

1 Corinthians 4.1-17

Living faithfully

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 17 October 2021

Seeing the Son [5]

Sir David Amess

Before I begin I'd like to say a few words about the awful death of Sir David Amess, the second MP in five years to be murdered.

There's a phrase that people sometimes use when confronted by something painful: 'Everything happens for a reason.' But I'm afraid that's not true – worse, it's complete rubbish: one of the reasons evil is so bad is precisely *because* there is no reason for it. The real truth is that Jesus is with us *always*, no matter what happens – and that in the end, *the Lamb wins*.

Please continue to pray for our political leaders – and not simply those you would vote for. Please pray for their safety, and for wise decisions to be made in the wake of this tragedy. And above all pray for God's victory and his kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

Recap

We are in week five of our series Seeing the Son in 1 Corinthians. Last time we were thinking about building carefully and wisely, which means building on the right foundation (Jesus), and with the right materials (faithfulness to Jesus' teaching, to Scripture).

We see a similar pattern in chapter 4, which begins with Paul talking about the **foundation** of the Christian life (forgiveness and grace) and the **form** of the Christian life (humility and love).

Foundation 1: forgiveness (1-5)

I wonder what you think makes a good leader? I'm a fan of most things Apple, so I enjoyed reading a biography of Steve Jobs – one of the founders of Apple. In many ways he embodied the world's ideal of leadership: visionary, inspiring, creative, strong, direct, successful, wealthy.

But he was also a bully, to the point of being cruel. His refusal to accept reality led him to create incredible products but also meant he refused the medical treatment that would have saved his life. By the world's criteria he was wildly successful – Apple today is worth almost \$2.4tn, more than most sovereign nations – and yet...

Those numbers might be bigger, but the world hasn't changed much in 2,000 years; the Corinthians judged their church leaders – including Paul – along those same lines.

But Paul's idea of his ministry was different. **This, then, is how you ought to regard us**, he tells them: **as servants of Christ... those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed** (1). (The mystery remember is the good news that in Jesus God is making a new family from all nations.)

For Paul, apostles weren't leaders but **servants** – the word means something like 'under-rowers',ⁱ people who follow instructions. They were stewards or house-keepers, **entrusted** with something that didn't belong to them. They weren't making stuff up but faithfully passing on what they had received from God.

To Paul's picture of the apostles as **servants** and stewards we might add Peter's picture of shepherds: (A) **servants** of Jesus, (B) **stewards** of the gospel, and (C) **shepherds** of God's people.

It's a far cry from what the world *then*, or the world *today*, looks for in a leader! In fact Paul never once uses a word for 'leader' to describe himself – almost always he is a 'servant'. Perhaps that is a lesson the church today needs to learn.

Paul is subverting the world's values here and replacing them with God's values. **I care very little if I am judged by you**, he says (3) – why? Not because they don't matter to him, but because:

1. they are judging him by worldly standards,
2. ultimately he is judged by God, not them (4),
3. human judgements are a waste of time anyway because we can't see what's hidden or the motives of others (5),
4. most importantly – he says (4): **my conscience is clear**.

My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.

Eh? How can he have a clear conscience if he isn't innocent?

Answer: because he is *forgiven*. Paul doesn't pretend he's perfect, or that his sin isn't really sin – that's the world's trick. Paul's conscience is clear – not because he's done nothing wrong, but because he has been forgiven, his slate has been wiped clean.

Paul is who he is and does what he does not because he's so amazing, but because in Jesus all who repent are forgiven.

Foundation 2: grace (6-7)

So the first foundation of the Christian life is **forgiveness**. The second is **grace** – not the prayer before a meal but the riches God gives us in Jesus.

Why is a broken drum the best present you could ever give someone? Because you just can't beat it.

The Corinthians were boastful. In worldly terms their church was a big success – large, wealthy, full of gifts – so they had a high opinion of themselves. They compared themselves – favourably of course – to other churches that were smaller, poorer, less gifted. They argued about which of their leaders was the most impressive and the proper one to follow – after all, they *deserved* the best; those other churches can make do with the rest.

Do you see how worldly their attitude was, how proud they were? I think that's what Paul is getting at in verse 6. It's tricky to follow his line of thought and *exactly* what he means – but I think it's to do with pride, with them thinking they knew better than the teaching they had received from Paul, getting **puffed up**, proud of themselves for getting or picking the 'best' human leaders.

The antidote to their bad attitude comes in the next verse, and it's one to learn: **What do you have that you did not receive?** (7).

It's a beautiful question that teaches us the second foundation of the Christian life. First was **forgiveness**; second is **grace**. **What do you have that you did not receive?**

I think grace is one of the hardest teachings in the Bible to accept. Why? Because it simply isn't fair! It goes against our sense of justice, and deep down we know we don't deserve it so we feel there must be a catch. That makes us fish around looking for something to *do* so we can feel like we've *earned* it.

Don't get me wrong – grace isn't cheap, following Jesus isn't easy, being a disciple is costly and involves self-denial and self-sacrifice. But, being adopted into God's family is not something we earn, it is a free gift of God's love and mercy. The forgiveness Paul knew is costly, but the price has already been paid by Jesus on the cross. The Holy Spirit isn't something we can buy for ourselves, but is the lavish overflowing of God's love for us.

What do you have that you did not receive? The foundation of the Christian life is forgiveness and grace. Next we'll look at the form of the Christian life: humility and love.

Form 1: humility (8-13)

Some of you may know the story about King Cnut standing in the sea trying to hold back the tide, and of course getting his feet wet. True or not, it's told as a fable about pride – except the original tale was precisely the opposite.

Cnut the Great was King of Denmark, Norway, and England 1,000 years ago. He was a Viking, and also a Christian.

As is often the case he was surrounded by sycophantic courtiers, and he grew tired of their continual flattery. To put an end to it, he ordered his court to the shore.

As he sat on his throne on the sand, Cnut commanded the tide not to come in. Yet soon the waters were lapping around his throne and around the legs of his courtiers.

Cnut turned to them and said, ‘Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings. For there is none worthy of the name but God, whom heaven, earth and sea obey.’ⁱⁱ

That is what humility looks like.

Paul’s sarcasm here can be hard to read. He seems to mock them: **already you have all you want! Already you have become rich!**

(8). But he is trying to burst their bubble of pride and arrogance – and as I know to my cost, that is a tough old bubble to burst.

Friends, pride is not a good thing. It isn’t *God*-centred, but *self*-centred, it is a worldly value to be unlearned not indulged. To make this point even more strongly Paul applies it to himself and to his ministry.

Listen to his rather unusual CV:

(9) It seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena.

(11) To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.

(12) We work hard with our own hands.

(13) We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world.

1 Corinthians 4.9-13 (NIV, abridged)

Paul is exaggerating – but not by much – to teach the Corinthians that the Christian life takes the form of humility. He describes himself – and the other apostles – as like:

1. defeated enemies, dragged along at the end of a Roman victory **procession** (9)
2. vagrants in **rags**, **homeless** and **hungry** (11)
3. day labourers on the minimum wage, **working hard** with their **hands** (12)
4. **scum**, **garbage** – the scrapings you have to scour off the inside of a toilet bowl (13)

It's not great is it. It's not very attractive, especially when you compare it with the culture and the wealth that had ensnared the Corinthians. Maybe that's why the church has so often grown in places of poverty, and stagnated in places of wealth.

But, Paul wasn't only describing himself here – who else does this remind you of? Jesus – he was dragged to humiliation and death, he was homeless and hungry, he was a carpenter who travelled with fishermen, and he was cast aside like so much garbage.

Paul didn't want the Corinthians to feel sorry for him, but to learn that following Jesus is humbling and costly: the Christian life, the life of a disciple of Jesus, is cross-shaped. Jesus said:

‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.’

Mark 8.34-35 (NIV)

It's a bit like this. You're at a party and it's a buffet so you've got your paper plate with your beige party food in one hand, and your drink in the other hand. How do you eat? You have to put something down, or you'll go hungry.

The Corinthians believed the world's lie that we don't need to lay anything down because we already have everything.

Form 2: love (14-17)

The first form of the Christian life is **humility**; second is **love**.

I don't like the way the word 'love' is twisted and watered down. For Paul 'love' is strong and powerful – it seeks the truth, it wants the best – and the best is not in here *tap on heart* – no, the best is Jesus! Fullness of life is not found in our desires but in Jesus – which is why in losing our life for him, we save it.

I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children (14). Paul has been speaking firmly to the Corinthians, because he loves them and he knows they are drifting away from Jesus and his life, and towards the world and death. Like any loving father who sees their child heading for danger, he warns them so they can turn around and be saved.

Friends, may we listen to this warning. The world is pulling the church away from Jesus – it always has, and it always will. Our temptation is to water down the truth in the Bible to make it more worldly, and so easier for people to hear. But that isn't love: to love the world we need to be faithful to what we have received.

What the world needs is for God's people to be *more* Christian, not less. That's why Paul says **I urge you to imitate me** (16), and why Paul sends **Timothy** to **remind** them of his **way of life** and his teaching (17).

It might sound arrogant, but remember he described himself as a **servant** (1), remember his bizarre CV (9-13). He longed for the Corinthians to be like him in his humility and love, to be like him in following Jesus by living a cross-shaped life.

Friends, I long for us to live faithfully. I long for us to stand on the foundation of forgiveness and grace. I long for our lives to be formed in humility and love. I long for us to reflect Jesus not only in what we **teach** but in our **way of life** too (17).

May we heed Paul's warnings, let go of our sin, and live faithfully the life to which God is calling us in Jesus.

ⁱ Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, 62.

ⁱⁱ Modified from <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/the-emptiness-of-flattery>. Retrieved on 16/10/2021. Also <http://www.viking.no/the-viking-kings-and-earls/canute-knud-the-great/>. Retrieved on 17/10/2021.