

1 Corinthians 4

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[0 : 00] Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 4, page 953.! There will be a lot of different ways you could answer that.

What I'm talking about is, who's well done has the power to control the way you live your life? The approval of that person, they are the one that determine the decisions you make.

Several years ago, I was at a dinner and they put beside me a gentleman who had done very well in business. And I was interested.

We had a great conversation. I was interested in what motivated him, why he had been so successful, how he got from being where he began to where he then was. And he said this to me. It was fascinating.

He said, My old man always said, there's no greater shame than to work for another man. My old man always said, there's no greater shame than to work for another man.

[1 : 22] His father's opinion had controlled every decision that he made in life. That was the driver. That was where all his ambition came from. It was the well done of his father.

It was the sense that if he was not working for himself and he wasn't making a success of his life, that that would be shameful. And we can roll our eyes and we can think, wow, you know, that's a pretty destructive way to live your life or whatever it might be.

But it's a version of something that's true of all of us. We do almost everything that we do based on what people are going to think. If you think about it and you're honest with yourself, we do almost everything we do based on what other people will think.

What we wear depends on how we want other people to perceive us. Whether we dress well or badly, we do it because we want to create an impression on the basis of someone else's ideas.

The choices we make about the careers we pursue, the places that we shop, the way that we try and raise our children. Almost everything. I've added almost in there because I want to say everything, but I'm not just completely confident that it's absolutely everything.

[2 : 33] But almost everything we do, these choices, they are made on the basis of the judgment of others, be that parents or friends or colleagues or whoever. Whose opinion are you living for?

Whose opinion shapes the way you will live your life? Whose approval, ultimately, are you seeking? I've been seeing how this church in Corinth has become controlled by the opinions of the Corinthian culture.

They have been drawn to the impressive wisdom teachers who have followed the apostles into the church. Paul, the apostle who wrote this letter, he planted the church. And Apollos, faithful pastor, came after him.

And now we're told, chapter 3, verse 10, that someone else is building on his foundation. And Paul is concerned that the ministry in Corinth has gone off course and it is being led astray.

Because it seems that they are being taken up with the wrong kind of approval. They are conducting their ministry and the Corinthian Christians are living their lives looking for the approval of the wrong kind of people.

[3 : 44] There is division and rivalry in the church. We've seen that over the last few weeks. And you can imagine there are some people in the church who are saying, you know, it's the, I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas.

Factions have developed, divisions have grown up in the life of the church. And you can imagine somebody saying, my old man always said there's no greater shame than to follow Cephas.

And Paul has repeatedly said that this is because the church has pursued the wisdom of the world. The church has been captivated by the culture outside rather than what he calls the foolishness of the cross.

And the first few chapters we've seen that this message that is at the heart of true Christian faith. The message of Christ and him crucified. The message of the one who came as God in flesh into the world.

As the savior of the world. As the hope of the world. As the power of God to reconcile men and women back to God. He, the very epicenter of the wisdom of God is the shame of the cross.

[4 : 46] He is crucified in the most objectionable way possible for impressive Corinthian culture. And that is what we say we believe. And he's saying instead of holding fast to that, the shame of that has been too much for us.

And so we have taken in the opinions out there. We have dressed up our Christian faith to try and make it look impressive. And the values of the culture out there have seeped into the church in here and are being lived out.

And he's saying that is not the way it should be. This church has loved and cared more about the approval and acceptance of Corinthian culture than it has the way of Jesus.

And Paul uses himself and his own ministry as an example. As a way to challenge the Corinthians. And again, as he does this, we are being reminded. All these years later, we are being reminded that if we live our lives for the praise of the world.

If we want our Christian faith to look and feel impressive to the surrounding culture. If we want the world's well done. When we live our life and we do the things that we do.

[5 : 48] And we want the world to go, yay, good on you. Well, we are going to be ending up compromised. We need to index our lives to the opinion and the judgment of God.

That was Paul's approach. Can you see verse 3? He says, Can you see the difference there in terms of the context of approval?

Is it you, the people? Or is it God? The church has been clearly critical of their apostle after he has left some considering perhaps his simple message and his unimpressive delivery just a bit out of touch.

But he doesn't do what he does for their approval. He knows, verse 1, as he said a number of times, he's a servant. 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. We saw last time he made this point, chapter 3. Servants don't provide the food. They just bring it to the table. Servants don't push themselves forward.

[7 : 07] Their whole approach is to be as invisible as possible. They operate in the shadows. They're not there to make themselves look good. They're there for the sake of others.

That's what servants do. And in the same way, Paul's role as an apostle was to faithfully steward God's Word. Nothing more, nothing less. And he knows that he will answer to God ultimately for how he has done it.

The opinions of others, he says, take them or leave them. He is faithful that his main concern, rather than being popular, rather than being well thought of by his hearers, is that he is faithful. I deliver the message, says Paul. People don't like it. It's not my problem. People pass judgment. That's up to them. My sole aim is to be faithful to God.

And can I say that's what you want in a minister? You want a minister who will tell you the truth. And he'll tell you the truth even when you don't want to hear it.

[8 : 06] Think about how often we are confronted by the Bible and we find it unpleasant because it cuts across our natural instincts. If you think about it, if every time the Bible cuts across your instincts, you can then cut that bit out, well, who's at the center of your world?

Simply, it's just you. There is nobody then that can challenge you. God's Word loses its teeth, as it were. God's Word is a servant of God's Word.

God's Word is a servant of God's Word. Because of our sinful instincts, we want to say, that's good. I heard that. I'm grateful for the rebuke and the correction. That comes from God. It is easy for ministers to become beholden to the approval of people in front of them.

Let me tell you, it is easy. The pressure is very significant. It can happen in all kinds of ways. The wealthy person is an obvious example. That has been the ruin of many down the years.

Think, well, if that person leaves the church, how are we going to pay the bills? We need to keep them happy. But many ministers, many of my fellow men are also controlled by the easily offended, the overly critical, the very influential, or perhaps even the opinions of the evangelical subculture of

our day, such that what ends up happening is they finesse what they say, or worse, they actually distort what the Bible teaches. Of course, because everything is online now, anyone can hear what you say, so the possibility of offense is even greater.

[10 : 05] The pressure of the opinions of the congregation, the pressure of the opinions of the wider culture, the pressure of the opinions of the subculture and the gatekeepers of that culture weigh heavily. And so what ends up happening is, don't say the hard thing, we don't say the thing that God's word says, and we don't cross those lines. A clear example of this has to be the whole area of sexuality. The culture is obsessed with getting people to celebrate homosexuality, and if you don't celebrate it, if you're not proud of it, well then you're a bigot. Well, the Bible is clear that homosexual desire is sinful. So you've got a choice. Whose praise do you go for? The aggressive voices out there in the culture or God's word. It's very unpopular to go with God's word.

And whole denominations have gone with the culture. But even among those who say they want to follow what the Bible says, there is significant confusion and compromise. Groups like Living Out, while well intentioned, have been very unhelpful in how they have taught on this matter, and so the church is confused.

The church has spoken with one voice on this question for centuries. So why is it now that we need to revise our thinking? It's because of the pressure of the culture. We don't want their disapproval. It's because of the pressure that the influential people in our culture, our subculture, want to press on us. And so we don't want their disapproval, and we go the other way.

You don't want someone who stands here and will preach for the approval either of the congregation or the culture. It was said of John Knox, the Scottish reformer, that he feared the face of God so much that he never feared the face of man. On his grave, it says, here lies one who never flattered nor feared any flesh. Here lies one who never flattered nor feared any flesh. That makes you pretty unpopular in polite society. I'm telling you, you want this kind of minister. One who will say, I don't stand or fall by your judgment or verse four, even by my own judgment of myself. It is the Lord who judges me. Leave it to him, and the last day will reveal the integrity of my work. A minister with that kind of heart, who is a servant of the mysteries of God, will lead you in a faithful direction. And in God's kindness, I want to say that you have, and I am grateful to work with, men here with that kind of heart, who serve in that kind of way.

The Apostle Paul isn't talking about his own ministry here just for the sake of it, though. We need to see this. He's doing it for the sake of the church. Look at verse six. Why does he go on and on and on about his own ministry? Well, verse six, I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. He's saying, I am telling you about the integrity of my ministry and the way that we have operated as apostles for your benefit, so that you may not go beyond what Scripture says, so that you'll stop this silly nonsense of pride and fighting with one another.

[13 : 24] It's for their benefit. Learn by us. He's saying, I'm giving you my example here. And then verse 16, can you see, I urge you then, be imitators of me.

Paul's saying he's playing the role of a father admonishing his children, verse 15. And he tells them how he views his ministry so that they would imitate him in their own lives.

And if they're going to imitate him, it means imitating his mindset. I don't care what other people say. I'm going to be faithful to what God's Word says, and I'm going to follow it wherever it takes me. That's the example. That's the mindset. He's saying, just as he does that, they should do the same. And for us, when we're in the arena where we are tempted by the approval of those around us that will take us away from what God's Word calls us to, the thing that will keep us on track is caring about the opinion of God more. Loving God, fearing God, seeking God's approval more than we love or fear anyone or anything else. Easy, okay? We stop there, we pray and go home. No, we need to listen. It's, of course, much more difficult than just saying, well, we've got to love and fear God more than we've got to love and fear the world around us. Because by nature, we want to be liked. We want to be well thought of. Of course we do. We don't want to be contentious. We don't want to be that guy or that girl. Unfortunately, in some cases, we're going to have to be. So how is it that we can live this way? And we can do that actually in a context where the values of our culture and the values that our culture celebrate collide so aggressively with our Christian faith? How can we get the kind of courage that we're being called to here, the kind of resilience that we're going to need? Well, Paul tells us, and he tells us we need to remember two things. First is this, we need to

remember what God has said. What God has said. Verse 6, I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written.

Point Paul has been making from the start of this letter is that the Corinthians have been walking away from the gospel of Christ crucified. They've been choosing instead to listen to the wisdom of the world. They have rejected, they have gone beyond the teaching of the Holy Spirit in favor of what he calls the folly of human ideas. So he's calling them back to what God has said, and he wants them to remember what God has said. But it's not just what God has said in general. It is, I think, specifically the passages of the Bible that he's referred to already in this letter. So chapter 1, verse 19, if you can look back over there, chapter 119, for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning, I will thwart. He's saying, remember what God has said about wisdom and folly, about true wisdom and real folly. The gospel message, it sounds like folly to the world, but it is the power of God. Remember that. When you're tempted to order your life according to the wisdom of the world, remember what God has said. He's going to destroy it.

He's going to bring all their supposed discernment to nothing. We saw last time, last week, that Paul's made a similar point in chapter 3, 3 verse 19, for the wisdom of this world is folly with God, for it is written, he catches the wise in their craftiness. And again, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise that they are futile. He's quoting Job 5. He's quoting Psalm 94. God has said that however clever someone appears or thinks themselves to be, God will ultimately catch them in their cleverness. He'll turn their cleverness back on them and show their supposed wisdom up as empty. [17:38] These weren't empty promises. The quote from Job is spoken by Eliphaz, the Temanite, who in Job was caught out by his own words. He's saying here, remember what God has said and don't allow your identity to be caught up in and controlled by the wisdom of the world because ultimately it is futile and God will bring it down. But he doesn't just give the negative perspective.

Don't do that because God is going to bring it down. He also holds out the benefit of living according to God's design. Remember what he said in chapter 2 verse 9 about what God is bringing about for his people. Probably quoting Isaiah 64, what no eye has seen, no ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him. God has prepared something for the human race that is beyond your imagination. We haven't seen it yet. We haven't heard it yet. But God is bringing those who love him, those who live their lives for his opinion into the renewal of all things under Christ.

He's saying, go for the praise of God over the praise of the culture because of what lies ahead. That is the Christian hope. We can't imagine it. What is promised to us is so great we can't see it, we can't imagine it. But those who love the Lord Jesus are being brought by God into a future that is so glorious that any decision that we make now to follow him over the praise of the culture will be worth it.

Standing out from the well-done's of our culture now for the sake of integrity and obedience to the Scriptures will be worth it. Do you need to hear that this morning? Holding to the truth, not going the wrong way, but only choosing to go the right way, however difficult it might be. God has said that it will be worth it because of what lies ahead. He is bringing you to a real glory. And the alternative, the glory that is offered by the wisdom of the world. And by the way, he's talking there about the philosophy and the worldview that our culture holds out as the good life. Paul isn't talking about, he's not saying there is no wisdom in the world. You don't need to check the theological convictions of your car mechanic before you use your car mechanic. He's talking about the vision of the good life that doesn't have Christ and him crucified at the center. That wisdom, however wise it might seem, is foolishness to God. And in the end, it'll be shown up as futile. So, a future glory is what makes living for God worth the struggle. The futility of the alternative shows us why living for the opinions of others just isn't worth it.

How do you love and fear God more than anything or anyone else? Well, remember what he has said. Remember what he has said about what is real and what is true and what is lasting.

[20:43] But alongside that, Paul also says that the Corinthians need to remember something else. And they need to remember, point number two, how Paul lived. First of all, remember what God has said. Secondly, remember how Paul has lived. He starts by taking all the rivalry and pride. Verse 7, sarcastically then he says, for who sees anything different in you? He's different there. It's,

who sees anything special in you? 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? Say, why are you so impressed with yourselves? Remember how he opened the letter right at the beginning of chapter one? All the emphasis there was on God's grace and God's gifting and the fact that they have been saved and chosen and they have understood the mysteries of the cross. All of that was God's doing. And he's saying, so why are you boasting? What is it about you that thinks you can boast when it's all been given to you as a gift? Like every believer, everywhere, everything we have, all the privileges, all the gifts, all the status that we have as God's people, it had nothing whatsoever to do with us. It was all down to the kindness and love of God. So why would you glory in it like it was yours? That's what he's saying. And he exposes the crassness further, contrasts it with the apostles' behavior. Verse 8, already you have all you want. Already you've become rich. Without us, you have become kings. And would that you did reign so that we might share the rule with you. 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. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ.

We are weak, but you're strong. You're held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour, we hunger and thirst, and we're 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. We have become and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. The Corinthians wanted their Christianity to be impressive, like kings, verse 8. Wise, strong, respectable, verse 10.

[23 : 10] And Paul mocks them for this. You get your celebrity into the church, get them up to the front quickly so that other people will see them and think, well, you're really impressive because you've got celebrities. Of course, we read on in chapter 5, whatever they think about themselves, their sin, we'll see this next week, Lord willing, shows that they're neither wise nor strong nor honorable and certainly not impressive. But still, they wanted the world's approval. They wanted people outside to look at them and to give them the thumbs up and say, we think you're really great. We saw this in spades during COVID. One of the big messages church leaders gave was don't do anything that people won't like.

People don't like what you're doing. It's a bad thing. Do what the experts tell you. Think about your witness. What this ended up meaning was that our witness was scientists and politicians are in charge, church services aren't essential. Church via a screen is fine. But God says, do not forsake meeting together. We weren't part of the church at the time, but I want to honor the elders here for staying open, choosing the approval of God over the approval of Matt Hancock and the evangelical leaders that said you should close your church for the sake of witness. Calibrating the way that you do things in the Christian life and in the church in order that the culture will approve is completely the wrong way around. Now, of course, it's possible that the Corinthians thought that they were being evangelistic or missional here, whatever. So they reasoned that if they looked impressive to the culture, the culture would give their Jesus a chance. You know, we look impressive. Maybe you'll look into Jesus.

Or look, we're just like you. You can have the world and you can have Jesus as well. What does Paul say? Here's my model. Contempt, weakness, poverty, persecution. That was the apostles. That was the apostles that he's saying that we should be imitators of. Contempt, weakness, poverty, persecution. He says, they are the scum of the world. There is nothing impressive or culturally respectable about them.

They are the refuse of all things. They are the rubbish of the rubbish. They're like that awful liquid that runs out of the side of the bin lorry. Bin juice. They're the bin juice of the world.

Paul says, Corinthians, that's what I want you to imitate. He says, IPC Ealing, that's what I want you to imitate. Why? Because this is the glory of God.

[26 : 24] Remember, the kingdom of God upends worldly categories. We think the good life is about honor and strength and respectability. But in reality, that is in the real world that God governs, it's about self-denial and humiliation. We think a life well lived gets you a KBE and an obituary in the paper. But it actually gets us reviled and slandered and treated like scum.

And the reason we know this isn't just because it was Paul's experience. It was Paul's experience because it was Christ's experience before him. The reason that Paul calls us to imitate him is because it is to imitate Christ.

It is to do what every disciple must do if they will be a true disciple. What does Jesus say? And take up his cross daily and follow me.

In the kingdom of God, the way to glory is down. All the way down to bin juice.

When you choose the opinion and the praise of God, that is what it means. In the culture, when those closest to you perhaps say, there is no greater shame.

[28 : 14] My old man used to say, there is no greater shame than being a Christian. When those

it's a feature, not a bug. One commentator says, the suffering so visible in the lives of the apostles is not some tedious detour for an elite volunteer corps, but the main highway for all Christians.

We don't really believe that. If we're honest with ourselves, we don't believe it and we don't want it to be true, but it is. And you will only accept this reproach if you believe that it was the way of Christ, and that to deny yourself and to take up your cross to kill those desires for the approval of the world in order to follow Him. You will only do that if you believe what God has said about the future. He is getting rid of all worldly wisdom, and He has something for you that is worth every sacrifice. So let me encourage you this morning to choose the wisdom of the cross. It was the way of Paul. It was the way of Jesus. And we choose it because the foolishness of the cross-shaped life is true glory and the power of God. All the rest is empty folly. Let's pray together.