

## 1 Corinthians 4:6-21

You could be forgiven for thinking that in chapter 4, Paul has only one string to his bow. In today's section he's harking on about pride in their lives. We've been down this road before! Mind you, Paul knows himself, and most of us probably realise that pride is a real killer when it comes to happy fellowship and fruitful ministry. If you have any doubts lurking in the front of your mind, you only have to see the shenanigans going on in Corinth. It's not a pretty sight. To be honest with you, it's sad, it's grim. If we're down at the cross of Jesus on bended knees, there's no need for it at all. You see, it doesn't matter who we are or what we are, the cross is the great leveller for all men.

Pride gets us nowhere, except deeper into trouble. At the end of the day, the only one it satisfies is the devil himself. That was his problem away back on day one when he had aspirations to outdo and outshine God. He fell and he hasn't recovered, he never will! That's the trap Paul warns these early Christians to avoid.

And he does it with a touch of sarcasm and irony—he's aware of the power of the pen. He uses his quill as a rod to give them a spanking. He pulls no punches when he reprovokes them, he's in no mood to mollycoddle them for he dishes out a few home truths that he reckons they need to hear. It's a stinging rebuke straight from Paul's heart and pen.

You see, Paul didn't look on these folks as people who had lost their way, people who had been unwittingly sidetracked into a luscious bypath meadow. He didn't see them as innocent folks who saw greener grass on the other side of the fence. When he looked out on this congregation, Paul saw them as disobedient children, and his children, into the bargain.

After all, Paul spent some time among them in earlier days, he preached his socks off and many of them were converted under the sound of his gospel ministry. In that sense he was their dad, his was the role of a spiritual father. Over the months Paul had faithfully

given them a real good grounding in the doctrines of grace and glory, he'd shown them the right paths to tread. He and his co-workers spent hours one-on-one discipling them; no energy was spared and nothing was too much trouble as they invested their lives in these dear folks. That's the kind of thing you do with brand new, fresh-faced believers!

And now it's all gone pear shaped, and that's awfully hard for any man to take. It's a very bitter pill for Paul to swallow. He is really gutted, he's so disappointed. He knows it doesn't have to be like that—it can change, they can bounce back if they get their act together before God. As an apostle of Jesus Christ, the situation must change!

Hence his terse and timely words in 1 Corinthians 4. It's not what they wanted to hear, however, it's what they desperately needed to hear! I think we'll pause for a short music break at this point and when we come back we'll start to unpack some of Paul's words to these errant Christians.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Paul starts the correctional ball rolling by asking three cryptic, rhetorical questions in verse 7. Let me read them for you: 'For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?'

See what I mean, Paul doesn't go softly, softly—he goes for the jugular. He's not pussy-footing or messing around, he's had it up to the back teeth, he's had enough and he's taking no more; hence his straight up-and-at-em confrontational approach.

The first question—for who makes you different from anyone else—was a frontal assault on their egos. They're bruised, and they know it! The fact is, they were no better than the church in the next town. They were not superior in any shape or form, there's no way they could walk around with their noses in the air for they were on an equal footing with every other assembly of God's redeemed people.

The second question—what do you have that you did not receive—is another one of those chilling uppercuts that Paul is excellent at delivering when he needs to. You can take it from me, when the preacher man finds himself in the ring, he doesn't punch below his weight.

There's a one word answer to the question: 'nothing!' They had heard the truth of the gospel from the lips of Paul, they were saved by the amazing grace of God, they were schooled by Paul and Apollos—that means all the good they possessed came from other people. There was nothing self-generated. It had little or nothing to do with them!

The third question—and if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not—that one goes below the belt. They are winded! They're down on the canvas! Knocked down! The old apostle has them where he wants them, they're silent and on their knees! These guys don't have a leg to stand on! They are reeling from one body blow after another! Bit like three strikes and you're out!

The next half-dozen verses are a stinging rebuke from Paul. It had to come to blows, that was inevitable; in a sense they were asking for it. Well, in verses 8-13, Paul clears the air, he leaves no stone unturned as he delivers a fistful of fives.

You know, these folks thought they had it made, they reckoned they were the front runners when it came to spirituality, they felt they were light years ahead of other congregations when it came to a vibrant and lively church fellowship. They believed they were a mature and highly effective church; to all intents and purposes, they were satisfied with their leadership and the general quality of their life together. They had settled down into the illusion that they had become the best they could be. In a word, they thought they had 'arrived'.

Paul punctures the balloon of their hugely inflated egos with a touch of irony when he says what he does to them in verses 8 and 9. He pulls the carpet out from under their feet and leaves them

floundering, slipping and sliding all over the place. Look at verse 8 especially, that's where Paul has a real go at them. A touch of staccato in his rapid action remarks. All that Paul says is punctuated by four straight up and down exclamation marks. I reckon if they don't get the message this time around, they are as thick as two planks!

There's more than irony in Paul's comments. There's a fair bit of wry sarcastic humour as well. It's the way he tells them! He exclaimed: 'Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!'

I can just see Paul sitting at his desk scripting these words. He has tongue in both cheeks! He probably wonders what their immediate reaction will be when they hear his comments read out at their congregational meeting! Whatever, that doesn't deter him one little bit from telling the truth. Paul knows he's not responsible for their response, he's only accountable to the Lord for what he has to do. Their smug arrogance is breathtaking. They think they're 'it'. Paul goes so far as to remind them in verse 9 that they believe they're heading up the procession of first-century saints, and he and his colleagues are stuck away near the back. That's where the slaves and captives were strung along in the Emperor's big march of triumph.

The words that Paul employs in the text are most illuminating and heart stirring. He sees himself and the other servants of the Lord as 'men condemned to die in the arena'. In other words, they were destined for the lions, they were like bits of human meat to feed the voracious beasts in the arena. What a contrast between how they see themselves and how Paul sees himself—a difference of chalk and cheese! They were oozing with pride, while Paul is unbelievably humble. Pride was draining out of their pores, humility was glinting in Paul's eyes.

Paul rounds on them when he says at the end of verse 9: ‘we have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.’ In other words, people are looking at him and his colleagues and they see what trials they’re currently going through. These are folks who are horrified and aghast at some of the hassles and hurts faced by God’s servants when they’re out there on the frontline. Others among them will be fair chuffed and laughing at the harassment they’re facing, such folks take enormous pleasure when God’s people are kicked around like political footballs. Mind you, you can’t expect anything else from those who are not already committed to Jesus Christ.

On top of that, the angels are also very much aware of what’s going on—they’re there, looking over the balustrade of heaven, and they see all that’s happening. They miss nothing. Such is their considerable interest in the people of God. In the purpose of God, they often rally as unseen forces to our defence—it has to be said, theirs is a unique ministry on our behalf.

Like so much of what we read in the Bible, there’s a lot more to some of these phrases than initially meet the eye. We’ll pause for a music break and, when we come back, I want us to look at Paul’s ongoing argument with these folks.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

In verse 10 Paul gives three more examples of the unbridgeable difference between the folks in Corinth and himself. Again it’s worth noting that each one is followed by an exclamation mark. Paul can’t quite believe they really think this about themselves, such is their high-brow arrogance and toffee-nosed attitude.

He sees himself as a fool for Jesus Christ, they’re happy to flaunt their self-opinionated wisdom; he sees himself as a man of weakness, they reckon they’re as strong as they come; he sees himself as dishonoured, they feel they’re ok and have an ‘I’m all right Jack mentality.’

See the gaping hole between them—they’re poles apart! The next three verses show how Paul earths his statement to what really is

going on in his world. He doesn't hark back to the good old days or the bad old days, he's right up to date for he specifically coins the phrase in verse 11: 'to this very hour ... such and such a thing is happening to us.'

The list is hugely impressive even though it's not particularly encouraging. He lives in the real world where the battles are hard and where it's tough to be a genuine follower of Jesus Christ. He tells it like it is, he spells it out to them in easy to understand language: 'We go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands.' Says something, doesn't it! This is life in the raw. Paul and his friends have been up against it for quite some time, they have been exposed to all kinds of dangers, they are living their lives on the edge for God and it's not easy! In fact, it's a struggle from dawn to dusk and you're not even sure how safe you are during the hours of darkness either.

Paul gives them an insight into what makes he and his friends tick when he shows the Corinthians their attitude to different kinds of personal upheaval. For example, when people curse them, Paul blesses them; when they are persecuted, they endure it; when they are slandered, they respond with kind words. The man is amazing! He really is! Having said that, it's the grace of God in his life that makes him the kind of person he is!

His one liner of a summary of his position is seen at the end of verse 13 when he writes: 'Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.' In other words, he isn't flavour of the month in certain circles; people treat him and his friends like door mats, they walk all over them and treat them as dirt. People rarely admire him for who he is or for all he has achieved—if the truth be told, Paul hits the headlines for all the wrong reasons and people hold him in contempt. Fact is, it's not only unbelievers who look on Paul as claptrap, it's also some of those folks inside the church as well, and the folks up in Corinth were in that category.

That's what really bugs Paul, it annoys him so much that we see his heartbeat in verse 14 when he reminds them of the reason why he writes in the manner he does. He doesn't want to back them into a corner but he longs for them to stand up and be counted for Jesus Christ. He doesn't want to hang out their dirty washing and leave them beetroot red with embarrassment, he says what he does because he values them in Christ, they are his 'dear children'. And that's a term of warm affection, it's a note of rich endearment—they mean something to him.

Verse 15 is one of the most telling verses in the chapter for it drives home the point that not everyone will stand up to them and tell them the blunt truth. Paul sees that as his responsibility because he is their 'father through the gospel'. And he's not a guy to shirk doing his job!

His impassioned appeal to them in verse 16 is for them to look on him as a kind of role model, he wants them to imitate him in his attitude and actions. You'll recall that Paul said something similar to the church in Thessalonica. Follow men, but pick up on their good points! Follow good men, but do it with your eye open!

That's when Paul spilt the beans and told them he was sending young Timothy to them to try and sort out their problems. His tremendous commendation of Timothy is a joy to read. What a wonderful tribute to pay to any young preacher. He sees him as a 'son whom he loves' – so he was for Paul also led him to the Lord and the pair of them have a father/son relationship. At the same time, Paul is quick off the mark when he acknowledges his faithfulness to the things of God. Old man Paul has total confidence in young man Timothy—and that is a good example for many to embrace in today's evangelical church. There's no point in dogging down young people, they need encouragement and they need the opportunity to exercise and develop the gifts that God has given to them. What better way for them to do it, to learn on the job, than to have the oversight of older and wiser brethren.

When Timothy pops in to see them he will reinforce all that he has written on parchment. In fact he will tactfully remind them that Paul practises what he preaches, and his life in and out of the pulpit is beyond reproach. Paul's testimony is one of true steadfastness. He doesn't vacillate, he's constant.

It's obvious from reading between the lines in verse 18 that a number of the folks in Corinth were not best pleased that Paul was not coming himself. They felt it undermined their standing and was a slur on their assembly for Paul to send someone else in his place. They reckoned they should be getting a visit from the top man not his number two. Well, times haven't changed, you get people like that everywhere and we certainly have them in many of our churches today.

Paul makes the valid point as a clincher to his argument when he declares in verse 20 that the 'kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.' In other words, they can talk all they want from now until the cows come home, it won't do much good—actions speak louder than words! They need to put their money where their mouth is, as it were!

The closing question in verse 21 puts the ball squarely back in their court—depending on their response to Paul's letter and his envoy's visit, that will determine what happens the next time he calls in to see them! They will either have him with a whip in his hand or he can come with a loving and gentle touch. It all depends how they react to the word of God: true then, true now.