

## 1 Corinthians 4 Bible Study

NOTE for Leaders: I think Q 3-5 is where most time should be spent exploring the application of how to live as Christians now. There is scope for some good application/discussion here – especially because application will look different for everyone and it's not as simple as ticking a bunch of boxes. This could be helpful for your group to focus on.

**Launch:** When have you found life most disappointing or frustrating? How do you expect that being a Christian will affect your experience of this life?

1 **Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-7.** *This is the conclusion to Paul's sustained argument against division, especially around different leaders.* How does Paul describe the ministry of the Apostles and what does this have to say about all ministry?

*Servants/stewards (note, this isn't the normal 'slave' word that the NT uses and Paul uses elsewhere; it is more of a 'steward', which includes the slave component (it's for a master), but includes responsibility/authority (e.g. a chief butler)). Ministers are servants (it's what the word means!), but also are appointed to exercise some authority. Wait for Chapter 5!*

*Ministry/Service is about faithfulness (to the master), firstly for the apostles, but also for us. You might like to discuss briefly what it means to be faithful in ministry.*

2 What is Paul getting at with the command “judge nothing before the appointed time” (v5)? Why do the Corinthians need to hear this? How does knowing that God will judge perfectly at the end (including revealing motives and giving praise) help us: a) deal with judging ourselves/being judged by others; and b) assess the ministries of others?

*In context, it seems that the Corinthians have 'judged' that Paul's ministry is elementary (cf. 3:1-4 where Paul seems to be quoting the Corinthians that Paul 'gave them milk') and they seem to be moving on from his laying of the foundation of the gospel.*

*Paul endeavors to serve faithfully and act in ways that cause his conscience to be clear. But he knows that, in the end, God will judge his faithfulness. This is particularly helpful when we believe we are acting rightly but others don't. (God will give praise in due time). It also challenges us to work hard to make sure that we can say that our conscience is clear before God (without being crippled by fear of the judgment of others).*

*It also causes us to be careful not to make judgements of others when we don't have all the information (e.g. motives, people's back-stories, etc). This doesn't mean we aren't to be discerning... and we will see in the next chapter that the Corinthians are called to 'judge' the immoral person and call them on their sin. But ultimately, we can leave judgment to God.*

In verse 6, Paul sums up his argument of the past few chapters about division around leaders. He says he has applied his teaching to himself and Apollos; thus being careful not to name the 'rogue' leaders in Corinth, while still calling them to account. In summary, “don't be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against another”. In summing this up, he uses a quote (not from the Bible) about not going beyond what is written. While it is hard to know exactly what this means, I think it is about not going beyond Scripture (i.e. adding to it). It is the leaders that have added to the gospel that have caused problems, because what has been added has become the focus, to the detriment of the preaching of the 'cross of Christ'. Verse 7 is worth reflecting on – especially when we are inclined to boast in anything other than the cross (Gal 6:14).

3 **Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-13.** Compare and contrast how the Corinthians and the Apostles understood and experienced the 'normal' Christian life. What do you think has led to the Corinthians having such a view of what the Christian life will be like? (hint: compare v10 with 1:18 and 25). What shapes the expectations of the apostles?

*The Corinthians were all about power and victory and success (= 'reigning in life' v8). They thought of themselves as wise and strong. In contrast, Paul talks about the apostles as being 'last in the procession' (=being captured by the Roman army, on display at the end of the victory procession to be abused and then lead to the Colosseum to become Gladiator fodder or lion food). I.e. The apostles expected life to be a lot like Jesus' life. The Corinthians expected victorious, resurrection life now.*

*Note, that we can understand how they got there. If they have been made heirs of God and adopted into his family, why shouldn't they experience all of the blessings of that reality? The problem is not so much that they got that idea wrong, but that they got their timing wrong – they will experience all of that when Jesus returns – not now. (The 'inheritance' illustration works well here. We have all of these things – but we don't experience them all yet).*

*In v10, Paul picks up the words 'foolish' and 'weak' – the same words he used in Chapter 1 to talk about the message of the cross. It implies that the Corinthians have relegated Paul and the apostle's teaching to second tier – and they are focusing on the resurrection power now (i.e. they've moved on from Paul, as we saw earlier). This particularly makes sense when we see that Paul doesn't mention the resurrection until chapter 15 (apart from in passing in Ch 6). He is reshaping their focus to the cross because they have moved on from 'weak' things to more 'impressive' things.*

*John 16:33: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Jesus is clear on what life will be like this side of his return.*

Summary: cross-shaped life now (suffering/sacrifice for the Gospel); resurrection life to come (in the new creation).

4 Are there ways that *we/you* could fall into the same trap as the Corinthians? Are there decisions we make and ways we act that might minimise any suffering for the Gospel? How can/should we be counter-cultural in how we live *now*, in light of what is *still to come*?

*See what comes up. Hopefully some good, practical discussion here. A couple notes (but I hope you can go much further than this!):*

- *One thing might be being 'ashamed' to talk about the cross (which seems to be what the Corinthians are doing). We should expect opposition when we talk about Jesus' death (but remember, it God's power for salvation!).*
- *We are also more inclined to focus on comfort and on power. Partly because of our culture, and partly as sinful humans. Good to think about how we challenge this cultural expectation in our lives. (just think about advertising etc!).*
- *What things does our culture push us to prioritise, that may not be so important in the big scheme of things? (for fear of upsetting people, you might consider like 'education', 'safety', 'fulfilling our potential', etc... but see where people want to go).*

*It would be appropriate to include thinking about v11-13 regarding how to respond to mistreatment (and in particular how it is modelled on Jesus teaching/actions).*

*Remember:*

- *We aren't to go looking for suffering; we should aim to be faithful, and see what happens (and respond appropriately).*
- *Also remember that we are called to make real choices: including "rejoice in the Lord always" – which we can do, despite suffering, because we are 'in the Lord'!*

5 **Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-21.** What does Paul call the Corinthians to do? (hint: Why does he send Timothy to them?). How would you feel about saying to someone "imitate me"? How might we (and how might we not) model Paul in such thinking? (cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

*Paul calls the Corinthians to imitate him (and note that is why he sends Timothy – to remind them of Paul's 'way of life in Christ'. (cf. 11:1 where Paul again says 'imitate me', but adds: 'as I imitate Christ').*

*Hopefully people are uncomfortable with the idea of asking someone to imitate us.*

*BUT, I think it's worth exploring a bit more, because there is a sense in which that is exactly what we are to be doing (and inheritably does happen).*

*First and foremost, our call is for people to 'imitate Christ'. But Secondly, we ought to be growing in maturity as we follow Christ in a way that people can learn how to live as Christians by looking toward other more mature Christians.*

*See where this goes. (e.g.'s: kids will inherently learn what priority going to church is by how their parents model it (I give thanks for families that are committed to regular church attendance!). If one of the preachers regularly starts using phrases from the pulpit, they can catch on. Conversely, I might assume it's reasonable for my family to own 6 cars because that is what my Christian mum and dad did (they didn't!)).*

*So, there is encouragement to work hard at being Godly, so that we might model how to live for Jesus to others. It is okay to recognise that we aren't Paul (i.e. an apostle, so it may not be true in exactly the same way, but I think it is still true!). (c.f. Titus 2:1-10 – with all the instruction for teaching others... I assume that modelling is part of the teaching).*

Finish by praying. Thank God for the cross and ask him to help us remain focussed on it. Also ask for help to look forward to the day of resurrection when we will experience all the benefits of our having been adopted. Pray for specific things that you have discussed regarding how we can live faithfully as followers of Christ.