McLean Bible Church
Dr. David Platt
March 1, 2020

Church & Culture
Viewing Our Leaders & Ourselves in Light of the Gospel

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—let me invite you to open with me to 1 Corinthians 4. If you're new here, we use the acrostic MAPS in our study. The M stands for meditate and memorize. Meditate means to read a passage slowly and soak in what the Bible is saying. Then A, apply it our lives; P, pray through it; and S, look for opportunities to share that with someone else.

In just a minute we're going to do something similar to what we've been doing in previous weeks. We'll have a few minutes to walk through this passage, meditating on our own. Today I want us to think about two particular questions under the "M" category. First, after you read through the entire chapter, I want you to ask yourself: how does God tell us to view leaders in the church? We talked about that a little bit last week, but I want us to dive in a little deeper today.

In a sense, that's what this chapter is all about. From the very beginning you're going to see Paul saying, "This is how one should regard us." By "us" he's talking about himself and other leaders in the church, including Paul, Apollos and Peter. We've already seen their names in 1 Corinthians and now Paul is saying, "This is how you should view us." This is the Bible telling us how we should view leaders in the church.

So I want you to read this through on your own. Anyone can do this. If you've been in church for decades or if this is your first time ever in church—even if you don't yet believe the Bible—we invite you to join with us in reading through this chapter and asking, "What does what I just read teach about leaders in the church?"

Then similarly to what we did last week, I want us to turn to each other and discuss for a couple minutes what you've found. Again, I know that makes some people nervous, because you're not really up for group discussion—especially with people you don't even know that well. You have total freedom to say, "I'm a designated listener." That's totally fine. Now, if everyone in your group is a designated listener, then broaden your group until you find somebody who's willing to say something. Or you can just sit in awkward silence. For those of you who don't like this activity, I'll be on a screen next week and you will be free. So you don't have to avoid coming next week.

© David Platt 2020

How should we view leaders in the church?

All right. I want you to read though this chapter and ask what is God telling us about how we should view leaders in the church? Let me pray for us first.

O God, we praise You for Your Word. We praise You that You've not left us alone in the dark. Knowing what we're about to read, I know You're going to teach us, not just about how we should view leaders in the church, but how we should view ourselves in ways I know have the potential to change lives and perspectives in this room. We ask You to do this for us.

Take Your Word, by Your Spirit, and speak to every one of our hearts right now. Speak to those who have been in the church for years and who may have read this passage many times before. But also speak to those who are totally new to this study method. We pray that Your Spirit would speak now in a supernatural way through Your Word, anticipating where that will lead us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Take a couple minutes on your own, read through 1 Corinthians 4 and think about this first question: What does this passage teach us about how we should view leaders in the church. Maybe circle words or underline phrases, make some notes that answer that question, then I'll bring us back together. Go for it. Take a few minutes to do this on your own right where you're sitting.

~~~~~~

To the extent you feel comfortable, I would love to hear some one-sentence answers to this question, based on this passage. All around the room, how does God tell us to view our leaders? Just simple sentences that summarize what you found.

"Servants." From the very beginning, God says we should view leaders as servants of Christ. What else?

"Stewards." That's another word. They're stewards of the mysteries of God.

"Faithful." That's like the job description of a leader in the church. Not "cool"—thankfully. Not "well-dressed"—thankfully. Anyway, we could go on and on. Not "creative," not "clever." Faithful—that's the job description. Good. What else?

"Humble." That's good.

"Guides." Good.

"Teachers, not authors of God's Word." Very good. That relates to something we talked about a few weeks ago—I'm not the chef; I'm the waiter. I get the food to the table, but I don't cook the food. I just get it there hot. What else?

"Fathers." Isn't that interesting? We have family imagery in the way he talks about Timothy as his child and the church as his beloved children. It's a powerful picture.

Yes, there's quite a statement in verse 16: *"Be imitators of me…."* A leader is someone who lives their life for Christ in a way that's worthy of imitation. Good. Anything else? "Not to be people pleasers."
~~~~~~

That's very, very good. "Leaders are human." Good call. It's a good word. Ah, there's so much here to soak in.

Here's an attempt to summarize everything that was just said. I think we can do this in five big-picture categories. How does God tell us to view leaders in the church? You've mentioned them all.

1. Servants of Christ. That's one clear word from God: leaders are servants of Christ. It's interesting that the word here for "servant" is not the word Paul often uses—the Greek word *doulos*—which can also be translated slave. Here the word is a word used in the first century which refers to an "under-rower" on a boat. Picture the lowest galley of slaves on a boat; the people whose only job is to row here or there, according to what the captain of the boat says to do. That's the picture of a leader in the church. They are servants.

Think about it. Who is the Leader of the church? Jesus is. He leads His church and has put leaders in place whose job is to do whatever He says. It's why leaders should not be authors of God's Word but only teach it. When you look in 1 Timothy 3, you see a list of qualifications for pastors and elders in the church. It's interesting that almost all those listed are character qualifications that you would expect of any follower of Jesus, which we'll be talking about more in a second.

Notice there's one competency qualification, one thing a leader—and a pastor or elder specifically—must be able to do. That competency qualification in 1 Timothy 3:2 is that he must be *"able to teach."* That's what drives everything. If leaders are teaching God's Word, then Jesus will be leading His church. If leaders are not teaching God's Word, then leaders will be leading the church in ways that are apart from Christ.

So leaders are servants, under-rowers. They're just to say what's here. That's the job every week; to just say what's here. To be honest, that makes my job a lot easier. I don't like to think, "What am I going to say next week? I've got to come up with something cool or creative." No, I just have to read what's in 1 Corinthians 5 and teach it.

2. Stewards of the mysteries of God. A steward is someone who has been entrusted with something to steward. When Paul talks about the "mysteries of God," he is referring to the gospel. This is what we've seen throughout 1 Corinthians 1-3. Paul is talking about the mystery of Christ crucified—a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles —but for those who are being saved, it's the power of God. Remember that language from 1 Corinthians 1? Or the wisdom of God that looks like foolishness to the world—that's the gospel.

If you are new here or this is your first Sunday in church, this is the core message at the center of the Bible. It's called the gospel, the good news. The good news is that all of us in this room have been created and loved by God, but we have all sinned against God. We've all turned aside from God's ways to our own ways. It looks different in each of our lives, because we've all decided our ways are better than

His ways. As a result of our sin against God, we are separated from Him. If we die in this state of separation from God, we will spend eternity experiencing judgment from God.

You might think, "Where is the good news in that?" The good news is that God has not left us alone in this state. God has come to us in the person of Jesus. He has done what we could never do. He's lived a life of no sin, then—even though He had no sin to die and experience judgment for—He chose to die. This is what the cross is all about. Jesus died on the cross to pay the price and endure the judgment for our sin.

Then three days later He rose from the grave in victory over sin and death. That means anyone, anywhere—including you today—through faith in Jesus can be forgiven of all their sin before God and reconciled into a relationship with Him for all eternity. That's the gospel and church leaders are stewards of that message. The primary responsibility of a leader in the church is to faithfully pass that message on from generation to generation to generation. They are stewards of the greatest treasure in the world—the gospel itself.

3. A spectacle to the world. In 1 Corinthians 3:9 Paul writes, *"For I think that God has exhibited us apostle…"* —talking specifically about leaders in the very beginning of the church that were laying the foundations for the church—*"…like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world."* This is the third description of how we view leaders: as spectacles to the world. Now, what does that mean?

Remember that Paul had started the church at Corinth and then left to go on to plant other churches. When he thinks about his life and that of other leaders, he says, "We've become like spectacles to the world." It was not very popular to be Paul or a teacher in the church. They were preaching Christ crucified at the risk of their lives. Paul was beaten, stoned, imprisoned, then even died in prison. And it wasn't just Paul. Think about those other first preachers and leaders in the church. Out of the eleven disciples—not including Judas, who betrayed Jesus—John was exiled on an island for preaching the gospel, and the other ten, from all we know from church tradition, were martyred because they preached the gospel. You didn't have people eager to sign up for this because it was a way to advance themselves in the world. They were spectacles to the world.

Paul goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 4:1l-13 that they hungered and thirsted, they were poorly dressed, they were buffeted, reviled, persecuted and slandered. *"We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things."*

Fast forward to the 21st century. By God's grace, I'm hopefully faithfully preaching the gospel today and not in danger of going to prison tomorrow for it—at least not today and not in this context. Some other leaders in the church today are facing that possibility. But this is a clear reminder to me and to any leader in the church in this context that this is not an avenue to applause in the world. I don't live, and the leaders in the church don't live, for the applause or acclaim of this world. That is not what we seek.

If leaders in the church aren't careful, like you mentioned earlier, we can live to please people. We can live to be popular. We can lead in ways that people will like us and often this can lead us to do things that are contrary to faithfulness to Christ. It's a good word.

Let me give you two more characteristics of good leaders.

4. Spiritual parents. Another one you mentioned is found in verses 14-16: *"I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus."* So leaders are spiritual parents in the church. Paul saw people in this church as his children. Specifically, he had led many of them to Christ.

If I were to ask around this room how you came to faith in Jesus, I'm guessing many of you would point to particular leaders in the church who had an influence in your coming to faith in Christ—some directly and some indirectly. Leaders have helped lead you to become children of God. That's a beautiful picture of what God has designed for the church. We should be able to look to leaders as those who care for us like a parent does a child.

I think about my kids. Yesterday one of my kids, out of nowhere, came up and crawled in my lap. I was actually working on the sermon for today and I thought, "Forget the sermon." I was sitting there with him, thinking, "Don't ever leave. This is so great." Then I think about last night, when our two older boys came to Heather and me with some questions about love and relationships. We thought, "You've come to the right place. We are the experts on this." We started diving into all kinds of things with them—it was so good.

I think about that, then I read this passage and think, "As much as I love my kids and want to see them grow up in healthy ways, God has called leaders in the church to think about the members in that way." Not that we're crawling up in each other's laps and I'm not saying I've got love advice for everybody in this room. But I am saying I want to feed you with truth that helps you to grow up in Christ, to mature in Him. That's why you see this all over the New Testament. In Galatians 4 Paul says, "I have labored for you as children to see you grow up in Jesus." Members in the church are supposed to look to leaders as people who are loving them like that.

5. Serious examples. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:16, "I urge you, then, be imitators of me." This was mentioned in a couple different ways. Leaders in the church are to be serious examples for Christians. I read this language, *"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."*

My ways? When I look at this as a leader in the church, I think, "Okay, I'm supposed to live a life that can say to those I'm leading, "If you imitate me, you will be imitating Jesus." Obviously, we all know I'm not perfect. No leader in the church is perfect. But leaders in the church are set up to be examples.

That's why 1 Timothy 3 has all these character qualifications that are expected of any follower of Christ. So a leader is supposed to reflect the character of Christ in ways that are worthy of imitation. That's a serious call. That's why we see throughout Scripture, "Don't be hasty to appoint and recognize leaders. Don't seek leadership without realizing the seriousness of that call."

I want to put a pause on this particular question. I want to practically encourage you in two ways, based on these five descriptions. One, I want to encourage and even ask you to pray for these things in leaders in the church. As you pray for any leaders in the church, pray that they would be servants of Christ, faithfully stewarding the gospel in ways that may lead them to be a spectacle to the world. Pray that they would faithfully parent the church in ways that set the example for Christians. As you pray for that, look to leaders for these things, knowing that sometimes leaders struggle. That's why these things are so important, aren't they?

When you find out a leader is struggling, if the foundation of your faith is in that leader, then the foundation of your faith starts to crumble. Don't let it be that way. They are servants of Christ. The extent to which any leader has ever pointed you to Christ, no matter what happens in that leader's life, as long as Christ is the foundation there is no crumbling there. Christ is the foundation and the gospel is still the center—so we focus there.

When it comes to spiritual parents and serious examples, when leaders struggle and we work to restore them to these standards, at the same time we shouldn't fall into a rut and say, "Okay, I'm just not going to look to leaders to be examples anymore." God is telling us in His Word, "Look to leaders for these things." Whenever leaders struggle, then walk through processes to rebuild them up, but keep the focus on Christ. Look for, pray for, seek out healthy leadership in the church. God is saying all this to us today from 1 Corinthians 4.

How should we view ourselves?

The second picture is related to this, but it will kind of be a little bit of a left turn. How then does God tell us to view ourselves? We're not going to be able to spend as much time in groups on this, but I want you to see this yourself first. How does God tell us to view ourselves, particularly in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5? I want you to at least get a glimpse in your own mind, then we'll think about this together. I pray that this would soak in in a way that would be life changing for you—and I don't think that's an overstatement. Hear how God is telling us to view ourselves in His Word.

To summarize, God is telling us to view ourselves, first, not according to what others think about us. This is so significant. In verse three, Paul says, *"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court."* Now remember the context here; remember what's happening in Corinth. There were members of the church who were aligning with different leaders. "We like Paul. We like Apollos. We like Peter." They were not only pitting these leaders against each other, but themselves

against themselves. “I’m in the Apollos camp. I’m in the Paul camp. I’m in the Peter camp.” All these different people were comparing leaders and themselves with others.

That’s why Paul says at the end of 1 Corinthians 3, “No more boasting in men. This is ridiculous. What are you doing? You’re consumed with comparisons, taking pride in this leader or that camp.” Paul says, “Your pride is ridiculous, comparing yourself and leaders with each other.”

This makes sense, right? Pride and comparison almost always go together. Nobody’s proud because they’re rich or attractive or smart or talented. People are proud only if they’re richer than someone else, or smarter than someone else, or more attractive or more talented than someone else. That’s where pride comes in. It’s exactly what C.S. Lewis says in his chapter on pride in Mere Christianity. It’s one of my favorite chapters in any book anywhere, because he gets right to it. He says:

> Pride gets no pleasure out of having something—only having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich or clever or good looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer or cleverer or better looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich or clever or good looking, there would be nothing to be proud about.

That’s right, isn’t it? Just think about an example. Say you’re proud because you’re talented, but what happens when you meet somebody else who’s more talented than you in that same way? Do you still feel proud? No. Suddenly, you don’t find the pleasure you once found in your talents, because you see someone who has more talents. That’s because you never really had pleasure in your talents in the first place. You were proud because you had more than the next person. Now that you’ve met somebody who is more talented, you’re not proud anymore.

Here’s why this is so important. We live in a world where we are constantly tempted to compare ourselves with others. Either consciously or subconsciously, it’s happening in us all the time. Men around this room are constantly wondering how they measure up with others in this way or that way. Women all around this room are looking around at others, thinking, “I wish I looked like that,” or “I wish I had that.” It’s the name of the game on Facebook. Put your best face forward. You don’t always see your best face—you see your worst face, because you’re constantly discouraged by looking at where others are. That’s how Facebook works.

Or it can cut the other way. We might see something and think, “I’m glad I’m not like that person.” Then there’s a whole other side of pride, right? We’re constantly tempted to compare ourselves to others. I confess, I’m tempted in the same way, in every area of my life—even as a pastor.

I was thinking about one conference I was preaching at overseas. I was with Francis Chan, another church leader and a friend of mine. A book I wrote had at that point recently surpassed one million copies purchased, so I assumed for a minute I had a little something to be proud of. Then at this conference with Francis, somehow it came out that a book he’d written before that had just sold two million copies. All of a sudden I found myself wrestling, wondering, “Where’s this coming from? It’s

absurd." But it was where my mind and heart were going. It's part of our nature, something we all do, and it ultimately leaves us empty. Maybe it makes us feel good for a moment, but it doesn't last. There's no end to it, because there are always going to be people who have more or do better or whatever. As long as we're comparing ourselves with others or by how we're viewed by others, that's a recipe for emptiness.

I say this to my teenage boys all the time. "If you want to live for the approval of others, it's going to be a battle all your life. So don't to it. It just leads to emptiness." This is why Paul says what he does in verse three, *"It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court."* In other words, "I'm not looking to anybody in Corinth for my sense of worth or identity. I'm not comparing myself to Apollos or Peter or anybody else."

What God is saying here is avoid comparison with others. Do not look to others to determine what you think about yourself. Do not look to others to determine what you think about yourself. It's futile and it's empty. If you're looking to someone for your worth, what happens when that person's thoughts about you change? When you base your identity on what your spouse says about you, then they change their mind or they're no longer there, what happens? When you base your worth on what your employer says about you, then they change their mind or that's no longer there, what happens? Don't look to others to determine what you think about yourself.

You say, "Well, what's the other option?" At this point, most people in our culture would say, "It's obvious." If you're talking with any counselor in our culture about this temptation to compare yourself with others or find your identity in that, the counselor is going to say to you, "Don't worry about what others say about you. You just need to be concerned with what you think about you. That's what's most important. What's most important is what you think about yourself."

So our culture's recipe for dealing with low self-esteem is to remedy it with high self-esteem. "Look at you—all you are, all you have, all you've accomplished." The focus is there. "Stop comparing yourself to others. Stop trying to live up to others' standards and evaluate yourself accordingly. Set your own standards, and evaluate yourself according to them." no, that is the exact opposite of what the Bible says to do here.

Look at what Paul says next: *"In fact, I do not even judge myself."* Paul says, "I don't care what you think about me and I don't really care what I think about me either." *"I'm not aware of anything against myself."* In other words, "If you were to ask me, I would probably say some good things. *"But I am not thereby acquitted."* He's saying, "I don't need to base my identity or my worth on who I think I am or what I think I do that's good." No. God's Word is saying here that we should not view ourselves according to what we think and avoid confidence in ourselves.

Do you realize this is a very counter-cultural message? The Bible is saying here that looking inward to myself is just as much a trap as looking outward to others. So many of us in this room tend to look to others, what they think of us, how we compare with them. That leads to emptiness. So we decide

to set our own expectations and standards for ourselves. Think about it. Who among us always lives up to our own expectations or standards? None of us do and this always leads to more emptiness and despair. The only way to avoid that despair is to set really low expectations or standards. But then we feel bad about ourselves because we have such low standards. It's all empty. It's futile and it leads to despair.

So what do we do? Where do we look? If not outward at others or inward at ourselves, then how do we view ourselves? Where do we find our sense of identity and worth and confidence in our lives? I'm glad you asked. Do you want a stable sense of identity? Do you want an unwavering sense of worth, an unshakeable sense of confidence in your life, no matter what you achieve or don't, no matter what you look like, no matter what anybody else thinks? Don't look outward; don't compare yourself to others. Don't do it—it's a trap that will try to pull you in every time. Don't look outward.

Don't look inward. Don't boost low self-esteem with high self-esteem, just thinking better thoughts about yourself. If you want a stable sense of identity, an unwavering sense of worth and an unshakeable confidence in your life, don't look outward. Don't look inward. Look upward. Paul says, "I look to the Lord Who judges me. I don't care what you think about me. I don't care what I think about me. The only thing that matters is what He thinks about me."

So the Bible is saying we should view ourselves only according to what God thinks. Paul says, "It's the Lord Who judges me." He goes on to say in verse five that God *"will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart."* Now, in and of itself, that's not necessarily a comforting thought. "I was starting to feel encouraged, but now I realize that one day every purpose of my heart, every action I've taken, every thought I've had is going to be brought into the light, then God is going to hold me accountable for it all.:

That's not good news for anybody in this room, until you realize that this God Who will judge you also loves you. He has made a way for you to be completely righteous before Him and accepted by Him. He knows everything about you and has done the unthinkable. He knows all the ways you have sinned, all your weaknesses, all your thoughts, all your desires, yet God—the Holy God of the universe—has done the unthinkable and unimaginable. He has come to us in Jesus and made it possible for any one of us—no matter who we are, what we have or have not done—for any one of us who puts our trust in Jesus to be declared loved by Him and secure in Him as His child forever.

Do you want to talk about a stable sense of identity, an unwavering sense of worth and unshakeable sense of confidence? The God of the universe, the ultimate Judge of all, says to you, "You are My child and I am for you. You're Mine and I love you." Christian, live in that. Breathe in that. Look on Facebook with that in mind. Go to work with that in your mind. You are free from living for the approval of others. You are free from living for the approval of yourself.

Look up to God. See how He sees you. You don't have to look a certain way before Him. You don't have to achieve certain acclaim before Him. You don't have to measure up in this way or that way.

That's the point. You can't measure up, but He loves you anyway. The God of the universe has spoken and has said to all who are in Christ, "You are My son. You are My daughter. In Christ, I am pleased with you."

When you realize this, then what do you live for? You live for commendation from God refusing to get caught up in a world that's always looking outward, evaluating yourself based on how you're doing in comparison to others. You're free from that. You refuse to get caught up in always looking inward, beating yourself up because of regrets, wondering how you could have done this or that differently. No, you live with your eyes looking upward, caught moment after moment after moment, gazing upon the God of the universe Who says to you every moment, "You are Mine."

In Christ, that's not going to change tomorrow. It's not going to change a week from now, a month from now, ten years from now, or ten trillion years from now. That is a stable sense of identity, unwavering sense of worth and unshakeable sense of confidence to bank your life on. That's why I say this is life changing.

So here's the question then for every person in this room. Have you rooted your identity in Christ? Have you put your faith in Jesus? That is the crux of the issue. Today I want to invite people who say, "No, that's not where my identity is" to let today be the day when you put your faith in Jesus. You'll have a whole new outlook on life. And for all who have put your faith in Jesus, be reminded today of a reality you can live in tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day, and the next.

Will you bow your heads with me? I want to ask have you put your faith in Jesus? Do you know you are forgiven of your sins before God, that you are accepted by God, you're in relationship with God as His child and in His family? If you cannot say in your heart right now, "Yes, that's a reality in my life," that can happen by faith. I invite you, right where you're sitting, to pray to God. Right there in your heart, say, "God, I know I have sinned against You. I know I'm separated from You by my sin. But today I want to put my trust in Jesus. Please forgive me of all my sin. Please restore me to a relationship with You. Please give me this unwavering sense of worth, unshakeable sense of confidence and stable identity in You, now and forever."

When you pray that, when you put your faith in Jesus, God says, "You are Mine." With our heads bowed and eyes closed, if you are saying before God, "Today is the day I'm putting my faith in Jesus," would you just lift up your hand, right where you are, saying, "Yeah, today is the day when I'm trusting in Jesus as my sense of identity, as my worth and confidence."

O God, I pray, thanking You for how You've brought people here today to say, "Yes, I want to be forgiven of my sins. I want to be restored to You." God, I pray for eternally life-changing decisions that are happening today as a result of Your work. I pray for those who are trusting in Jesus, that from this day forward they would know and live in this reality.

I pray for every follower of Christ in this room, that we would live in this reality and that You would free us from living for the approval of others or of ourselves. Help us to remember who we are in You, living to please You alone. May it be so, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material provided that you do not alter it in any way, use the material in its entirety, and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to the media on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Radical.

All Scriptures are quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By David Platt. © David Platt. Website: Radical.net