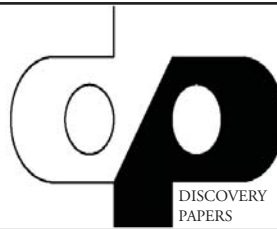


# FOOLS FOR CHRIST

**SERIES: MOVING ON TO MATURITY**



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1 Corinthians 4:1-21  
6th Message  
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In this study we turn to the fourth chapter of 1 Corinthians and conclude our examination of an important unit of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 1-4.

Consider what John Stott wrote about these chapters:

*For forty years and more I have been fascinated and challenged by the early chapters of 1 Corinthians. They have cast their spell on me. I believe they have a special message for church leaders today, whether ordained or lay, whether their ministry is in the world or in the church ... I have found the text extraordinarily relevant to Christian leaders in the contemporary world.<sup>1</sup>*

What makes this material ‘fascinating and challenging’? Some observations: Paul’s writing pours out from a passionate heart. He has the highest possible view of the nature of the church. He insists on the power of Jesus’ cross and the life-giving authority of the Holy Spirit. Yet, these verses also speak honestly of immaturity, divisions among believers, and the apostle’s own inadequacies. The combination of great and gritty realities is compelling.

In chapter four Paul continues in this vein, speaking at length about himself. He does so for practical reasons (an upcoming visit) and strategic ones (offering himself as a model of discipleship).

One purpose of this letter, we discover, is to confirm Paul’s travel plans (4:17-21). In an age when communication across a distance took weeks (even months), a hand delivered letter was the surest option. Paul’s discussion of his upcoming visit to Corinth also raises a question: what kind of reception will he receive when he arrives?

He is coming to Corinth for a family reunion. Paul makes explicit, in chapter four, what had only been implied previously—that he is their father in the faith. Like all good parents he both embraces and challenges his children. And it is because he is their father that he opens his heart in a personal way. He is not boasting, but rather offering himself as an example.

Children imitate their parents (for good or ill) and the apostle knows his pattern of leadership, especially

finding God’s power in our weakness, is precisely what the Corinthians need. He holds himself out for imitation in 4:16 (even more explicitly in 11:1) knowing his pattern of life can lead them to grow in Christ.

1 Corinthians 4:1-7:

**<sup>1</sup>So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. <sup>2</sup>Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. <sup>3</sup>I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup>My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup>Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.**

**<sup>6</sup>Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. <sup>7</sup>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?**

As if distributing a business card, Paul asserts that his calling is twofold. First, he is Jesus’ servant in all things. Second, as an apostle and teacher he has been given a trust: to declare the ‘secret things of God.’ These ‘secret things’ could never be uncovered by earnest investigators. They are divinely revealed and must be received as God’s gift. And those who teach what God has made known must do so faithfully.

Also, these verses speak to the question of how we know ourselves. What leads to self-understanding that is healthy and stable? Simply put, we must see ourselves as God does, refusing to be defined by either the appraisal of other people or of our own self-analysis (v. 3). ‘It is the Lord who judges (v. 4)’ and the Spirit has a specific word of divine approval

for each child of God. 'Each will receive his praise from God (v. 5).'

We are especially bad at judging ourselves. It is easy to fixate on warts and wrinkles that are inconsequential. We find it difficult to move on from past failures or humiliating defeats. Conversely, there are times when we refuse to acknowledge hard hearts and stubborn selfishness. There is much to which we are blind and even a clear conscience may be misleading (v. 5).

In addition to unhealthy self-examination, it is certainly foolish to build self worth on comparison with others. We cannot claim credit for the genes and life opportunities that come to us at birth. All that we know comes from the discoveries and insights of those who have gone before us. As in 7:

**<sup>7</sup>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?**

Finally, it is particularly difficult to discern motives and the passing of time can change our perception of people and events. Only God can be trusted and we must let him tell us the truth about ourselves both now at the end when everything becomes clear (v. 5). In his teaching Paul tells his own story, becoming an example—a disciple who has learned to see himself as God does.

The section that begins in verse 8 brings the grittiness of this letter back into view. Frustration, irony (sarcasm?), and an honest word about suffering.

1 Corinthians 4:8-13:

**<sup>8</sup>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! <sup>9</sup>For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. <sup>10</sup>We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! <sup>11</sup>To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. <sup>12</sup>We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; <sup>13</sup>when**

**we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.**

The word 'already' (v. 8) is a problem. The young Corinthian believers were basking in self-congratulation as if they'd concluded a journey that was only begun. They displayed scant evidence of Christian character, and deflected onto themselves honor that was due to Christ. They had much to learn yet refused to listen.

On a recent trip to Africa, I spent an evening in conversation with a wise local elder. He said that the congregations he served were in great need of a theology of suffering to counter the repeated refrain, 'already you have become rich.' He pointed out that churches will always be vulnerable until they learn how to cooperate with God in the process of being refined by trials. In the end we concluded that the same great need exists in America and everywhere else in the world as well.

Most importantly we remember that it was Jesus who was first condemned without cause. The language Paul uses to describe suffering by the apostles mirrors the suffering of the Savior as in verses 11-13:

**<sup>11</sup>To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. <sup>12</sup>We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; <sup>13</sup>when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.**

Finally, it's clear that the worldly claims and childish evaluations spouted by Paul's opponents are evidence of insecurity. They look down on apostolic suffering knowing that they would crack under similar stress. Gold that has been purified in fire is always beautiful. Genuine holiness does not need to be advertised. The voice which carries real authority can speak softly.

1 Corinthians 4:14-17:

**<sup>14</sup>I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.**

Stern language does not alter an essential relationship—they remain his beloved children.

**<sup>15</sup>Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in**

**Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. <sup>16</sup>Therefore I urge you to imitate me. <sup>17</sup>For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.**

## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>John Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership* (Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 2002).

The word ‘guardian’ in v. 15 can describe a hired tutor — someone whose main motivation is his own career. Jesus once spoke of himself as a good shepherd who is willing to die for his sheep. The shepherd contrasts with a hired hand who runs from danger. Similarly, Paul distinguishes between a father whose love is unconditional and a guardian/tutor who does ‘religion’ for profit.

1 Corinthians 4:18-21:

**<sup>18</sup>Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. <sup>19</sup>But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. <sup>20</sup>For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. <sup>21</sup>What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?**

Appearances often mislead. Talk is cheap. However, ‘the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.’

In the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul has written candidly about his own weaknesses and in detail about the suffering that gospel ministry has brought into his life. His opponents, flashier and more eloquent than he is, insist on being applauded and deferred to.

A showdown is coming and style points don’t count for much. The ‘simple’ apostle, bearing scars of suffering for Jesus’ sake is not going to permit worldly leaders and a false gospel to go unchallenged. Paul is a man indwelt by the Spirit and he will arrive in Corinth not with empty words, but rather with truth and with power.

Churches need godly leaders in our time as surely as in the time of the apostles. There will always be wolves masquerading as sheep who appeal to human pride and make empty promises. My hope is that the Lord will use these studies in 1 Corinthians 1-4 to make us a humble and courageous community — alight with the Spirit of God.

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