

1 Cor. 4 - 5 marks of a cross-shaped christian

Introduction:

If you are just joining us here in our series on 1 Corinthians, Paul, the apostle, has planted this church in Corinth, things were looking good, the ship left the harbor and was headed right on its desired coordinates. Paul leaves and some time passes when he receives word that the Corinthians have lost it. They set sail for America but they have ended up in Asia. Paul is now writing a letter back to the Corinthians to straighten some things out. What we've been dealing with these first few chapters is Paul addressing this church that is acting like the world, in the way that they have begun to promote certain leaders - to Paul's expense and creating divisions, jealousy and fighting among them, and in the way that they have been trusting in worldly wisdom rather than the wisdom of God, and in the way that they have left a life that gloried in Christ and have begun taking glory in themselves.

This morning in chapter 4 Paul closes down the argument against these divisions. How's he going to do this? Well once more he's going to point them back to the cross, but he's going to actually do it by way of personal testimony, and at the climax of this, he's going to say, "imitate me."

Paul models for us 5 marks of the cross-shaped christian

1. A cross-shaped christian is a servant and steward

4:1 This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

These Corinthians were so eager to look to one of their leaders and begin boasting in their talent, their ability, their accomplishments. They were boasting in men and man's ability rather than in Christ and what Christ has done.

Paul's attacking directly their propensity to lift up leaders or tear down leaders. He's basically building out what he already said in chapter 3:5, "what is Paul, and what is Apollos? Servants though whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. He might have planted, Apollos might have watered, but God is the one who gives the growth. They are nothing.

So he repeats it here, this is how you should regard us, us being the apostles, your leaders, regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

So the first word from this, not that there is any reason to, but I got to say it cause its straight from this text, there should be no boasting in matthew, or drew, or jonathan, or your small group leader, or anyone else here at Harvest, or any podcast or preacher that you listen to. We are nothing, Christ is everything. We are servants.

But this application leaks down, next to those who aspire for leadership in the church in any sort of capacity. You are aspiring for service. Climbing the ranks of christian leadership is really the journey of lowering yourself in christian service.

And next, this applies to all of us, though all of us aren't leaders, everything we talk about today is applicable to us. It's not the leaders are servants and everyone is exempt from that command of Scripture. No leaders are to lead the way in service. And as mentioned, Paul will say, imitate me later on.

So let me turn to you, what's your identity. How do you identify yourself? If I were to ask you for the top 10 words to describe you, would servant be on that list. Paul is saying we, as christians, are servants of Christ. That's who we are. You are not here to serve your self, you are not here to serve your spouse, your family, friends, your boss, your career, your hobby, or any fleshly desire, you are a servant of Christ.

Doesn't this just pull against your flesh, we just want to be something special. I want to have some significance, I want others to think incredibly things about me, I want to look good, I want to advance, You are a servant. Servants aren't special and not significant. If you are special it's because you serve someone special, but you aren't special in yourself.

There's two sides of the this coin, that's why I'm keeping servant and steward together. It's almost like servant is the job title and steward of the mysteries of God is the job description. Mysteries of God here is not like a mystery novel, it's the revelation of the gospel made known at the appointed time.

What does that mean, steward of the gospel? It means that your service to Christ rests upon you promoting the gospel through word and by example. You are doing everything you can to promote the gospel with your lips and with your life. This is your fundamental calling. It's not video games or fashion, or raising a family, or being successful at work, that's all secondary. That's not primary. Are those things bad, no, but they aren't primary. You leverage the gospel through these avenues.

This causes us to be careful with our lives. I was thinking this week about one of the most valuable objects I've ever had to carry, my wife's wedding ring. I mean from the moment I purchased that thing I became a steward of that ring, my job was to get that ring to her finger. Leading up to the engagement I was a nervous wreck that something would happen to this ring. I think I checked the hiding spot multiple times every day, and would even change hiding spots. And then of course the day of the proposal I was all the more anxious as the ring was no on the move. And thanks be to God it made it to her safely.

Point being, I was steward of that ring. How much more valuable is the gospel. We all have it. If you are a believer you are steward, the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes.

This is a beautiful picture. We couldn't have any more humble a position, servants of Christ, and yet, we couldn't carry anything more valuable, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How's your identity and purpose this morning? Are you a servant and a steward? If not, you are living for the wrong thing. Judgement awaits. That's Paul's argument. But if you embrace yourself as servant and steward, there is fullness of joy and freedom.

2. A cross-shaped christian seeks the praise of God

2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. 3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 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.

This is an interesting text, what is Paul getting at? Well these Corinthians have likely discounted Paul, and other leaders. They were writing them off. Not only were they not following Paul, but they were putting him down. To raise one leader up you got to put down another one.

What does Paul do, he turns their attention to what ultimately matters, God's praise. He says a steward must be faithful, by who? God. He says, judged by you guys? Are you kidding me? I could care less what you think about me! This isn't a high school popularity contest.

I don't even judge myself. He's saying, listen, what you think of me does not have ultimate significance and value. Even what I think about myself doesn't have ultimate value. He's quick to point out his conscience is clear, but his conscience is not God. God is judge. And by you guys writing me off you are standing in judgment over me, in the place of judgement reserved only for God.

It's interesting that the flow of this passage goes from the judgement of the Corinthians to the praise of God. Almost like Paul's sticking it to them, saying, that's fine if you want to put me down, but you just wait, on the final day God is going to vindicate me, I will get my praise then, and you will be shown how foolish you are.

But he emphasizes something very unique here, the purposes of the heart. **God will bring to light the things hidden in darkness, which are the purposes of the heart**, and its these hearts that are laid bare before God and judged. Were these purposes God glorifying or self glorifying. Only God can weigh the heart.

God wants your faithfulness. It's about being faithful. This levels our playing field. God doesn't judge our gifts, He judges how we use those gifts to His glory. It's not about drawing crowds or being flashy... It's about being faithful. You don't got to look like or talk like or act like anyone else but yourself, that's someone else's ministry. What has God called you to. How has God gifted you, wired you, designed you? That's what you need to pursue for His praise.

This means that when neither the praise of man nor the criticism of man distracts you from pleasing God. People start applauding you, big deal. People start criticizing you, big deal. Your focus is lazered in on hearing the only words you care about, "well done my good and faithful servant."

How you doing at this? Whose praise are you really about? Listen to me, if what people think about you makes you feel bipolar, you are living for the praise of man, not God. Man's praise should not lift you up, and man's criticism should not crush you.

Another revealing question here is this, how good are you at seeking the secret smile of God? When you do something good, serve someone, spend some time in prayer, spiritual disciplines, and you just itch to tell someone what you did, there's a good indication you may of been in prayer for the praise of man.

3. A cross-shaped christian embraces grace

6 I have 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. 7 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?

We are marching along the same theme here, Paul arguing against the lifting up of certain individuals and the putting down of others. This idea of going beyond what is written likely means going beyond Scripture. It was the stuff beyond Scripture that allowed them to promote individuals above one another.

The point is very simple here, every gift and ability you and anyone else has came by grace. That is, you did nothing to earn it, it has nothing to do with you except for the fact that you are the recipient. Why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

The cross-shaped christian realizes that everything he or she has has come by grace. Like Paul said in chapter 3 refering to his ministry, by the grace given me i planted this church, and later in ch. 15, speaking of his total person, "by the grace of God I am what I am." Paul knew this grace well. He was once a persecutor of the church and sought to kill christians, but God radically transformed his heart.

This is meant to destroy pride. If their is the slightest bit of feeling you deserve something in this life, that's pride. This is far reaching in the christian life, anything you can point to in yourself or about yourself that's good, it's there because of grace. And especially in this context of ministry, of being a servant of Christ, if there are ways that you excel in ministry and service, that's grace.

Have you gotten to the place in your life and heart yet where you believe everything is of grace? It doesn't matter how good you are at something, or how hard you've had to work, the work itself is still grace upon you. A great indicator of this is how much praise is in your heart, for God for what He's given you? But also, praise

for what God has given others? Rubber hits the road real quick there. At least for me. Deeply rejoicing with others that rejoice is challenging. What's that evidence of... jealousy. What's jealousy evidence of? pride. Those that have embraced grace for themselves don't judge others.

It is so easy to begin looking beyond grace. It might seem harmless but that's what tears a church apart. This prevents us from turning inward.

4. A cross-shaped christian suffers for Christ

8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! 9 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. 10 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. 11 To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, 12 and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; 13 when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

What the Corinthians have done here is become confused about reality. The Christian life is said to biblically be in an already-not yet state. What do I mean by that? When Christ came He inaugurated His kingdom. He came preaching, repent, for the Kingdom of God is upon you. The King is here. And resurrected, He ascended to the Father's right Hand where He reigns. That is true. That's the already of the gospel.

But on the other hand, look around, there is still sin and suffering everywhere, is this paradise? No. Scriptures point to a future time when the saints will reign with Christ over the world, sin and suffering will be done away with. We will be made righteous. That's the not-yet of the gospel.

Truth is in both camps. The challenge of the church is to shoot the middle. The danger on the other side, is everything is all suffering and there is no hope. The Corinthians were in danger of what is called an over-realized eschatology, they thought they had already arrived. This caused them to give in to the flesh and fail to live out the clear commands of Scripture.

Paul is reminding them that they have left Scripture. To drive the point, he, with a bit of sarcasm and irony, uses himself as an example.

"Oh you guys are already reigning! Literally, you have already launched out on your reign. Funny, cause I'm an apostle, and I'm suffering like crazy."

He says they, being the apostles, as the last of all, meaning "end of the procession" like men sentenced to death, becoming a spectacle to the world, angles, and men. He likely compares the apostles to what would happen when Rome would come back from conquered territories. First in line marching back would be the head generals, then would come the soldiers according to their rank, and finally at the end would come the conquered enemy in chains. These prisoners knew what their lot was. They were headed straight to the gymnasium, to face a gladiator or to be fed to the animals, to a watching crowd.

Paul is saying, you see those slaves being dragged in, spit on, and being killed for sport, that's us. That's the path of the cross, this was the path of Jesus. You are to be carrying the cross, and instead yall are wearing crowns.

He presses the point further...

10 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. 11 To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, 12 and we labor, working with our own hands.

Then he brings in the heart condition in these experiences, drawing a direct line to Christ.

When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; 13 when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

We have to embrace the fact that God has called us each to carry our crosses. We have not entered the promise land yet, we are not wearing crowns. The point of this is not to suffer for suffering sake, but it's to pursue Christ and His mission with the expectation of suffering, not comfort.

If life gets harder the more deeply and earnestly you follow Jesus, glory. Let's get rid of an expectation that life and ministry is supposed to be easy and comfortable. It's not. We aren't in heaven yet!

Now, neither does Paul expect everyone to have the same degree of suffering, that alone belongs to the Lord. Each has their own cup to drink. But let me remind you, that Paul asked for more suffering, why? that He may know Christ more. He prayed to know the fellowship of Christ's suffering.

Is that how you view suffering?

Suffering comes in all shapes and sizes, but the suffering Paul is talking about here is suffering that is brought on while serving Christ. Mission of personal holiness and sharing the gospel.

Is it if you are not slandered you aren't faithful, not I don't think that's the point. The point is, if you are slandered, it doesn't mean you aren't faithful.

But how might you be suffering for the gospel? Can we bring this a little closer to home? It's easy to think of missionaries that go over seas and suffer, but what about here?

Think about your small group for minute. What challenges are there? Small groups have priority at Harvest for how we are accomplishing the mission of God. A sacrifice in your small group is a sacrifice for the mission of God. I want you to connect the two.

Your workplace.

5. A cross-shaped christian is a changed life that changes lives

14 I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 15 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. 16 I urge you, then, be imitators of me. 17 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 in every church. 18 Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. 19 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. 20 For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. 21 What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

What Paul has just said is heavy, it's enough for them to feel ashamed, but he says this is not why I have written. I've written out of deep fatherly love. He reminds them of His authority in their lives as their spiritual father.

What I want to draw from this text is that first, this idea of power, which is not some crazy charismatic power here, its power to live for God and lead others into true salvation, knowledge of Christ. The point he is driving home is that christianity can not just be a bunch of talk, there has to be a changed life, a changed heart, transformation. Christianity is not bad people being made good, it's dead people being made alive. Our creed influences our conduct. Our beliefs influence our behavior.

If you have been able to divorce your beliefs from your behavior, those may not be true beliefs. They may be superficial. Life change is the ultimate test. You have new affections and new behaviors. Not perfection, but there is newness. It's called the new birth, conversion, you are a new creation in Christ. The cross-shaped christian lives new life in the cross.

But secondly, this changed life is also serious about others being changed. This is tied a bit to our first point. Paul says imitate me. We see Paul here actively engaged in leading lost people to Christ and then shepherding their lives. He's invested in them. He says elsewhere, I am in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. He could have written the Corinthians off, but he didn't, he's invested in them, he's after their growth in Christ. He says he can come with a rod or with love, like a truly loving father. Not that the rod is not driven by love, but it's there.

We too got to be engaged in mission and discipleship. We've been changed and now we are pouring ourselves out that others would be changed and grow up in the gospel. How are you doing that? Our primary channel for you to explore these thoughts and applications in our community groups. When I ask you about who you are concerned about seeing grow up in Christ, that's a great place to start. If everyone in your community group embraced mission towards one another and toward the lost, there's no telling what God might do.

Let's get out of the theoretical. Don't yes and amen these points without putting faces and names to them. Who is you are trying to see changed, and how are you accomplishing it.

Conclusion:

While we are going to fail at serving Jesus, let us remember that Jesus was the perfect servant for us. And while we will often be unfaithful, let us remember Jesus was perfectly faithful as the steward of the gospel, and Jesus was suffered

Jesus lived the life we could never live and died the death we all deserved.

Jesus is the perfect servant and steward of God's glory and grace. He pursued the obedience to the Father above all things, praying in the a garden before the cross, if there be any way that this cup could pass from me, take it, but nevertheless, not my will but yours be done. It's Jesus who live the perfect life, who died, and who rose from the dead, in order to give us power to live as new creations. And it's His power that works through us to extend His kingdom and build up His church.

Let us find all our rest and hope in Him, and while we do, may we imitate Him,

Let's pray.