

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

The “Jesus Path” to Unity

(1 Corinthians 4:1-21)

Study #5

Introduction: A few powerful hours...

Among the most powerful few hours in the whole arc of the Bible’s story are those hours Jesus spent with His disciples on the night before He was crucified.

John takes about a quarter of his Gospel to give us the details of those hours.

On that night, Jesus taught His disciples lessons that equipped them to thrive after He was gone.

He gave them deep and abiding truths about abiding in Him, about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, about prayer, about coming persecution, and about the need for His followers to love each other.

On that night, they enjoyed a Passover meal together. Around that low table, Jesus even identified the betrayer as Judas Iscariot - and nobody at that table seemed to “get it.”

But the evening got off to a shaky start because Jesus and His apostles had all arrived hungry...and dirty.

And in those days, hospitality required that feet should be washed before a meal. Walking around in sandals on first century streets made foot-washing a necessity.

But in the house where Jesus and His apostles had gathered, there weren’t any servants around to wash those twenty-six feet.

Correction. There was one Servant.

In the middle of that Passover meal, Jesus did the unthinkable.

He got up from the table and took off His outer garments. Then, like a humble house-servant, He wrapped a towel around Himself and took a basin filled with water to each one of the twelve apostles.

In that upstairs room, Jesus washed the grimy, sweaty, smelly feet of twelve men.

So, just as He had descended from eternity into time and from heaven to earth, on His last night, Jesus descended from “**Teacher and Lord**” (John 13:13) to humble, foot-washing Servant.

The recurring theme of the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians is unity. Unity in Jesus’ church is very important.

We should remove any obstacles to unity. We’ll suffer consequences if we stand in the way of unity.

Today, we conclude the first major section of this letter, dealing with unity one more time. Paul reveals the key that unlocks the door to unity. And, as with all good things, Jesus gave us the key.

The key that opens the door to unity is humility, the kind of humility Jesus showed when He washed the apostles’ feet.

Now Paul - the APOSTLE Paul! - was a big deal in the first century church. His reputation as an evangelist, disciple-maker, church-planter, and leader was second to none.

It is, therefore, instructive to listen as he tells us how he wants others to think about him.

Servant-Stewards Seek To Please Jesus (4:1-5)

Servant-Stewards Recognize Christ as Master (4:1)

Builders are servants (v. 1a)

[1] This is the way any person is to regard us: as servants of Christ...

What was Paul? How did he want to be known? Fundamentally, he was a servant of Christ.

What are you? What am I? Fundamentally, we are servants of Christ, and we want everyone to know that.

This is the only time in any of Paul's letters that he uses this particular word for servant.¹

This word signifies someone who doesn't act on their own initiative. They are under orders from a higher authority.

In the book of Acts, Luke used the word to describe the role that John Mark played on the First Missionary Journey with Barnabas and Saul. He was their "helper," their "go-fer." He did what the leaders told him to do.

That's Paul. That's Apollos. They are special envoys of Jesus, carrying out the mission Jesus has for them. They are Jesus' "go-fers."

But there's another way Paul wants us to think about him.

Builders are stewards (v. 1)

[1] This is the way any person is to regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

¹ The word here is "*υπερητης*" (*hypereths*) as opposed to the more common "*διακονος*" (*diakonos*) or "*δουλος*." (*doulos*) It is used to refer to Jesus' followers who were acting in service to Him, a king. (John 18:36)

In the first century world, the *steward* was the overseer of an estate that belonged to someone else. He had a lot of responsibility.

If the owner of the estate was wealthy, the steward had a big job to keep the household and farm and businesses running. He managed the organization and the people who ran it.

BUT the steward was always under the authority of the master. In relation to the other slaves on the estate, he was an overseer. In relation to the owner/master, he was another slave.

As you look around you this morning and as you look at yourself, you are looking at fellow servants of Jesus who also have stewardship to make sure that Jesus' work gets done.

There is ONE THING that servants and stewards - and by this, I mean all of us - in this or any church must do. We must be trustworthy.

Servant-Stewards Must Be Trustworthy (4:2)

[2] In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.

When you and your family go away on vacation, you might ask a teenager on the street to pick up your mail, mow the yard, and feed the livestock. (dogs, cats, etc...)

But you don't want him or her to paint the house or have a garage sale. You just want them to take care of things until you return.

Christians are only required to do what Jesus has commanded us to do in His absence. Love each other. Serve each other. Forgive. Share the Gospel. Make disciples.

It's like my favorite internet meme "You had one job." Our one job? Be faithful to Jesus until He returns or calls us home.

And as we are faithful to Jesus, what do we do with the evaluations of others?

Servant-Stewards Don't Stew Over Others' Judgment (4:3-4)

Evaluations by fellow builders / servants / stewards? (v. 3a)

[3a] But to me it is an insignificant matter that I would be examined by you, or by any human court...

Paul was unconcerned about the evaluations of others. But he wasn't unconcerned because he was thick-skinned or because he was arrogant.

He was unconcerned that the people around him would evaluate him because he wasn't living to please the people around him. And there's more.

On self-evaluation (v. 3b)

[3b]...in fact, I do not even examine myself.

Now, based on other things Paul wrote, I don't think for a minute that he never reflected on his life or that he never evaluated what he was doing.

I think Paul was as effective in serving Jesus as he was because he did have times of soul-searching and self-scrutiny.

I think what he was saying was that he didn't come to any firm conclusions about how he's doing based on his self-evaluations. He lives reflectively, but he still isn't all that sure about how he's doing.

This is all so very important.

Paul knew that other people couldn't know his true motives. He admits that he can't even be sure of them himself.

He knows that he can't know or assess the impact of his efforts here and now. Only time and eternity will tell.

He's got a point. It is impossible to assess the importance or the impact of our own achievements.

I may think I was responsible for something good happening, only to learn later that it was something that someone else did that made the difference.

Or I'll think that my failure led to the downfall of a project, when in reality it was a combination of factors that doomed the project.

Maybe you did something that you thought would bring blessing and benefit to someone - and it didn't. What you did didn't help at all.

Or, out of the blue, someone lets you know that your attitude or your actions were blessings to them - and you had no idea.

In most cases we would miss by a mile if we evaluated the impact of our actions on an Achievement Impact Meter or on the Kingdom Contribution scale.

The result of our self-evaluation can be depression on a bad day or arrogance on a good day. But it is not up to us to pass judgment.

On a clear conscience (v. 4)

[4] For I am not aware of anything against myself, however I am not vindicated by this...

A good conscience is a wonderful thing - but a good conscience is not foolproof.²

Paul was not aware of any great manner in which he had failed in his ministry stewardship.

But he did not rest his confidence in his clear conscience. His conscience might have been clear because he had forgotten something.

² There is a line in one of my commentaries in quotes, indicating that this is some famous saying, "*A good conscience is the invention of the devil.*" There is some truth to this - and it certainly agrees with Paul's sentiment here. A good and clean conscience might or might not be appropriate.

The evaluations of others is not the point. His own self-evaluation is not the point. Only one evaluation counts - **[4]...but the one who examines me is the Lord.**

And that leads him to the final statement of this section.

This verse, when taken seriously, is a faction-buster. It is a unity-maker. It is a maturity prod.

Servant-Stewards Care Only About the Master's Judgment (v. 5)

[5] Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of human hearts; and then praise will come to each person from God.

Jesus is the only competent Judge. He is the only one who knows everything.

He knows the secret things about you that you hope no one (but Him) ever finds out about. He knows all the secret things you have done for Him that no one else knows about.

He is the only One who can discern motives - not only what you did, but why you did it.

And then, at the end, when each one of us receives whatever praise we're going to receive, we will have the only praise that matters: The praise of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Imagine the scene at The Judgment Seat of Christ when your works are evaluated by Jesus and you hear a thunderous, ***"Well done!"***

Imagine Jesus giving you responsibilities in His kingdom and opportunities to serve Him there and then because of your faithfulness here and now.

When it comes to evaluating how well we're doing, we simply don't know. I don't know. You don't know. Only Jesus knows. Bowing to God's assessment of our lives and the lives of others is humility.

If a church is made up of humble Christians who allow God to make the assessment on themselves and on others, there will be unity.

If there is disunity, it is because Christians arrogantly (and wrongly) believe that they can come to a final judgment of themselves and of others.

Paul has put his finger on the problem that created discord in the church at Corinth. It was pride. So, from this point forward, he points us to the solution, which is humility.

The Humble Path That Leads to Unity (4:6-21)

Humility Means Setting Aside Party Spirit (4:6-7)

Arrogance is at the root of party spirit (v. 6)

[6] Now these things, brothers and sisters, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos on your account, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant³ in behalf of one against the other.

It is actually no surprise that arrogance was a problem in Corinth since the Greeks believed that humility was weakness.

To the Greek way of thinking, the sign of a great person was *hubris* - another word for pride.

Christianity says that humility is not weak. Humility - understanding who I am in relation to God and living a life of submission to Him - is strong. Humility is Christlike.

And we don't arrive at humility by trying to make ourselves humble. Humility comes as we simply live in truth. That's what Paul says. He was speaking to the Corinthians, and he is speaking to us.

The silliness of arrogance (v. 7)

³ The word translated "**arrogant**" here is used by Paul several times, every time except one in First Corinthian, indicating that arrogance was a special problem for this church.

[7] For who considers you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

In speaking of the “self-made” person, Paul’s got a point.

- Professional basketball players didn’t pick their gene pool so as to wind up at six foot six.
- People who are making millions in the computer industry didn’t choose to be born in an era or in a country where those skills are valued above being able to work a team of mules on the farm.

If on a material level what we “have” we have received, even more is that the case on a spiritual level.

Nobody worked hard to be saved. Nobody toiled for grace. Nobody labored for a spiritual gift. Every blessing we have in the spiritual realm is God’s gracious gift.

To boast about a teaching gift, or a service gift or a leadership gift in the church is as silly as Victor Wembanyama bragging that he is taller than I am.

Rather than boast and brag about what we have, we are each to simply use what we have been given to benefit others.

That was a lesson that the Corinthians had yet to learn. They were sitting pretty and liked the view from the top of the heap.

Humility Looks Like an Apostolic Life (4:8-13)

The apparent experience of the Corinthians (v. 8)

[8] You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you!

(You probably hear Paul’s sarcasm.)

Jesus said, **[Matthew 5:6] “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”** The Corinthians weren’t hungry.

Jesus said, **[Matthew 5:3, 5] “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth.”** The Corinthians had already inherited everything they wanted on earth. They were already living like kings.

Jesus said to the church at Laodicea, **[Revelation 3:17] “...you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have no need of anything,’ and you do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.”** The Corinthians didn’t know how bad off they really were.

The Corinthians were [apparently] paragons of strength. By contrast, Jesus’ apostles were [apparently] spectacles of weakness.

The actual experience of the apostles (vv. 9-13)

[9] For, I think, God has exhibited us, the apostles, last of all, as men condemned to death,⁴ because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to mankind.

Catch this. It was God’s plan that Paul and his fellow leaders be in places of humility, hardship, in the lowest place, the **“last of all.”**

The whole watching world - including angels - are astonished at the sufferings of Christian leaders and that God has made it so.

We shouldn’t be astonished, because Jesus lived the theology of the barnyard and the manger, crown of thorns and the cross.

But Paul got it. He welcomed his life because it aligned with Jesus’ life. He wrote, **[2 Timothy 3:12] Indeed, all who want to live in a godly way in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.⁵**

⁴ There is a first century saying that would have come to mind when the Corinthians read Paul’s words here, “*God means us apostles to come in at the very end, like doomed gladiators in the arena.*”

It wasn't that Paul enjoyed persecution. He didn't like suffering. But he knew that the Corinthians' theology of the palace was all wrong.

Here is Paul's description of his authentically Jesus-like life.

[10] We are fools on account of Christ, but you are prudent in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are without honor! [11] Up to this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed and are roughly treated⁶ and homeless; [12] and we labor, working with our own hands;⁷ when we are verbally abused, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; [13] when we are slandered, we reply as friends;⁸ we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

Who had the most pleasant life? Paul and his crew, or the Corinthians? Clearly the Corinthians.

And who doesn't want a pleasant life? It's nice to have material blessings, a good reputation, and leisure.

There's nothing wrong with a pleasant life, and I don't believe that we should feel guilty or ashamed of it, if that is our lot.

But we could ask other questions. Which ones, the Corinthians or Paul led the most powerful life? Whose life counted more for eternity? Which life better imitated the life of Jesus?

Obviously, Paul's life.

⁵ Once, when I was in Russia, I heard one of the pastors I was with, a brother named Slava, remark, "Our trials keep our hearts warm to God." This in response to my remark that a believer might suffer from a cold heart toward God.

⁶ The term "***roughly treated***" is the same word that described Jesus' horrible beating by the Roman soldiers (Matthew 26:67).

⁷ The Greeks considered all manual labor to be beneath them, which is exactly why Paul pointed out that he worked with his own hands.

⁸ See Jesus' words, [Luke 6:28] "***bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.***"

Which, to my way of thinking means that we should not, at all costs cling to our material wealth. do only those things that contribute to being well thought of. demand leisure as if it was our right... ..if by losing those things we could shine as brighter lights for Jesus.

Paul's putting out there a vision for life that puts at risk for Jesus' sake the things that make our life pleasant.

That's a vision worth living for, suffering for, even dying for. Paul continues. We have more to learn from him today.

Humility is the Choice for Spiritual Power and Impact (vv. 14-21)

Paul's unique relationship to the Corinthians (vv. 14-15)

[14] I do not write these things to shame you...

Shame is a powerful and a very negative emotion.

After Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, they experienced shame - the result of what they had done (sinned) and of what they had become (sinners).

But Paul hadn't written all that he had written to create shame in the Corinthians or us, or to make anyone feel bad about themselves.

He wrote with an entirely different purpose: ***[14]...but to admonish you as my beloved children.***⁹

He was offering them counsel, a little bit of free advice, like a loving father offers advice to his kids.

Paul loved them and wanted nothing but the best for them. So, one week away from Father's Day, we listen.

⁹ "***Admonish***" translates a Greek word "*νουθετεω*" (*nouthetew*) which can also be translated, "*counsel.*"

[15] For if you were to have countless tutors¹⁰ in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

Like a lot of you, my fellow dads here this morning, do or have done with your kids, the apostle invited his spiritual kids to an imitation game.

Paul's strong exhortation to the Corinthians (vv. 16-17)

[16] Therefore, I urge you, be imitators of me.

We know that Paul didn't want the Corinthians to attach themselves to him, as in, **"I am with Paul."** (1:12; 3:4)

But there is something about the way he lived that he wanted them to copy. What is it?

It is what he has just been talking about.

He wanted them to be just as willing to suffer, to be treated shamefully, to accept harsh treatment, to be looked down upon for Jesus as he was.

This father isn't calling his children to a safe life or to a comfortable life, but to a meaningful life. He's calling them to an impactful life.

This is Paul, calling you and me to the same thing. He imitated Jesus in His humble journey to the cross. He is calling us, me, you! - to imitate him by traveling the path of humility.

Now, he includes a point of accountability. To ensure that the Corinthians remembered how he followed Jesus, he's sending a surrogate, his partner in ministry, Timothy.¹¹

[17] For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.

And what is it that Paul taught in every church? I think he wanted Timothy to remind these believers when he got to Corinth what we read last Sunday.

[3:22] whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, [23] and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

We just have to remember our place in the universe.

We have received everything in Christ...and we belong to Christ. We are sons and daughters of God...and we are servant-stewards whose only concern is to be faithful to Him.

The conclusion of this chapter and of this whole four chapter section dealing with unity in the church is strong.

Paul's sober warning to the Corinthians (vv. 18-21)

[18] Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. [19] But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. [20] For the kingdom of God¹² is not in words, but in power. [21] What do you desire? That I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

Paul speaks of power. It is not the power of eloquent preaching or beautifully crafted prayers. It is not the power of someone who bosses other people around.

¹⁰ Tutor = "παιδαγωγος." The tutor took a child to his lessons. He was an instructor, a subordinate. It was not an exalted position.

¹¹ The Corinthians knew Timothy well as he and Silas had joined Paul in Corinth after Paul had been there for a while, serving Jesus with Priscilla and Aquila.

¹² Paul mentions the Kingdom of God more in First Corinthians than in any other of his letters.

It is the power that comes from being willing to be inconvenienced for Jesus, to lose status for Jesus, to put a pleasant life at risk for Jesus. It's the power of humility.

- If there was power in Jesus' humbly laying down His life for us, then it is powerful when you lay down your life for another.
- If there was power in Jesus humbly coming "***not to serve, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many,***" then there is power when you serve someone in Jesus' Name.
- If there was power in Jesus' humble, selfless love, then there is power in your sacrificial, Jesus-like love, too.