

Week 4, 1 Corinthians 4

Hook



Main Point: The correct way to evaluate others and relate to authority is based on the Gospel.

Research suggests that first impressions are solidified in only seven seconds.¹ With such a brief time to make a judgment on someone, there is little doubt that at some point in your life, you have failed to correctly evaluate a stranger.

“Misjudgment” is an understatement for a decision made by one of Decca Records’ employees back in 1962. Dick Rowe, the head of talent acquisition at Decca, was making a choice between two young groups that were each hoping to be signed for a record deal. The choice was made and the band selected, Brian Poole and the Tremeloes, went on to garner great sales for Decca. The band had a number of covers that made their way to the top of the charts in the UK during the 60’s.

The band that was overlooked for Brian Poole and the Tremeloes became known as the Beatles. A few years after the Beatles were passed over, Paul McCartney commented on Rowe’s decision:

“I bet he’s kicking himself.” To which John Lennon added, “I hope he kicks himself to death.”²

¹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/only-7-seconds-to-make-first-impression-2013-4>

² <http://www.gibson.com/News-Lifestyle/Features/en-us/Beatles-0102-2012.aspx>

Describe a time when you made a poor judgment concerning someone that you would later come to respect.

How do you evaluate if someone is successful or not?

How do you evaluate if someone is spiritually mature or not?

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Book

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Text Summary: 1 Corinthians 4

In this chapter, Paul continues his rebuke of the Corinthian church by extending their fallacy not only to their leaders, but to their entire paradigm of evaluation and authority. The Corinthians view not only their leaders the wrong way, they view *everyone* the wrong way. Their entire method of evaluating others is corrupt, as well as their ideas of authority. Paul uses both sarcasm and fatherly affection to correct their Christ-less view of leadership, evaluation and authority.

1 Corinthians 4: 1–13 [Read]

Sub-point: Success for a believer often looks like failure to the world.

While the Corinthians remain divided between the ministries of Paul, Peter and Apollos, they are overtly instructed in 4:1–5 to view their precious “tribal” leaders simply as Christ’s estate managers, distributing His goods that are not theirs in the first place.³ Caught up in a culture of progress, the Corinthian believers assume that productivity is the marker of a great leader, and they have started to pit their varying leaders against one another.

Paul begins this chapter by providing the Corinthians with a definition for *believers*: “individuals who are servants (subordinate to) Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” These “mysteries,” as labeled in verse 1, refer to truths that man cannot grasp without divine assistance; Paul is describing the wisdom of God.⁴

In an effort to snap them out of their culture of division and competition, Paul sternly reminds his hearers in verses 2–4 that 1) the true marks of a leader are *faithfulness* and *servanthood*, not productivity,⁵ and 2) the only one who can evaluate a person’s ministry with complete accuracy is *God Himself*, not the high-and-mighty Corinthians.

In verse 5, Paul marks the false patterns in the Corinthians’ evaluation model: First, they evaluate people *prematurely*. Second, they evaluate people *under the assumption that they*

³ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 73.

⁴ David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 512.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

know all the facts about a person's life, which only God could know and will one day reveal.⁶ Put differently, Paul calls out these believers on their evaluation patterns—they prematurely judge people (including the apostle himself) based on social status and productivity, all from the arrogant seat of artificial omniscience.

Paul uses himself and Apollos as an example to be followed in verse 6. Unlike the Corinthians, these two servants of Christ are careful not to go beyond “what is written” (the Scriptures). Paul posited himself as one under authority, not someone who made and followed his own rules; Paul was humble, not puffed up and arrogant. Humility was a challenging concept to embrace for someone with a Corinthian mindset; Greek philosophy viewed humility as a trait reserved for a slave, a characteristic to of weakness and not something suitable for a great man to display.⁷ So Paul pushes harder, asking a set of rhetorical questions in verse 7 and probing the Corinthians to provide something spiritual that they could boast over. Just like Paul and Apollos, the believers at Corinth received their spiritual gifts from the Lord.

The Corinthians desperately needed a new worldview. Paul brutally reinforces his point in verses 8–13, as his words are dripping with sarcasm. Paul calls them out on their self-important view in verse 8 when he states, “Already you have become rich! Without us, you have become kings!” Paul is exposing that these believers have applied their Corinthian philosophy to their Christian experience and assume that they already now have the rights of patrons and kings in the church.⁸ In verses 9–13, Paul offers the humble and traumatic experience of the destitute apostles—a purposeful and stinging contrast to these haughty and affluent Corinthians.

Paul drives his point home: the Corinthian believers are the Greek epitome of pride, crowning themselves as indulgent and independent kings instead of faithful and dependent servants of the true King.⁹ They have no idea what true spirituality looks like in themselves or another person. They believe that true religious success looks like being popular and being served, instead of being humble and serving others. In short, they have evaluated the success of themselves and others all wrong. This Corinthian pattern of evaluation should seem familiar to the American believer; today's culture often evaluates people along the very same lines.

Paul uses verses 1–13 to propose a challenging thought: The Corinthians seriously need to evaluate the way they evaluate people.¹⁰ Their entire evaluative model is worldly and corrupted, and it only further proves their infancy in Christ.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷ David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 513.

⁸ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

What does Paul mean by “not going beyond what is written” in verse 6?

According to Paul, what is the result of going beyond what is written (v. 6)?

How would you describe a “successful” Christian life?

Paul considers faithfulness the primary evaluative standard of spiritual success. How is this an upside-down concept to the Corinthian believers?

1 Corinthians 4:14–21 [Read]

Sub-point: Spiritual authority is both fatherly and sacrificial.

In verse 14, Paul makes clear that his goal is not to leave the Corinthians in shame, but instead to warn them for their good, as a father would. In the Corinthian world, people had many personal “guides.” These guides served as tutors or guardians (*pedagogues* in the Greek). They were usually slaves who followed children to school and kept watch on the child’s conduct by means of strict discipline. A child could have many guides, but these guardians were not to be confused with the true teacher, the father of the child, of whom a child only had one.¹¹ The true father of the child had the real authority. In short, Paul is telling the Corinthians exactly where he sits with them: unlike many of the ministers (guides) they have been following, he’s not their guardian or their tutor; he’s their spiritual father who has the right to speak to them authoritatively.

While Paul unapologetically asserts his authoritative role, he does not do so in a worldly way, using the power of intimidation or status. Instead, he asserts his authority using the language of *family*. Remember that he calls them children (v. 14) and considers himself a father (v. 15). Paul wants to make sure the Corinthians understand: Yes, the church is still a place where authority exists (for there is no such thing as a state of non-authority), but it’s a totally different type of authority.¹²

The kind of authority that exists in the kingdom of God is not about brute force, status or laying down the hammer; instead, true authority is about fatherly affection that longs to see a child grow and flourish. In Paul’s mind, it is loving and fatherly to snatch these spiritually oblivious children out of the worldly oncoming traffic that they’ve been playing in.¹³

In short, Paul is writing in a harsh authoritative way, not to abuse or control them, but because, like a father, he desires to see them flourish, and they need correction in order to thrive.

¹¹ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 59.

¹² Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 81.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 83-84.

Spiritual authority should be a parenting type of authority modeled after the fatherly love of God Himself. The Corinthians are to relate to this authoritative love, not as if it were coming from a boss or a dictator, but from a parent, a cultivator or a gardener responsible for their maturity.¹⁴

Not only is Paul's authority fatherly, but he also patterns it after the sacrificial and atoning work of Christ in verses 15–17. In Paul's mind, an authoritative figure does not dominate those under him, but instead serves them, as is the way of Christ Himself. Paul believes his leadership is patterned after Christ's atoning model of laying down His life for others, so he urges the Corinthians to imitate this Gospel pattern in verse 16. Said differently, the Cross is the measuring stick used to scrutinize all Christian ministry, including Paul's, and the Corinthians are not above this servant standard.¹⁵

Paul offers a final question in verses 18–20 to the believers in Corinth. While some assume he will not come to Corinth himself to snuff out their divisive habits, Paul reminds them that he definitely plans to visit. He expects a confrontation (v. 19) and would rely on the power of the Holy Spirit for discipline.¹⁶ The atmosphere of the upcoming meeting is in the hands of the Corinthians. By deciding to repent or not, they can choose whether they prefer the meeting to be brutal or gentle. Regardless of their decision, he will come as a father seeking to properly evaluate the spiritual behavior of his children.

Why does Paul send Timothy to these believers (v. 17)? Describe your spiritual role models. What have you learned from them that you have attempted to imitate in your life?

What does Paul mean when he says that the kingdom of God “does not consist in talk but in power”?

How would popular culture describe an authority figure? Compare and contrast that description to Paul's version of a spiritual authority.

¹⁴ Ibid., 87.

¹⁵ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 60.

¹⁶ David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 513.

Week 4, 1 Corinthians 4

Took



Main Point: The correct way to evaluate others and relate to authority is based on the Gospel.

Historical Event: Read the following quote from the *Harvard Business Review*.

“A quintessential chameleon, author Michael Lewis famously describes how imitation helped him transform himself from an inexperienced trainee into a highly successful bond salesman in his best-selling book *Liar’s Poker*. ‘Thinking, as yet, was a feat beyond my reach. I had no base, no grounding,’ Lewis writes. ‘So I listened to the master and repeated what I heard, as in kung fu. It reminded me of learning a foreign language. It all seemed strange at first. Then one day, you catch yourself thinking in the language. Suddenly words you never realized you knew are at your disposal. Finally you dream in the language.’”

Herminia, Ibarra, *Harvard Business Review*. January 8, 2015

Paul teaches us to be imitators of the righteous.

1 Corinthians 4:16; “I urge you then be imitators of me.”

1 Corinthians 11:1; “Be imitators of me just as I am of Christ.”

Philippians 3:17; “Brothers join in imitating me. ...”

2 Thessalonians 3:7; “For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us.”

But Paul is not the only Bible writer that urges us to imitate the righteous.

3 John 1:11; “Beloved do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; but whoever does evil does not know God.”

Hebrews 6:12; “... so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”

Hebrew 13:11; “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”

Whom are you imitating to grow spiritually?

Understanding your maturity shortcomings and strengths, what do you believe you might need to look for in a mentor?

Lesson Conclusion: The Corinthians clearly had a warped way of evaluating others and relating to authority. Paul gives them a new Christian paradigm in order to properly evaluate others and respond to their leaders, and his new model is diametrically opposed to the patterns of the world. Paul says that evaluating others must be done in humility and patience according to the standard of *faithfulness* instead of productivity. As for leadership and authority, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the way of the Cross is to lay down one's life for the sake of another's growth, whereas the standard of the world is to rise above others for person gain. The Cross says to humbly go low in service when God gives you a position of authority, whereas the world says to proudly rise up in power. The Corinthians have a decision between the two, and Paul tells them the correct conclusion: Ideal spiritual evaluation and authority follow the wisdom of the Cross itself—to be elevated, or even simply clear-headed, one must be humble. In short, *the way up is down* for the Christian.¹⁷

Challenge

Evaluate your evaluation methods. We have seen in this lesson that even the way we evaluate people can be distorted by sin. Take time to pray for God to reveal the ways you evaluate people on a daily basis. List the ways you define success as you assess those around you. What are your primary standards of “success” for believers or leaders in your church? Are these standards godly or worldly?

Serve unseen. The Christian's way to lead is to serve. Jesus, our prime example, washed the feet of His disciples; there were no crowds, no masses to applaud his actions. In order to produce humility and patience in your heart, what are ways you can serve unseen this week within your family, friends or church life?

Pray and provide opportunities for those you lead. We all hold positions of authority in one way or another. Whom in your life has God entrusted you with? List them by name and create a prayer chart. Praying is a simple way to fight against dominating those you lead, and instead gain a desire to see them flourish. Then create a list of ways you could give them opportunities to help them thrive and succeed.

¹⁷ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 77.

Hook & Took by: Danny Trout

Contributors: Eddie Caldwell, Bill Goodwin, Danny Trout