the day returns it with not a single coin missing. You know, they're not skimming any off the top. But this is what Paul wants the Corinthians to think a great Christian looks like.

Not a great orator, but a humble servant who can be trusted. It's not glamorous. It's not exciting. But it is steady.

And reliable. And faithful especially to Jesus. A great Christian is a servant of Christ.

And what the Corinthians and we should look for is somebody who lives their life according to the Bible's teaching. Who submits their life to the Bible's teaching.

But Paul expands on what a great Christian is by using himself as an example. Saying that a great Christian is primarily concerned with getting praise from God.

[7 : 49] And no one else. Not from men. This is what he starts talking about in verse 3. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself.

My conscience is clear. But that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Now, it may look arrogant at first. You know, Paul saying, I care very little if I am judged by you.

But Paul's not being arrogant. He's actually being quite humble. Because he knows that he serves Christ. He's proud of serving Christ. But he serves Christ with humility.

He's saying that his primary audience in how he lives his life is God. The only person he really cares about getting praise from is God.

And this is the mark of a truly good servant. A servant who is concerned with praise from the master. Paul knows his master.

[8 : 49] His master. His master is Jesus. And he knows that Jesus is the Lord. And Paul is concerned completely and confident completely in serving Jesus.

Because he knows that to do so means that he truly serves God. And that's what a great Christian does. They don't chase after greatness the way the Corinthians are.

Looking for those who can destroy their opponents in arguments or who look flashy or anything like that. No, instead, the Christian gives up any notion of greatness for themselves.

And instead, seeks to serve Jesus. And while sometimes it might be hard for us to figure out what somebody's true motives are as they are serving Christ, for Jesus himself, it is clear as day.

It is obvious. Have a look at verse 5. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart.

[10 : 01] And so make no mistake, brothers and sisters and friends. Our hearts are an open book to God. They are completely clear as day.

See, what we work so hard to conceal is evidently obvious to him. This ought to both make us nervous, but also encourage us. It ought to be deeply encouraging. You see, if we are seeking the admiration of others, he can tell. If we are seeking to just be nice people, to be basically good, he can tell. But if we are seeking true greatness, to serve him and him only, he can tell. And that is a good thing.

You see, the Lord Jesus said to his disciples when he was on earth with them, as his disciples were arguing amongst each other, which one of them is the greatest, the Lord Jesus said to them that, it is the one who is the least among you all who is the greatest.

[11 : 09] And as our passage says, our praise comes from God. He rewards service. And so what has Paul pointed out to us?

A great Christian is not flashy, necessarily, or even necessarily a great speaker. Somebody that the world would call influential. A great Christian is a servant.

A great Christian is a servant.

A great Christian is a servant. In the 2024 Paris Olympics, apologies here, I'm probably going to mispronounce his name, but Pan Zhang Lei from China set the record for the 100-meter freestyle swimming.

And it is an incredible time that he achieved. It's stunning what he managed to do. He managed to do the 100-meter freestyle in 46.40 seconds.

[12 : 31] That is very fast. Truly incredible. He is, at the moment, the man with the fastest swimming record in the world for the 100-meter freestyle.

But there is another record holder in the 100-meter freestyle, which I think is marvellous. In the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Eric Musumbini also set a record for the 100-meter freestyle. He became the fastest Equatorial Guinean to a country in Africa to complete the 100-meter freestyle in, get this, one minute, 52 seconds, 72.

Just to put that in perspective, Pan Zhang Lei, 46 seconds. Eric, one minute, 52 seconds. A time which did not permit Eric to advance into the next round.

But here's the thing. When he did that, Eric became the fastest Equatorial Guinean to finish the 100-meter race because he became the only Equatorial Guinean to finish the 100-meter freestyle.

[13 : 42] His country didn't even have a 100-meter pool for him to practice in. He had to practice every morning between the hours, I think, of 7 and 8 in a hotel 12-meter pool to get ready for the race.

And he only started eight months before the Olympics even began. But when his race started, his competitors were all immediately disqualified for starting too early, which meant that he was the only competitor in his race.

And he won in that wonderfully slow time. You can YouTube this race as well. I did it in preparation for this sermon, and it is a bizarre race.

In fact, I remember seeing it when it happened live. It is truly bizarre because he's in the pool by himself, floundering. He's barely making it. So much so that the commentators start wondering, you know, is he actually going to manage to finish this race?

But he perseveres. Which is what Paul says a great Christian can look like. And so while the Corinthians are looking for greatness, Paul offers a lesson in humility.

[14 : 57] Second half of verse 6. You see, by arguing amongst themselves which teacher is the greatest and who is the greatest person to follow, the Corinthians are not treating each other in a loving way at all.

They're not caring about each other. They're trying to be better than each other. They're trying to be puffed up, as Paul says. They're acting in a way that's puffed up.

Now, Paul is going to argue later throughout 1 Corinthians that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. And so to help the Corinthians remember to love each other, he reminds them quite forcefully, actually, of who they are.

He reminds them of who they are and how they came to become Christians in the first place. And he does this through rhetorical questions.

He asks them, what do you have that you did not receive? Why do you boast as though you did not receive it? And here we ought to pause and remember how it is that we became Christians as well.

[16:23] See, Paul talks about it in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verse 22. You see, we became Christians by believing in a crucified and risen Jesus, a truly ridiculous notion, both in the ancient world and in our world today.

The very idea that God would take on human form, that he would come to earth, go to the cross and die, a most shameful and humiliating death, is ridiculous.

It's ridiculous, especially when you note that he does it in the place of his people, the very people who offended him. It's a ridiculous notion when you think about it.

It is so antithetical to everything that our world considers to be great, a God shamefully displayed on a cross, as opposed to mightily reigning and sweeping his enemies aside, you know, the people who have offended him.

That the only way we could ever truly believe this is, as Paul argues in his letter, if we were given God's help to believe it, by the Holy Spirit.

[18:07] You see, by his Spirit, God ensures that when we hear this good news of a crucified and risen Jesus, that we, his people, will respond in faith.

We can only ever truly come to faith in Jesus if God helps us. No amount of clever arguments, no amount of owning your opponent in arguments, or miracles even, will ever truly convince us. Only a supernatural work of God, performed by his Spirit, will open our ears and our hearts to his message.

You see, to the world, Jesus looks foolish. To those who have God's Spirit, he is the power of God. God's Spirit, which is why Paul calls out the Corinthians, saying, you were not clever enough to work this out, to work out this truth.

God gave it to you, as he has given it to us. But of course, the Corinthians are falling away from that idea, believing that greatness looks like worldly influence and power.

[19:25] That's where they're going. They think that they are ruling, that they have everything, that they are being wise. Which is why Paul then brings up his lived experience as an apostle.

Verse 9. For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the 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.

A spectacle in a bad way, like a car crash, you know, where everybody slows down to have a look at the carnage. The Corinthians are looking for worldly greatness.

Paul says he feels more like a slave in a gladiatorial arena, being let out in chains, with the whole world watching him about to die.

That's his lived experience. In terms of athletics, he's saying he looks and feels more like Eric, struggling to complete the 100-meter freestyle race.

[20:43] True Christianity looks to this world pathetic. As Paul points out in verses 12 and 13, when we are cursed, we bless.

When we are persecuted, we endure. When we are slandered, we answer kindly. We do not seek fame or fortune, what the world values, status and wealth, and so we must look so foolish.

But it is not shameful. It is glorious. Because to live the Christian life like this, believing in the gospel, even when the world hurls every insult that it has at us, is to live like Jesus.

We are shamed for believing what others might call a fairy tale, just as how our own Lord was shamed when he was displayed on a criminal's cross, as he suffered death and died.

But God did not abandon Jesus to death. Three days later, he rose again. His tomb is empty. And now, even if it looks foolish, the only possible answer that we have, the only possible thing that we can do, the only course of action we have, is to believe in him, to trust him, to cling to Christ.

[22:18] And that's what great Christianity looks like, clinging to Christ. Someone who clings to him to the very end, even in the face of ridicule, suffering, persecution.

See, our hope is not to win this world's admiration. When Eric swam in the 2000 Olympics, he was clearly struggling, clearly struggling at the end there, but he pushed through, and he climbed out of that pool to a standing ovation.

Our hope is to reach the end, to hear Jesus say, well done, good and faithful servant.

So if that's what great Christianity looks like, a great Christian looks like, Paul is now going to tell us what we can do with one. Have a look at 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. And so, Paul now returns to very tender language with the Corinthians, very tender.

[23 : 33] It may seem strange for us to hear Paul refer to himself as the father of the Corinthians, but what he means is that the Corinthian church first came into being because he preached the gospel to them.

He preached as a witness to Jesus to them. See, he's not claiming a divine right over them or some sort of spiritual headship or something like that. Rather, he's simply saying that he's their dad because they came to believe in Jesus after he told them about Jesus.

That's why he's using the father language. Now, I'm a dad as well. As I mentioned before, I've got two young sons, Mark and Paul. Neither of them are school-aged yet. And so, the other day, Mark had to stay home from daycare, had a doctor's appointment.

But anyway, I took him shopping at Coles after the appointment. I was really, really tired that day. And so, as I'm walking through, just picking up items and listening to the music as it's playing, the song Shake, Shake, Shake by Casey and the Sunshine Band came on.

It's the one, if you've never heard it before, it mentions, Shake your booty, Shake your booty.

Anyway, because I'm tired, I just start singing it without thinking. And wouldn't you know it, little Mark starts singing it next to me as well in the middle of the aisles.

[24 : 54] And so, as he started mimicking me, I was reminded then and there that, hang on a minute, my sons are learning to be men by watching me. So I had to think, well, I need to be very careful with my behaviour, but I also then found myself in the unenviable position of having to explain to young Mark exactly what a booty is.

He found it hilarious, by the way. Anyway, that's what Paul means when he uses the father language with the Corinthians. He wants to remind them that as a good son learns their way of life from their dad, they are to learn their way of life in Christ with him.

That's why he says in verse 16, therefore I urge you to imitate me. See, as their father, Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate him because he has their best interest in mind.

He truly does. He's not trying to win them over as like some sort of status symbol for himself, like a notch in the belt saying, ah, look at this, I've got the Corinthians to add to my collection. No, to him, the Corinthians are precious.

He loves them dearly. They are a church of people that Jesus bled and died for. They are precious to him. He desperately wants them to follow Jesus.

[26 : 10] And so he says to them, follow me as I follow Jesus. I base my life on him and that's the key for us. That's what we are to do with the great Christian.

We are to follow the Christian who follows Jesus. The one who says, follow me as I follow him who points us to Jesus. If we do that, in turn, then we all grow together to be more like Jesus as we encourage and serve and love one another.

You see, the Corinthians had chosen poorly. They had chosen to follow worldly ideas of greatness, the person who can win the arguments, who can destroy their opponent with facts and logic.

and as a challenge to them, Paul himself was now coming. In verse 19, Paul announces that he plans to visit, not just to see how fine their arguments are, but also what power they have.

As Paul says, for the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power. The power to change lives, to turn people back to God, to have people know, love, and follow Jesus.

[27 : 28] On the one hand, we can choose, like the Corinthians, to follow worldly ways of thinking, chasing worldly influence, or we can choose to follow Jesus the way a great Christian does, to see God's power to change lives in action, to help people believe in Jesus to move from death to life.

In our world today, messages from Christianity or about Christianity, I should say, are more prolific than ever. Anyone with a phone can put up a ten-second clip of their argument swaying thousands, if not millions, of people as they destroy their opponents in their arguments.

they can sway millions of people to a certain way of thinking. So who do you listen to to ensure that you are actually following somebody who says, follow me as I follow Jesus?

Who do you listen to? Well, look for what Paul has described in our passage. For me, that Christian is a man from my home church. I won't mention his name only because he would hate it if I were to call him a great Christian.

But to me, in my mind, in a strange way, that actually makes him more of a great Christian because he's humble. But he is the person that I look to when I think of somebody who is a steward, servant, someone who understood that telling other people about Jesus was the most important thing in the world, but who would actually live out Jesus' teaching in his life.

[29 : 14] And so at church, whenever things needed to be set up, chairs needed to be set up for a meeting, there he was setting up chairs. Whenever tables needed to come out, there he was setting up the tables.

Whenever I recognized that I had made a mistake, or even before I had recognized I had made a mistake, when I had done something which was not in line with the Bible's teaching, there he was to pull me aside and say, you need to repent.

you need to turn to Jesus. But even in himself, when he recognized his own sin, would do the same.

I need to repent and turn to Jesus. He would say sorry. He would turn to Jesus for help, no matter what he had done. And this reminded me constantly, taught me so much about following Jesus.

Jesus. Because this man lived his life, lives his life, he's still alive, lives his life to tell others about Jesus, but also lives his life to serve others and turns to him constantly for forgiveness.

[30 : 20] He is a great Christian, retired now, but still lives his life every day saying, follow me as I follow Jesus. And I would much more rather look like that man than 007 any day.

See, it's so easy to be swayed by clever arguments and fine sounding words, by people who sound like they know so much, who have all the answers, but that's not the mark of a great Christian.

A great Christian is a servant whose life does not necessarily look glamorous, but it is faithful to Jesus, who follows Christ. Follow them as they follow Christ.

And together we will grow. We will grow well as Christians.