

1.5 I Want It All, and I Want It Now!

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[0 : 00] But Josh Johnson is preaching this evening. He's been leading us through some of the early chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We're going to turn there now, if you'd turn with me, to 1 Corinthians chapter 4.

And we're going to read this whole chapter together. For those perhaps a bit unfamiliar, Paul's writing to an infant church in Corinth, a church he planted, but a church that has run into some problems, rather full of themselves.

Rather tending to look down on their apostolic founders, like Paul and the other apostles. And Paul is writing really to challenge them on that and to remind them of the truth of the gospel and who are the true preachers and teachers of the gospel.

If you pay attention as we read, you'll see that there's a lot of us and we and me. And Paul is very clearly defending himself and the other apostles and showing the contrast between them and the way the Corinthian church seemed to be thinking about various things.

So here's how he begins in chapter 4, verse 1. And this is how you should regard us, that is Paul and the apostles, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

[1 : 27] 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 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, don't pronounce judgment before the time. Before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things that are 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 didn't receive it?

[2 : 35] Already you have all you want. Already you've become rich. Without us, you've become kings.

And 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.

We're weak, but you're strong. Pay attention. 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're fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We're weak, but you're strong.

You are held in high honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour, we hunger and thirst. We are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands.

[3 : 49] When reviled, we bless. When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat.

We've become, and we still are, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.

For though you have countless guides in Christ, you don't 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, puffed up, as though I were not coming to you, but I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills.

[4 : 55] I will 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. May God bless to us his word. Well, good evening.

Do turn your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 4. Do let me apologize in advance. I've got a bit of a cold, so my voice might be a bit unpredictable, so do bear with.

But 1 Corinthians chapter 4. If they talk like the world, walk like the world, and act like the world, then we can be sure that they are of the world.

[6 : 09] Except that the Corinthians couldn't disagree more. Who are the Corinthians? That's a big question, particularly in this chapter.

because in it we see that their family resemblance is all mixed up. This is anything but a case of like father, like son.

Paul uses familiar language. He calls them brothers. That's fairly standard Christian language. But he also brings into this chapter the language of father and son. But what is blindingly clear is that with Paul as a spiritual father to his children, the Corinthians, there could not be more of a striking contrast.

Paul shows us in this chapter that the Corinthians have a key ingredient in their ministry that is different to Paul's. And it risks ruining everything for them.

You see, Paul's ministry is shaped by the cross. With all of its suffering, with all of its shame, and all of its sacrifice. The cross is not just his message, but his method and his manner.

[7 : 19] The Corinthians' ministry is mistakenly shaped by the resurrection and its victory. But not in the future. They want these things here and now in the present.

Paul's ministry is invested in that which will last into eternity. The Corinthians want the best of this world. Paul looks forward to the victory to come, and so he endures all kinds of things in the present.

The Corinthians want to skip the cross. They want it all and they want it now. And so Paul says, firstly, in verses 1 to 7, it is God who has the final say on real ministry.

God has the final say on real ministry. In the end, there's only one verdict, one judgment, one seal of approval that matters when it comes to a church and its ministry.

These verses are all about approval. They're all about how ministry will be judged, thought of, and viewed. Notice verse 3. Paul says, it's a small thing that I should be judged by you.

[8 : 30] I do not even judge myself. Verse 4, it is the Lord who judges me. Verse 5, do not pronounce judgment before the time. Even verse 7, who sees anything different in you or who judges you to be any different?

And verse 6, it's the same old chestnut that we've been seeing again and again. They are puffed up in favor of one against the other. They're judging the best ministry, the one that they most like the look of.

And so the question is, whose approval do we long for? Look at verse 3. Paul says, it's a very small thing that I should be judged by you. It matters very little to Paul what the Corinthians think of him.

Paul isn't interested in popularity contests. So they can think what they like about Paul. He's not going to change for them. That's his point. They don't get to set his course.

And so even though they clearly don't appreciate him, his response isn't to try and be more like them. No, his response is to confront them with the fact that writing Paul off reveals that they're also writing off the Lord Jesus.

[9 : 42] It isn't the Corinthians approval that Paul is after. His concern is to be, verse 1, a faithful servant of Christ and to be a faithful steward of the mysteries of God.

Now, a steward is someone entrusted to take care of something. Paul's entrusted to take care of the mysteries of God, that is the gospel. And the gospel isn't stewarded, it isn't taken care of by locking it up somewhere safe and keeping it out of sight.

The gospel is stewarded and taken care of and protected as it is faithfully preached. And so what is the measure of success for a steward of the gospel? Verse 2, that they are faithful to those who have entrusted them.

That's why Paul doesn't really care what the Corinthians think about him. Verse 3, what the Corinthians think of him is a small thing because verse 4, it is the Lord who judges whether a steward is faithful.

It is God himself who has entrusted the gospel to his preachers and it is he who gets to weigh their work. No one else. Paul doesn't hold his own view of things as ultimate.

[10:56] There is no pat on the back for himself. No, he strives and works and pours out his life that he would be faithful before God. And so Paul is clear when it comes to ministry there is only one person whose approval, whose verdict matters.

I think I am right in saying that Christians in sport have or at least used to have little wristbands that they wore when they were competing that said three words on them. Audience of one.

That's helpful here. There is always a temptation to shape our ministry, to shape our service of the Lord around how it will be perceived. How others are going to think of it.

How others are going to think of us because of it. And of course when we are teaching Sunday school or preaching or leading a Bible study your audience is important because you want to effectively communicate with them.

the Bible is always taught to people teaching it clearly is important but that's not what Paul is saying here. What Paul is saying is different to that. He's saying that when it comes to ministry and service we can either be slaves to the crowd or servants to Christ enthralled to perception or seeking praise for Christ not ourselves.

[12:13] And so it's a very tempting thing for a preacher to flex his communication skills to captivate the crowd to woe them how many YouTube hits did I get this week what did people think of my sermon and it isn't long before public approval is what drives a ministry like that and the problem is once you have public approval you don't want to lose it and so a claim is a very dangerous poison to the soul of a Christian and especially to a preacher it is very hard to be faithful to God and to always want to please people Paul is making clear that a faithful steward has to be prepared to say unpopular things and to become very unpopular even in society and perhaps most of all in the church and so that's how we serve and minister no matter the setting it could be very tempting for a minister to scrimp on his sermons in order to spend time doing things that people notice spending lots of time mingling and befriending and being liked a good youth group leader isn't someone who wants to be your child's friend but someone who wants your child to flourish in their faith so they won't shy away from the Bible's teaching on things that are particularly unpopular today like human sexuality a good student leader will have hard conversations with you

I know you've been seeing this guy for a long time and this is going to be painful but if you keep seeing him then I'm concerned that they will tear you away from the Lord Jesus that's never a popular conversation when it comes to doing ministry and indeed all of our service it is helpful for our motivation to remind ourselves we have an audience of one our father God verse 5 he sees how we do things and he will disclose the purposes of our heart a light will be shone on our motivations we can't fool God I've been told that a common reason that people who head off to do mission overseas feel is because there's such a pressure to show results to justify your place and so the temptation is to spend time doing the things that can be photographed or measured to the neglect of things that are important but unseen well every small or significant sacrifice made in secret done behind closed doors is seen by our father so yes we can't fool him but at the same time we don't have to jump up and down and wave our arms to get his attention so that he sees all the sacrifice that we've made and the truth is that for every sacrifice made for his kingdom for every act of faithful service well verse five each one will receive his commendation from God so we can seek a claim here and now we can live for the approval of the world we can serve for the benefit of ourselves so that people can see it we can seek thanks and respect and honor here and now and it will be possible to get it or we can be greeted one day by the

Lord Jesus saying well done good and faithful servant I saw it all but we can't have both the danger in seeking approval now is that we won't want to jeopardize it and then it isn't long before the Bible needs to be adapted and needs to be made fit for a new purpose so verse six I have applied these things to myself and Apollos that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written a real ministry a faithful church is committed together to proclaim Christ and all that he has done and all that that means from pulpit to pew from sermon to Sunday school from Sunday to Saturday at work and at worship not less than what is written so as to flatten what is true not more than what is written so as to add and alter what is true and not something completely different if we find ourselves embarrassed or ashamed by something in the

Bible then perhaps the diagnostic question to ask ourselves is do I long for approval and acceptance in this world or the world to come Paul continues verse seven and he turns things

around on the Corinthians how are they viewed verse seven who sees anything different in you nobody what do you have that you did not receive nothing if then you received it why do you boast as if you did not receive it what Paul is saying here to the Corinthians is that whilst they put great stock in how things appear now in looking more impressive than Paul even the truth is that their precious superiority is a delusion it's a mirage if all they have has been given then how can they boast how will they be judged any more favourably for it if all they have has been given then how are they better than anyone else at all if all they have has been given then surely all believers have been given the same

Paul is clear in these verses about who the judge is about who passes the important verdict and it's not the Corinthians it's God alone but he's also begun here to show that when that judgment is passed is also important when does it happen look at verse 5 Paul says do not pronounce judgment before the time before the Lord comes then each one will receive his commendation from God the Corinthians want it all and they want it now and so Paul goes on to define for us what real ministry looks like and that's what the family resemblance should be and that's what we see in verses 8 to 14 real ministry is cross now resurrection to come real ministry is cross now resurrection to come genuine

[19:12] Christian ministry means sacrifice it is costly shameful it is a joke to the world the true path of ministry is more rubbish dump than Buckingham Palace the true path of ministry looks more like being scorned by the mainstream media than being treated like an A-list celebrity the true path of ministry is more prisoner than professor the Corinthians want to skip the cross and enjoy instead all that is promised for the future but they want it now and that colours everything Paul in verse 8 uses a scathing deuce of sarcasm to expose this look at verse 8 already you have all you want already you've become rich without us you have become kings but of course that isn't the case for Christians in this age turn over to chapter 15 another key chapter in this letter that picks up the themes in chapters 1 to 4 chapter 15 verses 22 and 23

Paul says for as in Adam all die so also in Christ shall all be made alive but each in his own order Christ the first fruits he has been raised then at his coming those who belong to Christ resurrection isn't now Paul says in this chapter that life is a bare kernel it's to be planted into the ground and only when it dies does resurrection burst forth and so 1 Corinthians 15 again verses 42 and 43 Paul says what is soon is perishable this life is perishable but what is raised is imperishable it's soon in dishonor it's raised in glory it's soon in weakness it's raised in power that's the order of things perishable dishonor weakness now this life and then at the Lord's return glory might honor the Corinthians don't like this because it means they have to wait why wait if we can have it all night and that is the perennial challenge for the Christian to keep eternity in view to temper expectations for this life to not get caught up with how all our colleagues and friends think about success the challenge for us is to be prepared to not have our best life night when that simply means aping this world wanting to maximize this life is an incredibly tempting thing to want to be a Christian and have a well respected career to be well thought of by society to have notoriety to mix in successful social circles and to genuinely find in Christianity something that elevates this life above anyone above what anyone else has without a cost that's what the Corinthians wanted I wonder if they're alone in desiring that they get to talk about resurrection and victory strong powerful words and completely unlike what Paul's ministry looked like but the truth is the Corinthians are all mixed up a faithful Christian life looks a lot more like the cross than the resurrection turn back to chapter one chapter one verse seven Paul left them waiting they were waiting for the revealing of the Lord Jesus but now since Paul left they've decided they don't want to wait and so Paul mocks in chapter four already already you have all you want already you've become rich however what he's really saying to the Corinthians is that you think you have these things but actually they're not for now that's an important phrase it's an important phrase for a young couple here dating when temptation inevitably sets in it's not for now that comes later when we're married helpful phrase it's not for now and that's what the Corinthians needs to learn look again at verse eight because it isn't just that they want it all and they want it now look at who they leave out Paul says without us without Paul without the apostles the Corinthians have gained everything without us you've become kings so here it is if you want to be associated with words like being rich being kings or verse 10 words like being wise and strong and held in honor here's how to do it for a start abandon the apostolic word and abandon the apostolic way because if we believe what

[24 : 51] Paul believed and behave like Paul behaved we will never be the toast of this world if our version of success and power make us uncomfortable with Paul then our view of success and power have been shaped by this world Paul lays his way of life alongside the way of life and ministry of the Corinthians those who want it all want it now and as he lays them side by side they couldn't look more different the Corinthians think that they are rich they are kings but verse nine the apostles well they are exhibited as last of all like men sentenced to death a spectacle to the world verse ten we apostles are fools but you Corinthians are wise we are weak but you are strong you are held in honour but we in disrepute do you see the contrast skipping the cross taking the easy way the easy life has significant knock-ons

Paul goes on verse eleven we the faithful ones we hunger and thirst we're poorly dressed we're homeless verse twelve we labor with our hands we're reviled and persecuted verse thirteen we're slandered we have become and still are the scum of the world the refuse of all things the Corinthians couldn't look more different from Paul the truth is that faithful churches won't have a seat at the political table and respect no they'll be treated like the scum of the earth faithful churches won't be clapped and celebrated but slandered and treated with a kind of revulsion that we would have for the inside of a full bin lorry on a hot day I was walking up the street to the office this week behind a bin lorry and the stench was awful it prompted me to run ahead of it to get away from it that is how the world will see true sons of

Paul the refuse of all things Paul knows that all Christians share in the same things and you can see it again here in verse 8 he says would that you did reign so that we might share the rule with you if the Corinthians are already spiritual kings if they have already inherited their future rewards then Paul and the apostles would too if all they have is given to them then Paul would have it too but the truth is the Corinthians are driven by a theology of glory now and Paul is driven by a theology of glory to come it sounds like a little change but actually it changes everything Paul's theology is a theology of glory to come but it beckons him and enables him to share in the sufferings of Christ now and what is true of Paul in that must also be true of all

Christians so if that's the experience that we have now be encouraged if you knew all too well the scorn of the world if you've been called a fool if you felt utterly weak when confronting the ideas and beliefs of your friends and colleagues if you've been harshly written off by teachers and others at school then be assured that isn't you getting it wrong you're walking in the footsteps of the apostle Paul and the Lord Jesus a faithful Christian life a faithful ministry is a lot more likely to lead us through filth than fame through prison than palaces it's a lot more likely to leave us with scars than successes in the world's eyes it is the difficult way the way that hurts that's a struggle that faces opposition at every turn but it's the right way it's Jesus way it's Paul's way it's the cross's way and with this life that we sue we sue what's perishable and we will raise what's imperishable be raised imperishable this life is soon in dishonor but it will be raised in glory it's soon in weakness but it will be raised in power

Paul goes on in verses 14 to 17 to say that real ministry marks out real churches real ministry marks out real churches the genuineness of a church is seen in their commitment to Paul's words and Paul's ways the Corinthians show new family resemblance with Paul when laid side by side they couldn't look more different but even though they aren't acting like true children of Paul look at how Paul responds to them it is still the response of the loving father verse 14 I don't want you to be ashamed but I can't let you keep doing harm to yourself I need to admonish you for your own good because you're my beloved children verse 15 he is their spiritual father he's their model the Corinthians have many guides the footnote says you have 10,000 guides but not many fathers that's just like today isn't it we can find all kinds of guides there are people all around who love to tell us what spirituality is whether it be at wacky conferences or the pleasant people on the street handing out magazines to try and lure us into their cults or the internet gurus on YouTube or we can find on

[30 : 51] Google all kinds of people who love to tell us who God is to tell us what is really important about being a Christian to tell us what we're lacking or how we can flourish and maximize this life there is no shortage of guides around someone asked me last week how do you know what churches are like the Corinthians and what ones are the real thing after all they said very few churches will outrightly deny the message of the cross very few are going to say we don't really like the cross so how do you tell well the measure of a real church is how much they are like Paul verse 16 verse 17 Paul has sent them Timothy if you want to know what Paul's way looks like there's

Timothy you can look at him if you need a reminder he is a true child in the faith that'll be a sore one for the Corinthians but look at verse 17 closely

Timothy isn't coming to remind them of Paul's words but his ways in Christ that's what distinguishes true churches Paul's ways Paul's whole pattern of ministry is important the weakness isn't by accident it's by design it's not enough for us to simply assent to the correct beliefs about the cross a true church ought to display the cross by its weakness in this world by its shame in this world and by the sacrifice of this life in this world because a true church knows the resurrection is coming it isn't now but it is coming and verse 17 again that's the case in all the churches that

Paul has planted and taught and nourished that's what he teaches everywhere in every place it's the Corinthians who are right of kilter and so he finishes finally by saying verses 18 to 21 real ministry has real power real ministry has real power in the end impressive talk will have no lasting effect but a life and ministry devoted to the word and the way of the cross will ripple into eternity Paul says that he intends to visit Corinth verse 18 perhaps the Corinthians are like the child who knows that their parents threats are a bit hollow a bit empty they know that at the count to ten nothing's going to happen but that's not the case Paul is planning to come to them soon and he'll be able to identify the real ministry from the one that flatters to deceive verse 19 he won't be interested simply in their talk this is a church that loves to talk speech and talk in words of eloquent wisdom with lofty speech with plausible words of wisdom we've seen in previous weeks in chapters one and two later on in the letter they love to talk in utterances of wisdom and knowledge they love to speak in tongues of men and angels and then chapter 14 speaks speaks speaks speaks speech speaking everywhere that's what this church loves impressive speakers but

Paul's not going to be interested in their talk he won't be interested in the talk of those who think themselves superior they think themselves truly spiritual or as Paul calls them arrogant what he'll be interested in is the power of these people for verse 20 the kingdom of God consists of power not talk and as Paul's been making clear it's the words of the cross and the way of the cross that is power look back at chapter 1 verse 17 words arrogant talk spiritual superiority empty the cross of its power 118 the word of the cross is the power of God 123 and 24 Paul preaches Christ crucified and that is the power of the cross the power of God chapter 2 verse 4 Paul's message wasn't impressive to the world it wasn't full of words of wisdom but in demonstration of power 2 5 it is the word of the cross that means our faith doesn't rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God real ministry has real power a ministry that shies away from the word and the way that Paul shoes the way that God has given is a ministry that won't have any real power it may look impressive for a time it may create a buzz it may attract flocks of young people it may grow faster than a real church it may dazzle it may have lots of money but it won't be powerful we want to be a powerful church that means we're going to look like a very weak one we want to be a growing church we want more and more people to be trained in the gospel we want to be engaged in evangelism as individuals and as a church and the truth is that each one of us has a ministry in our daily settings and our spheres of influence and what Paul is saying to us is let it be the right kind of ministry one that's prepared for scorn one that accepts sacrifice also that our crucified king might become the crucified savior to many more because that is the only hope for our city for our country for our chums for our colleagues it's anything that has power to bring them to life so no matter how written off we become no matter how weak and witless we look if we hold out the gospel of christ crucified and at the same time we are a church that is marked by the cross now then we are holding out the power of god to glasgow anything else churches that appear in the newspapers that are given status by the government that are celebrated churches that welcome you they might look powerful and significant but not according to paul it's so easy for us to get down beat because more than ever society hates the gospel but paul is saying that every instance of us every instance of you embracing paul's weak ministry is an opportunity for the manifestation of the only real power that can do anything in this world the power that can rise the spiritually dead and bring them to everlasting life so whose lineage do we find ourselves in the corinthians do we want it all and want it now or paul's and christ's there is glory for the christian wonderful glory we will have everything but it's not for now for now we work we labor we endure we make christ known trusting that the kingdom of god doesn't consist of mere talk however impressive it can be or in shoes of triumph but the kingdom of god consists in power and paul's big message in these opening chapters of corinthians is that the cross is power well let's pray father we ask that you would steal us for our task we are sold so many attractive alternatives all of the time in this world carries plentiful and

powerful allures and so we ask that you would give us clarity on these things and add to that your grace that we might gladly give up this world and take hold of the one to come and as we do so would you use it to prosper our ministry here in this city so that you would be powerfully at work [39 : 51] for we ask it in Jesus name Amen