

# True Children?

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[ 0 : 00 ] We're going to turn to our scripture reading for this evening, and you'll find that in 1 Corinthians chapter 4. Again, if you're following in the Blue Bibles, that's page 953.

Now we're going to be looking at the whole of this chapter this evening, and it's a long and rich chapter. And it's the culmination, really, of the whole of the argument of the first four chapters of this book.

So we'll take our time in reading it, and later on we'll be able to focus on some of the detail.

1 Corinthians chapter 4. Paul's been discussing his ministry and the ministry of the person who came after him to Corinth, Apollos.

And he's been arguing that despite their differences, these two, despite their differences in personality and style, they've been doing the same thing.

[ 1 : 01 ] So, chapter 4, verse 1. This is how one should regard us, that's Paul and Apollos, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Moreover, it's required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me, it's a very small thing that I should be judged by you or literally by any human day.

In fact, I don't even judge myself. I'm not aware of anything against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Then each one will receive his commendation from God. I've applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.

For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

[ 2 : 26 ] Already you have all you want. Already you've become rich. Without us, you've become kings. Would that you did reign so that we might share the rule with you.

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we've become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men.

We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.

To the present hour, we hunger and thirst. We're poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless. And we labor working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless.

When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat. We have become and are still like the scum of the world.

[ 3 : 30 ] The refuse of all things. I don't write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For they you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers.

For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you then, be imitators of me. That's why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills. And I'll find out not the talk of these arrogant people, but their power.

For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod? Or with love in the spirit of gentleness?

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Let's just pause and pray for a moment.

[ 4 : 45 ] Heavenly Father, we do pray that you would, through your spirit, breathe on us. And take your words and plant them deep into our lives. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Let me ask you a question.

What does a real Christian worker look like? I don't mean tall, short, fat, thin. You may have your own opinions on that. But what do they do?

It's one of the biggest questions in the world, that question. Why? Because the important lessons in life are not learned from disembodied words, but from people who speak words.

Words are very powerful things to be sure. But the power of a life, a life that meshes with words, is immense. And that's why it matters so much what a real Christian worker looks like.

Nothing is more important in this world than that people come into right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Now, you can do that simply by picking up a Gideon Bible in your hotel room and reading it.

[ 5 : 56 ] And you'll probably know people who've done that kind of thing. But most people don't become Christians that way. Most people become Christians as a result of somebody speaking words to them.

And living those words out in front of them. That's how it usually happens. What the life looks like is a very powerful part of the message.

The pattern of life shows what the messenger really believes. Shows whether the words are just talk or whether they mean more than that.

If you went to a seminar on how to live the healthy life and the person conducting the seminar came in hobbling with a stick and coughing and spluttering, that would be the end.

Because the life speaks. If you attended a course on how to make a success of your small business and the person conducting it turned up looking scruffy and disorganized, that would be the end.

[ 6 : 54 ] Because the life speaks. If, on the other hand, you go on a day course on how to become a successful stock market investor and the person who leads it turns up in a Maserati wearing a very smart suit, you're going to listen very hard to a person like that.

Because the life speaks. You see, the real messages are communicated not just by words, but by the way of living that goes with them.

And all over this world, people, both Christian and not yet Christian, learn about Jesus through the lives, not just the words, of Christian workers.

So what does a real Christian worker look like? It's one of the biggest questions in the world.

Because the life speaks. Speaks about Jesus.

And of course, in our world, there are massively differing opinions about what Christian ministry looks like.

[ 8 : 01 ] The Christian worker, he's a bringer of health and healing. The Christian worker, he's a wealthy person. The Christian worker will be successful looking. The Christian worker will have special power over sin and evil.

The Christian worker will be one who dispenses the spirit of God to others, especially spirit-filled person. The Christian worker will be a magnificent preacher. The Christian worker will be a mover and shaker in society.

There are loads of different versions of what the Christian worker might look like. And as we come to 1 Corinthians 4, it is the biggest question in this chapter. And it's the biggest question, I think, in this letter.

What does a real Christian worker look like? Now, there's so much to think about in this chapter that we're hardly going to be able to scratch the surface. So let me outline what I'm going to do this evening.

First, we'll summarize very briefly what's in this chapter. Second, we'll focus in on what the heart of the chapter is about. And third, we'll look at some of the detail and draw some implications out of that.

[ 9 : 05 ] So first, let me summarize what's in this chapter. What do we find in 1 Corinthians 4? Well, we find one topic all the way through from beginning to end.

And the topic is the Apostle Paul's way of doing things. Paul's pattern of gospel work is the subject matter of this chapter from beginning to end, all the way through.

One topic. Second thing we find in this chapter, we find two judgments, two opinions. There is Paul's view of his way of doing things.

You find that at the beginning, verses 1 to 5. And then we have the Corinthians view of Paul's way of doing things. You'll find that in verses 9 to 13.

And Paul's big aim in this chapter is to change their view about his way of doing things. At the moment, they think one thing. He wants to move them to thinking another thing.

[10:12] In fact, he wants to do that so much that not only do they agree with his way of doing things, they come to imitate his way of doing things. Look at chapter 4, verse 16.

This is the big what to do about this chapter. I urge you then, be imitators of me. He wants them to imitate his way of doing things.

Take on for yourselves my pattern of ministry, says the apostle to the Corinthians. This is something they are at the moment very reluctant to do for reasons we'll explore.

One topic, Paul's way of doing things. Two views of his way of doing things. And finally, there's a key word in this chapter. And it's the word puffed up.

It's translated in two ways in this chapter. Puffed up or arrogant. It means inflated, swollen, expanded.

[11:17] It's that kind of word. And it comes up in three places in this chapter. Look at verse 6. I've applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be inflated in favor of one against another.

Notice that not to go beyond what is written. That probably refers back to the end of chapter 1. Just turn back to the end of chapter 1. The very last verse.

Therefore, as it is written, let the one who boasts boast in the Lord. Paul is quoting here from Jeremiah chapter 9. Back to chapter 4.

The Corinthians at the moment are not boasting in the Lord. They're puffed up about one person versus another person. boastful about certain people.

That's the first place it comes. The second place this word comes is in verse 18. Some are puffed up. Same word. As though I were not coming to you.

[12:33] And then it's again in verse 19. But I will come to you soon if the Lord wills. And we'll find out not the talk of these puffed up people, but their power.

Is there anything more to these hyper expanded people than just talk? In other words, there are some people in Corinth who've become swollen headed.

They think they know better than the apostle. They think their opinion is better than his opinion.

That's what we have then in this chapter. Three things. Paul's pattern of ministry.

Two views about that. His and theirs. And thirdly, his view of their judgment. Namely, that it's puffed up. Arrogant.

Wrong-headed. So that's what we've got in this chapter. Now, let me focus in on the heart of this chapter. I think the heart of this chapter is verses 6 to 8. Let me read verses 6 and 7 to start off with.

[13:37] I've applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what's written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.

For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you didn't receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as though you did not receive it?

Now, let me ask a couple of questions. Verse 7. Where did the Corinthians get what they have received? Well, they got what they received from Paul's gospel.

Turn back to chapter 1. Here, Paul talks about how they got what they've got. Verse 5. You have been enriched in every way in Christ, in all speech and all knowledge.

How? Even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you. In other words, you Corinthians were thoroughly enriched through the gospel message that I brought to you.

[14:50] Now, back to chapter 4. Look at verse 6. Here's another question. Who have the Corinthians become puffed up in favor of?

And who are they against? How have they become, verse 7, boastful? Well, the answer to those questions is in verse 8.

Already, you have all you want. There's one boast. We have all we want already. Already, you've become rich. There's another boast. We have become rich already.

Without us, you have become kings. That's what they are against. They're against Paul and his fellow messengers.

We have it all. There's the boast. Without you. That's what they're against. The big issue in this chapter and in this letter is simply this.

[15:57] Paul brought the gospel message to Corinth. Some of them no longer favor his way of doing things. The pattern of his ministry.

They know better than that now. They now have more than they got from him and his message in the beginning. Paul is sarcastic in response. And they're really proud of what they have now. Paul is sarcastic in response. Verse 8. If only it were really true. Maybe some of it might rub off on me.

And not only is he sarcastic. Verse 14. He writes to admonish them. To get them to change their minds urgently about this.

Why does he want them to change their mind? Is he offended? Is he hurt? Well, he might be. But that's not the reason. Is it just that he thinks his opinion is better than theirs? And they're really stupid. And they jolly well ought to listen to him.

[16:59] Well, he does think they're stupid. But that's not the reason. Does he want people to imitate him because he's better than them? Well, he probably is. But that's not the reason. Is he just as swollen headed as they are?

No, he's not. The issue is this. Paul is convinced that his way of doing things. His way of doing gospel ministry is the God-given way of doing gospel ministry.

And if they abandon his way of doing gospel ministry, they abandon what God has provided. It's not an option.

It's a necessity that they take on his way of looking at things. He asks them in verse. If they won't take on his pattern of doing things, they will in fact be stepping outside the bounds of the Christian family.

It's a life and death issue. Will the Corinthians embrace his way of doing things? It really matters that they do. He asks them in verse 7.

[18:05] Who sees anything different in you? What's so special about you Corinthians that you want to distance yourselves from what you receive through my ministry? We see the flip side of that in verses 16 and 17.

I urge you then, be imitators of me. That's why I've sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach them everywhere in every church.

The pattern that I gave you. The pattern that Timothy will live out in front of you, I know because I know he's a faithful child.

Is a pattern for every church everywhere. It's the God-given pattern. What makes you think you're special?

That you can step outside the God-given pattern. It's a pattern for everyone. It really matters. Look on to chapter 10.

[19:11] Let me convince you of this. This is a big issue all the way through the letter. Chapter 10 verse 31. Paul says exactly the same thing. That his pattern of doing things is the God-given pattern of doing things.

Look at the end of chapter 10 verse 31. So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God.

Just as I try to please everyone in everything I do. Not seeking my own advantage, but that of many that they may be saved. Be imitators of me.

The same thing again. Be imitators of me as I am of Christ. I am the authentic pattern of how to follow the Lord Jesus.

Now go back to chapter 4 again please. Corinthians says Paul, What's different about you that you think the God-given pattern doesn't apply to you anymore?

[20:16] That's the heart of this chapter and that's the heart of this letter. Some in Corinth think that the normal pattern of Christian ministry doesn't apply to them anymore.

They're different. They think that Paul's way of doing things is something they can step away from with impunity. He says it's not. It's the God-given way of doing things.

Now folks, before we look at some of the detail and some of the implications, let's just reflect on that for a moment. This has enormously far-reaching implications for Christians in every age.

If you are unwilling to embrace Paul's way of doing things, you're unwilling to follow Jesus. You're not really Christian if you're unwilling to embrace Paul's way of doing things.

And let me observe that Paul's pattern of doing things is just as distasteful in our day as it was back in the first century in Corinth.

[ 21 : 21 ] Think of how the Apostle Paul is viewed in popular Christian circles, never mind in the secular world out there. Paul is variously regarded by people who call themselves Christians as the one who has tampered with the message of Jesus, the one who hates women, the one who hates Jews, the champion of an inhumanly narrow sexual morality, the friend of fundamentalists, and I could go on at length.

Paul is roundly despised in many Christian circles. Now, of course, nobody who calls themselves Christian will say, I disagree with Jesus.

But lots of people who call themselves Christian want to distance themselves from Paul. Paul is a great embarrassment to many in this age.

He was a great embarrassment to the church in Corinth. They thought they could step away from his way of doing things with impunity. He says, you can't step away from my pattern of doing things and you step away from imitating Jesus.

It's that important. So what then does real gospel ministry look like, according to Paul?

[ 22 : 44 ] Well, I want to say three things about real gospel ministry from this chapter. Here's the first. True gospel ministry looks for God's approval on the last day.

Not human approval in the present age. True gospel ministry looks for God's approval on the last day. Not human approval in the present age.

Read the beginning of the chapter. This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. It is required as stewards that they be found trustworthy.

But with me, it's a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I don't even judge myself. I'm not aware of anything against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted.

It's the Lord who judges me. Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes. He will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

[ 23 : 49 ] Then each one will receive his commendation from God. Look at the words Paul uses for gospel workers here. They're servants, not lords or rulers, stewards.

Stewards are people who carry out instructions given to them. Trustworthy people who will do what they've been told. In other words, people who do the work properly.

For the Corinthians, of course, the big issue is not, is the work being done properly? The big issue for the Corinthians is how good does the work look? The Corinthians don't think much of how good Paul's work looks.

And they think that they have the ability to judge. And Paul says, verse 3, look, I'm not playing to a human audience here. It's not your judgment I'm worried about.

Now, let me say what he doesn't mean by that. He doesn't mean he's not bothered about their opinion of him. He's very bothered about their opinion of him. He does very much want them to accept his pattern of doing things. He cares that they don't.

[ 24 : 50 ] He goes to great lengths in this letter to win them round to his opinion. Neither is he protesting his innocence or his perfection.

Look at verse 4. I'm not perfect. I'm not saying I'm perfect. I'm not aware of anything against myself. But I'm not thereby acquitted. It's the Lord who judges. Now, verse 3 is important.

I've heard these words used proudly and arrogantly. I don't work for the church. I work for God. Meaning, I think I'm right. And I'm jolly well not going to listen to any criticism.

That is not what Paul is saying here. What he is saying is that you cannot now assess the ultimate value of gospel work.

You can't. The ultimate value of it will be seen at the end. And at the end only when the Lord judges. Now, the Corinthians are forever claiming that they are more spiritual.

[ 25 : 54 ] That they have the future already. Here, they're claiming to have the judgment of the future in the present. The clarity of mind. The wisdom to know what's right and wrong.

He says to them, it's not your judgment I'm worried about. I'm not seeking commendation from you now. But from God in the future.

And the final verdict on my work. And that of any gospel worker. Is God's verdict in the future. Not the human verdict on how good it looks now.

Now, let me say this is an enormous relief in Christian ministry. Because so much of Christian ministry doesn't look very impressive in the here and now. Annie and I used to teach Sunday school.

And when we were on Sunday school rota. I can't remember. I think it was about one week and three at that point. It took our whole weekend to do it. We spent all of Saturday. Trying to work out what on earth this Bible passage meant.

[ 26 : 54 ] And then trying to work out how on earth we teach it to a bunch of three to ten year olds. And then, you know, usually late at night. Where on earth we could find the visual aids to help us teach.

That difficult Bible passage to the three to eleven year olds. And next morning we roll up at Sunday school. And they come charging in. And they look just the same as they looked last week when they went out. And after 45 minutes of what was significantly crowd control.

They went rushing off again at the end. Looking just the same as they came in. And you only have to do that three or four times before you begin to think. Is this going to accomplish anything in the end?

Because it doesn't look fruitful in the here and now. Well, Christian ministry is like that. It doesn't look fruitful in the here and now in lots of ways. Only the end will tell what the impact of God's word has been in the lives of people.

Only the end will tell. True gospel ministry looks for God's approval on the last day. Not human approval in the present age. This is very important indeed.

[ 27 : 56 ] Many Christian ministries are totally dominated. Driven by the desire for the approval of Christians in this age. And what that results in is on one hand.

That such ministries lack spine, strength, resolve, clarity. And on the other. They will do almost anything that people approve of.

Now this is something we all have in us. The deep down desire to please people. And the way to deal with that is not to care nothing about what people will think.

That's a disaster in ministry. The way to deal with that is to have the Lord's judgment on the last day. As clearly in view as possible.

So let me ask you. Whatever your responsibility in Christian ministry. Whether it's creche or Sunday school. Or you're a CU leader. Or you're an elder. Or you're a youth leader. Or whatever it is. Whether you work in the congregation as leading large meetings.

[ 29 : 00 ] Or whether your work in the congregation is just the regular stuff. Of talking to your next door neighbor on a Sunday morning or evening. Let me ask you this question. And remind you of this.

That much of the work that you do. If it's being done properly. Will not look splendidly effective now. That conversation you have with the person next to you.

After the meeting this evening. Do you think that will look splendidly effective in the here and now? Well probably not. But if you're sowing the word of God in one another's lives.

In the end a great harvest will be reaped from that word. Whose commendation are you looking for?

And what day are you waiting for? True gospel ministry looks for God's approval on the last day.

Not human approval in the present age. Second big thing. True gospel ministry is not attractive in the way that the world measures attractiveness.

[ 30 : 04 ] Now we come to a very painful part of this letter. Because in the middle of this chapter. Verse 9 following. Paul makes them look fair and square.

At the fact that they think themselves superior to him. He's using their ideas about him in these words. Let me read from verse 9. I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all.

Like men sentenced to death. Because we have become a spectacle to the world. To angels and to men. What kind of spectacle? We are fools for Christ's sake.

But you are wise in Christ. We're weak but you're strong. You're held in honor. We in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst. We're poorly dressed. Buffeted. Homeless. We labor working with our own hands.

When reviled we bless. When persecuted we endure. When slandered we entreat. We have become and are still like the scum of the earth. The refuse of all things.

[ 31 : 05 ] The Corinthians think Paul. Foolish. Weak. Disreputable.

And thoroughly unattractive. Why? Because he's always hungry. His clothes aren't great. He gets beaten up regularly.

He doesn't have a home of his own to go to. And he will insist on paying his own way. Doing that dreadful manual job. That's what verse 12 is about.

We labor working with our own hands. Paul's tent making work. The Corinthians are very unhappy about that. It's so disgustingly manual. So common that work.

And he puts up with hostility. And he doesn't defend himself as strongly as they would like. They'd like him to slap people around a bit. He doesn't do that. They really don't like the way he does things.

[ 32 : 04 ] The truth is that the model of spirituality the Corinthians had. Was just a spiritualized version of the things that they loved. Before they were Christian. He does not look.

Like what their world values. What sort of exhibit are we? Says Paul. Look at verse 9. I think that God has exhibited us apostles.

As last of all. Men sentenced to death. A spectacle. To the world. To angels. And to men. What kind of exhibit is he talking about here?

He has in mind the Roman victory parade. The emperor has returned from his grand campaign overseas. And he's beaten the opposition.

And to show his power. He brings a great parade through the city. He rides in a huge chariot at the front. His army follows behind. With all his generals dressed up with their medals.

[ 33 : 04 ] Waving their swords and spears. And last of all. Last of all in the procession. Come the guys that they've conquered. Who's still alive. Weak.

Weak. Ridiculed. Hungry. Thirsty. Just kept alive long enough. To be gloated over before execution. Beaten.

Beaten. Humiliated. Poorly clothed. No home to go to now. The kind of crowd that no one in their right mind wants to belong to.

What do the apostles look like? Says Paul. Are they the victorious Christian living guys at the front of the procession?

People the world will be impressed by? Absolutely not. They're like enemy soldiers conquered by a great king. On the road to certain death.

[ 34 : 02 ] The kind of crowd that no one in their right mind wants to belong to. That is the apostolic pattern. Why is that the apostolic pattern?

Well because that is precisely the pattern. Walked by the Lord Jesus. On his road. To victory. All these words could be used of him.

Weak. Hungry. Thirsty. Beaten. Stripped of his clothes.

Humiliated. Enduring scorn. Blessing those who cursed him. Reviled. And in the end.

Verse 13. Thrown out with the garbage. That is how God wins.

[ 35 : 08 ] That's how he wins. That's how he wins. And that's the pattern to follow. And let me say. If in your part of Christian responsibility.

Whatever it is. If you are looking for approval. Acceptance. Honor. To be looked up to. You're in the wrong procession.

And if you want your Christian leaders. To be like that. Looked up to. Approved by the world around.

Accepted. Honored. You're wanting them to be in the wrong procession. All over the world. The message rings out.

In various ways. That if you're a Christian. Life will be really good for you. In this world. Come to Jesus. And he'll make you rich.

[ 36 : 06 ] Give your money to him. And he'll give you even more. Now. Most of us don't find that. That easy to embrace. Because we know that's a stupid message.

But we often have our own. Toned down version of it. Robert Doyle puts it like this. Often the Christian expectation. Is that one will die.

Comfortably. At a great age. Surrounded by prosperity. Firm friends. And extended family. Who are likewise prosperous. And faithful Christians.

Christians. Those are no more. Than the values. Of our own culture. Dressed up. In spiritual clothes. True gospel ministry.



I urge you then, be imitators of me. Gracious God, we thank you for the Apostle Paul's care for these, his spiritual children.

Thank you that despite their arrogance and their hostility towards him. We see his love for them and his care for them.

Expressed in the pages of this long and careful letter. We thank you for that example of Christ-likeness. That he sought after those who were hostile towards him.

[ 43 : 28 ] Despite all he'd done for them. We pray that you would help us for ourselves to embrace this family pattern. Deliver us, please, Heavenly Father, from dressing up the values of our world in spiritual-looking clothes.

Help us to be willing to join in with that difficult procession of those heading on the road to death.

We pray for our nation. We recognize that this was once a nation in which your word flourished.

And in which people understood the gospel and loved the Lord Jesus.

We pray that you would raise up many faithful stewards, servants, imitators of the Apostle Paul.

Who will, with courage, not seek the approval of the world now. But rather look for your approval on the last day.

[ 44 : 43 ] Please, would you be merciful to us. And we pray for our world. So many parts of our world are dominated by a message purporting to be Christian.

That Jesus will make the believer rich and prosperous in this age. We pray for those who work faithfully in the vicinity of such teaching.

And pray that you would give them courage and endurance and patience. Help them not to seek for the approval of people in the present age, but for your approval on the last day.

Help them to be faithful stewards. Despite the temptation to go for what looks successful. Heavenly Father, we thank you once again for this great chapter and this great letter.

And we pray that you'd help us to believe deeply the things that it teaches. Hear us, we ask in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen.