

## **The Cross and Christian Community**

The Cross and Christian Leadership

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## **THE CROSS AND CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP 1 Corinthians 4**

First Corinthians 4 in your Bible. I ask you to open it there. If you don't have one with you, I hope you'll find somebody that you can look on with. Grab the sermon notes page there, and let's study God's Word together.

You know, it's incredibly difficult to show favoritism for a particular thing or entity without digressing to the point of criticizing another thing or person in that same category. Doesn't mean it has to happen. Doesn't all the time happen. But there is something that leans in that direction. If this morning, I said to you, "I am a big fan of the Alabama Crimson Tide," it probably wouldn't be very long into that conversation before I said something critical or negative about the Auburn Tigers.

Now, on the other hand, if I told you today that I'm a part of Tiger Nation, probably somewhere in that conversation I might say something that is a little degrading to the Boys in Tuscaloosa. It's just the way it is. It's kind of the whole thing about how sometimes we push others down, and we're critical of others in order to build ourselves up. When we do that, we do that with things maybe that are innocent, like college football loyalties. And maybe when it comes to sports loyalties or favorites in other things, maybe it's not that big a deal. But it is an entirely different thing when that happens with regard to church leaders in Christ's church.

And that's what is happening in the book of 1 Corinthians. That's part of the backdrop. Those of you that have been part of this study know this. The Corinthians were exalting certain leaders—their leaders of choice. And, in so doing, there was a lot of carnage going on. There was a lot of fallout as a result. There was a lot of residual ramifications of that. And one of those was that they were growing to the point of criticism toward other leaders. And that can happen to us if we're not careful, even without realizing it.

You know, when we begin to exalt our favorite leaders, whether it's a small group leader or an elder, if we're not careful, we can find ourselves then comparing other small group leaders or other elders or other preachers to the one that we have chosen as our favorite. We may not have started out that way, but this is one of the issues that the Apostle Paul is addressing. There were people that had aligned themselves with certain leaders in the church, and consequently, they had evolved—or digressed, if you will—to the point where they were now criticizing other leaders in the church unduly.

And so here's the deal: There were not only people at Corinth who were for Apollos and Peter, they were against Paul. And that's the situation we come to in 1 Corinthians 4. In fact, some have looked at 1 Corinthians 4 as it is on the surface and seen Paul's defense of his apostleship. You have that, no doubt, in 1 Corinthians 4. Paul is defending his role as an apostle and, especially, as it played out among the Corinthians. But church, watch this. Come in here real close. I want you to understand that is not all Paul is doing.

If I were sitting where you are sitting this morning listening to this message, and somebody said, "1 Corinthians 4 is a defense of Paul's apostleship," I would call "time out" and say, "Wait a second! What in the world does that have to do with us, Shaddix? There aren't any more apostles. That office doesn't exist anymore today. Why are we talking about a defense of Paul's apostleship?" And the answer to that question is because that is not Paul's primary purpose.

Let me show you what I'm talking about. Just look at 1 Corinthians 4 here for a moment and look specifically at verse 6 as an example. Paul says, "*I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit...*"

Apollos wasn't an apostle, and yet he's been a part of this conversation ever since the beginning of 1 Corinthians 1. Paul includes a guy who wasn't an apostle in this conversation in this defense, and he sets him up as a church leader as he was. And he's using him as one example—not positive, not negative—but just part of the conversation about how we should approach church leaders. In that same verse, the Apostle Paul says, "I'm doing this for your benefit."

He wasn't trying to get the Corinthians to a perspective just about apostleship. He was trying to get them about a proper perspective toward not only himself but also Apollos and Peter and Christ and everybody else who was considered one of the people that had spoken into their journey. Look down a little bit farther to verse 16. Paul says, "*I urge you, then, be imitators of me.*"

Well, obviously, Paul wasn't trying to get all the Corinthians to be apostles, right? He wasn't championing for all of them to step up to the apostolic office. Obviously, he was wanting them to imitate his character, his attitude, his demeanor in the Christ-life, as well as his perspective about leadership.

Now, Brook Hills, why I'm pointing that out to you is so that we don't check out on this as simply some historical treatise that really doesn't have any relevance for our lives today. When we come to 1 Corinthians 4, we come to a good place in answering the question: How do we view our leaders? How do we approach them with regard to our relationship with them? What does the Bible say about church leadership and how that, then, affects how we relate to the men and women that He raises up in our midst to serve in various leadership capacities. That's where we are in 1 Corinthians 4.

And, consequently, the Apostle Paul begins in 1 Corinthians 4:1 with this statement. Look down at your Bible. "*This is how one should regard us...*" That's what this is about. That's what this chapter is about: How we should regard church leaders.

Now, some of you are leaders in our congregation; some of you are elders. We're about to affirm by way of vote next week in our consideration some others to join that. Others of you are small group leaders, and you're on the frontlines of where we do church and how we do church here at Brook Hills. Others of you are leaders in ministry organizations of different kinds, inside and outside the church. There are numerous leaders. Probably everybody in the room today could be considered a potential leader.

We don't know what God's going to do. We don't know how He's going to work. But for those of us in those roles or those of us who might be in those roles at some point, we need to know that 1 Corinthians 4 is a really, really good description of what we ought to strive for, what we ought to be, what we ought to aspire to. But Paul's primary focus is to say to

all of us as a people of faith: "In the light of what those leaders are supposed to be and what God intends for them to be, this is how we should regard them," as he says here in verse 1.

So here's how it's going to play out. Paul's going to give us three major divisions, three major descriptions of church leaders. The first one we'll look at in verses 1 through 5. He's going to talk about faithful stewards—leaders being faithful stewards. And then verses 6 through 13, he's going to describe leaders, interestingly, as foolish spectacles. And then, in the remainder of the chapter—verses 14 through 21—he's going to talk about leaders in terms of being spiritual fathers. And so, I want us to look at those three descriptions, and then here's what I want to do: I want to take you to those descriptions, and I want to call your attention to two to three applications for us as a people of faith in relating to our leaders. All right?

### **We should view our leaders as ... Faithful stewards in the service of the gospel.**

So, let's begin with the first one: Faithful stewards. I'll get us started by reading verses 1 through 5; you follow along in your copy of God's Word. Paul says:

*This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.*

So Paul starts out with two primary descriptions of the leader. One is the word "servant" in verse 1. It's an interesting word. It is used outside the New Testament for third-level rowers. Some of you maritime folks who may have studied the shipbuilding in ancient times, you may have seen the pictures of how there were different decks within the ship where there were different rowers. The top deck people would have the longest oars, because theirs had to stick out farther. And then, the next level people, their oars were a little bit shorter, but they were longer than the lower level. And then, you had that third deck, and those were the guys with the shortest oars on the very bottom deck. Nobody knew who they were. All the stuff from above fell on top of them. They were the lowest of the low. And that's the word Paul uses to describe church leaders. He says they're third-level rowers of Christ.

And then, he couples it with another description. You see it there: "...stewards of the mysteries of God." Now, this word is also a word that spoke of the servant but one who had been entrusted with something. A steward was an individual who had been entrusted with all of the household of his master. He was responsible. And there was an incredible amount of investment in that. There was responsibility. I mean, this individual was a known individual in the household.

And so, Paul takes these. He takes a third-level rower—the lowest of the low—and then he takes a steward—still a servant, but one that probably had a little bit more position because of the nature of his responsibility—and he puts those together. And when he does it, he creates this tension that is a reality in the lives of every man or woman that God would raise up as a leader in Christ's church. And that is the tension between being the lowest of the low regarding any merit of themselves, any pursuit of glory, any name to position, any pursuit of that position, he takes that, and he couples it with somebody who has been entrusted with something very important.

And when Paul uses the word here, he's not just talking about a household and the affairs of somebody's household. Notice what he says: "...*stewards of the mysteries of God.*" This is leadership in the church, going back to the apostolic office but stemming even today are individuals who have been entrusted with the most precious thing in all of the universe in all of history, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's what the mysteries of God refers to. They would be those things related to the gospel hidden in the Old Testament but now made known and revealed in the New Testament.

And Paul says, "As church leaders, we've been entrusted with that." And so, there's this tension between being the lowest of the low—not in pursuit of our own glory or position, but at the same time, as those who have been entrusted with that which everybody has to have—the most important prized possession in all of the universe.

Now, we could just stop right there and wallow in that. You know what wallow means, right? We could just spend some time just getting down in that and getting it all over us and everything. But the interesting thing is Paul's primary purpose here is not to delineate descriptions of these leaders. His primary purpose, remember, is to identify how we ought to approach these. And so, what he's trying to do is call attention to what leaders are so we would know, then, how to relate to them. And he does that by making these two points of application. I want you to notice them in the text.

### **Church leaders are loyal to Christ alone.**

Here's the first one: Church leaders are loyal to Christ alone; church leaders are loyal to Christ alone. He takes this description of the steward—remember, he's put these two things together—but he carries the idea of steward a step further in verse 2 when he says, "Here is the most important quality about a steward, and that is that he trustworthy; he is faithful." In other words, he doesn't have to be supervised by his master. At all points, he is completely trustworthy and faithful. Why? Because he is loyal to his master. He's loyal.

Back in verse 1, it says, "...*servants of Christ.*" You notice: "...*stewards of the mysteries of God.*" There's somebody that has charged this individual with that description. And the Apostle Paul is desiring to say in this—watch this, don't miss this, now—he's desiring to say in this to the Corinthians, "Your criticism of me is really irrelevant, because I am first and foremost loyal to the One who has put me in this role and entrusted me with this."

Now, church, listen to me. This is not intended to say to the Corinthians or to us that our leaders are not accountable to us. We know they are. We have policies and procedures in place. Know that our elders, our small group leaders and ministry leaders do have to answer to us. But remember what Paul is addressing. He is addressing criticism that has come his way unduly, because people are comparing him to their leader of choice. And now they have begun this competition thing that has not only led them to have a loyalty to a particular leader, but has caused them to digress to the point that they are comparing Paul and other leaders to their leader of choice and, thereby, criticizing him and pushing him down. And

the Apostle Paul says, "You know what? That has absolutely no influence on me, because I don't answer to you."

And there is a great lesson in that for church leaders, as we said. Oh, that we would be men and women who are not shaped, who are not driven, who are not motivated by, who are not influenced by undue criticism that comes in comparing us with another leader! That our desire would be to be loyal and faithful first and foremost to the One who has called us.

But there's a lesson in it for all of us. And that is that we would be a people who would never, never criticize our church leaders by way of comparing them with other church leaders, another small group leader, another elder or another leader of some organization or missional endeavor in our church, because we have attached ourselves and our loyalties to one, and we seek to have some impact on another one through criticism. God forbid! God forbid that we would ever allow that to happen.

### **Church leaders are looking for God's approval alone.**

The Apostle Paul gives a second application. These faithful stewards in the service of the gospel are not only loyal to Christ alone, but they are looking for God's approval alone. It just goes with it; flows right out of it. You can't separate the two. This is why he says in verses 3 through 5, "I'm not looking for your approval. Not looking for you to pat me on the back. That's not where I find my significance and my esteem." And, leaders, again, this is great, great application for us.

But Paul carries it a step further, and then he says, interestingly enough, "This is not about my approval. And while I do self-evaluation, I'm not aware of anything that I'm guilty of right now and I don't even trust myself. Because I can't discern the fleshly, worldly parts that grow out of the innermost parts of our being. I need somebody smarter than me—more spiritual, more insightful than me—to do that." And that leads him in verses 4 and 5 to say, "That's why I'm after God's approval and God's approval alone. Because one of these days, He's going to make all of that known. He's going to bring it to the surface, and He will reward me accordingly." We talked about that last week.

And so, when he says that church leaders are faithful stewards in the service of the gospel, he's bringing that to the table so that we would not waste our time and spend our energies and our resources in criticism and comparison of one small group leader to another, one elder to another, because ultimately, it doesn't matter and should never be a part of our influence of our leaders and our response to them. Because they are loyal to Christ alone, and they're looking for God's approval alone, and we need to applaud that. It frees us up, then, to look for ways that we can encourage them and come alongside them and strengthen them in their service of gospel ministry. So, that's the first description: Faithful stewards in the service of the gospel.

### **Foolish spectacles for the sake of the gospel.**

And so, Paul comes to the second description. And that's this weird one, this interesting one, this being foolish spectacles for the sake of the gospel. Now, verses 6 through 13, I think they revolve around the hinge verse—a thesis statement or a central idea that we find down in verse 9. So, just go ahead and jump down there. Let me show this to you, all right?

Paul's going to say in verse 9: "*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.*" In other words, this is to everybody. This is what we are. "We are foolish spectacles in everybody's mind," the Apostle Paul says.

Now, some interpreters think that what Paul is referring to here is what was called the "Roman Spectacle." The Romans used to do some pretty serious pomp and circumstance, and it was just like one circus piled on top of one another. And they had all these ceremonies and these parades and just this big celebration. But the Roman Spectacles would always conclude with a parade of individuals—sometimes gladiators, sometimes other individuals who had been condemned to die—and that would finish up with them being thrown to the lions to their death.

Other interpreters see here a picture of what's maybe more familiar to us, and that's the Roman Triumph. And you've heard the description of Roman warriors, leaders who would go off to war and fight a battle and win, and then they would come back and there would be this big parade, much like we do with a World Series winner or Super Bowl winner. And they would just parade their armies through the streets, and people would celebrate the victory. And in the Roman Triumph, the end of the parade would always be in shackles, in chains, in ropes; these were the spoils of war. In other words, they were prisoners that had been taken captive during the war itself. And, once again, those were individuals that, when all was said and done, were condemned to die; they would be executed.

Really doesn't matter that we land on exactly which one is correct, because the point is the same. But the metaphor here is piercing with imagery of utter humiliation. And that's Paul's point. This is what he's doing, and it's what he's going to do in the development of this. And I'm going to show you in just a moment. I love what Gordon Fee said. He said, "The scandal of the cross is written large over Paul's vision of his own apostleship. For him," Fee said, "it truly was like master, like servant."

So here written over Paul's apostleship and through him, the leadership of any man or woman who's raised up as a church leader within the congregation—a local congregation—this is the issue here that Paul is getting at, and it's an interesting one. It is the issue of humility. Utter humiliation is what the Apostle Paul chooses to emphasize in this. And this is what he wants to do, in charging church leaders, yes, but also to help us understand. Our perspective toward church leaders—why they do what they do and what they exemplify for us who are beckoned (listen to me, now) to follow them. To follow in like manner.

So what does Paul do with this issue of utter humiliation? What's the deal with that? Well, I think he unpacks it in three ways, and these will be our applications at this particular point. He says to us these things about church leaders.

### **Church leaders teach the humility of the cross.**

First of all, that church leaders teach the humility of the cross. This is a large part of their ministry. This is one of the things that ought to flow from their ministries, is the teaching of the humility of the cross. Look at verse 6. Paul says, "*I have applied all of these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit...*" And then look at what he says: "*...for your benefit, brothers...*" To this end; this is a purpose clause. "*...that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written.*" And why is it that he suggests was written? "*...that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.*"

Do you understand what Paul says? He says there is a theme that keeps showing up in God's Word. It's written. It's written in the Old Testament, and it is written in the New Testament. And that is that one of the things that characterizes in a prominent way God's salvation, as it would be played out in His Messiah, is this issue of utter humiliation. He would be humbled.

Isaiah 53 in the Old Testament is just one place you might track down at one point to see this description of the prophesied Messiah. But one in the New Testament came to my mind, and I'm embarrassed I didn't think about this as I was putting this together. But, just this morning, I thought about it, and I thought it'd be really cool for us to really have this in our mind. It's just a few books removed from this in the book of Philippians. Many of you are familiar with this passage, so hold your place here in 1 Corinthians 4 and turn over to the book of Philippians.

Paul's writing to the church at Philippi, and in this, there are many places where he makes some statements that have pulled out—they have been memorized, they've been passages we've revisited, no doubt. One of them is on this subject in Philippians 2. In Philippians 2, we see an example of Paul teaching this in the New Testament, of writing it down, and in writing it down, emphasizing it to the Philippians as something he wants them not only to take at heart, but to embrace.

So verse 5 in Philippians 2 says, *"Have this mind among yourselves..."* Notice that. "Embrace this; take it on; let it be a part of your life," he says. *"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped [or held onto], but he emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant..."* In other words, He didn't hold onto heaven; He left heaven. He came to earth. He became a man, and He took on the form of a servant. *"...being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross."*

That is one place where the utter humiliation of Jesus Christ is written down in the New Testament, as it had been prophesied in the Old Testament. And we find the Apostle Paul here saying, "Take that characteristic and embrace it and apply it to your life."

And this is what we find him saying in 1 Corinthians 4. "We've applied this to you. We've used examples with myself and with Apollos and with Peter. And we've applied them to the things going on in your lives, and how you're having your favorites and you're aligning yourself with certain leaders. And it is creating (watch this, now, church, come in here real close) it is creating the very opposite effect on you and what God desires. And so what you've needed," Paul said, "is you've needed people like we're attempting to do to apply this to your life and say, adopt a different perspective."

You understand how this favoritism thing was leading them, ultimately, to be a prideful people. This is what was happening in Corinth. They were saying, "I'm of Paul." And, "I'm of Apollos." And comparing those leaders with one another and beginning to say, "I think Paul is the best, and he's the most gifted. And that makes him the most spiritual. And I'm aligned with him, and therefore, that makes me more spiritual than you." And this is another one of those residual effects of unhealthy favoritism among leadership in God's kingdom. It begins to create a character quality in our lives that not only is different from the character of Christ, but it's on the opposite end of the spectrum.

And so, Paul says, "Church leaders teach the humility of the cross to the end that that would not be a part of our lives." And then he carries it a step further, and he takes that same idea and points out to them in verse 7. And their teachers were a gift from God, and any impact they had on them was only a manifestation of the grace of God. He says, "*For who sees anything different in you? [Is your life any different now? Does anybody see anything different?] What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?*"

People were boasting about their leaders and their affiliation with those leaders, as if they had done something to brag about. Paul said, "Your leaders are a gift from God, and any life change has been brought about through their ministry. And your life is a manifestation of the grace of God. You don't have anything brag about!" Again, trying to point out to them how the cross of Christ is opposite of pride and arrogance, but it is a demonstration of humility, which is the desired characteristic in our lives.

And then it gets worse! I mean, this is one of those places where you just thought, "Paul, you should have just stopped right there!" Because he comes to verse 8, and he takes this whole thing to a new level in his rebuke of the Corinthians by, to some degree in a righteous way, mocking them with irony and with sarcasm. This is kind of the way verse 8 would read if it were being verbalized and vocalized.

*"Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!"* You know what Paul's rebuking them for? This residual effect... I mean, it's just the ripples keep going out further and further and further. And they come to a place of a super-spirituality mentality. "This is my favorite leader, and I think he's the best. And I compare everybody else against him, and that makes me critical of them. But, because he's the best and he's most spiritual and I'm aligned with him, then I'm more spiritual than other people out there. And, if I'm more spiritual, then I lead a Christian life that is different from everybody else's."

And that can take you, Beloved, to a place that is so erroneous theologically. And that's exactly what had happened to these Corinthians. Do you know what they were doing? They were embracing an over-realized eschatology. You know what that is? It is when someone takes their doctrine of the end times, and they begin to assume that everything related to the future is theirs to be had and experienced now. And so, you know what the Corinthians were doing? They were living under the assumption that they were already in God's heavenly kingdom and experiencing His banquet table and all of the glory of His riches. And that's what they were claiming.

I heard a story—probably some of you heard it this week—of a couple in another city who are now up on third degree murder charges because they just recently allowed their second child—or the...They had more than one child, but this is the second time this has happened—they allowed him to die without giving him medicine for an illness because they were proponents of faith healing. They say, "We don't need medicine."

Now, my point in calling attention to that instance is not to argue the issue of faith healing; it is to tell you that there are great demonstrations in our day of people who are saying, "All of the blessings and the glory and condition of heaven I'm claiming right now in this life." And, if you're not careful, that over-realized eschatology can lead us to some of the greatest heights of arrogance and pride in all of Christendom.

And that is exactly what the Corinthians were doing, to the point that the Apostle Paul says at the end of verse 8, *"And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!"* He says, "I wish it was that way. That would be great! We'd be right there with you. But it's not." And, in Paul's rebuke, he essentially reminds them: "This is not what we taught you, and this is not what church leaders teach their people."

Paul would say to them, "I would remind you what we told the churches in our missionary journey in Acts 14 that through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God." He would say to the Corinthians, "We want you to know what I would write to the Romans (in Romans 8:17), *'...if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided [provided, provided!] we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.'*" Paul said, "That's what I taught," but the Corinthians had forgotten all of that. And their attachment to their favorite church leaders—by adopting the economy of this life and this world and the way that this world relates to rock stars or movie stars or public figures—bringing that into the church and led them to a super-spirituality mentality, where they thought that they were better than everybody else.

And being at that plane of spirituality led them to begin to claim the glories of the eternal kingdom in the here and now. The Corinthians were the epitome of demanding that this is your best life now. And the Apostle Paul said, "No! You need teachers who would be honest with you and tell you your best life is later." And this had created so much error and so much confusion and so much—as we talked about last week—disunity in the body of Christ. And it was leading to so much shipwrecked faith. And what Paul wanted them to have was church leaders who taught the humility of the cross.

### **Church leaders trust in the power of the cross.**

But then, he goes on and says, *"Church leaders trust in the power of the cross."* This is not just something that they teach. It's not just something they say. They live this out. Look at verse 10: *"We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute."*

I hope the terminology there that Paul is using sounds familiar, because it is exactly what he's been talking about for four chapters now in the gospel of Christ and the power of God that is manifested through that. You go all the way back to 1 Corinthians 1 where we began this study, and there Paul's talking about how this twisted economy of God is that He's chosen the foolishness of the cross that's foolish to the world and the low things—not many of you were from noble birth or powerful or not many were wise according to worldly standard. God has chosen what is foolish in the eyes of the world to shame the world's wise. He's chosen the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

And so, Paul is using this terminology, and he said, "Look, this is what you're claiming. You're claiming to be wise. You're claiming to be strong. And you're claiming to have a great reputation when it comes to spirituality. And all the time," Paul says, "we have been before you as ones who are weak, ones who are foolish, and ones who are in disrepute."

You know what Paul said? He said, "We're doing our best to have confidence in what God said to have confidence in." And that is the power of the gospel and the cross of Christ. That's where real life change is.

Beloved, this is what we desire in leaders. This is what we long for in leaders. This is what we rejoice about when God raises up leaders in our midst like this that are not only individuals that are giving us the teaching of the humility of the cross with their lips, but

they're living it out in their lives as ones who really have confidence in the gospel of Christ. And, consequently—watch this now—they're not afraid to be men and women who are before as weak and, in the eyes of the world, as foolish. And, in the eyes of the world, ones who don't have good reputation. In the eyes of the world, ones who are wasting their lives.

I remember when I was in my last year of college, right up the road here. I was an English Literature major. And I turned in a paper. And when those papers were turned back, the professor at the end of class asked me to stay around a moment. And in a conversation, she said to me, she said, "You've done well on this paper. You write well. And I know you're going to be able to use this. What are you planning to do?" And I had the opportunity to tell her that I felt like God had called me to preach; I would spend my life doing that. I'll never forget her looking at me and saying, "Why would you want to waste your life and the gift that you have?"

That's the way the world looks at us—not just me, you! Not just your church leaders, but every person that names the name of Christ. You're "wasting your life." And Paul said, "We have desired to be those who the world considers to be wasting their lives." This is what church leaders are.

### **Church leaders live out the death of the cross.**

Then, Paul goes a step further, and he says church leaders not only say it, not only have confidence, but they live out the death of the cross. It gets practical. This has feet put to it.

Now, before I read to you verses 11 through 13, I want to help us look at it through a particular lens. I've told you what the point is, okay? You've filled in the blank, but now let's make sure we read the Word of God with the right ears, and we see it with the right lens.

So pause here for a moment, hold your place here in 1 Corinthians 4, and go back to Mark's Gospel and find Mark 8. I want to show you this. And what I want to show you in doing this is Paul over here in 1 Corinthians 4 is about to say, "Church leaders really just take Jesus at His word when He described what followers of His look like and what being a disciple of His would actually look like."

So Mark 8. This is just one of the places in the Gospels that we find this. Verse 34, "*And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'*" That's not very appealing to the world. You start talking about having a cross of your own. You start talking about denying yourself. Verse 35, "*For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*" That makes no sense in the hearing of the world.

Verse 36, "*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?'*" The world says, "Don't think about eternity. Don't think about spiritual things. Profit! Get that! Gain that!" Verse 37, "*For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'*" That's what Jesus said about being a disciple—not just a church leader—but being one of His followers.

Now with that lens, go back to 1 Corinthians 4 and hear Paul's words. Verse 11: "*To the present hour...*" That means, like, right now; all the way up to right now; it's still going on. "*...we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless...*" So Paul says, "We've had inadequate food and water and clothing, and we've been beaten up for this."

And the word translated "homeless" here in my text is one that indicates being considered a vagrant. "We've been labeled as vagrants in this journey."

Verse 12: "*And we labor, working with our own hands...*" Labor to the point of utter exhaustion. "*When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat.*" Paul says, "We've done our best to live according to the Sermon on the Mount and the life that Jesus laid out when He talked about weird stuff like 'turning the other cheek' and 'going the extra mile.' We have endured all of these things from a physical standpoint—from slanderous standpoints in the... This is the way that this is played out in our lives."

And, in so doing, the Apostle Paul said, "We have been ones who've not just taught the humility of the cross. We are not just ones who have put our confidence in the power of the cross. But we are ones who have let this find its way to our feet in the way that we live our lives—the lifestyles that character us. We have lived out the death of the cross that Jesus said would characterize those who follow Him."

That's the kind of church leaders we want. That's what we want in men and women who would lead us in gospel advancement. And yet, isn't it easy, church? Sometimes, as Paul has said all the way up to this point, it is so easy living in this world in the flesh to adopt the ways that this world looks at high profile figures or those who are out front or those who are considered to be our leaders, and to take that mentality and bring it into the church and, therefore, want our leaders to be the best looking and the most gifted and have the most eloquent words and to be the most popular. And the Apostle Paul says, "We have sought to be foolish spectacles for the sake of gospel of Jesus Christ, the cross of Christ. This is what leadership in the church is supposed to be."

### **Spiritual fathers to the children of the gospel.**

So, he brings us to the third and final description, and that is the church leaders are spiritual fathers to the children of the gospel. We find it in verses 14 and 15. Paul says, "*I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.*" So he identifies them as his children, and then, in verse 15, he's going to identify them in a fatherly way. "*For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*"

Paul says, "You have many that have spoken into your life—tutors along the way who have been brought in after the fact." And he's not condemning them. He's saying that that is good. But he's identifying himself in a unique role here in with the Corinthians, and it's the same role that you would play whenever you lead somebody to Christ. That's what Paul's referring to. He said, "I'm in a little bit different relationship with you, Corinthians, because (as recorded in Acts 18) I came to Corinth, I preached the gospel, and you were born again by the power of the gospel under my ministry. And so, I was there as you were born into the kingdom of God. That makes me your spiritual father."

And every time you lead somebody to Christ, you essentially are in that role. You bring them into this world by the power of the gospel, not by your merit; you're their spiritual father. But remember what we've already noted all the way through this, and even here in this paragraph, when we first started awhile ago. I showed you Paul's end game was not just to call attention to his unique role. So, I think that the Apostle Paul is, yes, he's calling

attention to that probably to contrast himself with his accusers. But then to say, "This is really something that all of us should seek to attain by way of the way we relate to those who we lead, and those of us who follow by the way we relate to those who are our leaders." In other words, this idea of spiritual fatherhood is a healthy thing; it is a good thing.

### **Church leaders admonish their people in love.**

And so, Paul fleshes it out with these applications. First of all, church leaders admonish their people in love; they admonish their people in love. Now, here's what we have to get. Paul uses this word here in verse 14. This word translated "admonish" in my English translation. And it means "to warn." And in fact, the implication of it is to warn somebody who is at fault, who is doing something wrong. And here's what Paul knows: He knows that up to this point his words have been very strong. Why? Because he knows the grave danger of this favoritism that leads to super-spirituality, that leads to disunity, that leads to an erroneous eschatology of the end times, and begins to make us feel like we're better—that all of those things growing out of this compromise of the character of Christ. And Paul has spoken very strongly to the people, and also knows that those strong words could be interpreted as mocking the people in a severe and unhealthy way.

So what does he do? In this third description, he brings this intimate imagery of fathers with children. And it's in that context, notice, that he brings up this word "warning," "admonishment." And he says, "*[I sought] to admonish you as my...*" And here's the key word right here: "*...beloved children.*" He not only takes the familial arena—the familial imagery—but he adds this idea of the love that is between a father and his children. And he says, "It's in that context that I sought to warn you who were at fault."

And we know this, don't we? We know this. This is part of fatherhood. Any good father—and I'm well aware that there are lame fathers in our world today because of sin, and they are not our model; they are not what we measure everything against. We measure everything against the Fatherhood of God, as expressed in fathers in this world who truly love their children. And Paul said, "This is the norm for fathers, and that is, they don't shy away from warning their children about things they're doing wrong and encouraging them to the good."

This is sometimes so weird for us, because we've been so affected by secular psychology, even in parenting, in the family context, in the home, to the point where we're being told, "You can't talk about anything negative. You can't point out to a child anything they're doing wrong. You can't rebuke a child for something. We just need to emphasize the positive and build them up." And the Apostle Paul says, "No! There are things that are grave dangers, and any father that loves his children will love them by lovingly warning them when they are in error and encouraging them to the right." And the Apostle Paul said, "That is what good teachers and leaders do in your midst in the spiritual family of God."

### **Church leaders give their people examples to follow.**

And then, he says, "Good leaders in the church give their people examples to follow." 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.*" What's Paul saying? Is he saying, "Man, I got it all together. I'm the one that's perfect. I'm the one..."? We can't read, even this chapter—we can't even read the things he said before and think for a moment that Paul is saying, "Imitate me out of arrogance and pride." But what he is saying is, "I've done my best to live the crucified life, and I think that's been done enough to give you a representation of it that you can follow. So, I want you to look at me as I look at Christ, to the end that you would not be at first a primary follower of me, but that you would be a follower of Christ. Watch me so that you

can know how Jesus looks." That this is what good leaders do. They're not afraid to say, "Imitate me." They are so given to obedience to the gospel of Christ and to the cross of Christ that they're not fearful of saying to us just like -- watch this, now -- any loving father would do.

How much love is there for a father to say, "Here is how you grow to love a woman like you're supposed to love her. Now, I'm telling you what you're supposed to do. Just jump on Google and Google it, or find a YouTube video. Somewhere there will be some instructions. Here's how you work hard in the job place. You work hard in the job place. I'm telling you to do that now. Go Google that; find somebody that's got some expertise in that." No! That's not what fathers do. That doesn't mean fathers are an expert in every area, but what they say is, "Here's what's right. Now, watch me and I'm going to show you how to live this out." That's what good fathers do.

And when they don't have expertise in a particular area, they say, "Watch me, and let me take you to where you can find this information and where you can see this." They are examples to their children. The Apostle Paul said, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ. I am going to give you flesh and blood, meat and bones, to be able to see." And, apparently, he had enough confidence in his young protégé, Timothy, that he was a reflection of Paul, who was a reflection of Christ. That he had confidence that when he sent him to the Corinthians that he would be a real live YouTube video on how to emulate the character of Christ. This is what church leaders do. They give us examples to follow.

And therein is implicit the responsibility that we have, not to reduce them to something that they're not intended to be, as if they had nothing to offer. Not to over-spiritualize and say, "Well, I don't follow any man. I only look at Jesus." Well, you can't see Jesus except He is being out in the lives of flesh and bones in this world. And that's where we look at our leaders, and we say, "Of those who are rightly reflecting the character of Christ and the crucified life and denying themselves for the sake of the gospel, I will emulate that in my life, not in a way that exalts me and makes me more spiritual, but because I want to emulate Christ."

### **Church leaders discipline their people for righteousness.**

And then Paul brings the third and final description of these spiritual fathers to the table, when he says, "Spiritual fathers and church leaders discipline their people for righteousness." It's what you have in verses 18 to 21. Paul says, "*Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you...*" He knew that if he sent Timothy, as he did, some would think he's just too chicken to come and face us. But he says in verse 19, "*But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills...*" And he says, "This is one of the things I'm looking forward to." "*...and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.*" Paul says, "That will show up. All of that eloquence you're boasting of, all of that favoritism you had, all of the giftedness you're championing for—I'm going to find out if any of it is rooted in the supernatural, otherworldly power of God." I think he had a sneaking suspicion.

And so, he said, "You be the determinant." In verse 21: "*What do you wish? Shall I come to with a rod [the rod of discipline], or with love in a spirit of gentleness?*" Just being able to affirm you. Here's the deal, here's Paul's point. Remember this: In the same paragraph that he's talked about admonishing in love, that he's talked about being examples to follow, he's still talking about a father with his children. And he brings to the table this idea of discipline.

And he says something that is so contrary, again, to what we're hearing in our culture today with regard to parents of children in the home, as well as spiritual parents to spiritual children in the church, and that is this thing of discipline has no place. And Paul says, "On the contrary, discipline is part of being a loving father; it is part of being a loving father. We don't rewrite the rules."

We must understand when we come to a text like this, that this biblical issue has been raped by a culture of abuse and abandonment. It has lost its innocence at the hands of selfish parents who don't love their children, but instead, treat their kids as objects of their own rage and means to the end of their own selfish gratification. And our culture has looked at that abuse and said, "That must be bad," and thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Instead of throwing the abuse out, we've thrown discipline out. And Paul comes back, and he says, "No! No! Yes, throw the abuse out. Throw the perversions out but don't throw discipline out! Because that is an expression of a loving father."

If we had time today, I'd take you to Hebrews 12; the reference is in your Worship Guide. I hope you'll track it down and show you there the ways of God with His children when it comes to disciplining them. The author of Hebrews says, "God disciplines His children, because that indicates sonship." If you don't get disciplined by God, you're not His child. Because it is a natural thing that fathers discipline their children. It's what they're supposed to do. It's how they show love.

And that's the second thing he mentions. God disciplines you because He loves you. And if He doesn't discipline you, then it would mean that He doesn't love you. But He does love you, and that's why He disciplines you. And then, the author of Hebrews said, "And discipline leads to the healthy things of true life and respect and righteousness, and that is God's ordained plan for biological families—families in the home—as well as the spiritual family of the church."

And I'm so grateful today. I'm still the new kid on the block here, a short-timer. I have been here just a few months. To know that one of the great privileges of my life is to serve with so many small group leaders and so many staff members and elders that are demonstrating these character qualities. That doesn't mean it's a perfect group and that we're all doing it all right. No! But a group that is committed to teaching the humility of the cross, and providing examples for people to follow and living out the crucified life and teaching the character of Christ in this. But also who are not afraid to lean into the love that can only be shown by loving, firm discipline in a congregation.

Even now, your elders are continuing to work through policies and procedures and processes to lead us as a faith family to love one another even in a better way through this issue of church discipline. And I pray that we would not only pray for them, but we would align ourselves under their leadership. Because we can't claim to be a family in which there is love without this demonstration.

Our pastor, in the coming weeks, is about to lead us into 1 Corinthians 5 and, over a few weeks, help us to consider this noble, yet difficult issue of discipline in the family of God. And I want to ask you to be especially prayerful for him and for us as you pray for our elders in this particular subject, because it is a characteristic of loving fatherhood in a family like ours.

But, you know, maybe the greatest discipline that a father ever exercised on the son was not on the Son who deserved it, but on a Son who simply took the place of others like us,

that they might become children of God. Isn't that weird? That's this weird economy of God. And, yet, it is what He chose to do, because He loved you so much and loves me so much.

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