

The Way of Faithfulness

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[0 : 01] So C.S. Lewis once wrote, As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people.

And of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you. It's rather upsetting then that we live in a culture where arrogance and pride are virtues to be celebrated rather than vices to be avoided.

The underlying moral principle of our culture is that no one has the right to tell you who you are or how you should live your life. It's the philosophy of you do you.

But is this not actually astoundingly arrogant? The arrogance that says you alone have the power to define yourself, that all truth is found within, not without.

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who was certainly no believer in God, once made this rather astute comment. Through pride, we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience, a still, small voice says to us, something is out of tune.

[1 : 18] Well, this kind of self-deceptive arrogance characterized first-century Corinth in much the same way that it characterizes Glasgow and the rest of the UK and the Western culture in general today.

And in the same way, below the surface, something is out of tune. As we've worked through the opening chapters of this letter, we've seen Paul pleading passionately with the church that had believed in the gospel, but wanted to maintain that same arrogance and pride that characterized their world.

They didn't want to change the way they lived. They didn't see how the cross of Christ should alter their way of life, how belief in the Jesus message implied living the Jesus way.

Why? Well, because following the Jesus way is a one-way ticket to looking like a fool in the eyes of anyone who isn't a Christian. We often want to look like the world rather than look like Christ, to keep our heads down below the parapet.

But the Jesus way doesn't allow for this, and it demands that we put aside the arrogant you-do-you philosophy of our world.

[2 : 34] Instead, it requires, above all things, faithfulness to Jesus. The Jesus way is the way of faithfulness. So as we consider what the way of faithfulness looks like, we have three contrasts.

Human judgment versus Christ judgment, reigning versus suffering, and arrogance versus faithfulness. And this should be up on the screen there. So those are three contrasts that we want to work through.

What could be more arrogant than putting human judgments over and above the judgments that come from God? And yet, this is what the world does, and it's what the Corinthian church was doing.

Last week, Paul had focused his gaze on the role and responsibility of leaders in the church, and that's where he picks up here in chapter 4. He begins by saying this about Christian leaders.

This, then, is how you ought to regard us, as servants of Christ, as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.

[3 : 38] This basically defines what God expects of church leaders. This, and what Paul says in verse 2. Now, it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

A good servant, a wise steward, a diligent employee, will be faithful to the one they are working for. And in this case, the one they're working for is God himself.

In the Corinthians, where we're judging Paul and Apollos and others against a very different set of values. They valued skill and intelligence and powerful oratory and worldly wisdom.

They judged Paul against their own preconceived ideas and notions of what was wise and culturally relevant. Christ. Christ will judge Paul against the standard of faithfulness.

Which is why Paul ultimately cares very little about how the Corinthians, or anyone else for that matter, views him. He says, I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court.

[4 : 45] I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. The Corinthians can go ahead and make all the judgments they like about Paul, but it's only Christ whose judgment actually counts.

Paul doesn't even bother judging himself. He does have a clear conscience, but he recognizes that even a clear conscience doesn't justify him. Christ is the only judge.

It's interesting the phrase, any human court. It reads literally, any human day. The reason is that Paul is juxtaposing the day of Christ on the one hand, when Christ will come and judge everyone, to the small and petty judgments of the Corinthians on the other.

The day of man barely lights a candle to the day of the Lord. Because it is only the Lord who judges.

Paul says in verse 5, There's a time for everything.

[6 : 02] And the time for judgment is when Christ returns. Corinthians shouldn't be pronouncing judgments on Paul or Apollos or anyone else. Nor should we.

Now, it's maybe worth clarifying things here. Paul is not here throwing all discernment out of the window. Indeed, there is a kind of judgment that Christians are still to have.

We don't excuse sin or error, for example, but we gently correct with grace and with kindness. But that's not really what Paul is talking about here. The heart of what Paul is saying is this.

The Corinthians had decided that basically their way of looking at the world, i.e. their culture's way, was correct. And so they were taking it upon themselves to sit in judgment upon Paul, despite his apostolic authority that he received from Christ himself.

A parallel today might be the churchgoers who say that the church needs to catch up with the world or it's going to be left behind. Or another parallel might be those who judge a church for not doing enough to tackle whatever different social or political issues it might be and who, therefore, decide that the church is a failure.

[7 : 18] Now, Paul's response to this kind of thinking is to show it up for the arrogance that it really is. Who made you judge of Christ's church? And against what are you judging it?

But by the echo chamber of culture or subculture. My brothers and sisters write to Paul, I have applied these things to myself and to Paulus for your benefit. So you might learn from us the meaning of the saying, do not go beyond what is written.

Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. Paul's been tactful in applying these things to himself and to Apollos.

But this suggests that he has others in mind, those who are teaching the Corinthians now probably. But he wants to show that no one is exempt. All teachers are to do the work of servants and to build Christ's church in faithfulness, not arrogance.

Then and only then, this disunited church will become united once more. No one will be puffed up because they follow one teacher over another, and none will go beyond what God has written and revealed.

[8 : 29] Then in verse 7, this is where Paul really goes for the jugular. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive?

And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you did not? Paul's just dismantling their pride for what it is. What gives you the right Corinthians to think you know more than the rest of the churches?

You receive salvation from Christ, but you act as if you did it all yourselves. You receive the message from me, but you're boasting as if you've just come up with it all on your own. Corinthians, don't you see how your attitude is both illogical and absolutely incompatible with Christ?

When we walk the Jesus way, there is no room for the arrogance and pride that characterizes the world. No room at all. That kind of attitude, it's like the teenager who decides that they suddenly know much better than their parents, believing that their parents have done a terrible job and know nothing about the real world.

What this teenager doesn't realize is actually how much work has gone into raising them, how much love and compassion, how wise their parents really are, and actually how much they have perhaps shielded their child from the worst parts of the world for their own good.

[9 : 53] That kind of arrogance is, I think, a good description of our culture today, particularly given its refusal to learn from those who have gone before.

In our world, new is always better. But the foundation of the church should never be the new. The foundation must always be Christ crucified.

A value system based on pride is incompatible with the humility of Christ and will always lead, eventually, to an attempt to usurp him. Consider how this played out in Corinth.

This is us on to our second point. The Corinthians were behaving like kings, reigning over their little kingdoms. But juxtaposed with the Jesus way, embodied in the apostles, like Paul, well, the Jesus way was to suffer for Christ.

It's very different. Very different. Paul's got a wonderfully caustic wit here, and he employs it to absolutely devastating effect. Listen to verse 8 again. Already you have all you want.

[11 : 00] Already you have become rich. You have begun to reign, and that without us. How I wish that you really had begun to reign, so that we might also reign with you.

The Corinthians, in their eyes, they'd made it. There was nothing they needed to change about themselves. That's the attitude that this kind of prideful thinking ultimately leads to.

It's you-do-you theology. There's nothing wrong with you theology. Paul wishes that were true. If it was true, he could then put his feet up and join them in the sun. Well, that's not how the Jesus way works.

Listen to the contrast that he develops between the experience of the apostles, those people Christ himself had chosen to be his special messengers, and the Corinthians. Paul says, The sarcasm here is absolutely sharp as a dagger.

Paul has suffered so much on behalf of Christ. And many more Christians would suffer as the centuries plowed on, and many continue to suffer today for Jesus' name.

[12 : 31] The Corinthians had been very blessed to avoid suffering like this, and they attributed this basically to their spiritual prowess. But, counters Paul, if you guys are right, well, God must have a really cruel sense of humor, turning his apostles into grotesque spectacles, condemned for entertainment in a cosmic coliseum.

They were not right then. They were blinded by their arrogance. They didn't understand that following Jesus is costly and requires living in a way that diverges sharply from the way the world lives.

They didn't understand that suffering is in fact the normal experience of the Christian. Listen to what Paul and others like him had endured. To this very hour, we go hungry and thirsty.

We are in rags. We are brutally treated. We are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure it. When we are slandered, we answer kindly.

We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world, right up to this moment. Across 1 Corinthians, Paul's focus has been proclaiming Christ crucified and knowing nothing but Christ crucified.

[13 : 56] And his description of the apostolic experience here, well, this is Christ crucified. This is him imitating Christ crucified. Jesus lived on the road.

He said the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. He was slandered and abused and persecuted. Through it all, he submitted meekly in humility, kindness, and grace.

He was brutally treated by Roman soldiers who flogged him and crucified him. He hung on the cross in less than rags. As he died, he said, I thirst.

And hanging on that cross, he became the scum of the earth. The experience of the apostles reflected Christ crucified.

And it raised a question for the Corinthians. Are you better than the Lord who suffered? Perhaps it might raise that question for us. Jesus himself, not long before he died, said to his disciples, Remember what I told you.

[15 : 02] A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. The world's way is reigning now. The Jesus way is suffering now.

And when Christ returns, we will reign with him. The Christians' union with Christ means that when he returns in victory to destroy death and sin completely, we will share in his victory.

Our future is to reign. Our present is to suffer. As Paul said to the Romans, Now if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

If indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. And this is, I think, really rather encouraging.

Because although the idea of suffering sounds bad, the implication is that we don't have to put our hope in our success in this life. The prosperity gospel, for example, would say that true spirituality is marked by success and riches now.

[16 : 13] Paul would disagree. Paul would say that true spirituality is measured by knowing nothing but Christ and him crucified. The Christians in the UK have been very blessed and we haven't had to suffer much for Christ.

But if culture does continue to distance itself further from Christianity, well, we shouldn't be surprised. If proclaiming the gospel and reading the Bible, particularly those elements that are deemed culturally irrelevant or even hateful, if that comes under criticism, we shouldn't be alarmed.

If we lose friends because of what we believe, we shouldn't be shocked. But perhaps the more subtle danger is in this, in adopting that you-do-you theology that the Corinthians had.

Because culture always creeps into the church. To illustrate this philosophy, listen to these book titles, which are all self-help book titles of one variety or another.

The Abundant Mindset, Success, Starts Here. Good Vibes, Good Life. How self-love is the key to unlocking your greatness. Geralt, Stop Apologizing, a shame-free plan for embracing and achieving your goals.

[17 : 34] The audacity to be queen. The unapologetic art of dreaming big and manifesting your most fabulous life. More than enough.

Claiming space for who you are, no matter what they say. Now for being honest and frank, doesn't this philosophy sound good? It promises so much.

All we need is to unlock our inner, innate greatness. Because you are great. There's nothing to apologize for. Inside of you is your real self.

You just need to let it out. Your inner goddess or your inner God. You don't need anyone else. You don't need to change. You do you. But that's not the Jesus way.

That way of thinking is built on a foundation of arrogance and pride. But more than that, it's built on a hollow foundation.

[18 : 34] When the rains come, it will be swept away and found wanting. Its treasures are based on lies. The Jesus way is built on a foundation of weakness and suffering.

What I find particularly worrying is that two of those five books I mentioned purport to be Christian books. I suspect Corinth would have lapped them up. It might seem like a bizarre idea, but the Jesus way calls us to embrace the weakness and the suffering of Christ.

Not just his own suffering on our behalf, but also the suffering that we may undergo as we live for him. There's no shame in suffering for Christ.

In fact, it's just the opposite. There is glory in suffering for Christ. To embrace the suffering of Christ, to embrace the weakness and the foolishness of the Jesus way, all pride and arrogance has to be banished.

And instead, we want to pursue faithfulness. And this is the last contrast that Paul develops in this chapter. Notice, although he has employed a fair amount of sarcasm and rebuke in this chapter so far, he hasn't been without compassion.

[19 : 55] In fact, his stern words erupt from a fountain of love and compassion. Listen to Paul in verse 14. I am writing this not to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children.

Even if you had 10,000 guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For in Christ Jesus, I became your father through the gospel.

Paul's not been pulling his punches, nor will he as the letter goes on. If you look ahead, you'll see just how justified this is. Corinth was absolutely riddled with issues. And so like a wise father, Paul is giving his spiritual children a stern warning.

I don't think anyone enjoys getting told off by their father. It's not fun. But a good father tells off his children in order to protect and preserve them. Discipline is love.

Discipline is discipling with a firm hand. As their father, the one who came and showed them Jesus, Paul wants them to imitate him.

[21 : 00] Therefore, writes Paul, I urge you to imitate me. Paul, as we saw, imitated the sufferings of Christ. Now he wants the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. It's also the sincerest expression of living the Jesus way when we imitate him and imitate those who have faithfully followed him.

No human father is perfect. We all know this, but the best human fathers show us how to navigate the world and the way to live wisely and morally. Paul became the father of the Corinthians when he preached the gospel to them.

He wants them to learn from his example. They need to grow up, stop playing the teenager and recognize the wisdom of Paul. One person who had learned this was Timothy, one of Paul's most trusted coworkers.

Paul says, for this reason, I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love. who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

[22 : 15] Timothy had become a sort of spiritual son to Paul. What is the defining characteristic of Timothy? Faithfulness. Paul says Timothy is faithful in the Lord.

Timothy is going to come like the elder brother, although he was in fact rather young, and help the Corinthians to understand and follow the Jesus way, the way that it was taught in every church and still is.

It's not like Paul isn't teaching this everywhere else he goes. He is. But the Corinthians, in their arrogance, have just been so blind to this. They only look inward. Timothy would have been a breath of fresh air to help shake them up a bit and give them perspective.

But if they don't find perspective in change, a harsher correction will be needed. Paul finishes with a warning of fatherly discipline. Because fatherly discipline, though painful, is much better than the judgment of Christ when he comes.

Paul disciplines out of love. Some of you have been arrogant as if I were not coming to you, but I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have.

[23 : 35] For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power. Fools talk, and their talk is often empty and shallow. True power is not going to be found in the words of the arrogant who think they've got it all sorted.

True power is found in the message of Christ and him crucified. So what do you prefer, asks Paul? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and a gentle spirit?

The Corinthians have a choice because a battle is being waged over their very souls. Paul will come with a rod of discipline if he has to, because the way the Corinthians are going doesn't have a happy ending.

You can't believe the Jesus message without following the Jesus way. Eventually, you'll end up abandoning the Jesus message as well.

And Paul is an anxious father who wants more than anything for his children to take the Jesus way seriously. So if you come away with anything from the studies in 1 Corinthians and our discussion of the Jesus way, come away with this.

[24 : 53] We are always going to be tempted to follow the world's way rather than the Jesus way. It promises rewards in this life, and it looks much better.

But it is empty. It is a black hole that leads to nothing. It will ultimately not satisfy, but it will ultimately destroy you.

But the Jesus way, the Jesus way looks weak, but it will satisfy. You probably will suffer for it. You will probably not make many gains in this life by following it.

But you will one day reign with Christ if you do. And you will hear the voice of the king saying, well done, good and faithful servant.

In our age of arrogance, the antidote is faithfulness. Faithfulness to the one who died for your sins. Faithfulness to the one who was hanged on a cross in your place.

[25 : 55] Faithfulness to the king who gave up everything that you might live. Faithfulness is not always easy. It will require sacrifice, but it is the Jesus way.

And Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. And so the best thing we can do as we wait for his return is to follow the way of Christ crucified in faithfulness.

Let's pray.