

## **Last of All, Fools for Christ**

I Corinthians 4:9-21

*<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, <sup>12</sup> and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; <sup>13</sup> when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.*

*<sup>14</sup> I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> I urge you, then, be imitators of me. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. <sup>19</sup> But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. <sup>20</sup> For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. <sup>21</sup> What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?*

- I Corinthians 4:8-21, ESV

### **Introduction: Do as I say, or do as I do?**

Have you ever found yourself saying to your children, “Do as I say, not as I do?” I hope not. While we all have our regrettable moments as parents, the words of James Baldwin ring true: “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”

Of course, we can all point to exceptions that prove this rule, to children who have turned out very, very different from their parents, in both good ways and bad. But still, consistent modeling beats hypocritical lecturing every day of the week. Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson famously said, “Your actions speak so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying.”

### **A. The Apostles: Last of All, Fools for Christ**

The Apostle Paul has been dealing with the problematic pride of the Corinthians as it manifested itself in worldliness and divisions within the church. He’s been telling them that the power of the Holy Spirit and the fullness of redemption in Christ are what makes the life of the believer and the church, not worldly wisdom, eloquence or power. He is redirecting their focus away from seeking worldly fame and human approval and toward the greater wisdom and power of God, which is shaped like the cross in the upside-down kingdom of God, where the way up is the way down and the greatest of all was servant to all and gave His life as a ransom for all.

What Paul was asking of the Corinthians was hard: Swallow your pride, embrace the cross, treasure the wisdom of God more than the wisdom of the world, seek spiritual fruitfulness over worldly success and prominence. These are not things which come naturally to us, and we can only walk in this way if we're following Jesus and living by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul's whole appeal to the Corinthians would have fallen flat if he himself was living a life of pride and self-exaltation, seeking worldly fame and approval, seeking to accumulate as many followers for himself as he could. But clearly, the opposite was the case for Paul and the rest of the Apostles:

*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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, <sup>12</sup> and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; <sup>13</sup> when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. – vv. 9-13*

Paul is using a very shocking illustration from the Romans world to make his point, a scene the Corinthians would understand well. When a conquering ruler rode into the city in triumphant procession, he would bring behind him his victorious army and also the defeated prisoners of war. At the very end of the procession, men condemned to die were marched before the people for public scorn and ridicule. They were then led into the local coliseum or arena to be executed.

Paul is saying this is the position God has been pleased to give His Apostles before the watching world. In fact, 11 of the 12 Apostles would be executed for their testimony in Jesus, and John, the last living Apostle, would die in exile on the Island of Patmos.

Last week, I said that the Corinthians were guilty of acting as if they were already living in the age of glory that is yet to come, and they were not heeding Christ's call to us in this life that we are to take up our cross daily and follow Him. That's what Paul is referencing here. Jesus was mocked, ridiculed, beaten, despised, rejected, and crucified publicly for us and for our salvation. This was the saving demonstration of the love, power, and wisdom of God, as He became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him!

The Apostles, as those commissioned by God to take the Gospel to the nations, followed in the footsteps of Jesus in being despised and rejected by the world. I think it's important for us to see why, as much as we can. First, it does seem to be a pattern for conformity to the likeness of Christ, in self-denial and learning to depend on God.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul would describe the "thorn in the flesh" God allowed to torment him with suffering of some kind:

*to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of*

*Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. – 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, ESV*

So, it does seem that weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities are designed to humble and weaken believers, to make us depend entirely on God and His grace.

Secondly, suffering Apostles are a more effective witness to the truth and power of the Gospel. If the Apostles had been men of prominence, power, and wealth, skeptics could easily claim that they were only preaching the Gospel to line their own pockets and advance their own names. Sadly, many ministers of the Gospel have fallen into this trap and brought dishonor and shame on the church and the Gospel in the process. But for the Apostles, proclaiming Christ meant leaving and losing the honor, wealth, comfort, and positions they enjoyed in this life, and why would anyone willingly do that? Only if the Gospel was true and Jesus had indeed opened the way to eternal life, so that the things of this life would not have as much attraction. So, the public humiliation and suffering of the Apostles strengthens their testimony to the truth of the Gospel.

## **B. The Corinthians: Strong and Held in Honor**

In contrast with the humiliation of the Apostles in the eyes of the world, the Corinthians sought honor and power. There's more than a bit of sarcasm in Paul's words, but he's still communicating a vital truth, in v. 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.*

What the Corinthians were seeking, they had, in some measure, achieved. We need to be careful when we're seeking things that are not ultimately right or good for us, because sometimes the worst thing that can happen is to get what you've always wanted.

The Corinthians were convinced of their own superiority, in wisdom and strength and honor, and they wanted even more. They boasted of all the wrong things and failed to grasp the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God.

So, they had some eloquent and influential leaders, but they wanted even more eloquent and influential leaders. They missed that God chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong, as Paul had told them in chapter 1:

*For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. – vv. 26-29*

The people in their church they were probably most ashamed of, they needed to celebrate and rejoice in, for their inclusion in the kingdom shows off the greatness of the saving grace of God. And many were

failing to see that rejoicing in their own weakness and foolishness in the eyes of the world magnified the saving grace and power of God.

Here's another unexpected and vital truth the Corinthians missed: Not only did they misunderstand the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God, where the least are the greatest and those despised by the world are the most marvelous trophies of God's grace and bring Him the most glory, but they also missed the true nature of the needs of their souls. The more we center our lives on ourselves and exalt ourselves, the emptier we are inside and the more restless and dissatisfied our souls are.

It is only when we are emptied of ourselves, removing our own desires and selfish ambition from the center of our lives, that our souls are truly satisfied. As Augustine of Hippo famously wrote: "You have made us for Yourself, and our souls are restless until they find their rest in You."

Augustine knew this truth from experience, which he lays out brilliantly in the only book-length autobiography written as a prayer I have ever read, *The Confessions*. Augustine had been a very successful teacher of rhetoric, the most sought-after in the Roman Empire. He had many beautiful young ladies who adored him. But his heart was restless. The beauty of words and the beauty of women could not satisfy him, as long as he was living for himself.

Here's what Augustine wrote in Chapter 27 of *The Confessions* –

"Too late I loved You, O Beauty so ancient and so new! Too late I loved You. For see, You were within and I was without, and I sought You out there. Unlovely, I rushed heedlessly among the lovely things You had made. You were with me, but I was not with You. These things kept me far from You; even though they would not exist at all unless they were in You. You did call and cry aloud and did force open my deafness. You did gleam and shine and did chase away my blindness. You did breathe fragrant odors, and I drew in my breath; and now I pant for You. I tasted, and now I hunger and thirst. You did touch me, and I burned for Your peace."

And so, not only did the Corinthians misunderstand the nature of God's kingdom, they also misunderstood the needs of their own souls. And so, the very things the Corinthians thought made them great and strong were actually keeping them from growing in Christ, and the things they were most ashamed of and wanted to hide were actually what marked them out as great objects of God's love and grace.

### **C. Responding to Adversity in Faithfulness**

One of the great benefits, and also one of the telling signs, of embracing this upside-down nature of the kingdom and the self-forgetting, Christ-exalting call of the Gospel is that it allows us to respond to adversity with faithfulness. If we think life is all about protecting, serving, and advancing ourselves and our own agenda and influence in the world, then adversity is a really hard thing to face. It short-circuits all we're trying to achieve for ourselves.

But notice how Paul says he and the other Apostles responded to adversity:

*To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. – vv. 11-13*

How can we bless God and bless others when we are being reviled? It's only possible if it's not our reputation we're seeking to protect and advance. How can we endure persecution? Only when we remember what Christ has endured for us, and we remember that He is the One calling us to endure and promising us eternal rest and reward as we endure by His strength and not ours. How can we entreat, making earnest pleas with people to believe the Gospel, when they are slandering us? Only when we realize that we don't wrestle against flesh and blood and also remember that we were just like the slanderers, and we would still be like them, if it were not for the grace of God.

Fixing our faith and our ambition entirely on Christ frees us to not care so much what people think of us, say about us, or even how they treat us. We know what God thinks of us and how He has treated us.

#### **D. Imitating Worthy Role Models**

So, why is Paul writing such a sarcastic roast of the Corinthians? Is he just trying to make them feel bad, shame them into better behavior? No, he's not. Paul is speaking to them as their spiritual father and is calling them to a better way of thinking and living. He's done so using reason, rhetoric, reminders of the Gospel, and even irony and sarcasm. But he's not done so out of spite or meanness, but in love –

*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 through the gospel. 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. – vv. 14-17*

The Corinthians are Paul's spiritual children. He first brought the Gospel to them and brought them to Christ. He planted the church and nurtured it in its early infancy. They may learn from other reliable guides and teachers, like Apollos, but only Paul has the fatherly care for them.

Paul then, as their father, urges them to imitate him. He isn't saying, "Now, do as I say and not as I do." No, he's reminding them of what they themselves saw in him when he was with them in Corinth. He sends Timothy to remind them of this and to assure them that this is the way Paul consistently lives. He lives as one who is relentlessly focused on the Gospel, faithfully obedient to the call of Jesus Christ on his life, and sacrificially committed to the good of the church.

We all need worthy role models to imitate, godly men and women we can watch to see sincere Christian faith and obedience in their lives. This can be one of the benefits of studying church history and reading good biographies, because we can learn to imitate the great men and women – who were all very fallible, ordinary men and women – who trusted in God and were used by Him to influence many lives for Christ.

But we also need people in our lives, people we know and who know us, who can encourage us and model faithful Christian living for us. We need to be careful, because we don't want to put anyone on a pedestal. All people are sinful and will disappoint us if we rest our hopes on them. Making an idol out of a person destroys both you and them. But realistic, honest, fallible sinners who are nonetheless sincerely seeking to follow the Lord and live by His wisdom and power and for His kingdom and not by the wisdom and power of the world and for the kingdom of self – these are people worth getting to know and worth imitating.

Now, as a father, Paul doesn't just call them to imitate him; he also lovingly warns them. He knows some people in the church are stirring up the trouble. They are the ringleaders of the divisiveness, and for them he has some harsher words. After all, he is an apostle, and he does have spiritual authority given to him by Christ:

*Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, 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. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? – vv. 18-21*

It's appropriate to handle the ignorant and misguided differently from the arrogant and power-hungry. Those who don't know any better and have simply been led astray should be treated with pity, patience, instruction, and encouragement. But those who are arrogant and who defy God's authority because they're seeking to establish their own need a firmer approach – for their own good, as well as for the good of the church they've misled.

So, Paul is giving them a stark choice: You can follow the arrogant, power-hungry, divisive men in the church, who are full of talk, or you can submit to the word of God and His true, saving power. Paul uses strong language because the issues really are important. A worldly church full of petty, self-interested men building their own kingdoms is a terrible witness to the world, does harm to God's children, and brings dishonor to Christ. This kind of church, led by these kinds of arrogant men, keeps believers as infants in Christ, weak and helpless, misrepresents Christ's character to a watching world, and brings shame to the name of Christ.

The world has seen too many churches like this, led by too many arrogant men. This is why it's so vital that we repent of our pride and worldliness and embrace the upside-down kingdom of God, led by a king who willingly embraced a cross for the salvation of His own.

### **Walking in the Footsteps of True Greatness**

When we do so, we are walking in the footsteps of those who, like the Apostle Paul, have been used by God to turn the world upside down. In Acts 17, before Paul came to Corinth or Athens, he was in Thessalonica, in Northern Greece, we read this –

*“there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them.” -Acts 17:1-7, ESV*

“These men who have turned the world upside down” – men like Paul and Timothy and Silas and Jason and Apollos and Peter. Following them, down through the ages, faithful pastors and theologians and missionaries have turned their backs on the world and its empty promises and have taken up their cross to follow King Jesus, the rightful king of the eternal kingdom.

Will we imitate them and follow in their footsteps?