

Faithful Stewardship

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 0 0] to 1 Corinthians 4, our passage for today. And the background that I've given you will be helpful for us as we try and understand this passage. Now, I should tell you, I'm only going to focus on verses 6 through to 13, and I'll just dabble in one or two verses after that.

Okay, so that's where we're going. These verses, 6 to 30, they're the heart of this passage. I want to emphasize it. Let's see how Paul starts off. The first thing he says is that his concentration has been on himself and Apollos because they're a case study for the benefit of the Corinthians.

In other words, he's saying, I'm going to deal with your divisiveness by focusing on two people that you trust and know, Apollos and myself. And my focus is going to be for your benefit, he says.

In other words, what Paul is saying is that he's been focusing on him and Apollos to this point, but now he's going to do something else. Now he's going to turn to the Corinthians themselves and he's going to apply all of this to them.

Now look at the second half of the verse. He wants them to learn through him and Apollos and he wants them to learn the meaning of this saying, nothing beyond what is written. If you want to put it in one way, another version puts it, do not go beyond what is written.

[1 : 1 3] Now, what does Paul mean by this? Don't go beyond what is written. Well, I've just shown you, haven't I, that five out of six times when he quotes Old Testament scripture, he means scripture.

Okay, and this time, I think he's meaning the same thing. What I think he's saying is, remember those six scriptures that I have shown you. I want your lives to conform to those scriptures.

In particular, I want your lives to line up with the scriptures that I've been giving you all through what I've been saying to you. Listen to them. Don't go beyond them.

Stick with them. Do not go beyond it. Focus, therefore, on the sovereignty of God, his grace, inferiority of human understanding. I want to make sure that you learn and do not go beyond the Bible.

For if you follow scripture in this, if you refuse to go beyond scripture in this, then the result will be that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one over against another. And that, I think, is what the second half of verse six says.

[2 : 1 7] Now look at verse seven. Paul's urged them with scripture. Now he pushes on by getting them to see that their knowledge of God and their experience of God's grace has taught them something as well.

So not only has scripture taught them, their experience has taught them. And the background to this is that they were tempted to define themselves according to themselves. Right? Define themselves according to themselves.

According to their personal accomplishments or their status in society or some distinguishing personal characteristic that they had. And Paul shows them that this is fraught with danger and wrongheaded.

And he shows them by asking three questions. A who question, a what question, and a why question. Let's look at each one. First of all, who sees anything different in you?

In other words, who is the one who has given you the very thing that identifies you? Who gives you your identity? Who is the one who makes you distinctive? Well, the answer screams out from Genesis 1 to 3.

[3 : 16] It is God because God saved them. God chose them. God revealed his mysteries to them. God is the source of their life in Christ. It is God, God, God.

It is God, not them that makes them distinctive in the world. That is what makes them stand out in the world. It's God. Now for the second question, what do you have that you did not receive?

See, what he's saying is everything you Corinthians have is a gift. It is received. It comes from outside of you. It comes from God. And if it comes from God, you can't boast about it, can you?

Boasting is excluded by grace. Now for the third question. So third question, if you received it, he says, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

Paul is clear. If the things that make you distinctive come from God, if they're received, if they are a gift, then how can you boast about them as though they were not? Scripture teaches us don't go beyond Scripture and boast.

[4 : 23] Experience of God's grace teaches you don't boast because what you have is a gift. Your self, what he's saying is your self-glorification is wrong according to Scripture and it denies the reality of your experience of God's grace.

But there's another reason why it's wrong. And that focuses the next few verses. So let's turn to them now. In these three verses, Paul compares and contrasts himself with the Corinthians.

First, he reveals how the Corinthians perceive themselves. He says, you've already got everything you want, haven't you? You're like people who have eaten too much. That's what the Greek word means there.

You've become satiated, full, rich. And he goes on to say, you're reigning as kings, aren't you? In other words, you are brimming over with pride and self-confidence.

Now look at the second half of verse 8. You get the impressions that the Corinthians, I think, thought that Paul should be a bit more like them. They wish Paul was rich, reigning, impressive.

[5 : 25] And so Paul uses some very deep irony with them. I get the impression that his tongue is well and truly planted very deep in his cheek as he says these words. He says, indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we might be kings with you.

Friends, there's a double-edged sword there. There's a double-edge to Paul's irony. After all, who is the king that they know? Their king is Jesus.

And where do you see the rule of Jesus exercised? Well, you see it exercised, don't you, from the cross. The kingship of Jesus is demonstrated in his giving his life as a ransom for many.

That's what true kingship looks like. It looks like dying for people. And that leads to our next section. The Corinthians might like Paul to be full and reigning like them, but he's not.

No, he's an apostle. And apostles, Paul says, are God's exhibits with a cosmic audience looking on. They're spectacles to the world, he says, to the angels, to all human beings.

[6 : 32] They are God's examples of Christ-likeness, models of what it means to be like Jesus. And I take it that this is the meaning of verse 9. For I think, says Paul, that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as those sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to mortals.

And now look at verses 10 to 13. First Paul gives three contrasting pictures of apostles, such as he himself on the one side and the Corinthians on the other side. So here we go.

He says, he says it, and remember, it's full of irony. Apostles are fools for the sake of Christ. But you Corinthians, oh, you're so wise in Christ.

Apostles, well, they're weak, just like Jesus who was crucified in weakness. Oh, but you Corinthians, you are so strong. You are held in such honor.

But not us apostles, no, we are disreputable. We are like the dishonorable whom God uses to shame the honored back in chapter 1. And then Paul gives three contrasts.

[7 : 42] He lists, so he's given three contrasts, I mean, he lists six hardships that apostles go through, that they demonstrate that they endure. Can you see them there in verses 11 and 12? To the present hour, we are hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, beaten, homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands.

Now, here are the Corinthians getting fat, living like kings, not the apostles. The Corinthians might have everything that they want so that they're full satiated, but the apostles, what are they like?

Well, they're hungry and thirsty. The Corinthians liken themselves to kings, but the apostles, what are they like? Well, beggars, poorly clothed, beaten, homeless, growing weary from the work of their hands.

Well, not quite beggars because they've got to do their own work. And Paul lists three responses that the apostles give to what happens to them. When reviled, what do we do? We bless. When persecuted, what do we do?

We endure. When slandered, what do we do? We speak kindly and finally, he concludes with these words. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things to this very day.

[8 : 56] Now, the words for rubbish and dregs are words for things that brought disgust to first century people. They border on foul language.

The word for dregs in particular is a word used for the scrapings that are scrubbed off things. Sort of like when you step in mud or some other things and then scrape it off with your shoes and that stuff that's left, that's what an apostle's like.

Right? They are the stuff you scrape off. The apostles are the world's scum, the scrapings from everyone's shoes. Now, Paul is not saying that he and others are living some sort of special life that no one else has to.

No, he's saying that the way of the cross that he follows is the way that is shaped on Jesus. It follows the example of Jesus. He is taking up his cross and following Jesus in the way that he goes.

He's doing what he did. He's going where Jesus went. He's following Jesus' lead and the Corinthians should get in line and do the same thing.

[10 : 01] Take the lead of the apostles. They, in their brains, in their attitudes and in their lifestyle should do the same. Look at verses 14 to 16. Paul is clear.

He's saying, I'm your father in the gospel. Come on. He's appealing to them. Look at verse 16. I appeal to you then. Be imitators of me. That is, join me in being the, you know, the sludge from people's feet that they wipe off.

Come with me. So let me try and summarize for a moment. What Paul is saying in this passage is crystal clear. What he's saying in the preceding chapters is clear.

The Corinthians are shaped by the wisdom of their world. They are fleshly infants who see themselves as kings. They are fleshly infants who have a very childish, wrong, fleshly attitude.

However, the apostles, well, they are shaped by the wisdom of God which is the wisdom of the cross. They are mature and the Corinthians need to change. They need to become who they are in Christ.

[11 : 14] They need to become shaped by what God has done for them in the cross. They are Christians. This is their identity. They were born to follow Jesus.

Their goal is to be shaped by Jesus, by what he's done on the cross and by those who follow in his footsteps. That is their goal. Now friends, what I'd like to do now is talk about two rival theologies.

The great reformer Martin Luther coined a phrase for them. The first, he called the theology of glory. The theology of glory does this. It focuses on what you can know about God from his works in creation.

A theology of glory, therefore, goes on to draw parallels from the world through to God. So, for example, you might look at strength in the world and you say, what does strength look like in the world?

It looks like raw power. Then what's God's power like? What's God's strength like? Well, it must be sort of like worldly strength on steroids. Just a huge version of the same.

[12 : 16] Now, in some sense, the Corinthians had a theology of glory. They measured their greatness by the world. They thought that God's view of greatness was the world's view of greatness.

Their view of power was the world's view of power. Their wisdom was the wisdom of this age and the rulers of this age. The end result was that what they did was they exalted human pretension.

They exalted gifted human beings. They held up these great human, these great gifted human beings and they gloried in them. And their perception of God and his greatness was colored by the world that they lived in.

That is a theology of glory. This theology of glory has filtered down into the way they viewed themselves, their leaders, Paul and perhaps even Jesus himself.

But let me tell you this is not the theology of Paul in 1 Corinthians. Now Luther had a term for the theology of Paul. He drew it from 1 Corinthians. He called it a theology of the cross.

[13 : 17] A theology of the cross captures the idea that God achieves his intended purposes by turning human ideas just upside down. He does the exact opposite of that which we humans expect.

He reveals himself, for example, in an event which turns everything on its head. And that one event is the cross. In the cross, God does the incredible. He triumphs over sin by allowing sin and even evil to apparently triumph.

He shows his strength not by wielding his fist but by allowing his son to die through weakness and frailty. That's a theology of the cross.

That's the sort of theology Paul has. A theology that begins and ends with the cross. An understanding of God who is of who God is and how God functions that begins and starts with the cross.

And we've seen that theology here in this passage. We've seen it filtered down to the way Paul views what it means to be a Christian. You see, if you focus on the world you will think that greatness is measured by the world and its values.

[14 : 24] success, wealth will be measured by greatness. Suffering and pain will be sidelined because it's not really great to suffer. However, if you focus on the cross you will think that greatness is measured by the cross and the values portrayed in it.

So, with that in mind let me ask you what do you think a great apostle would look like? A great apostle. You know, a really good apostle. He wouldn't look like a king for a start.

He would not live in a grand house. He would not mix with the grand people of the world. He would look like a fool. He would look weak. He would be held in disrepute by everyone.

He would speak a gospel that looked absolutely loopy and that no one would be interested in. He would have no trouble working with his own hands in order to support his gospel ministry. He would not mind being hungry and thirsty for the gospel.

He would be like his Lord and would bless when he's reviled. He would speak kindly when he's slandered. He would look like the crap of the world and the scrapings from people's boots. And he would rejoice and be satisfied when God tells him that his greatness is made perfect in weakness.

[15 : 38] And he will say that whenever you are weak, then you're truly strong. Friends, Luther put it this way, living, or rather dying and being damned makes a theologian, not understanding, reading and speculating.

I'll read it to you again. It's a fascinating quote, isn't it? Living, or rather dying and being damned makes a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating.

It's the reverse of the way the world thinks. Friends, I began with some observations I'd made from a couple of websites. I got you to focus on the values you could see in some of the words that were used on those websites.

And now I want you to ask yourself whether those websites spring from a theology of glory or a theology of the cross. Do they spring from a theology of glory or a theology of the cross?

And then, what do you think? And now I want you to think about your own aspirations as a Christian or as a potential Christian leader. Are your aspirations grounded in a theology of glory or a theology of the cross?

[16 : 58] Now I want you to think about what areas of service you might give yourself to here at Holy Trinity or elsewhere. Are the choices you make governed by a theology of glory or a theology of the cross?

Prince, some of those website things appended to people's names were so thoroughly a theology of glory it was not funny.

As Christians, we have become so informed by our world. The internet is making it even worse and I need to tell you I feel drawn that way myself. I feel myself influenced this way and I'm sure you do too.

But we must resist for if we buy into it we will be an infant, worldly, fleshly Christian just like the Corinthians and we'll be a church full of worldly, infant, fleshly Christians just like the Corinthians.

We must decide that we will be truly and authentically the disciples of Jesus Christ the crucified one. And to help you I want to teach you a new word.

[18 : 09] Now I want us to start using this word here at Holy Trinity amongst this congregation is the word I want us to know and I want it to be part of our identity. I don't mind if you use it it's a technical word but I think it's a good word because it says so much.

The word is this one so remember it now. Cruciform. Cruciform. What does it mean? Well it means shaped or formed like the cross. Cross formed.

It means cross shaped and that is what God wants us to be. Moulded by, shaped by, formed by the cross of Jesus Christ, the death of Jesus Christ.

Now with that in mind I want to close with a story. It's a story to show you the God of the cross in action. It is a story to contrast the values presented at the beginning of this Bible talk with something that comes from the other side of the world and comes from a century or more two centuries away perhaps a century and a half.

It comes from 19th century Pakistan. It comes from a time when Christians were struggling to really make any headway. They decided that they'd go to the world to do people of Pakistan and bring the gospel to them.

[19 : 26] It concerns a man called Dit. D-I-double-T. Now let me tell you a bit about Dit. He belongs to a very low class division of Hindu outcasts.

They are the sweepers and scavengers and Pakistan society is very tiered. These people were down the bottom. They dealt in bones and leather and horn and animal hair.

Now imagine Dit. He's 30 years old. Now I need to tell you a bit more about him. He's not just from this particular low caste group of people. He's crippled.

He's crippled in one leg. And he's got to walk around continually with a hunch and this little, he's only a small man and this little crutch that he's made for himself.

He's constantly limping. Anyway, Dit has been taught about Jesus by a converted friend. And he goes to the missionaries to seek baptism. The missionaries are a bit cautious.

[20 : 24] However, they can't find any reasonable objection to his baptism. And so in June 1873, the missionary eventually agrees to baptize the small cripple.

And Dit, he's just overflowing with joy. He is the first among his clan to embrace Christian faith. And so the family gathers, they're angry, and Dit explains, and the reaction is far worse than he ever expected.

But he resolves to continue on in the faith despite opposition and rejection. And one by one, Dit explains the faith to the others. And gradually, they begin to convert to Christ.

And more and more members of his family join him. And the news of Christ spreads from household to household, from family clan to family clan, from village to village.

Eleven years later in 1884, you know, up until this time they'd struggled with getting the faith into Pakistan. Eleven years later in 1884, it is reported that in a single year, the communicant membership of the Synod of Punjab had doubled to more than 1,100.

[21 : 35] The next year, another 500 had been added. And much of that can be traced back to the efforts of a little cripple from a despised outcast people group.

In fact, if you ask people today, Pakistani Christians, a significant number of Pakistan Christians can trace their heritage back to debt.

Friends, this is the God of the cross. This is the incomparable God of reversals and surprises that we see active in the death of Jesus on the cross.

God loves it, you know. He loves taking the values of this world and just turning them on their head. He loves doing it. So friends, I want to ask you tonight, will you desert your theology of glory?

Will you join Jesus and live his cruciform life? Will you join the apostle Paul and live the cruciform life?

[22 : 41] Will you join with debt and all others like him and live the cruciform life? will you take up your cross and follow his Lord?

Let's pray. Friends, we thank you for this marvelous chapter. We thank you for Paul's great understanding of the cross of Christ and its impact on Christian ministry and Christian life.

Father, we pray that you help us not to forget it and to determine to live cruciform lives. Father, we pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.