**A MODEL MINISTER OF CHRIST  
*1 Corinthians 4:1–21***

***“Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me.” (15–16)***

So far in 1 Corinthians, Paul has addressed the issue of divisions in the church that were caused by boasting of following human leaders. Paul helped them to refocus on the crucified Christ, who is the power and wisdom of God (1:24). In chapter 3, he helped them to have the proper view of church leaders as God’s servants and of themselves as God’s field and God’s temple—united in Christ for God’s purpose and glory. Paul concludes this issue by presenting three portraits of the true Christian leader: a faithful steward, a suffering servant, and a loving father. These traits, which Paul displayed, did not come from Paul, but from Christ, whom Paul eagerly imitated. The Corinthians could overcome divisions and boasting as they learned true spiritual greatness by imitating Paul’s Christlikeness. Through this message, may God grant us earnest desire to grow in the likeness of Christ, which Paul vividly displayed.

1. **A Faithful Steward (vs. 1–7)**

The Corinthians viewed their church leaders as larger-than-life personalities and spiritual celebrities, similar to how the culture of their time view popular orators and philosophers. Paul sets them straight in verse 1: “***This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.***” “Those entrusted” is literally “stewards”. On the one hand, this is a very humble assessment: they are not masters, but servants; they are not owners, but stewards. On the other hand, they are privileged and honored to serve the Lord of lords and to be entrusted with Christ’s authority to dispense the riches of “the mysteries God has revealed”—that is, to preach the message of the cross, the words of the gospel.

When the Corinthians adopted this proper view of their spiritual leaders, they could avoid idolizing them, and at the same time, they could give them proper respect, for dispensing the words of God is a glorious calling. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:17, “*The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.*” Respect for those to whom God has entrusted his words is essential for believers to grow and for the church to thrive, and it pleases God.

With spiritual authority, comes heightened responsibility. Verse 2 says, “***Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.***” Faithful means reliable, responsible, or trustworthy, and it is a crucial characteristic of those who would serve God. This is because faithfulness is an attribute of God himself, who always keeps his promises, and of Christ, who carried out his Father’s work even to the point of death. The key to success in serving God is faithfulness, for devotion to the task he has given, and not outward measures, is what God sees and rewards. American missionary Adoniram Judson went to Burma, a strong Buddhist kingdom at that time. He laboriously served, seeing no visible fruit for six years before baptizing his first convert. However, as he faithfully served the task God had given him for 38 years, God used his suffering to bring many thousands to faith in Christ. In fact, nearly 3,700 congregations today in Myanmar trace their roots to his work[[1]](#footnote-1).

How can we be faithful? Look at verses 3–4: “***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.***” If Paul had cared about the judgment of the Corinthians or of human courts, then he would have watered down the message of the gospel into a people-pleasing message of comfort and prosperity, with wise-sounding, eloquent oratory. However, Paul not submit to the judgment of others; he did not even judge himself, nor did he compare himself with others. He lived and worked before the Lord who had called him and who would judge him. When Paul lived before the eyes of the Lord, he could remain faithful to the Lord, serving people with the message of the cross.

Pointing to the Lord, the ultimate judge, Paul teaches the right attitude believers should have in verse 5: “***Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.***” The Corinthians made judgments that led them to exalt some ministers and to criticize others. Paul pointed out their wrong attitude and urged them make no human judgment before the Lord comes. This is because the Lord will bring to light what is hidden in darkness, even the deep motives of human heart. He will reward each person according to what they did out of their hearts. So Paul only looked forward to the praise from God, “*Well done, good and faithful servant!*” (Mt 25:21), which is what each of us should live for as well.

How can we learn this important attitude of seeking only to please God? We can learn from Christ Jesus, who testified, “*For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me*” (Jn 6:38). In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, “*Yet not what I will, but what you will*” (Mk 14:36), surrendering completely to his Father’s will. Because Jesus remained faithful to his mission, seeking to please his Father, “*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name*” (Php 2:9). God evaluated Christ as supreme.

People love to give opinions and evaluations. Students fill out evaluations of their professors. We often solicit feedback after conferences. Such evaluation from others can be helpful to identify areas for improvement from different perspectives. But ultimately, God’s evaluation of us is the only evaluation that matters. He is the one we work for, and he is the one who offers lasting rewards that far surpass anything the world could offer. We should hold on to this right Biblical perspective and fix our eyes on Christ to remain faithful to the end.

Paul now testifies how he and Apollos applied these things to themselves so that the Corinthians might learn from them the meaning of the saying, “**Do not go beyond what is written**” (6). They didn’t approach Scriptures with their own inclinations or worldly opinions. Paul humbly obeyed the word of God, living by the Scriptures he had quoted earlier in his letter: “*For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate’”* (1Co 1:19) *“‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord’*” (1Co 1:31).

Paul explains why boasting is groundless in verse 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?***” He reminded them of God’s grace to them, which was given not on the basis of any human merit or qualifications, but only based on God’s kindness and generosity. Once they had been in darkness. Whatever they had gained after being born again, including knowledge and wisdom, came from God. Since what they had was not related to anything they had done, they had no right at all to boast. We also must not boast except in the Lord and his grace, for everything we have—abilities, virtues, knowledge, and wisdom—came from God as his gracious gifts.

Having explained ministry in terms of being a faithful steward of God’s words, Paul illustrates the second qualification of a spiritual leader, which is resemblance of Christ.

1. **A Suffering Servant (vs. 8–13)**

Paul begins with a facetious description of the Corinthians in verse 8: “***Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you!***” The Corinthians acted and regarded themselves as though they were satisfied, rich, and reigning. But this was not the case. “Already” is not when the church is supposed to have everything we want or to be rich or to reign; that will happen in the new heavens and the new earth. The pride of the Corinthians was ungrounded and after the pattern of this world rather than after the pattern of Christ and his apostles. That’s why Paul said, ***“…and that without us!***” In their pride, their lives had ceased to resemble Christ and his apostles, and they didn’t see anything wrong with that. But it is a problem when our concept of Christianity diverges from the life that Christ lived.

So in verse 9, Paul vividly describes how he and the other apostles lived and ministered: “***For 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. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.***” In Paul’s day, there were many parades and processions. At the front was the king or victorious general, followed by officials and officers dressed in finery, and then there were soldiers brightly arrayed in a display of military might. At the end, there were prisoners of war or criminals who were condemned to die in the arena as an entertaining spectacle for the crowds. The Corinthians thought they were up at the front with the royal retinue, but Paul explained that the place of true spiritual greatness is in the very back, with those the world wanted dead. For that’s the position Christ himself took.

Jesus was led out of Jerusalem carrying his own cross in a procession together with common criminals to be executed publicly, followed by many people who mocked him and spit at him. God presented Jesus to the world in weakness and shame, as the crucified King of the Jews. Jesus was glorified through submitting to humiliation and torture out of love for his Father and for the world. Jesus’ apostles took up their crosses—sometimes quite literally—to follow him along the path of suffering to glory.

Paul contrasts the apostles with the Corinthians again in verse 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!***” They needed to learn that true spiritual greatness looks to the world like foolishness, weakness, and dishonor. Then Paul described the hardship that he and the other apostles faced in ministry: “***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.*** …” (11–12a). They faithfully endured hardships and labored to support themselves financially. And how did they respond to mistreatment? “… ***When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 13 when we are slandered, we answer kindly.*** …” (12b–13a). This reflected the attitude of Jesus, who prayed while he was being crucified, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Lk 23:34). Paul concluded with a superlatively humble, self-effacing declaration: “***We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment***” (13b). The world, who hated Jesus, regards his followers no better.

The work of the gospel involves rejection, suffering, and persecution. Our Lord’s life and ministry clearly showed this. We too should imitate our Lord, following in his footsteps. How can we share in the glory of Christ’s sufferings and humiliation, as Paul and the other apostles did? We should begin by embracing their mindset toward the suffering of Christ, which we can see in Acts 5:41, after they were flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus: “*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*” Likewise we should realize that it is an honor to suffer disgrace for the sake of Jesus.

Once we have this mindset, what might participation in Christ’s suffering look like practically? We must be willing to be misunderstood and have others think poorly of us, and even to face public humiliation. Sometimes when we are reaching out to people in the name of Christ, we will seem foolish. Some people may be offended, and others may ask us difficult questions, making us look ignorant. That’s ok. We must be willing to seem foolish as we preach the message of the cross, which is foolishness to those who are perishing. As Paul, the well-educated religious scholar, was willing to go around in rags and homeless, working hard at menial tasks to support his ministry, we should consider it gain to lower our standard of living or take a lower-paying job for the sake of Christ and his mission. As Jesus forgave his crucifiers, we should respond to meanness with kindness. Expressions and acts of kindness can often disarm hostile people, but even when they don’t, God sees and is pleased.

Jesus suffered because there was no other way to save us from our sins and give us life. When we suffer for his sake, it is not meaningless but lifegiving. Jesus likened walking the way of the cross to a kernel of wheat falling to the ground and dying: “*Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds*” (Jn 12:24). God works through the suffering of Christ’s followers to bring life to the world.

So far, a model minister of Christ seeks to please only Christ and faithfully endures hardship as Christ did. The final picture Paul presents deals with the motivation and heart God’s servants should have—reflecting the heart of God himself.

1. **A Loving Father (vs. 14–21)**

Paul changes to a gentler tone in verse 14: “***I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children.***” Paul had drawn a scathing contrast between the puffed up, boastful Corinthians and the Christlike apostles, whose lifestyles were like night and day. His aim wasn’t to make them feel bad but to lead them to repent of their pride and to help them to see what a life following Christ looks like. Paul confessed his love for them, as his dear children.

Paul explains why he so regarded them in verse 15: “***Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.***” Upper-class Roman citizens would employ guardians to educate and train their children and accompany them to school. From the child’s perspective, the guardian was functionally similar to the parent, giving them care, instruction, and discipline. However, whereas guardianship is a job, fatherhood is unconditional love. Paul became the spiritual father of the Corinthian believers through the gospel, when his gospel preaching was instrumental in bringing them new birth in Christ. Paul labored for a year and a half in Corinth through their spiritual infancy until they could be established in their faith firmly enough for him to move on.

Paul could love and serve them like a father because he knew the heart of God the Father. God had compassion on the rebellious, suffering, helpless world and gave his only Son to save us and give us eternal life. God graciously provides us with all we need day by day. God is patient with sinners, giving them chance after chance to repent and turn to him for forgiveness and restoration, and he stands ready to welcome them with open arms. God teaches his children, helping us to grow in the image of our heavenly Father.

Let’s read verses 15–16 together in one voice: “***Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you to imitate me.***” How could Paul say this? Not everyone can. It’s because Paul imitated Christ. So to imitate Paul was to imitate Christ. Even though the Corinthians were doing wrong by boasting in some leaders over against others, they should grow to imitate the Christlike characteristics of all their leaders.

We, too, should imitate Paul as Christlike shepherds, as well as learning from many examples that God has given the church throughout the ages. As the Corinthians could learn from Paul, Apollos, and Cephas, we can learn from Christian authors and missionary biographies and our Bible teachers and other church leaders. It’s easy to think, If I only had a perfect model to follow, then I could live a fruitful life. But there is no perfect model apart from Christ; all human leaders have weaknesses, as well as strengths. As learners, we should learn from the Christlike characteristics of Christians around us, and especially those over us, and imitate them as they imitate Christ. As teachers, we should earnestly seek to imitate Christ, knowing that others are watching and will follow our example. As we grow to be Christlike shepherds worth imitating, we can help those whom we serve to grow in Christ so that Christ may be formed in their lives.

As God the Father sent his Son whom he loved, Paul was willing to do the same. Look at verse 17: “***For this reason I have sent 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.***” In order to facilitate their imitation of him, Paul sent Timothy. Paul had served and taught Timothy, who had spent enough time with Paul to be able to teach Paul’s way of life, as well as to display it in his own life. Through imitating Timothy, they could imitate Paul, and ultimately, Christ.

Look at verses 18–19: “***Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. 19 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.***” Paul revisited the Corinthians’ problem of pride. Some of them were talking like they were wise and grand church leaders, even greater than apostles like Paul. But Paul would assess if God’s power was at work through them to match their words, “***For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power***” (20). Then Paul challenged them to repent in verse 21: “***What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?***” Paul earnestly desired to treat them gently with love, but with a concerned father’s heart, he was willing to show tough love to discipline them for their good.

I’m very thankful for the opportunity to prepare a message based on this passage, for in it Paul addresses areas where I need to grow and challenges my self-satisfaction and complacency. I love praise and approval from people, which leads me to boast and tell others about my good deeds. Instead, I should obey my Lord Jesus, who warned, “*Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them*” (Mt 6:1), and I should seek only God’s approval and rewards, which were enough to motivate Paul to suffer all things. Moreover, just as the Corinthians’ self-perception was incongruous with the humble suffering of Christ and his apostles, my comfortable, well-fed, warmly-clothed lifestyle is at odds with Paul’s description of the apostles. I learn the value and glory of sharing in Christ’s sufferings, and I am humbled by how far I fall short of the spiritual greatness Paul portrays. Finally, I see that my attitude toward Bible students more reflects a guardian than a father. I want to be liked and maintain our relationship more than I earnestly desire their spiritual growth. With such an approach, I fear that I might teach someone for four years and leave them spiritually unchanged. I should share Paul’s fatherly heart to show tough love and challenge them to grow, to repent, to leave their comfort zone, to be more devoted to Christ. I pray that I can grow as a Christlike servant so that others can see Christ in me, come to him, and grow in him, so that he may be glorified and pleased with my life.

Though this passage, we can learn about the model minister of Christ, who is worth imitating because he imitates Christ in his faithful stewardship, suffering servantship, and fatherly love. I pray that we might be faithful stewards of God’s word, seeking to please him alone; that we might cheerfully participate in the sufferings of Christ to reach the lost around us; and that we might share God’s heart to reach out to unbelievers and shepherd young believers until they are deeply rooted in Christ. May Christ be glorified in us as his image is formed in us. Amen.

1. https://document.desiringgod.org/adoniram-judson-en.pdf?ts=1439242118 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)