**Averting Spiritual Arrogance**

*1 Corinthians 4:14-21*

**Introduction:**

We love to be inspired…it’s part of what makes the Olympics so great. We love hearing the stories of the sacrifices made to become the very best in the world at something. They say the gold medal won by the ‘magnificent seven’ inspired another generation of young girls to be gymnasts. They expect that this year’s gold by the ‘fab five’ will do the same thing again. We love watching Michael Phelps rack up gold medal after gold medal (and are even a little disappointed with a silver!). Several commercials have highlighted the sacrifices made by these athletes to get to this point…the things given up, the all-consuming nature of what they do and the belief that we can each find our own greatness by raising the bar in our own lives.

In this first section of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul has endeavored to do something very similar. He has spent four chapters laying out his life before them as an example of what following Christ is supposed to look like. He is deeply concerned over the direction of the church in Corinth. Their misunderstanding of the foolishness of the gospel message had created an attitude of arrogance within the church and created a false standard for evaluating success and failure. They believed they had become wise, they looked down on Paul for his inferior speech and way of life, they believed themselves to be mature and as a result there were problems, strife, divisions and blatant sin in their midst.

Here in 4:14-21 Paul concludes the opening big-picture appeal of chapters 1-4. He entreats the Corinthians to humble themselves, averting their growing spiritual arrogance by returning to the foolish way of Christ that he has modeled for them. Their response to this appeal will quickly become evident as Paul moves to address specific issues in the following chapters. He first appeals to their dependent position.

1. **Accept Your Dependent Position (14-17)**

It’s interesting that in our culture the idea of dependence has a negative connotation. We think of dependence as a sign of weakness. We are inundated with the belief that if we just try hard enough we can do it ourselves – we don’t need any help. Unfortunately this belief creates some difficulties for us because our Christian life is based on a dependent relationship with God.

But this is where Paul concludes his opening call to the Corinthians - with a reminder of their dependent position. In the section Pastor Jordan preached last week, Paul drew a sharp contrast between himself and the Corinthians. Paul condemned them for their insensitive pride and reminded them of his own lifestyle of humility. While Paul and the other apostles labored to humble themselves, relinquish their rights, take up a lowly lifestyle and have every aspect of their life controlled by the gospel, the Corinthians were self-exalting and arrogant.

A huge indicator of the Corinthians arrogance was their self-sufficient view of life. They had demonstrated a growing belief in their own superiority and wisdom. They had moved passed Paul’s foolish way of preaching and living and had need of him no longer. Paul knew that if the Corinthians were to avert this shift towards spiritual arrogance it would begin by remembering and acknowledging their dependent position. Paul reminds them of the need they had for salvation, of the need they still have for correction and of the continuing need for godly examples.

1. **You Need Salvation (14, 15)**

**I Corinthians 4:14, 15 – *“****I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my* ***beloved children****. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I* ***became your father in Christ Jesus*** *through the gospel.”*

Over the course of these first four chapters, Paul has recalled for the Corinthians their salvation experience.

* He recalls their faith through the power of God
  + **I Corinthians 2:4, 5** - *“and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,* ***so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.****”*
* He reminds them of his role in planting
  + **I Corinthians 3:6** – ***“I planted****, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”*
* And also his part in laying their foundation
  + **I Corinthians 3:10** – *“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder* ***I laid a foundation****, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.”*

It was clear to Paul that the Corinthians had come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ and he understood that this result was based upon the power of God through the preaching of His word. Their faith in God resulted in a new position and standing before the Lord – they were now in Christ Jesus. The foundation of their Christian life had been laid in the gospel and the goal was to build upon it. Their faith in Christ served as the foundation, the building blocks providing the ability for them to change and grow. While they had regarding Paul’s speaking ability as being substandard, it was nevertheless the proclamation of the gospel that had been brought to bear in their lives and had been used by God to bring them to the point of salvation.

While God could have used any variety of means to communicate the gospel to this world, He has chosen to work in and through frail people. As we are faithful and obedient to communicate the gospel message – that a holy God created man to glorify Himself, that mankind has rejected their created role and instead chosen to pursue their own glory (what we often call sin). The consequence of our choice is that we have been separated from God and are awaiting just and righteous punishment for our sins. And yet, because of His great love and in order to bring even greater glory to Himself, God chose to send His perfect son to earth, to live a perfect life, to die a horrible death and to rise from the grave in order to satisfy God’s wrath and conquer death once and for all. All that remains is for us to turn from our sinful ways, accept the sacrifice of Christ in our place and come to God not based on our personal merit but by faith claiming the righteous work of Christ for us. It is through this foolish message, proclaimed by foolish messengers that God chooses to display His glory and draw people to Himself.

This was the role Paul had faithfully filled with the Corinthian church and he is now calling them back to this message. He is reminding them that they were dependent in the grace of God for salvation and they continue to be dependent on the grace of God for their sanctification. He wants them to find their value and status in terms of the cross of Christ rather than their own wisdom. He wants them to see Christ as being glorious and the way of Christ (i.e. – being counted worthy to suffer for the sake of the gospel) as being a worthy and glorious pursuit.

It is because of their response to the initial gospel proclamation that Paul is able to refer to them now as his *‘beloved children’* (14) and the ones that he has *‘begotten’* (15). He is not one of the many teachers they now have…there may be many others who have come in to share with them, they may have learned much in his absence but no one cares for a child in the same way parent does. They may have a face that only a mother could love but they’re his children and he’s committed to loving them. They are his children in Christ and he cares how they conduct themselves. Which leads to the second area of dependence…the need for correction.

1. **You Need Correction (14, 15)**

**I Corinthians 4:14, 15 – *“****I do* ***not*** *write these things* ***to make you ashamed, but******to admonish you*** *as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”*

Paul’s harsh, biting words to them in these first few chapters are put into context here. He’s not trying to shame or embarrass them but rather is seeking to correct their errant way. Their values and behaviors have come into question and now are in need of correction.

To Paul, they are ‘beloved children’ and he desires only their best interests – he is not selfishly motivated, seeking to shame them in order to stroke his own ego and make himself appear as some great spiritual guru. His motivation is not selfish gain. He is not a messenger of the gospel for the sake of profit, he is not interested in having a big title, being the one to make the big decisions or having the largest number of twitter followers…he cares for them as their spiritual father and is even willing to correct them if necessary in order see them turn into the men and women God has called them to be. “*Parental love sometimes entails the unpleasant task of correction for the good of the child, but this is a sign not of indifference but of concern, care and responsible love.”[[1]](#footnote-1)* He is investing in a lifetime relationship not merely supervising them for personal gain and right now they need to be corrected because they are straying away from Christ.

It’s amazing watching the parents of these Olympic athletes! The agony they go through as they are forced to sit idly by and watch their children endure tremendous pressure as they compete at the highest level. Paul is just as emotionally invested in the Corinthians lives and he’s unwilling to sit idly by while they miss the event they came to compete in!

In fact, Paul compares himself here to the ‘countless guides’ they have in Christ. The word Paul uses was commonly used of a servant or paid attendant who accompanied a child for the purpose of protection, guidance and general supervision of behavior when a parent was not present. These guides were characterized as being harsh and stupid and were often identified by the sticks they carried to punish children who were not behaving. They were known for talking big and considering themselves to be great teachers while actually knowing very little.

In referencing them, Paul is drawing a sharp contrast between himself and other teachers they may have in their midst. The Corinthians may have had many such guides but Paul was their spiritual father. In contrast to others, he actually loved and cared for them. He was not motivated out of duty or in fulfillment of a workplace responsibility but out of deep care and concern for their best interests.

It was because of his considerable love for them that he was willing to confront their sin and address the issues they were having. If Paul was going to avert their spiritual arrogance it was important that they grasped their need for receiving correction. Receiving correction indicates that we understand our dependence on the Lord and illustrates our desire to walk in humility rather than pride.

1. **You Need Imitation (16, 17)**

**I Corinthians 4:16, 17** – *“I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.”*

Continuing to spring off the father/child analogy, Paul urges them to be imitators. Just as it’s natural for children to imitate their parents, it’s also natural that the Corinthians should imitate Paul as their spiritual father.

For four chapters, Paul has built up to this point. He has explained the gospel, he has laid out is philosophy of ministry, he has explained their short comings, he has pointed to practical illustrations from his life – all to get to this point, this single command: ‘*be imitators of me’*! Here, in no uncertain terms, is the choice he has been revealing throughout - will you choose to imitate the way of Christ or will you continue to follow your own way!! Paul’s life was defined by the ‘word of the cross’; he had given up the pursuit of position and status, he had endured hardship and much difficulty and even now was thought of as a weak fool by the Corinthians. But would they accept having their life defined by the gospel in the same way as Paul?

To be extremely clear – this is not a call for outward conformity. Don’t rationalize this command away, don’t claim to be imitating Paul because you know the answers to some bible stories, are generally a good person or usually go to church!! Just looking like a Christian, being religious or having a list of “do’s” and “don’t’s” isn’t the issue. This is an internal issue, an issue of your heart and mind. Are you imitating the principles and patterns of his life? Have you worked to integrate the gospel into all aspects of your life? Has it become the central guiding factor in making all your decisions? Does it prompt you to make calls that your co-workers and unsaved family members view as foolish? Are you defined by the weakness and foolishness of the gospel message as Paul was? Are you willing to sacrifice much and will you do hard things for the sake of what is eternally valuable? The call is to be a visable, tangible example of Jesus Christ in every moment of your life.

It’s not a call out of arrogance on Paul’s part – this also isn’t some twisted way for Paul to achieve a new personal best in disciple making. He wants them to imitate things that will lead them into complete submission to the gospel. Paul is not modeling his own wisdom but God’s wisdom – this is what he is calling them to, to imitate Christ as he has.

* **I Corinthians 11:1** – *“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”*
* **I Thessalonians 1:6** – *“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord…”*

This is the pattern of discipleship. Discipleship is the process of walking closely with the Lord while walking closely enough with someone else that they will see you modeling the gospel in all aspects of your life. Paul’s goal was to teach others what it looked like to be completely committed to the cause of Christ.

Discipleship then is very simple (not easy, but simple) – it’s simply living out the gospel in a relationship with someone else. Everyone can do it, everyone can participate. Paul entrusts this duty to Timothy in **II Timothy 2:2** – *“and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”* However, it’s also more than simply hangout with people. You can meet for a long time and sit through a lot of bible studies together without any actual discipleship taking place if you’re not sold out for the gospel and willing to have the hard conversations to call people back to the gospel.

This engagement in discipleship was something Paul was very familiar with. Timothy is referred to as Paul’s *‘beloved and faithful child’* – he was the perfect example of what they were to strive to become. He has been tasked to remind them of the way of Christ by demonstrating that he had learned to imitate Paul already. He is both an example of what they are to be and a reminder of who Paul had been.

This form of discipleship was a consistent aspect of Paul’s instruction to all of the churches. It was the expectation and hope that their spiritual knowledge would take root in their hearts and bear spiritual fruit in their lives. Their venture into spiritual arrogance was not the way of Christ that had been modeled for them. Paul and the apostles had not left the Corinthians - they were the ones embarking on a maverick course. They were the ones pursuing a different pattern of life. Paul had taught them the all-consuming nature of the gospel that he had taught all the other churches because it is the way of Christ. Four times Christ is mentioned in verses 14-17 – the way of Christ is what mattered not the Corinthian’s way. They had failed to remember their dependence on Christ and it was resulting in their spiritual arrogance. They needed to be reminded of their salvation, of their need for correction and of the command to imitate the examples they had been given.

1. **Alter Your Defective Perspective (18-21)**

Paul concludes these opening four chapters with a warning – they need to alter their defective perspective. They have headed down their maverick path of arrogance and things need to change. In failing to imitate his way of life and cling to the message of the gospel they have developed flaws in their spiritual perspective. Their vision is clouded and they have drifted off course. In order to correct this they will need to completely change their mindset. This begins by…

1. **Analyze Your Attitude (18)**

**I Corinthians 4:18** - *“****Some are arrogant****, as though I were not coming to you.”*

Paul has previously referenced the potential for arrogance early in this chapter. In **I Corinthians 4:6** – “*I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written,* ***that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.”*** It was clear that some of them were failing in this area and Paul zeros in on them to help correct their perspective.

In choosing to send Timothy to them rather than come himself, Paul was likely to offend some of them. It struck at the heart of their problem – they believe they deserved better than a second rate, no good, backup preacher (…eerie sometimes…). They had already begun to fall prey to spiritual arrogance. They were proud, they believe they deserved better and they thought less of Paul because he wasn’t given them what they deserved – he clearly didn’t care for them!!

It is so easy to fall into this way of thinking…our sin nature can leave us with such an attitude of entitlement. Beware of your tendency towards arrogance; be cautious when you catch yourself feeling left out, ripped off, or short-changed in a particular situation. You may be correct and you may even be entitled to something as far as the rules are concerned but rarely do those things line up with the way of Christ *”who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* **(Philippians 2:6-8)** Christ’s way, was to renounce the things he was entitled to, not to fight for them.

1. **Adjust Your Values (19, 20)**

**I Corinthians 4:19, 20** – “*But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.”*

The problem with the Corinthians attitude, the reason that they had becoming arrogant in their thinking and way of living was because they had a wrong set of values. They had puffed themselves up because of their knowledge. Their lives were characterized by much talk, by shows of strength and displays of human wisdom. They had experienced Paul’s lack of preaching eloquence, they knew about the suffering he had endured, they had witnessed his lack of personal possessions, they had observed his busy schedule and lack of personal possessions and it didn’t look fun at all.

The problem was that their form of Christianity was characterized by words rather than deeds. They desired to be well-liked and well-received. They were willing to call themselves Christians and to be part of the church in Corinth as long as it didn’t cost them much. They were defined by their talk rather than their action.

Words and talk aren’t all bad – it was through the preaching of the word that the gospel came to them. **I Corinthians 1:5** even states that in Christ they had been enriched in speech, *“that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge”*. However, shortly thereafter in **I Corinthians 1:18** he also states – *“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* And this was Paul’s point, they may have been enriched in all speech but their speech needed to be subject to the word of the cross where true power to change is found. The way of Christ is not found in winning the public debate or in appearing the most spiritual, but is rather an issue of substance. Were their lives demonstrating the ‘weak’ way of Christ and was their speech communicating the power of the gospel to change lives? What was the effect of their Christianity?!

Paul was planning a visit and it was not to admire their eloquent speech but to inspect their effectiveness in life – to discover their ‘power’. ‘Power refers to the solid enduring effects as opposed to that which lacks substance and is shallow and passing. Paul has already referred to the *‘power of God’* (I1:18; 2:5), the *‘power of Christ’* (1:24), and the *‘power of the Gospel’* (2:5). The power of each of these was substantiated by the valid effects they have had in peoples’ lives. Now, Paul is coming to experience the ‘power of the Corinthians’…there won’t be any comparison.

The Corinthians self-evaluations have been based on their defective perspective of power with disastrous results. They think they reign as kings (**I Corinthians 4:8** – “*Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!”*) but in God’s kingdom they are severely lacking. They have put their hope in eloquent speech, much knowledge, enlarged influence, popularity and success. God does not value what they value – status in his kingdom is based on an individual’s submission to the gospel. They were found lacking and their perspective was defective because they had a wrong idea of success.

Is the power of your Christianity displayed in how God is effectively working through you to produce life change in others or is the power of your Christianity exposed in that you only talk a good game.

Paul is eager to arrive and discover that they have given up their spiritual arrogance. He desires to see the changing effect the gospel is having as they reprioritized their pursuits in life and adjusted what they value. He is not interested in winning an argument or becoming the most highly esteemed teacher in Corinth. He cares for them and wants to see them align their values with Christ.

1. **Align Your Course (21)**

**I Corinthians 4:21** – “*What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?”*

His appeal is over and his argument is done. Paul has given them the knowledge necessary for change but the choice remains. Will they accept correction? Will they imitate him as he imitates Christ? Will they alter their defective perspective by analyzing their attitude, adjusting their values and aligning their course with the way of Christ?

They have perhaps viewed Paul as weak because he has merely ‘admonished’ them (14), ‘urged’ them (16) and ‘reminded’ them (17), but he is planning on coming and if they do not correct their own course he will bring the rod of correction with him. There will be consequences if they choose poorly.

The ‘rod’ is the same as is referred to in the book of Proverbs. (**Proverbs 22:15** – *“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.”*; **Proverbs 23:13, 14** – *“Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.”*) Paul has already established his role as their spiritual father while ‘admonishing’, ‘urging’ and ‘reminding’ them to leave their current heading. Will they listen to his instruction or will they need to be driven from it when he comes? As my father used to say, “If you’re not going to listen, then you’re going to feel.”

Like my father, Paul’s hope is that they will alter their heading before he arrives so that he is able to come *‘with love in a spirit of gentleness’*. He has declared his love for them and has referenced it as his motivation for exhorting them. He is willing to go to even further lengths if necessary, however, if given the choice, he would prefer that they all enjoy his coming visit.

The choice is theirs! If they will correct their course before he arrives he will not need to escalate things when he comes! The question is: “What will they chose to do?”

**Concluding Questions to think and talk through:**

* Have you acknowledge your dependence on God for salvation? Are you willing to accept correction or are you slow to listen to the admonishment of others?
* Are you engaged in the process of discipleship? Have you surrounded yourself with spiritual role models who will model gospel centered living for you? Are you becoming a person that others could imitate? Are you marked by your faithfulness and are you available to spend time reminding others of the way of Christ?
* Are you reprioritizing how you view success and failure? Are you willing to be viewed as weak or foolish for the sake of the gospel? Are you known for big talk or for faithful service for the kingdom of God?

1. Thiselton, New International Greek Testament Commentary [↑](#footnote-ref-1)