

GETTING PERSONAL

1 CORINTHIANS 4:6-21

There's a great story that illustrates the difference between a *pastor* and a *theologian*...

A local church was hosting a conference for Christian theologians from various denominations, when a fire broke out in the building where they were meeting...

The **Methodist theologians** all huddled in a corner of the sanctuary and began to pray... The **Baptist theologians** immediately went looking for the baptismal pool and some water... The **Quaker theologians** quietly praised God for the eventual blessings of a fire...

Lutheran theologians nailed a thesis to the door, that listed the evils of fire... **Roman Catholic theologians** took up a collection to pay for the damages... The **Greek Orthodox theologians** posted symbols throughout the sanctuary, hoping the fire would pass...

Congregationalist theologians shouted, "*Every man for himself...*" **Fundamentalist theologians** pronounced, "*This fire is the vengeance of God!...*" **Charismatic theologians** positively confessed, "*There is no fire...*"

Episcopalian theologians formed a procession and marched out of the burning building... Presbyterian theologians appointed a committee to look into the matter of fires at church, and then submit a report...

But the pastor of the church hosting the conference, grabbed a fire extinguisher and put out the fire!

Theologians relate to their books. They think abstract thoughts. They grapple with universal, over-arching truths about God, and mankind, and salvation, and life, and even the afterlife. “Their heads are in the clouds.”

A pastor too, has to have his head in the clouds, but “his feet have to be firmly planted on the Earth.” For unlike a theologian, a pastor’s concerns are not just academic, but relational - not just global, but local - not just eternal, but daily. A pastor lives life with his people.

A pastor handles the here and now. He confronts the practical issues his congregation faces. Theologians deal with the high and lofty - pastors the nitty-gritty.

And Paul was both *a pastor* and *a theologian*...

The story is told of two men walking through a cemetery. One guy points to a

grave, “Look, two men buried in that one grave!” His buddy said, “*How do you know?*” He answered, “Well, the tombstone reads, ‘Here lies a pastor and a theologian.’” **The implication is that you can’t be both.** *But Paul would disagree...*

There’s never been a sharper theological mind than that of the Apostle Paul. He pondered deep thoughts. God revealed to him high and holy truths.

Yet Paul also spoke practically and personally. In some of his letters, including 1 Corinthians, Paul’s writing is actually one side of a conversation. He’s answering questions his readers are asking. He’s a pastor helping his people navigate life and faith.

And this is what Paul does in the latter part of chapter 4. He gets personal with the Corinthians.

The Church in Corinth was guilty of petty divisions. The Corinthians had divided themselves over favorite teachers. Some were “of Paul” - others “of Apollos.”

And in the first three chapters Paul has tried to correct their divisive spirit with universal truths.

He’s discussed *the great unifiers* - the message of the Cross and the mystery of the Church... He’s challenged the Corinthians to mature spiritually... He warns

them about the judgment-seat of Christ... He encourages the Church to be the temple of God - and the recipients of Christ, the giver of all things... Paul even describes Christian leadership - not as self-promotion, but as servants and stewards of God...

Paul has tried to reason them off the cliff of carnality. He's appealed to theological concerns. But now in 4 Paul gets personal with these stubborn Corinthians...

He's miles away, and His only instrument is a pen, but as best an author can, Paul looks these readers eye to eye... He sits down to have a heart to heart...

Pastor Paul gets personal with the Corinthians. He's unpacked truth, now he pours out his heart. He's been profound, now he probes and prods. He doesn't just *expound doctrine*, he *exercises discipline*. He reaches out to them not only with *logic*, but with *love*.

And in doing so, we see the unavoidable *messiness of ministry*... ***It's tough to care for stubborn people.***

Paul writes in verse 6, "Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to

think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.” The Corinthians had elevated Paul and Apollos, and other apostles to celebrity status. *But Paul had set the record straight...*

The apostles were under-rowers - enslaved to the Captain's orders... Custodians of God's mysteries.

In both examples, their goal was *faithfulness to God*, not *fame with men*. This is why it was preposterous for Christians to divide over an allegiance to galley slaves. Yet they'd bragged, *“I am of Paul,” “I am of Apollos.”*

In reality, their schism had little to do with these men.

It was the result of their own *pride!* The Corinthians were puffing themselves up, one against another.

One commentary says the Corinthians, *“were puffing themselves up like bullfrogs.”* *Did you know frogs have the ability to inflate their bodies for various reasons?*

Frogs will puff themselves to appear bigger. This discourages certain predators from trying to eat them.

This is what a male frog does in mating season. He puffs up to impress the

female frogs in the pond. When he inflates his throat it creates an echo chamber which amplifies his voice and allows him to croak louder.

This is also a strategy among human males... We also like to puff up to impress. We're a lot like frogs.

We all tend to puff ourselves up... we inflate our ego, our bravado, our resume, our estimation of ourselves - in an attempt to get our way, or to defend ourselves.

The easiest means for me or you to *lift ourselves up* is by *putting down someone else*. *By making you look bad, I can make myself look good*. This is why usually the root cause of division within the church is pride.

We'll learn later in 1 Corinthians there are legitimate reasons for Christians to separate. But Paul knew the divisions in Corinth were nothing but one bunch of Christians trying to look better than another bunch.

Pride was the problem!

At night, when you hear all the chirping, and trilling, and croaking - remember it's all just frog talk...

And a lot of frog talk occurs in the Church. Christians croaking about stuff that doesn't matter - *picking sides*, and *picking on others*, and *picking out trivial*

issues.

It reminds me of the fellow on the bridge about to jump. A man saw him, and shouted, "Don't do it!" The distraught fellow answered, "*But nobody loves me.*"

The man said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" The fellow replied weakly, "Yes." The man was excited, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "*A Christian.*" He said, "Great, me too! Protestant or Catholic?" He answered, "*Protestant.*" "Me, too! What denomination?" He said, "*Baptist.*" "Wow, me, too!"

"Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" "*Southern Baptist.*" "Incredible, me, too! Southern Conservative Baptist or Southern Moderate Baptist?" He answered, "*Southern Conservative Baptist.*" "Wow, me, too! Southern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Southern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?"

"*Southern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.*" "That's wonderful, me, too! Southern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Southern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" The man said, "*Southern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.*" Suddenly, the guy who'd been so helpful shouted, "Heretic!" Then he pushed him off the bridge.

At some point a person's prejudice has nothing to do with legitimate differences - it's nothing but *pride* - it's the desire to feel superior - to "one up" someone else.

Paul says the Corinthians need to "*learn... not to think beyond what is written...*" He's saying, *Enough with the unbridled judgments!* There're boundaries to what we can and can't judge... If it's not **written** in God's Word - if you can't substantiate it with chapter and verse - *if it's just a question of style, or opinion, or taste, or tradition* - it's not your business to judge!

Just because *you* don't like a thing, doesn't make it wrong. We need to be careful in our judging of others.

Paul humbles the Corinthians in verse 7, "*For who makes you differ from another?*" In essence, every Christian in Corinth put their britches on the same way.

Every Corinthian was as dead in their sin as the next... They all had the same Savior... They received the same grace... Everyone was indwelled by the same Spirit... "*Who makes you differ from another?*"

"And what do you have that you did not receive?"

Here's a humbling question. *What do we possess that was not a gift? We were*

born with talents, and propensities, and a personality... At an early age you picked stuff up from the people around you... Later in life you went to school, and were taught and trained...

But all that information and instruction was a gift!

There is no such thing as a self-made man, or a self-made woman. All you have is ultimately because of God, or a parent, or a teacher, or a coach, or a friend.

In his book “[White Fang](#),” Jack London describes the wolf’s extraordinary fighting powers... “[The parts of him were better adjusted than the average dog. Body and brain was a more perfect mechanism. Not that he was to be praised for it. Nature had been more generous to him than to the average animal, that was all.](#)” And the same observation can be made relating to each of us.

You may be gifted - richly talented - but it had nothing to do with you. In London’s words, “[Nature \(or “God”\) has been more generous to us, *that was all.*](#)”

This year’s commencement speech at Dillard University was delivered by actor, Denzel Washington.

He urged the undergrads, “[Put God first in everything you do... Everything that I have is by the grace of God... It's a gift... I didn't always stick with Him, but He](#)

stuck with me... While you're (on your knees), say thank you... for grace, for mercy, for understanding, for wisdom, for parents, for love, for kindness, for humility, for peace, for prosperity..." And Denzel is right. We all owe God. I don't care how hard you've worked in life, it was still God Who gave you the health to work hard.

It reminds me of the pastor who asked his friend, "Will you pray that I stay humble?" His friend replied, "First, tell me, what do you have to be proud about?" The answer for all of us is zilch. *All we have is a gift.*

And Paul has a follow-up question, "Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" *Why pretend that we did it all ourselves?*

It reminds me of the woodpecker pecking at the trunk of a oak tree. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck the tree and split it in two. The lightning knocked him off the oak. The bird was shocked in more ways than one.

But later, the woodpecker returned to the scarred tree. He had brought nine other woodpeckers with him.

He pointed to the split trunk, "There it is fellows. Behold the power of my beak!" Let's not be as foolish, and take credit for what are obviously God's gifts to us.

It angered Paul to think the arrogant Corinthians were bragging over gifts from God as if they had originated with them. He mocks them with sarcasm in verse 8, **“You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us - and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!”**

The Corinthians were acting like they had arrived.

They were so haughty. They acted so spiritual. If all you had listened to was the Corinthians estimation of themselves you would've assumed they were the fullest, richest, most anointed Christians on the planet.

If you'd walked into the Church at Corinth, and seen their pompous, self-righteous attitude, you would have asked, **“When did Jesus return and put you in charge?”**

The Christians in Corinth thought they were right, and everybody not named **“Me”** was wrong.

You ever thought of a prideful person, **“If I could buy that guy for what he's actually worth, and sell him for what he thinks he's worth, I'd be a millionaire?”** Well, this is exactly how Paul summed up the Corinthians.

There will be a day, yet future, after the Church has been perfected that we'll all

reign with Christ, *but the Corinthians were acting as if that day had arrived!*

In response Paul tells them, *"I could only wish. Oh, for the day when that'll be true. When I can **reign with Christ**, rather than be **rained on by this world!**"*

For that had been his plight until now. Verse 9, *"For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men."*

The word *"spectacle"* was well known to Roman citizens. The Emperor managed the masses by keeping their *stomachs full* and *minds entertained*. *"Bread and circuses"* was the Caesar's formula.

And the various forms of Roman entertainment were known as *"spectacles."* Amphitheaters were built to host athletic competitions... Chariot races were held in Rome's Circus Maximus - the Talladega of the day...

After the Roman Coliseum was built, the Emperor would flood its floor and stage mock naval battles...

And of course, there were the infamous gladiators, who fought to the death... But the favorite fix for the bloodthirsty Romans was to toss Christian leaders to the hungry lions, and watch them get mauled to death.

Paul points out that while the haughty Corinthians are passing frivolous judgments on one another, and causing dissension in their ranks - other believers in the Church were paying a steep price to follow Jesus.

The Corinthians were acting juvenile, *making a carnal scene* - while heaven was focused on the men and women this world had turned into a “*spectacle.*”

Irony of ironies, heaven and earth, men and angels, had their eyes focused on the martyrs in the arena. The Corinthians had their eyes fixed on themselves.

And this certainly applies to us... we moan because we don't like our job... or we don't get the attention we deserve... or we haven't been given the opportunities other folks have... or our church isn't friendly enough...

All the while Christian pastors are being held and tortured in Iranian prisons... Sudanese Christians are under persecution... Local governments in India make it hard on churches and men who preach the Gospel...

Are we like the Corinthians, huddled together in our little cliques, focused only on ourselves and our own needs - oblivious to what concerns God and heaven?

Christians today have adopted a consumer mentality.

It's all about what scratches my back, and meets my needs. Our approach to

church is *what's in it for me...*

Entertain my kids... keep my High Schoolers out of trouble... give me some music that makes me happy... I need some practical pointers that help me solve my problems, but that don't really challenge how I live...

Like the Corinthians, many Christians today are all about *me and mine*, while heaven is fixated elsewhere.

Verse 10 is a study in perception. Paul contrasts how the world viewed *the persecuted apostles* up against how *the prideful Corinthians* saw themselves.

Paul writes sarcastically, “**We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!**” Remember Greeks and Jews represented the two poles of human values at the time. *The Greeks were into wisdom*, whereas *the Jews were into power*.

Yet God chose to defy what the world valued most.

The cross was foolishness to the Greeks, and weakness to the Jews... **The church** consisted of “**not many mighty, not many noble.**” God chose the folks the world deemed *foolish* to shame the wise - and people the world saw as *weak* to show off His strength.

God gave the world the exact opposite of what it prioritized. With **the cross** and **the church** it was as if God was scoffing at what the world valued most!

Yet this irony had escaped the Corinthians. This was a church that still aspired to the values of this world.

The Corinthians hung on to philosophy, and logic, and the facade of worldly wisdom. While the apostles humbled themselves. They were willing to appear foolish and weak, and become *“fools for Christ.”*

The apostles renounced human strength and political muscle, and trusted in God’s Spirit. If Jesus died on the cross; then they could be weak in man’s estimation.

The Corinthians tried to maintain a hip, sophisticated image. Whereas, the apostles were willing to endure ridicule and scorn to be associated with Jesus.

And I hope this same irony isn’t lost on us. The Church today reveals its shallowness if we think our success is tied to appealing to what this world values.

Beauty, brains, and brawn make the world go round. But according to Romans 14:17 “the Kingdom of God is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

God saves us and uses us in ways that mock the world’s system. Christianity flips life topsy-turvy. God uses fools, not geniuses - the weak, not the swole.

Paul is trying to show the Corinthian Church that they were judging success by worldly, *not godly*, measurements. *Let’s not make the same mistake!*

Perhaps you’ve seen the movie, “[Field of Dreams.](#)”

I watch it on occasion. It’s about Iowa farmer, Ray Cansella, who hears a voice from his cornfield telling him to plow under his crop and build a baseball diamond. He builds it, and invisible players from a bygone era materialize, and practice ball on his field.

Of course, his extended family thinks he’s a certifiable nut! He’s plowed under precious farmland, he needs to make a profit. No one trusts his actions.

They think he’s reckless. Everybody calls him a fool.

And I relate to the movie, because as a Christian I’ve also base life-altering decisions on a voice nobody else heard. I’ve taken economic risks to follow that

voice. I've seen God in action when nobody else had faith.

This is the Christian life. It's an adventure into the unknown. Are you ready to be seen by other people the way Ray Cansella's family and neighbors saw him?

Are we willing to be a *"fool for Christ's sake?"*

The Corinthians were proud and image-conscious. They wanted to be seen as wise, strong, honorable. Paul could care less about *his image*. All he cared about was serving Jesus, and being *"found faithful."*

He continues in verse 11, *"To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless."* This was how the world had treated the apostles - *the leaders of the Church*. In fact, this was how the world treated the Lord Jesus Himself!

Yet somehow the Christians in Corinth thought they could avoid discomfort. They got things twisted around.

They took pride in their prosperity. These Christians wore stylish threads, and chilled in nice homes, and avoided persecution... *It was time to recalibrate.*

Their Christianity was a different brand. Like a fake Prada purse - it was a knock-off of the real thing.

And I wonder if we're guilty of the same crime? Is your Christianity biblical - the faith of the apostles - or is it a modern American hybrid - a knock-off faith?

Right now in America, it's still somewhat "cool" to be a Christian, but that perception is changing fast.

What happens when it costs us to be a Christian?

The church today wants apostolic power - *to work miracles, to prophesy* - to do and speak supernaturally. But are we willing to be treated like the apostles? How will we handle the persecution, and scorn, and venom?

What will pastors do when the IRS takes away the tax deduction for charitable giving, and the churches no longer bring in enough money to pay them full-time?

How many so-called "*apostles*" today, will act like the first apostles? Paul writes "**And we labor, working with our own hands.**" Paul worked a job to support himself.

Acts 18 tells us it was in Corinth that Paul met "*Aquila and Priscilla*" - and together the three friends picked up a needle and canvas, and did the painstaking and boring work of making tents to pay their bills. *I wonder*, if pastors have to return to that practice, how many will still relish the work of the ministry?

Paul knew a steward's goal was not to be rich and comfortable - but **faithful**,

even if it required sacrifice.

And the first, persecuted Christians considered it an honor to follow Jesus, *come what may...* Paul writes of their attitude, verse 12, “**Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat.**”

There was beauty in Jesus that Paul was determined to follow - *even in the way Jesus reacted to opposition.*

Jesus fought back, and Paul was a fighter. Neither of the two men ever just rolled over. *They fought back.* Yet Paul learned from His Lord a new way to fight.

His reprisals were of love... When someone hurled an insult, Paul boomeranged a blessing... Resistance was countered with increased commitment... If Paul was falsely accused, he retaliated by proclaiming truth.

Paul sums up how the world of the first century treated the apostles, “**We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.**”

Literally, “**we are treated like the scum of the earth!**”

Here’s how erroneous human judgments can be... Here’s how far off this world’s values are from what God holds dear... **The very people heaven crowns, this world treats as scraps for the garbage disposal.**

Paul gets even more personal in verse 14. He stops speaking to the Corinthians as an apostle - even as a pastor - but as their spiritual father. He writes to them...

“I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. (The Corinthians are his spiritual kids. And as a father he needs to warn them.)

For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.”

Paul was the person who led the Corinthians to Christ. He'd gone to Corinth and planted this church.

He was their spiritual father. Over their lifetime they'd have 10,000 teachers, but only one spiritual parent.

And this is true of all believers... The pastor or friend who led you to Christ - the church where you started the journey - will always hold a special place in your heart. Over a lifetime, a Christian enjoys many churches, and Bible teachers, but has only one parent.

Which is what made the Corinthians' doubts of Paul all the more painful to him.
These were his kids!

I've got to tell you, this is how I feel about you guys.

Over the last few years I've traveled a bit, and taught at a lot of churches - and I enjoy speaking to different groups about Jesus. I feel that I can be a help in other places. *But I've realized what Paul is saying here...*

When I'm a guest speaker I drop the bomb, and then fly home. The local pastor is on the ground to handle the impact. I'm just a ship in the night. But the local pastor is there. He's responsible in the long term. I'm an instructor - *one of many*. But I'm not their father.

Yet when I'm here, at CCSM, it's just the opposite. In the words of Darth Vader, "Luke, I am your father."

And for many of you, I am a spiritual father.

I was there when you were saved. You've grown up spiritually at CC. I've baptized you. There's a bond.

And if I saw you going astray, trust me, I wouldn't just sit on my hands and do nothing about it. I'd try to warn you, just as Paul is alerting his sons in the faith.

Yet what grieved Paul's heart was that the Corinthians had listened to his critics, rather than trust him and his ministry. They were being *rebellious* kids.

The Corinthians acted like adolescents - know-it-all teenagers. They were prideful, and self-absorbed, and were bucking the authority God had placed over them.

They thought they knew more than *the old man!*

And realize, this is what breaks a pastor's heart. *Not when someone moves and obeys God's call.* I rejoice in God's will for your life, even if it doesn't involve me.

But when somebody gets the big-head, and rejects wise counsel, and refuses to listen to love... *it hurts.*

Here's a truth I've learned... **Love flows downward.**

My kids don't love me as much as I love my kids...I'm sure I don't love my parents, as much as they love me... None of us love God as much as He loves us...

Love always flows downward, and the same is true in the Body of Christ. The

people you lead spiritually and disciple, won't love you as much as you love them.

You'll get rejected and it hurts. *Knowing this truth doesn't make it less painful - just not as surprising.*

Paul had loved the Corinthians, but it wasn't being reciprocated. He makes an amazing appeal to this church in verse 16, **"Therefore I urge you, imitate me."**

What a powerful statement! Paul is NOT like the parent who says to his kids, **"do as I say, not as I do..."**

And if you're such a parent, don't be surprised when those words are ignored by your child. The leadership people respect is not just rhetoric, but example.

Paul was a leader by example!

Verse 17, **"For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord..."**

Not all of Paul's love was unreciprocated. Timothy had stood by Paul. He was a ***"faithful son in the Lord."***

"Who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church." Timothy had traveled with Paul. He could testify that what Paul had

taught the Corinthians, he'd communicated to all the churches.

He wasn't being harder on them, than on others.

Paul continues, "Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you." Some of the Corinthians had the attitude, "while the cat is away the rats will play." In Paul's absence, self-promoting leaders had taken over.

Apparently, the church at Corinth had a leadership vacuum, and the wrong kind of leader had stepped up.

Paul is not going to leave this church in disarray. If they can't get it together on their own, he'll pay them a visit. And it's up to them, whether it's pleasant or not...

Verse 19, "But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God *is* not in word but in power." The Corinthians had been doing a lot of talking... stirring up strife and dissension. Paul would come and shut them up. **Paul packed a pow!**

Apparently, the Apostle Paul was a tough hombre.

He wasn't one to back down from a conflict. He was willing to lace on the gloves. Paul and the apostles were willing to be weak in the world's eyes, but in the Church they weren't afraid to flex some muscle.

I'm not sure exactly what Paul had in mind for this church, but it sounds like he was ready to cram a little humble pie down some haughty Corinthian throats.

Paul had power up his sleeve. *He certainly moved in the Spirit... even worked miracles... he definitely spoke with authority...* Spiritual authority manifests itself in various ways, **but you know it when you see it.**

One thing is for sure, when Paul hit town he was going to demand an accounting of the Corinthian's carnality. It'll be *put up or shut up* time for this church.

Yet Paul wants his return to Corinth to be a happy reunion. Chapter 4 closes in verse 21, with a question, **“What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?”** *It's their choice!*

He's speaking as a father to his kids. Do they want from him *the nod of approval or the rod of correction?*

Paul's approach to the Corinthians depends on their attitude toward him. Sometimes *discipleship* requires *discipline*. It takes both love and a firm hand to lead.

I've raised three boys, and I've learned you can't raise want-to-be men if you're afraid of a little conflict.

I was never a dictator. My first appeal was always to logic. I'd reason with my kids to a point... But reason doesn't always work with kids, so I'd take off my belt.

And often just the act, *the mere threat*, was enough. All I had to do was hang my belt over their bedroom door, and it said to my boys that dad meant business.

Here Paul is letting the Corinthians know that he means business. He loves them too much not to lead.

I'll close with a line from a country song, "Sometimes you're the windshield. Sometimes you're the bug."

Well, here Paul is saying something similar...

At times, he was weak for Jesus' sake. He was the bug that took the hit...But not this time, the Corinthians are going to be the bug, if they don't stop bugging him!