

Jason Upchurch - 1 Cor. 4:6-21 - A Final Plea for Unity in the Church

This morning we're going to see Paul's closing argument for why Christians should not divide over their favorite leaders. As we have seen all along this is very instructive for us because we tend to gravitate toward our favorite people, advocate for our favorite people, and win others to our side.

And let me just say that while this section deals with our attitude toward leaders in the church specifically, these principles apply generally in many situations.

Benjamin Franklin said there are 2 certainties in life: death and taxes. Well, let me give you a third certainty: you will have leaders in your life that you don't like.

Maybe their personality is different than yours. You're an introvert, they're an extrovert. You pay close attention to details, they could care less about nit picky details and they love the big picture. Maybe they rubbed you the wrong way, spoke harshly, didn't take a stand you thought they should take. Maybe there was someone better qualified for their position that got passed up. Or maybe you can't put your finger on it. Sometimes there are people in life we just clash with and we don't always know why.

But the bottom line is they aren't what you'd want in a leader. You wish it was someone else. Let me just say, that most of your life you will experience someone in a leadership position that you think is doing a sub par job. Whether in government, at the workplace, maybe even within your family.

But here in Corinthians the context is our attitude toward leaders we don't like in the church. There is conflict and difficulty over leadership within Christian circles just like anywhere else.. Whether at camp, or at church, or within national and international ministries, these are things we need to know how to deal with.

Welcome to the fallen world. The place where there'll be perfect leadership is in the New Heavens and New Earth where righteousness dwells in totality. Until then we are here living life to the glory of God under leaders who are far from perfect.

But here's the thing: even the gospel informs us of how we should treat leaders. The saving grace of Jesus doesn't just get us into heaven, it also informs how we view fallen leaders.

Jesus submitted to many fallen leaders. Whether to his parents, or his synagogue leaders, or governing authorities. He walked in righteousness amid bad leadership - and by his grace we can too.

And how we treat and talk about and submit to fallen leaders either advances the gospel or it brings shame to Jesus. The gospel is hindered by how we treat and talk about leaders. Slandering and bad mouthing and creating factions around leaders simply over preference brings shame to the Lord who saved us.

And just to be clear, we're not talking about leaders who are in sin. If a leader is in sin, we simply go through the **Matthew 18** process. You go to them one-on-one, then take one or two witnesses, so on. That's what you do if a leader is in blatant sin.

What Paul is talking about are leaders you just don't like because they're different than you. There's no sin here, they just don't do what you want them to do or have the personality you like in leadership. How do we bring glory to Jesus then?

Paul doesn't give us a step by step guide, but he does give us biblical attitudes we need to have.

1) We don't give leaders more importance than the Bible gives them. **Read 6**

Remember that last time we talked about this slogan: do not go beyond what is written. It's a summary of what the Bible says about not adding to the Word of God and not taking away from the Word of God. But being very careful to do exactly what the Bible says.

Here Paul is applying that principle to how we view leaders. We don't go beyond what is written. So on the one hand, leaders in the church are to be followed.

Turn over to 1 Tim. 5:17-22 for a minute. I think this verse gives us a good balance of this principle.

By the way, I'm using the generic word "leader" because in the early church there were local elders, there were prophets, and there were apostles and all had some level of authority in the church. They were all viewed as leaders. I don't believe that apostles are around any more and I believe the authoritative office of prophet is also gone, so the only true authority of any church are the elders. But I want to be fair to the context which is why I say leaders. And here elders are in view. **Read 17-22**

So elders are to rule well. Ruling implies authority and direction. But does that mean that elders are immune from being held accountable? No, elders are held to the same standard and process of **Matthew 18** as everyone else.

Turn to Heb. 13:17-19. This is where we see the term leaders used somewhat generically, but again I think this refers simply to local church elders now. **Read 17-19**

So the writer says its to your advantage to let leaders lead well. And to submit to them. That doesn't mean we can't give suggestions or ask questions or bring up difficult issues. But it does mean we don't want to make our leaders groan.

You ever had those people that when they text you or you see their number pop up on your phone you kind of groan and don't want to answer it? Yeah, don't be that guy. **Good leaders** are always seeking to act in a clear conscience to the advantage of the whole body of Christ. But we're not perfect, so be gentle. And get this: we will give an account to God of every soul under our care.

I have to tell you: as a pastor that's sobering. I bump into people all the time that I've shepherded either for a small season or long one. And this verse weighs on me. God is gracious, but you need to understand every leader worth their salt knows this verse is here. Which is why we desire for you to pray for us.

So there's this balance. Leaders do lead and are held to a high standard. But we have to be careful not to place them too high. Higher than the Bible places them.

Back in **1 Cor. 4:** that's what he's getting at. This is what has been written about leaders. Don't go beyond this. Don't elevate any leader higher than what the Bible has designed.

2) Everything a leader has is what God has given them. **Read 6-7**

So Paul says that everything every believer has has been given by God. Our very faith, our place in life, our ability to serve the church, everything. And the implication is that that is true of leaders as well.

Whatever I have in life has been given to me by God. We call this comprehensive providence. God has provided absolutely every single aspect about every single person's life. So if God has given me everything I have - I didn't earn it, I didn't achieve it, I'm not special - then why would anyone boast in me?

It'd be like boasting in your friend who's parents are rich. "Look at Johnny, he's loaded." Johnny isn't loaded, his parents are loaded. Johnny did nothing to earn that sports car. It would be ridiculous to boast in your friend Johnny.

Well, the same thing is true with leaders. "Look at Apollos! He's an amazing preacher. So kind, so gentle." Apollos isn't special. You know who's special? God. Who gave to Apollos everything he has.

"Look at Paul! What a church planter. Man isn't he great." Nothing special about Paul. God gave Paul is marching orders, God told Paul what to do. All those amazing miracles he did? Yeah that was God working. All those people who came to faith? That was the Spirit working.

That same truth about your favorite leader is also the same truth concerning you. And the person sitting next to you. **Read 7**

When we boast about the position we have in the Kingdom of God or look down on those whose lives are not as “desirable” as others, we’re boasting. We’re saying that somehow, some way we are the ultimate determiners of our destiny. We’re cutting God out of the equation.

Paul says that all believers - whether leaders or not - have been given everything we have by God. When we divide over our favorite leader we are in part saying “This person deserves our allegiance more because **they’ve** accomplished more. **They’ve** done a better job. And **I’m** smart enough to recognize it.”

It’s boasting. It’s boasting in people and boasting in ourselves.

Everything we have and everything our fellow believers have is all from God.

There’s a third reason we don’t divide.

3) Christians are destined to rule together.

This is where we see that maybe smaller, less important doctrines actually have a rather large significance in the Christian life. All doctrine - no matter how primary or secondary - will ultimately have an effect on how we live.

Almost in passing, Paul touches on a reality that we need to understand: Followers of Jesus are destined to rule together. And Paul brings this up as kind of a slam on the Corinthians for thinking that they are already ruling now. And he does it in a really clever way. **Read 7-8**

So he hits them on one side saying that they’re being boastful for acting as though somehow what they have is their own doing. It’s not, everything they have is from God. But at the same time they’re acting like they’ve already inherited the entire Kingdom - like they’re reigning in heaven right now - and they are ruling like kings. They are deciding who is important, they are standing in judgment over the apostles, they are acting as though they are rich.

And Paul jabs them and says, “Boy, I really wish you were reigning because maybe we could reign alongside of you, your majesties.”

See, the reality is that we **will** reign with Christ in eternity.

Luke 19:11-27 (parable of the minas) Jesus indicates our faithfulness in this life will determine the extent of our reign in eternity. One guy ruled over 10 cities, another 5 - remember that?

2 Tim. 2:12: If we endure, we shall also reign.

In **Rev. 5:10** remember the saints in heaven are singing a new song: And you have made them a Kingdom and priests to our God and they shall reign on the earth.

Rev. 20:4 - talking about the millennium - which I believe is a present reality in heaven: They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. I think that’s a present reality for the saints in heaven.

But the bottom line is that Christians will reign with Christ. We will exercise authority given to us by God for all eternity.

But we’re not there yet. And Paul’s saying: wouldn’t that be nice if it were true now. But it ain’t true now. Stop acting like it is.

I remember being a teenager and working with a kid who's dad owned the company I worked for. And there was this air of arrogance that he could kind of do whatever he wanted and that the typical rules didn't apply to him because he was special. He was a little above the rest of us. He wasn't technically the boss - he was too young for that. But he acted like it.

That's what Paul's talking about. You ain't in charge just yet. You will be, but in the meantime walk in humility. Know your place.

There's another reason we don't divide.

4) Our lives are one big cosmic show - someone is always watching. **Read 8-9**

So in Roman times when Rome went out to war and conquered their enemy they basically chained all the survivors and marched them back to Rome. You know the Arch d'Triumph in France? That's a tribute to Roman Arches of triumph that Rome would build to famous generals. They'd walk through these arches with all the pomp and circumstance - like a big parade. And the conquered enemies were the last part of the parade. And they'd take these enemies to a coliseum where they would basically fight in the gladiator games for one person: to be killed. And the Romans would all gather to watch these conquered soldiers fight to the death. And they'd cheer and applaud as these defeated warriors were slaughtered right in front of their eyes.

The language that Paul uses here is describing that exact situation. The apostles are exhibited last of all. He said: we're the guys in the back of the victory parade about to meet our death in front of people cheering.

NIV: 1 Corinthians 4:9 (NIV): 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.

I'll be honest, that's a very, very loose translation - but it's getting exactly to what Paul has in mind. The apostles are defeated men condemned to die. And most all of them died a martyrs death.

Who's in the stands cheering? **Read 9**

Everyone. The world is watching them. That's the unbelieving world. The unbelieving world watches as Christians are attacked and persecuted and dishonored. But they also watch when we divide over our favorite leader. Or slander leaders or degrade them. When we make foolish statements on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram.

It's not just the apostles that the world watches - it's everyone.

It's also angels. Angels are watching what we do. The word angel just means messenger - angels are God's messengers. They also minister to us in various ways.

Heb. 1:14: Says they are ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who inherit salvation. That's Christians.

They protect us, fight unseen battles, and it seems as though they also nourish us in spiritual ways we don't even know. If you think of all the weird evil things that demons do in the gospels - demons are fallen angels - imagine the spiritual counterpart for good that angels might do.

They're watching us, they're even present with us now. Let me just give you a weird preview of coming attractions. **Turn to 1 Cor. 11.** This is talking about head coverings. This is awesome. **Read 10**

So the head covering is a symbol of authority. Some people think the covering is actually long hair. We'll get into all of that. But the bottom line is that one of the reasons for head coverings is for the angels.

What in the world does that mean? Good question. No one knows. There's no other passage in the Bible that talks about this or why angels would care. But it seems like angels have a vested interest in what men and women do with our heads in the congregation. And you thought other people we're judging you...

But Paul's point is that everyone - the entire universe - is watching what we do. The unbelieving world, angels, other believers, generations that will come after us. Our lives, to some extent, are on display for all to see.

You ever watch the movie the Truman Show? Jim Carrey is locked in a huge dome warehouse thing and his whole life is video recorded for the world to watch. I haven't seen it in a long time, so it might be trash. But his life is on display for all. That's us in the cosmic scheme of things.

And the question is: how are we going to act knowing that information? Look what Paul was up against. And notice: most of this section is sarcastic. **Read 10-13**

Ah, sarcasm to the glory of God. The apostles were basically homeless men who got beat up everywhere they went. God revealed to them the mysteries of the gospel but it was the Corinthians who were wise in their own sight. Right.

Paul didn't get to determine his circumstances or calling or how God had planned to use him but what he did determine was that he was going to live his life in faithfulness to God before the entire cosmos.

The lives of leaders are a spectacle. And your life is a spectacle. How are you going to live and treat others in light of that?

Of course, the real issue is that our lives are lived out in the sight of God - that's who matters the most. But everyone is watching. They see when we divide, they see when we unify. Which one most reflects the glory of God? Unity.

1 We don't give leaders more importance than the Bible gives them. 2 everything a leader has has been given by God. 3 Christians are destined to rule together. 4 Our lives are a big cosmic show.

The last way we keep from division is:

5) Listen to the advice of our parents in the Lord. **Read 14-21**

We could spend a lot of time here. Lots to unpack. But here's what often happens, as we grow older in the Lord we begin to think we're better and smarter than those who are our guides in the faith or even our father's in the faith. Your spiritual father - or mother - is the person who led you to the Lord. They're the one who was instrumental in bringing you to faith in Jesus. And what often happens is that our attitude to them is similar to the attitude of a teenager toward their parents.

When a kid is young, their parents are their heroes. Then they become a teenager and their parents are fools, they know nothing. Then as teenagers grow up they often go: you know, my parents weren't so dumb after all.

The same thing is true with spiritual guides and spiritual parents. We outgrow them for a while. We know more, we see their flaws, we see their bad theology, we see their humanity. And what happens over time is we realize that they're just trying to live a faithful life the best they know how. No one intentionally goes around living life thinking they're a fool.

So Paul says, listen to me. I'm your dad in the faith. I'm not trying to shame you, I'm trying to admonish you. Warn you, encourage you. Urge you in the right direction. If you listen to me for no other reason, listen to me because of this: I first told you the gospel. I loved you and sacrificed for you. I - above all people - have your eternal best interest at heart.

And here's what Paul wants. **Read 16**

That could sound proud, but it's not. Paul really is living his life as best he knows in the Spirit of God. He's striving for faithfulness, and that's all he's asking of them. **Read 17**

Paul isn't saying he's perfect; he never has been. He's the chief of sinners. But he's lived his life before them as an example of what a redeemed sinner should look like.

Sometimes parents spank us. Sometimes our spiritual parents spank us. Sometimes our parents shower us with affection. Sometimes our spiritual parents shower us with affection. Paul says which do you want? **Read 18-21**

This is church discipline language. Church discipline is the process by which someone who is in deliberate, unrepentant sin is warned and warned and eventually removed from the church. Chapter 5 is church discipline over sexual immorality.

Division in the church - even over something as seemingly small as our favorite leader - is something Paul says can't be tolerated. **Look at Titus 3** for a moment. Here Paul is dealing with people who are getting divisive over genealogies. Lists of who's who in your family tree. And they're dividing over small points of the Law. **Read 9-11**

Two warnings is all they get. Why because division is so harmful to the Kingdom of God. Jesus said the way we will show others his love is to be unified together. When we divide over nonsense it's actually a distortion of the gospel - it undermines what he's doing.

You guys, the saving grace of Jesus has brought us together. And we show people the effect of that saving grace when we humbly fight to stay together in unity.

Pray