

*Sermon on 1 Corinthians 4:1-13 prepared for Grace Church by Jonathan Shradar*

Are you anything like me? I wake up most days and I contemplate how I can best be served, fulfilled and gain everything I desire. It really is a sickness. Last week a pastor shared a picture on twitter that he called a parable of our times, an audience with their backs to the candidate all taking selfies! Whether we are public about it or not, truth be told we are all about ourselves. The mentality of it infects everything we touch... relationships, work, our time, and certainly our faith.

It comes from an understandable place - if I am the one responsible for everything in my little fiefdom, then I should have first place. I should set the agenda, my opinion (on everything) should reign supreme, and it should be totally okay for me to trash you if you get in the way of any of that.

Occasionally we get a sense that something isn't right with this mentality, and the life that follows it. Whether we achieve what we set our hearts to or fail miserably, there seems to be something off - it drives us to redefine success and rewrite our life goals... or it has us proclaim that there is nothing more to be had - we have reached the final destination and this is all we have (hope it's good.) If we are lucky we experience moments we end up cherishing because everything seems right, the laughter, the perfect sunset, the adventure; and we realize it was good because it wasn't about us, it wasn't delivered by you, but it was a gift to you.

There is a way to make each experience like this. Each moment of life really, and that is the point what the church is to proclaim, that is what the Apostle Paul wants the church in Corinth to recognize. He is calling them and us to a cross-formed life.

**The way of the cross makes us humble and hopeful.**

**1 Corinthians 4:1-13**

Paul has spent a lot of ink on correcting the Corinthian church for their divisions and putting worldly wisdom and advantage above Jesus Christ and him crucified. The church thinks it has arrived, it has miraculous gifts, great speakers and an inward focus that seems to be satisfied with what they had gained. Paul has unrelentingly invited them to unity, growth, participation in the purpose of the church and ultimately back to the place of difference from the systems and strategies of the world - to the cross.

The church has judged Paul for his presentation, and has a swagger about them that suggests their wisdom makes them better, more spiritual Christians, their material possessions are proof of their privileged blessing, their heaven is now, opened to them and experienced in the midst of those who get it.

In his summation of correction for division in the church, he uncovers what I think are the gems of the life of a believer in Jesus transformed by grace. Humility and Hopefulness. And as we think of these things I want us to think of them as cruciform. Cross-shaped, formed, resembling a cross. It is probably not a word you use that often but perhaps we need to add it to our vocabulary...

These are things that are Gospel-formed, the results of the cross, Jesus-modeled...

### **1) Cruciform Humility**

When it comes to characteristics that are appealing to us, humility is high on the list. At least we say it is. A humble person that is not braggadocious, that highlights the efforts and aptitudes of others over themselves. The person that seems to have a good perspective of what they bring to the table and is slow to put others down. They always seem to be a team player and have a grateful perspective of life because things could be much worse.

But in real life, we find ourselves actually drawn to the arrogant, those confident in self and learn at a young age to be our own spokesperson making sure all the right people know how great we are in comparison to everyone else.

This is not just a modern narcissism that has evolved over time but was the experience of the Corinthians. And this comparison, this judging of others and boasting in self has no place in the church in the wake of the cross of Christ.

**a) Judging** - Here is a church that has been aggressively judging those that ministered among them. Specifically in reference to their teaching ability and the depth of what they presented. In the spirituality of others and those less gifted. They were quick to evaluate and pass judgment on people in the church and beyond it.

If there is one thing everyone in this room is good at, it is judging... at least we do it all the time. For good, and for bad. "We are all evaluators, and we are all evaluated. We judge people, places, and cultural commodities by a diverse web of standards that we have weaved together over the course of our lives."

We fancy ourselves as amateur (or semipro) critics with an unimpeachable perspective on everything from food to film, athletes to news anchors.

We end up being paralyzed by other people's judgment of us... We are dying for someone to wade through the mess in order to see and accept us for who we really are - no performance necessary. That is what we find at the cross and because of it our penchant for casting judgment based on our preference and preconceived ideas of success dies. Paul models that for us.

For the last few chapters Paul has been building a case against such judgmental division and he concludes it here. He says that he and others proclaiming the gospel should be considered as servants of Christ charged with faithfulness rather than the approval of man. It is pointless, a very small thing, to be judged by a human court, Paul doesn't even judge himself - his faithfulness is in preaching Christ and him crucified, and he will not be knocked off message by the opinion of those that prefer the style of another preacher. Since they are fellow workers in God's field and unified in Christ there shouldn't even be a Yelp page for them!

It is the Lord that judges... **4:5** "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God."

Paul is saying, Church don't get ahead of yourselves, live for faithfulness (as he is modeling it) and trust in the Lord's judgment where everything will be revealed.

The humility Paul is pointing to, cruciform humility, is having a right view of who sits on the throne of the universe, who is set to judge his people and knowing what the verdict will be in light of the cross. The commendation comes for those faithful to the message of the gospel and the Corinthians need not weigh in with their own opinion. There is a reorientation that happens here toward faithfulness in life and ministry over the perceived opinion of others.

But it is only half of the humility quotient - as the Corinthians were not only judging the apostles but also boasting in their own situation.

**b) Boasting** - All that has come before points to this goal - that they would not go beyond what they had been taught... **6b-7** "that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"

The point of his letter thus far is to bring truth in such a way that the church is humbled and clearly sees themselves. That they wouldn't be puffed up, proud of their brand of church or their collection of spiritual gifts as if they were the ones that had secured them. Paul asks centering questions that given the circumstance have a bit of bite to them. 'Really you all haven't changed... All that you have was a gift from another - so why boast in it like you come by it naturally?!'

Cruciform humility hears these questions and realizes what we deserve then responds with gratefulness for all that we have been given. Salvation, a gift. Faith, a gift. The Holy Spirit as comforter and power for life, a gift. The church and those that stumble toward faithfulness in community, a gift. Sinners in need of forgiveness, unable to come on their own, unable to live the perfection required... and still Jesus humbles himself to take on our burden and give us his freedom. He changes our standing before God, but the reality of it does not move us to a

category above others from which we can boast... at the cross we get low, knowing who we are and being awed by redemption, even for us.

All of it has been given to you... it is all grace. This is hard because voices everywhere attempt to tell us how great we are and how we are surely worth boasting in... Scott at Starbucks “you deserve more.”

You believe enough of those messages and you start to think you are pretty cool like the church in Corinth.

They didn't need Paul and his simple gospel... they had arrived in the spiritual winners' circle and had the crowds and abundance to prove it. There were no sinners among them anymore. The church full of “strong” Christians, they had the corner on wisdom and how could anyone not know how great the church in Corinth was, they would be sure to tell you! In fact it was like the kingdom of God was a kingdom for their pleasure and position.

The foolishness of boasting amongst people who owe everything to the grace of God.

They missed cruciform humility because they were stuck attempting to feel superior by judging Paul and others, by boasting in what they thought were their own accomplishments. They missed cruciform humility because they settled for a view of themselves that falsely led the church to think its best days were now, and that had them living in what they assumed was privilege.

This view not only kept them from humility but it also kept them from the hopefulness that we are meant to cling to in light of the cross.

## **2) Cruciform Hopefulness**

Hope for the Corinthian church was set on what they were experiencing now, rather than what was to come. This is why in 1 Corinthians so far Paul has consistently been pointing to the Day of the Lord to the final consummation of the kingdom of God and Christ's undisputed reign - he knows they that All they were living for was the present and the erroneous belief that they had advanced beyond all others and that glory was for now, not to come.

At the heart of the boasting at Corinth was the conviction that they were really a successful, lively, mature and effective church. The Christians were satisfied with their spirituality, their leadership, and the general quality of their life together. They had settled down into the illusion that they has become the best they could be. “Arrived”

This is the church living not what we often refer to the already and not yet of Christianity - and instead living as if the already was the full delivery of glory they had claimed as their own.

Already - is a valid part of the Christian life but it is not one to be fully experienced in this life on earth: we have been filled, enriched, lifted to reign with Christ, but we shall not enter fully into that inheritance here and now. It is a theology of glory, but it has to be placed in the context of a theology of the cross.

“A theology of glory expects total success, finding all the answers, winning all the battles, and living happily ever after. The theology of glory is all about my strength, my power, and my works. A theologian of glory expects his church to be perfect and always to grow. If a theologian of glory gets sick, he expects God to heal him. And if he experiences failure and weakness, if his church has problems and if he is not healed, then he is often utterly confused, questioning the sufficiency of his faith and sometimes questioning the very existence of God.” Gene Vieth

This was the church in Corinth and Paul is saying they have it wrong. We wrestle with this, especially in circles where we believe the Holy Spirit is active and gifting and working miracles in the same way he did in Scripture - because God can and does heal, all that we have is a gift from him and from our position as Western Christians that can feel like and is abundance.

But if we are not careful we slide into thinking the cross delivers something far different and something much self-focused than what it really does. A modern prosperity false teacher tweeted “Jesus bled and died for us so that we can lay claim to the promise of financial prosperity. #ProsperityInChrist #WealthyLiving #AbundantLife”.

What is labeled hope is meant only for the immediate and at the most 60 years of this life... but they are robbing themselves of the true gospel hopefulness meant for those following Jesus.

Paul calls the church back to the place of the crucified Jesus because it forms a life that looks different than what was being constructed in Corinth. A life of humility and hopefulness focused on Christ’s work and the life he calls us to live.

The sarcastic comparison of the two theological patterns:

**4:8-13** “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! [9] For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. [10] We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. [11] To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, [12] and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; [13] when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”

This is not meant to flatter the church, they haven't really become kings, they are not wise and strong. They have simply convinced themselves they are. And Paul says "you are doing Christianity wrong! This is the way of the cross."

To be low, fools in the eyes of the world; last of all, the scum of society. I worked in public relations for a long time and was fairly good at spin... you can't spin this. Let me invite you to faith in Jesus, to persecution, slander, being treated like trash. While we might want to avoid verses like these, and all the others that reveal suffering as expected, and that weakness what we aspire to... we miss the way of the cross if we do.

**Matthew 16:24-25** "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. [25] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

"The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. *When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.* It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call." (*The Cost of Discipleship*, 99)

Die to self... rely on another... This is hard, because who really wants it, I am willing to die to myself giving up a latte once a week to give a little money to the church, but whole life sacrifice, even slight suffering? Nah! Paradoxes of the gospel... the way down is the way up. The way of weakness is the way of strength. The way of poverty is the way of riches. In Christ we are to live not a theology of glory but a theology of the cross.

"A theology of the cross defines life in terms of giving rather than taking, self-sacrifice rather than self-protection, dying rather than killing. It reorients us away from our natural inclination toward a theology of glory by showing that we win by losing, we triumph through defeat, and we become rich by giving ourselves away. Of course, our inner theologian of glory can be counted on to try to hijack the theology of the cross and make it a new, more reliable scheme for self-improvement. But the theology of the cross happens to us and in spite of us. For the suffering person, this is a word of profound hope." TT

This is the place of cruciform hopefulness. Paul says that the treasures of the kingdom are the trash of the world, which offers great hope to anyone who does not measure up. We can view our pain and suffering through a different lens, not as punishment for a faint faith but the cross-carrying way that focuses our attention on our only source and what he has promised us.

And we don't have to fully understand it to hope in it. We don't even need a full grasp of what is to come to have hope.

Paul himself admits that no mind could ever conceive what God has in store. **1 Cor. 2:9** "But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"

"Brothers Kar-am-azov: Ivan's description of this renewal is beautiful: I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, . . . that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.' - In other words, suffering makes no sense now. It isn't supposed to. But in the power and love of God, one day, it will."

**1 John 3:2** "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." There is more to come - this is not all there is. From our low position we have hope because we look to and live toward home. Eternity with Christ - the end of pain, of sin and the groaning of this life - and only the glory promised in him.

This is the better way, this is the cruciform life, the cross-formed life of a Christian. Humble, knowing where the seat of judgment lies and that we live not in our own abilities and what we have accumulated but through the grace of God. Hopeful, that we would follow Jesus, taking up our cross, looking to him as we live low being transformed by his grace.

**1 Cor. 4:14** "I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children."

We can learn from Corinth's diversion, we can look to the cross and let it shape us. **The way of the cross makes us humble and hopeful.**

### **Response:**

Live Low - come to Christ, laying at the cross all of your failed attempts and wrong perspectives of him. Know that he has called you and covered you by his blood, that you would be secure, promised to stand before the throne of God blameless, set for eternity with him. Be sustained by his grace, what do you have that you did not receive? Look to what will be finally and fully received in Christ.

HOW? having friends that remind us of our flaws, coupled with confession, spending time with people who aren't like you and don't look like you and don't have the money you do and realizing they have insights into Christ that you don't"

"Gospel life is about deferring, about elevating others, about pursuing someone else's interests, about being humble and not being arrogant, about giving and not always receiving, about wealth distribution and not wealth accumulation, about leveraging one's power and influence for those who are powerless. Only the inverted, upside-down, ironic paradigm of the kingdom of God through the person of Jesus Christ will help us to be noble and heroic [humble] in the true sense of the term." Um

Share Hope - Don't hide, let others see life, pain and all, and where you find your hope. Remind each other of the grace we have been given through the cross and the One we call Savior.

Jesus turned down the promise of immediate glory on earth in order to remain faithful to the Father and deliver a greater glory... the truth of Christianity is evident in that everyone does, in fact, have problems, struggles, and sufferings. And this can be our point of contact for Christ, who on the cross not only "was wounded for our transgressions" but also "has borne our griefs" and "carried our sorrows"

Where will the cross take you today? To humility... to hope? May we go there together and live from the cross, our place of salvation and union with Christ, and toward the glory to come, our place of dwelling with Christ.