



DESERT VIEW BIBLE CHURCH

FOLLOWING CHRIST THROUGH CHAOS | 1 CORINTHIANS 4:8-21

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MAIN POINT

Living for Christ is a costly endeavor. Though it takes everything, it is incredibly rewarding.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

How would you describe the American dream?

Why do you think this dream is such a big part of the culture in the United States?

How is pursuing Christ different than pursuing the American Dream? Do you think Christians ever get these two things confused?

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 4:8-13.

Paul was so confident of his criticisms against the pride of the Corinthians that he began to ridicule their practices. Having reminded his readers that they had nothing in and of themselves, Paul accused them. First, they behaved as if they already had all they wanted. The Corinthian believers involved in prideful factions behaved as if their gifts and wisdom were perfect and complete, though these were really temporary and incomplete. Second, they acted as if they had already become rich.

Based on this passage, how would you contrast the qualities of Paul with the qualities of the Corinthian believers?

Why is pride such a destructive trait in those who follow Christ? Why is it so tempting to become prideful?

To bring out the irony he saw in the Corinthians' pride, Paul contrasted his experience of suffering with their attitudes in verse 10.

Why is it important that we not see ourselves as being “above” suffering and persecution?

What does it look like to join in our suffering, pain, and weakness?

Paul points out that the apostles themselves—the very people over whom the Corinthians divided—did not live up to the Corinthians' boasts. Did the Corinthians feel superior because they followed Peter? Peter was persecuted, and he rejoiced in

his suffering (Acts 5:41). Did they follow Jesus? His suffering exceeded that of every apostle. They could not rightly claim to follow these leaders and also claim to be above suffering and persecution.

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 4:14-17.

It would have been easy to misunderstand Paul's intentions here. He did not engage in sarcasm and mention his trials as an apostle to shame the Corinthians. Sensitive readers at Corinth were put to shame by the contrast between Paul's humility and their own pride. Yet, Paul's goal was not to shame them, but to warn or admonish them.

How might the Corinthians' attitudes have been different if they had already been imitating Paul? What was going to have to change for them to take seriously his words in verse 16?

Are there any Christian mentors, teachers, or leaders whose actions you seek to imitate as a fully devoted Christ follower? How has their example shaped your walk with Christ?

Why do you think Paul wanted to send Timothy to Corinth?

As a practical expression of his fatherly love, Paul planned to send Timothy, perhaps along with this letter. Paul loved Timothy as his dear son and trusted him in the work of ministry (Acts 17:15; 1 Thess. 3:1-3). So, Paul commended Timothy to the Corinthian believers as a man who was faithful in the Lord. Timothy had proven himself to be a loyal follower of Christ and a reliable leader of the church.

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 4:18-21.

In Paul's absence, some members of the church had become bold in their stances. They had probably grown confident in their opposition to Paul, assuming he would never return to challenge them.

Why do you think some of the people had become arrogant in Paul's absence? What does this tell us about their pride and priorities?

What do you think Paul means when he says that the kingdom of God is "not a matter of talk"?

Why were Paul's options in verse 21 so extreme?

Put simply, Paul said, "Talk is cheap." Paul would expose his opponents by showing that their ministries failed to display the work of the Holy Spirit. If the Corinthians continued to follow human pride by dividing the church into factions, Paul would rebuke them harshly on his arrival. If they recommitted themselves to the true humility that comes from the gospel, he would come peacefully. Paul offered this choice in the hope they would choose the latter.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

In what areas of life would you say you already have all you want or are already rich? How can you keep your focus on God alone in those areas?

How has sacrifice, weakness, or persecution affected your walk with God? How have these things made you more dependent and focused on Him?

What would need to change for you to live the kind of life you want others to imitate?

Are there any younger believers for whom you are modeling how to be “all in” with your faith? Who has God placed in your life for you to lead in this way?

PRAYER

Close your group time in prayer. Thank God for the eternal perspective He has given us by sending His Son to bring salvation. Pray that He alone would be our focus, and that He would convict us of areas of our lives where we are not living a fully devoted life focused on eternity.

COMMENTARY

1 CORINTHIANS 4:8-21

4:8. Having reminded his readers that they had nothing in and of themselves, Paul accused them further. First, they behaved as if they already had all they wanted. The Corinthian believers involved in prideful factions behaved as if their gifts and wisdom were perfect and complete, though these were really temporary and incomplete (13:9-12). Second, Paul chided them for acting as if they had already become rich. Paul thought that those who divided the church through pretension and arrogance behaved, on the one hand, like self-assured rich people lacking humility, and, on the other, like Christians who had already received all their future blessings and took great pride in them. Third, Paul accused them of behaving as if they had already become kings. Christians hope for the day when believers will reign with Christ over

the new earth, but the divisive members of the church acted as if they had already reached this destiny. They behaved as if they had no flaws, no weaknesses, and no need to grow (1 Cor. 13:11-12).

Paul pointed out the Corinthians' specific boasts so they would see themselves as he saw them. He wanted them to realize they had no basis for their high opinions of themselves. He also wanted them to abandon their arrogance, to be reconciled to one another, and to respect his authority.

4:9. He and other apostles suffered severely for the gospel. They were like those led in public procession to the arena to die. What more humiliating description of his service could Paul offer? He felt that he had been made a spectacle to the whole universe. Everyone, both angels and men, watched with glee at his painful suffering and humiliation. That the apostles suffered so greatly further emphasized to the Corinthians their error of thinking that they had already become kings.

4:10. To bring out the irony he saw in the Corinthians' pride, Paul contrasted his experience of suffering with their attitudes. He had been a fool, weak, and dishonored, but they behaved as the wise, strong, and honored. From the Corinthians' perspective, and from the world's, the Corinthians really were wise, strong, and honored, while Paul was foolish, weak, and dishonored. But God did not share such worldly perspectives. The Corinthians' wisdom, strength, and honor stood only according to worldly principles that God did not recognize. If the Corinthians wanted true strength, wisdom, and honor, they would have to seek it by being weak, foolish, and dishonored like Paul.

This verse turned the tables on the Corinthians' self-esteem. They needed to repent of the things in which they took pride, while those things they despised in Paul made him more worthy of their respect. They had no basis for their pride, and thus no basis for their divisions. In order to gain the things they thought they already had, they would have to become the kind of people who would have no reason to divide into factions.

4:11-13. Paul digressed to describe his apostolic experience even further. He and other apostles suffered terrible times to that very hour and moment. The list of experiences in 4:11 is striking: hungry and thirsty, in rags, brutally treated, and homeless. In 4:12-13 Paul indicated that he and other apostles worked with their own hands, endured when persecuted, and answered kindly when slandered. Paul then summarized his condition as the scum of the earth and the refuse of the world. The

apostles did not err like the Corinthians. They did not behave as those who had already received their rewards.

This section points out that the apostles themselves—the very people over whom the Corinthians divided—did not live up to the Corinthians' boasts. Did the Corinthians feel superior because they followed Peter? Peter was persecuted, and he rejoiced in his suffering (Acts 5:41). Did they follow Jesus? His suffering exceeded that of every apostle. They could not rightly claim to follow these leaders and also claim to be above suffering and persecution.

4:14. Paul did not engage in sarcasm and mention his trials as an apostle to shame the Corinthians. Sensitive readers at Corinth were put to shame by the contrast between Paul's humility and their own pride. Yet, Paul's goal was not to shame them, but to warn or admonish them. That is, though he intended to shame them to some degree, their shame was not his ultimate goal. He employed shame as a tool for admonishing them, for inspiring them to reject their pride and repair their divisions. Paul wanted to help the Corinthian church imitate his own life, and thereby to help them avoid the consequences of the sin in their church. Love, not anger, motivated Paul to do this. He cared for the Corinthians as his dear children, and this affection guided his words.

4:15. Paul was justified in calling himself the father of the Corinthians. They may have had ten thousand guardians, various leaders and teachers in the church. Nevertheless, they had only one spiritual father. Paul became their father when he first brought them to faith in Christ through the preaching of the gospel.

4:16. On the basis of his fatherly role in the Corinthian church, Paul urged his readers to imitate him, just as children are instructed to follow the example of their fathers. He told others to imitate him as well (Gal. 4:12; 2 Thess. 3:7). Here, he encouraged the Corinthians to forsake their pride and to gain the same kind of humility he demonstrated.

4:17. As a practical expression of his fatherly love, Paul planned to send Timothy, perhaps along with this letter. Paul loved Timothy as his dear son and trusted him in the work of ministry (Acts 17:15; 1 Thess. 3:1–3). So, Paul commended Timothy to the Corinthian believers as a man who was faithful in the Lord. Timothy had proven himself to be a loyal follower of Christ and a reliable leader of the church. Paul assured his readers that Timothy could be trusted to remind them of Paul's way of life in Christ Jesus. That is, Timothy would tell them more of the sufferings and faithful

service Paul had rendered as an apostle and of Paul's way of life when he had been in Corinth previously—both of which Paul would have the Corinthians imitate. Timothy's efforts would be reliable because he agreed with what Paul taught in every church—he would not vary from the apostle's true teachings. Paul sent Timothy as an act of love in the hope that the younger minister would be able to facilitate the restoration of the Corinthian fellowship.

4:18-19a. Paul worried that some of his readers had become arrogant, thinking he would never return to Corinth. In Paul's absence, these members of the church had become bold in their stances. They had probably grown confident in their opposition to Paul, assuming he would never return to challenge them. Even so, Paul warned them that he would come ... very soon. Paul frequently revealed his keen desire to visit the churches of Christ throughout the world (Rom. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:18). This should have encouraged his opposition to rethink their attitudes and to correct their behavior, or else to prepare themselves to deal with one imbued not with mere words, but with power (1 Cor. 5:4). Although some people in the church did not believe it, Paul was determined to come to Corinth.

Still, he admitted that his desire was not ultimately the determining factor in his travel plans. He qualified his intention by saying, If the Lord is willing. Paul planned to spend the winter in Corinth after traveling through Macedonia (1 Cor. 16:5-7).

4:19b-20. Paul explained that upon his arrival he would find out two things. He would investigate how these arrogant people were talking. He would find out for himself exactly what they were saying and what power they had. He wanted to see if these proud leaders who opposed him had the gifts and demonstrations of the Holy Spirit to back up their theological claims. He wanted to demonstrate to them that their "gospel" lacked the power to mend lives and create unity. Paul mentioned the power of God on a number of occasions, having in mind God's works in the church (1:18; 6:14; 15:43).

The apostle then gave the reason for his focus on the power of the Spirit in his opponents. The kingdom of God does not consist of talk. It consists of power. Put simply, Paul said, "Talk is cheap." Anyone can use words to persuade the naive, but Paul would expose his opponents by showing that their ministries failed to display the work of the Holy Spirit.

4:21. Paul had spoken rather forcefully to the Corinthians. He closed this section with a pointed question: In coming to visit and test his readers, how should he treat

them? Should he come like Jesus cleansing the temple (Mark 11:15), with a whip to drive out his opponents who refused to change their ways? Or should he come to them with love and with a gentle spirit, they having heeded his warnings and changed their ways?

If the Corinthians continued to follow human pride by dividing the church into factions, Paul would rebuke them harshly on his arrival. If they recommitted themselves to the true humility that comes from the gospel, he would come peacefully. Paul offered this choice in the hope they would choose the latter.