

Are you a here and now Christian? 1 Corinthians 4

Good afternoon.
My name's Hugh.

Before we start, let's pray.
Father God, when we come to your word it should expose our sin,
And then sooth our hearts with the gospel.
May your Spirit work in us so that this is the case today, amen.

Think of a church, ministry, or Christian speaker that you consider successful.
Why do you consider it / them successful?
Turn to the people around you, and have a chat about this question.
Think of a church, ministry, or Christian speaker that you consider successful.
Why do you consider it / them successful?
...
Does anyone want to share an answer? ...

I was really interested to hear what answers people came up with today,
Because the sorts of answers that first pop into our minds are often churches that are big,
With programs for every demographic,
A large paid ministry team,
A senior pastor who almost acts like a CEO,
And multiple church sites called campuses.

We think of para-church ministries that gather and unite large numbers of Christians.

Ministries that have a positive media presence.
Ministries that have a well set out training program,
Clearly divided into a number of steps.
Ministries that can raise hundreds of thousands of donations for mass overseas evangelism.

When we think of success,
Our minds naturally think of speakers who get invited to big conventions,
Where the listeners are called 'delegates',
And a professional music team leads the people in exultant worship.

And even if you don't think of these sorts of things when you think of Christian success,
There are lots of people who do, aren't there?
In fact, the church in Corinth thought this kind of way.
But we're going to see today that authentic Christian living is far less glamorous.

This is truth that God wants us to know, so have your Bibles open so you can see what he's saying.
1 Corinthians chapter 4, starting at verse 1.
1 Corinthians 4:1

Well Paul starts with a verse that reminds us of what he's already talked about.
Verse 1:
So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.

So reminder number 1: Paul and Apollos are servants of Christ.
Do you remember that from last week? They're servants working to build God's church with the message of the gospel.

And then reminder number 2:
The gospel is God's secret wisdom that's now been revealed.
We looked at that two weeks ago.
The apostles –
And I mean that with a lower case a –
Church planters like Paul and Apollos are making the mystery of salvation in Jesus known to the world.

That's what they're doing.
That's their commission from God.
That's how the Corinthians should think of them.

The problem is, that's not how they're being treated.
Instead they're being viewed for their success.

Paul says in verse 3:
³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ 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.

Paul says he's been entrusted with the

gospel,
And it's his responsibility to administer that faithfully.
It doesn't matter what other people think.
It doesn't even matter what he thinks of his own success.
What matters is what God thinks.

The Corinthians have no right to judge Paul.
Paul's not talking here about judging his content.

It's not as if he's saying:
Just let people teach whatever they want,
And don't judge them on it.
No, no, Paul's content is the gospel,
And we need to make judgments about the content of our teachers.

What Paul's saying is: don't judge the person,
And don't judge the ministry.
The Corinthians don't know what his motives are,
And the Corinthians can't judge his success.
We shouldn't judge other people's ministry.

In fact, by judging Paul, the Corinthians aren't just writing him off,
They're showing a puffed up view of themselves.

Have a look at verse 7:

⁷ 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?

Can you see the problem?
If you judge someone else,

You have to make a comparison, don't you?

The Corinthians assume that they're got something special going on.
The Corinthians assume that their ministry is the healthy benchmark,
But Paul says: what makes you say that?
And who is it who's blessed your ministry – you or God?
And if it's God who's blessed your ministry,
Why are you pretending like your success comes from yourselves?

Sometimes it's easy to look at a small church –
One that struggles to pay its minister,
One that never seems to grow.
It's easy to look at that sort of church and think:
I wonder what that minister's doing wrong?
I wonder what's wrong with their music?
I wonder what's wrong with their pastoral care, and welcoming?
I wonder what's wrong with the kid's church program?

Of course if the gospel's not being preached, that's a real problem,
But to everything else, Paul says: don't judge them!
They're being faithful.
God will be the judge,
So don't put yourself in his place.

That's a challenge for me.
Is it a challenge for you too?
Don't judge ministry prematurely.

And then Paul goes on to describe what true ministry often looks like.
And he does this by comparing himself to the Corinthians so called "triumphant Christianity".

Verse 8:

⁸ 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!

The Corinthians think that heaven isn't in the future, it's here and now!
After all, they already have the Spirit and the blessings he brings.
They believe they're already reigning as kings over the earth.

Paul wishes this were true, because then he'd be reigning too.

Instead he says:

⁹ 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.

In a victory parade,
The first person to come through is the general on his horse,
And then after him all the soldiers,
And last of all the captured slaves on their way to death in the coliseum.

Paul says he feels like one of those slaves.
It's like he's there for everyone to gloat over.
And of course this isn't any different from

Jesus himself.

Remember that Jesus had to walk through the streets of Jerusalem, Carrying the cross for his own death.

Paul continues his comparison:

¹⁰ 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! 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. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³ when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

What's the point?

True Christian ministry isn't glamorous.

In fact, worldly glamour is the very opposite of what Christianity is about.

We follow a messiah who rejected glamour, And who was rejected by the glamorous.

What makes us think we're going to be any different?

The Christian rapper Lecrae has become fairly successful.

He's won a couple of Grammys,

And got invited to a Grammy's party with some of the big Hollywood stars.

But he said, as he stood there at the party, he just didn't quite fit in –

Partly because he wasn't as famous as some of the others,

But partly because he was a Christian.

Even a successful Christian, by the world's standards, isn't all that successful.

True Christian ministry is not impressive.

And so with this, Paul moves to the final point.

You Corinthians think you're impressive, But you need to learn to follow my example. Have a look at verse 15:

¹⁵ 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.

I think what Paul means here is that the Corinthians might have elders and teachers, But Paul's the one who shared the gospel with them in the first place.

The Corinthians have a special place in his heart, And he should have a special place in theirs.

Because of this special bond, Paul says:

¹⁶ Therefore I urge you to imitate me –

And we might add: just as Paul imitates Christ.

He continues, verse 17:

¹⁷ 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.

The Corinthians seem to be successful. They're living well in the here and now, But Paul's saying they've got it wrong. There's something wrong with their thinking.

There's something wrong with their way of life, And they need to start living more like Timothy, More like Paul, And more like Jesus.

Mother Teresa earned a reputation for selfless love to the poor of India.

People often use her as a point of comparison.

A model, An inspiration.

And Christian leaders should be like that – That's a challenge for us leaders.

And so where do we see ourselves in this chapter?

After all, Paul wrote this to the Corinthians, But he intended for others to read it.

He intended for us to read it.

So where do we see ourselves?

And there's two options, aren't there?

We can see ourselves with Paul, Rejected by the world, and living an authentic Christian life,

Or we can see ourselves with the respectable, comfortable, worldly Christians of Corinth.

You know, we want to see ourselves with Paul, don't we?

We naturally want to put ourselves with the good guy.

We want to think that we're doing it right, But I don't think most of us belong there.

Think again about Corinth.
Corinth is a wealthy city,
Full of battlers who've made a name for
themselves.

Corinth is a university town,
Progressive and intellectual.

Corinth is a cultural center,
A global city,
Full of the latest and greatest trends.

Corinth is ... Sydney, isn't it?
And I can sympathize with the Corinthian
Christians.
They're just trying to live and work as
Christians in a worldly city.
Everywhere they turn they have to deal with
issues.
It's no wonder that some of that thinking's
crept into the church.

Isn't that the same for the Church in
Australia?
There's not too many of us who *go hungry
and thirsty*.
There's not too many of us *in rags, ... brutally
treated, [or] homeless*.
When it comes to identifying with the people
in this chapter,
We're the Corinthians, aren't we?
When it comes to the here and now, we're
doing ok.

And so this chapter gives us a very clear
warning.
Paul says I'm writing this to warn you.
We need to look at, and copy the lifestyle of

Paul,
And of Jesus.

But how do we do that?
Well let me give you two suggestions.

The first is evangelism.
I wonder if we're too soft on evangelism?
We know our culture doesn't want to hear
about Jesus,
And so we just don't tell them.
Our evangelism's so subtle that it's almost
non-existent.
We're never going to be persecuted,
because there's nothing to persecute.
Paul's focus was on making converts for
heaven,
I wonder if ours is on the here and now.

That's evangelism,
The second example is wealth.

We live in a wealthy country,
And our standard of living is good,
But I wonder if for Christians it's a little too
good?

Apart from the plaque on the front door,
Could anyone tell your house apart from the
non-Christian's next door?
Does your lifestyle look different from the
non-Christian's next door?
Do your holidays look different?
Paul was so focused on the gospel that he
went hungry at times,
I wonder if we're just a little too focused on
the here and now?

Friends, the Corinthians thought they were
onto something good,
And they were judging Paul for being
unimpressive,
But Paul had it right, didn't he?
True Christian ministry isn't impressive,
So where do you need to follow Paul's
example?

Let's pray:
Lord God and Heavenly Father,
Thank you that you've saved us out of the
sinful world by the cross.
Please help us to live unimpressive cross
shaped lives.
And we pray for these things in Jesus'
name.
Amen.