

The Ingredients of Real Ministry

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon and welcome to our lunchtime Bible talk. Please do make use of the lunches on offer after the service is finished if you have time. And please stay behind and get chatting to those around you.

Now though, for the next three weeks we'll be spending some time in 1 Corinthians. So perhaps you could turn up at 1 Corinthians chapter 4 in your Bibles. And we'll read some of that after I pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can gather together in the middle of the week. Here so that you may speak to us through your living and active word. Help us to put off the distraction of all that pulls at us this week and focus on your word now.

That we might hear you speak to us and so be encouraged to walk in your ways with the strength of your grace. For we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Let's read then 1 Corinthians chapter 4. Beginning at verse 7 to the end of the chapter. 4. Who sees anything different in you?

[1 : 12] 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? Already you have all you want.

Already you've become rich. Without us you have 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 have 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 are we hunger and thirst. We are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless. And we labor working with our own hands.

[2 : 09] When reviled we bless. When persecuted we endure. When slandered we entreat. We have become and are still 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 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 is 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. And 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 will find out not the talk of these arrogant people. But their power. For the kingdom of God. Does not consist in talk.

[3 : 07] But in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod? Or with love and a spirit of gentleness? Ingredients are a big deal in my house.

My wife is a cook. And she is a big fan of the great British bake-off. I am not allowed to add flavors at crucial stages to meals anymore. The wrong tweak here or there.

And it could ruin the subtle or complex flavors of what is being made. Similarly. If Mary Berry were to give you a recipe. To bake a beautiful cake. But when you weigh out your ingredients.

You substitute the plain flour. With self-raising flour. A little difference in the process. That sounds like it maybe could be okay. It ends up spoiling the end product.

Instead of getting a lovely and fluffy airy cake. You are left with a heavy one. One that is a little bit bitter. And when you take it out of the oven. It might even sink.

[4 : 11] The right ingredients are key in producing the right product. 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. Paul's ministry is marked by the cross and its sufferings. The Corinthians ministry is marked by the resurrection and its victory.

Paul's way looks forward to the victory to come. And so endures all manner of things now. The Corinthians avoid the weak looking way that Paul has.

Because they thought they already had all of the glory of the resurrection now. Paul has been picking apart this error in the first chapters of this letter.

And his last strand to unpick is to highlight this difference. This church in Corinth thought they had moved on from Paul. His simple basic gospel of Christ crucified was all well and good as they became Christians.

[5 : 14] But now they've outgrown this. They're spiritual Christians. Paul was fine to introduce them to Christ. But now the Corinthians had their own brilliant preachers to guide their bulging spiritual brains.

They had their idea of spiritual gifts to ram home their obvious superior spirituality. Paul couldn't possibly match them.

He was weak. Everywhere he went, people opposed him. He was foolish with his constant, simple message of the cross. So now the Corinthians have new teachers, impressive looking ones.

They speak in tongues. They were clever. They were held in honor by the world. They were more spiritual than Paul and his brand of Christians.

Or at least that's what the Corinthians thought. Paul and the other apostles were a bit dated, a bit dry, a bit dead, compared to this new thriving kind of ministry at Corinth that looked powerful, that looked wise, that looked impressive.

[6 : 19] So Paul is responding to a very dangerous problem. A problem that undermines the gospel and causes great struggle to regular Christians. The Corinthians had spiritual Christians and unspiritual Christians.

But Paul is making it clear that the spiritual are those who belong to the church and trust Christ. There is no such thing as an unspiritual Christian.

So firstly, we see that we must be careful who we write off. We see in the early verses of chapter 4 that Paul is downplaying the grandeur of his own role, he's saying that the apostles are to be regarded as servants, stewards.

Do you see that in verses 1 to 2? Not kings, not special over all others. Not impressive. Servants and stewards of God. The Corinthians boast in and celebrate things that make them look impressive.

And so they do not want to be associated with someone such as Paul, who's so obviously unimpressive to the world. They write Paul off, verse 3. They judge him inadequate.

[7 : 30] Look at verse 5. Paul says, Do not pronounce judgment before the time. And again, before the Lord comes.

They're doing things earlier than they should. Look briefly at verse 8. Already you have all you want. Already you have become kings.

The Corinthians have a disjointed present and future. So they look at Paul's ministry and claim that it is now beneath them. But that is not the place of any human.

Paul says that prerogative belongs to God alone. The Lord will, verse 5, bring to light the things now hidden and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

But that is yet to happen. If the Corinthians were claiming some special revelation from God to judge Paul's ministry as unsatisfactory, irrelevant, outdated, then they are claiming to do something that belongs to God alone.

[8 : 34] Paul is saying God will, at the last day, commend those who are faithful, stewards, and genuine servants. But that is yet to come.

The Corinthians think themselves superior to the apostles. They think themselves special. They look at Paul and his gospel and the churches he's planted and they scoff. They think it looks pathetic, weak, beneath them.

Because they have mixed up the present and the future. Paul turns it around on them, verse 7. Who sees anything different in you?

Or who sees anything spiritually superior in you? Implied answer. 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 their superiority is a delusion.

[9 : 35] It's nonsense. It's a mirage. If all that you have has been given, why would you boast? If all that you have has been given, then how are you better than anyone else?

If all that you have has been given, then surely all believers are in the same boat. God sets the standard for ministry. He sets the standard for what the church is like.

And he will be the one who all are accountable to in the end. Any who claim to have a new or better way of doing things that leaves behind the apostles' way, well, they're deluded.

To sideline the apostles is to claim some spiritual insight that belongs to God alone. Paul knows that the Corinthians have an ingredient that is different from Paul's message and model.

It doesn't set them apart as superior. It threatens to derail their church. So he moves on to say in verses 8 to 17 that he, Paul, shows us the true path of ministry, the only path.

[10 : 41] And the true path of ministry is much more like a rubbish dump than Buckingham Palace. The true path of ministry looks more like being scorned by the media than being a celebrity.

The true path of ministry is more prisoner than professor. The Corinthians' messed up view of the present and the future colors everything for them.

Paul, in verse 8, uses a scathing dose of sarcasm to expose this. Look at verse 8 with me. Already you have all you want. Already you have become rich.

Without us, you have become kings. The Corinthian form of spirituality claimed things for now that belong in the future. Chapter 15 deals at length with what disbelief in future bodily resurrection meant.

And it seems that that may have been what was believed in Corinth. That this life was all there is. No resurrection of the dead. Hope in this life only.

[11 : 48] The Corinthians seemed to believe that the body was going to be left behind. That the spiritual was all that mattered. And because the spiritual was all that mattered, they believed they were already resurrected spiritually.

Hence, they could do things like speak in the tongues of heaven. So for them, the present was all that was important. And when they died, they would continue as they were, spiritually, without the body.

So their presence and their futures are all mixed up. And that is the ingredient that is different to Paul's. The life the Corinthians lived now was all that was important. They were now living with all the victory that resurrection brought.

They're all mixed up. Because all of that is yet to come. That is waiting in the future. Paul mocks, Already you have all you want.

Already you have become rich. However, what he is really saying to the Corinthians is that you think you have these things. But actually, they're not for now.

[12 : 56] I have a friend who, whilst dating, had a phrase that was required when they were attempted to cross the line. When things would perhaps drift towards the inappropriate for what is an unmarried couple, they would remind each other, It's not for now.

It's not for now. That's what the Corinthians needed to know. It is not for now. You see, they expected to enjoy, in the present, what is promised for the future.

And so their lives and ministries looked very different. Verse 8, You have all you want. You have become rich. You have become kings. Words associated with them are wise, strong, honor.

That one ingredient has changed everything. If we are living victorious Christian lives like the Corinthians, then we'll expect to be associated with those words. Wisdom, strength, honor.

But we see from verse 9, Paul contrasting these two kinds of ministry. His ministry marked by the cross and its present suffering against theirs marked by victory.

[14 : 11] And what does that look like? Well, verse 9, God has exhibited us, apostles, as last of all, like men sentenced to death, a spectacle to the world. Verse 10, We're fools, weak, held in disrepute.

11, We hunger and thirst. We're poorly dressed. We're homeless. Verse 12, We labor, we are reviled, we are persecuted. Verse 13, We are slandered, we have become, and still are, the scum of the world, refuse.

Paul's way is marked by looking weak, sounding foolish, and being treated as criminals, held in disrepute. Two kinds of ministry, one incredibly attractive here and now, and one that just looks ridiculous.

It isn't difficult to see why the life marked by resurrection victory is attractive. It's not hard to see why people might want to believe it. After all, when we believe things that are wrong, it's because they're attractive to us.

Visible signs, like speaking in tongues, look more impressive. Preachers who speak with eloquence, who entertain, who have messages about victorious living, these look and sound more impressive than what Paul offers.

[15 : 36] Who wants to be hungry and thirsty? Who wants to be written off? Who wants to be mocked? Who wants to be treated like filth? And Paul knows that all Christians share the same things.

You see that in verse 8. 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 Corinthians are mistaken. They are driven by a theology of glory now. Paul is driven by a theology of glory to come, which means sharing in the sufferings of Christ now.

And what is true of Paul in that must be true of all Christians. Where you see a church that looks impressive, that stands out to the world, that's widely celebrated for its obvious appeal, its great charity, its warm inclusiveness, then be wary.

Because that is a church that is behaving in a much more Corinthian way than a Paul way. We must not be lured in by a church or by people that are full of the talk of glory now, of enjoying the fullness of heaven here, of heavenly tongues in this place right now to make you more spiritual.

[17 : 08] We must be prepared to follow Paul's gospel no matter what that costs us. Paul shows us the true path of ministry. It's a path that is real.

And it's a path that will, at the last day, bring commendation. Verse five. It's a path that may cost us reputation, that may cost us respectability, that will cost us financially.

But the path is much more likely to lead us through filth than fame, through prison than palaces. And it's more likely to leave us with scars than successes in the world's eyes.

There are people all around who will love to tell us what spirituality is, to tell us who God is, to tell us what really is important about being a Christian, whether it be devoting ourselves to social work or being open and inclusive to the spirit of the age.

But we must only listen to those who, verse 16, are imitators of Paul. We must only follow those who are trustworthy stewards of the truth.

[18 : 17] We must only follow those who are so committed to the apostles' message that, like Paul, they will endure anything now because of what is yet to come.

Verse 17. Like Timothy. Imitate Timothy as he imitates me, says Paul. He is a living example from another church of what real, faithful ministry looks like.

You see, Paul's way is true for everyone. Timothy embodies what the Corinthians scorn because he's just like Paul, because he's just like every other real Christian.

The way that is a mark of the true church, verse 17, is everywhere. It's in every church. Paul's way is universal. The way marked by the cross and its sufferings.

All Christians are to be involved in the work of ministry of making Christ known, of offering the real hope of the cross to all. And that is what we must stick to, even if it costs us greatly, or even if it costs us greatly again.

[19 : 31] Because verses 18 to 21, real ministry has real power. Real ministry has real power.

Paul says he's going to come to them and he will be able to identify the real ministry from the one that flatters to deceive. He won't be interested in their talk, verse 19.

And the Corinthians love to talk. They love to talk. Speech and talking are words that crop up all over this letter. They love to talk, 117, with words of eloquent wisdom.

2.1, with lofty speech. 2.4, with plausible words of wisdom. 12.8, utterances of wisdom and knowledge. 13, speaking in tongues of men and angels.

Chapter 14, speaks, speaks, speaks, speaks, speaking everywhere. The Corinthians love to talk, but Paul won't be interested in their talk.

[20 : 33] He won't be interested in the talk of those who think of themselves superior as truly spiritual, or as Paul calls them, arrogant. Paul will be interested in the power of these people.

For verse 20, the kingdom of God consists of power, not talk. The gospel of Christ crucified is power.

117, words, arrogant talk, spiritual superiority, empty the cross of its power. For Christians, 118, the word of the cross is the power of God.

123-24, Paul preaches Christ crucified and that is the power of God. 129, 129, 24, Paul's message wasn't impressive to the world.

It wasn't full of words of wisdom, but in demonstration of power. It is the word of the cross, 25, that means our faith doesn't rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

[21 : 41] Real ministry has real power. A ministry that compromises on the word and the way that Paul shows is a ministry that won't have any real power in the end. It may look impressive now.

It may be tempting to us. It may be able to attract flocks of students and young people. It may have huge numbers and lots of money, but it won't be powerful in any lasting way.

No matter what age and stage we are at, we have a job to do, a ministry to be part of, people to tell the gospel to. And Paul is saying, let it be the right kind of ministry, one that sticks to what is written, that sticks to the cross of Christ, no matter the cost.

Because that is the only hope for our city. 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 we as a church are marked by the cross now, then we hold out the power of God to those who are being saved.

Our only real power, the only real hope we offer, is Paul's word of the cross and his way of life that is marked by it. And it's a hope that looks forward to an eternal future of glory.

[23 : 13] What else could we have to offer? What else would we want to offer but the power of God? That's why we put up with looking weak, looking silly, looking foolish.

Because what we want to achieve here and now carries the power of God and we look forward to glory to come. That's why we follow Paul. That's why we hold out his gospel.

That's why we put up with all manner of things now. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that we can be sure of a great future of sharing in your glory.

Please spur us on by this to greater service of your kingdom, to be faithful in following those who've gone before us and holding out the wonderful gospel of Christ crucified.

Help us to be able to put up with whatever we need to to be faithful to you. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.