

## Just Who Do You Think You Are?

### 1 Corinthians 4:6-13

Introduction: These are some of the hardest verses in 1 Corinthians to correctly understand and helpfully apply. They are difficult to understand because Paul uses irony and sarcasm. They are difficult to apply because they are so very foreign to most all of us in our 21<sup>st</sup> century comfortable American and Western context. And yet, these words are desperately needed because they strike at the heart of the great enemy of God's people: PRIDE. John Piper is right, "There is a very close relationship between unbelief and pride....Unbelief is a turning away from Jesus (or God) in order to seek satisfaction in other things. Pride is a turning away from God specifically to take satisfaction in self" ("Battling the Unbelief of a Haughty Spirit," 12-18-88).

The Corinthians were doing both of these things. They were taking pride in a particular spiritual leader and they were arrogant in terms of just who they thought they were and what they had achieved. Paul knew how deadly these twin sins could be in the body of Christ, the local church, and so he confronts them head on with biting sarcasm and irony. He does it "for their benefit" (v. 6), praying it would have the sting of healing.

I. Be careful about being prideful about who you follow

4:6-7

Paul continues his plea for unity in the church, a plea that began in 1:10 and will conclude in 4:21. The Corinthians were in turmoil because they misunderstood: 1) the nature of the Christian message (the gospel of Christ and Him crucified as the wisdom of God), 2) the role of the Christian minister (servants), and 3) the attitude of the Christian minister (humility). Paul, one final time, will try and put the ministries of himself, Apollos, and the apostles in proper perspective. If he is successful the church will come together in unity for gospel advancement. If he fails, their witness will be compromised and their future effectiveness fatally harmed.

1) Don't pit one servant of God against another 4:6-7

Paul again addresses the church with tact and gentleness, calling them "brothers and sisters" (v. 6). He tells them that he has "applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit." J.B. Phillips paraphrases it, "I have used myself and Apollos above as an illustration." (*The New Testament From 26 Translations*, 734). "These things" refers to the various images in 3:5 – 4:5 of servants, coworkers, master builder, and manager as appropriate analogies for their leaders. Bottom-line: they are servants sent by God to fulfill their assigned task. To unduly exalt them or unwisely judge them is wrong. It is to view ministers of the church contrary to how God sees them.

It is to tell God we have a more accurate understanding of who our ministers are than you do!

Paul says his goal is that the church “may learn from us the meaning of the saying: “Nothing beyond what is written.” The purpose is that none of you will be arrogant (*ESV*, “puffed up”), favoring one person over another.” The phrase “nothing beyond what is written” is difficult. It is not found in the Old Testament. It is possible Paul is referring, in general, to what the Old Testament teaches about arrogance and pride (Schreiner, *1 Cor.* TNTC, 101). He could also be referring to a common or popular slogan in the early church (Carson, *The Cross and the Christian Ministry*, 102). We can’t be certain. However, his main point is clear. He does not want the church to be arrogant, prideful, puffed up, choosing favorites like worldly political parties. Don’t be seduced by the ways of the world when it comes to your leaders. Think biblically! Don’t line up behind Calvin or Luther, Whitfield or Wesley, Lloyd-Jones or Stott, MacArthur or Piper. Don’t fall into the trap of pride by thinking you are smarter and wiser than others because you know who is really the best. Be wise? Sure. Be arrogant? God forbid.

2) Don’t forget everything you have is a gift of grace 4:7

Verse 6 teaches us not to boast in who we follow. Verse 7 teaches us not to boast in what we have. Afterall, it is all because of grace. Paul employs

three rhetorical questions in verse 7 to remind the church that any good thing we have is the result of God's grace in our lives.

First question, "For who makes you so superior?" Fee says, "The English equivalent...would be, "Who in the world do you think you are, anyway?"

What kind of self-delusion is it that allows you to put yourself in a position to judge another person's servant?" (1 Cor. NICNT, 186). What incredible presumption you are demonstrating is his point.

Second, "What do you have that you didn't receive?" Have you lost sight of the fact everything you have is grace, a gift? Absolutely everything?!

Again Fee is right, "All is grace; nothing is deserved, nothing earned" (p. 186). Calvin pointedly adds, "there is no man that has anything of excellency from himself; therefore, the man that extols himself is a fool and an idiot" (1 Cor., 160).

Third, "If, in fact, you did receive it, why do you boast as if you hadn't received it?" Grace leads to gratitude. Pride leads to boasting. Grace says thank you Lord. Pride says look at me Lord. Warren Wiersbe gets to the heart of this issue when he writes, "The best commentary of 1 Corinthians 4:7 is the witness of John the Baptist: "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.... He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease"" (John 3:27, 30) (*Be Wise*, 65). Grace gives us what we have and

what we need. It gives us what we don't deserve and cannot earn. It saves us. It sustains us. It gives glory to the one who rightly deserves it: God, not us.

## II. Be careful about being arrogant about who you are 4:8-13

Paul will now employ some sanctified, spiritual sarcasm. It is biting. He will employ a series of contrast and strong statements with the intent of shaming the Corinthians. You can almost sense desperation in Paul's words as he writes them. He has tried everything he knows to do. Maybe a little (a lot!) of sarcasm and playful ridicule will do the trick.

Sixteen different points are made. We will note each one, but only briefly. Cumulatively, that constitute a mountain of evidence and a very powerful argument.

### 1) Before the world and angels we are condemned 4:8-9

Paul tells the church that our lives are always on display "to the world, both to angels and men" (v. 9). The whole universe is always watching the church. Arrogantly and pridefully you see yourselves as "already full" (v. 8). You think you have arrived and have all that you need. You fools! You are still thinking like pagans. Schreiner is persuasive here, arguing that primarily the problem was not their eschatology (an over-realized eschatology) but their ethics. They were thinking like the Stoic-Cynic

philosophers of the day. He notes the example of Epicetus who said, “Who, when he lays eyes upon me, does not feel that he is seeing his king and master?” (Diatr. 3.22.49). The Corinthians are convinced that they are spiritually filled, abounding in riches, and ruling the world” (Schreiner, 102). Paul is brutal in his sarcasm, “You are already full (*ESV*, “have all you want”)! You are already rich! You have begun to reign as kings without us-” But, and here is the brutal truth, “I wish you did reign, so that we could also reign with you!” (v. 8). I wish your perspective was correct. I wish the kingdom was here now, today, in all its fulness and glory. But, it isn’t. If you need proof, just look at the apostles. “For I think God has displayed (*ESV*, “exhibited”) us, the apostles, in last place, like men condemned to die” (v. 9). We are not first, we are last. We are not living, we are dying. And the death we are dying is not taking place privately or in secret, as what follows makes perfectly clear.

2) Before the world and angels we are a spectacle 4:9

“We have become a spectacle to the world.” Paul likens the death of the apostles to “condemned criminals in the amphitheater” (Vaughn, *1 Cor.* BSC, 50). The word “spectacle” is *theatron*, from which we get our word theater. Paul Gardner says, “They are living pictures of the one they follow” (*1 Cor.*, ZECNT, 209). Believers are put on shameful, public display for the

world to mock and lampoon, just like Jesus. Angels look on in amazement at this spectacle. Demons no doubt laugh and shout with glee and joy.

3) Before the world and angels we are fools 4:10

Verse 10 adds needed perspective. “We are fools for Christ!” Paul knows the Corinthians think themselves “wise in Christ,” but once more they have it all wrong. Better to be a fool before the world Paul says. Let them sneer at the crucified Galilean and those who follow him. Better to receive the approval of Christ than the world. It is His “well done” we long to hear.

4) Before the world and angels we are weak 4:10

The Corinthians in their pride, arrogance, and adoption of worldly standards, saw themselves as strong, powerful and influential. In contrast the apostles appeared weak and insignificant. Had the Corinthians already forgotten that God “has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1:27)? Wiersbe is right, “Paul discovered that his spiritual strength was the result of personal weakness (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Strength that knows itself to be strength is weakness; but weakness that knows itself to be weakness [in Christ] becomes strength” (*Be Wise*, 66).

5) Before the world and angels we are dishonored 4:10

The Corinthians saw themselves as “distinguished” (*ESV*, “held in honor”), but Paul said it is better to see yourself as “dishonored!” Morris notes the

word for dishonor (Gr. *atimos*) is “sometimes used of those deprived of citizenship” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 78). In this world we are nomads, aliens without a home country, because this world is not our home.

6) Before the world and angels we are hungry 4:11

Paul will now introduce a list of deprivations and sufferings that are his and the apostles experiences as a servant of Christ. It anticipates a similar list in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29. It further reinforces his argument that the kingdom has not arrived and that boasting and pride are actually the ways of the fool. “Up to this present hour we are both hungry...” (v. 11). “Up to this present hour” tells us things have not changed. Today is like yesterday and the day before that. Sometimes food has been in short supply and sometimes there has been no food at all. Unlike you, I have never had all that I want (v. 8). But, Paul would say, I have always been content in Christ (Phil. 4:11-12).

7) Before the world and angels we are thirsty 4:11

We are hungry and we are thirsty, often without, and in need of water. An abundance of the basic necessities of life has never been our experience.

8) Before the world and angels we are clothed in rags 4:11

“Poorly clothed” is our Sunday best! We are not personally acquainted with the current styles of the cultured people of society. No new spring and fall

wardrobe for us! If we have a single, decent suit of clothing and a pair of sandals we consider ourselves blessed! [I know people like this!]

9) Before the world and angels we are brutally beaten 4:11

Far from being treated like kings and the rich, the apostles are “roughly treated” (*ESV*, “buffeted”). Morris notes, “Paul’s word (kolaphizō) is that used of the ill-treatment accorded Jesus (Mt. 26:67)” (Morris, 78). Insulted and abused captures well the apostle’s intent.

10) Before the world and angels we are homeless 4:11

Those of us accustomed to a comfortable and culturally convenient Christianity struggle to identify with the apostle’s words here. In that respect we are once again very much like the Corinthians. However, as Gardner notes, “Homeless” is the lot of the missionary who is constantly travelling. We are reminded of Jesus who had nowhere to call home (Matt. 8:20)” [1 Cor, 210]. Vagabonds for Christ! No place to call home in this world.

11) Before the world and angels we are mere laborers 4:12

Kings and wealthy was not the station of the servants of Christ. Paul writes “we labor, working with our own hands” (v. 12). Paul gladly supported himself in gospel ministry as the Corinthians well knew (see Acts 17:3). He would not be a hinderance nor put a stumbling block in the way of the

gospel. The Greco-Roman world might despise manual labor, “thinking of it as fit only for slaves” (Morris, 78). Paul and the apostles thought otherwise.

12) Before the world and angels we are cursed 4:12

“Fee notes what follows “are clear reflections of the teaching of Jesus and as such anticipate the “imitation of Christ” motif in the next paragraph” (p. 195). “When we are reviled, we bless” is a reflection of the Lord Jesus by word (Luke 6:28) and example (Luke 23:34). Paul repeats this ethic in Romans 12:17 and 1 Thess. 5:15. This is not the response of a slave to this world, it is the response of a slave to Christ.

13) Before the world and angels we are persecuted 4:12

“When we are persecuted, we endure.” Our eyes are drawn to Golgotha in this statement. Persecuted, we do not quit, drop out of the race or throw in the towel. We persevere, hang in there, and refuse to quit. Simon Kistemaker points out, “The verbs Paul uses in this passage are in the present tense to indicate the apostles were constantly mocked and persecuted” (*1 Cor.*, NTC, 141).

14) Before the world and angels we are slandered 4:13

Paul says “when we are slandered, we respond graciously” (v. 13). Vaughn notes, “The Greeks would see this as cowardliness, but Paul sees this as a demonstration of the virtues of Christianity” (*1 Cor.*, BSC, 51). You may

speaking ill of us and seek our harm, but we will not play the world's game. A kind word, a soft answer, will always be what you get in return.

15) Before the world and angels we are scum 4:13

Paul's last two words in this list are striking: "scum and garbage," (*ESV*, "scum and refuse"). Paul says "even now (*ESV*, "We have become, and still are"), we are like the scum of the earth." This reflects Lamentations 3:45. We are the stuff removed when you clean a body, the floor, a toilet. Our contemporary phrase "scum of the earth," I'm sure, has its origins here.

16) Before the world and angels we are refuse 4:13

Scum and refuse are virtually synonymous. Repetition no doubt intensifies the word picture. MacArthur points out, "The words were commonly used figuratively of the lowest, most degraded criminals, who often were sacrificed in pagan ceremonies. That is the way the world looked at the apostles. They were religious scum and dregs..." (*I Cor.*; MacArthur NT Commentary 112).

Conclusion: Amy Carmichael (1867-1951) was a wonderful and faithful missionary to India. She built an orphanage, rescuing little girls from a life of Hindu temple prostitution, and never came home on furlough. She suffered from neuralgia, a disease of the nerves, that greatly weakened her body. She was severely injured from a fall in 1931 and was basically bedridden the last 20 years

of her life. Still, she pressed on, endured in missions ministry for her Master, and she went to be with her Savior at the age of 83. How did she see her life as a servant of Christ? I think we should let her speak for herself. Echoes of 1 Corinthians 4:8-13 can be heard ringing in the background! “Do not be surprised if there is an attack on your work, on you who are called to do it, on your innermost nature – the hidden person of the heart. The great thing is not to be surprised, nor to count it strange – for that plays into the hand of the enemy. Is it possible that anyone should set himself to exalt our beloved Lord and not instantly become a target for many arrows?” (Quoted in *Expect Great Things*, 191).