

“So, You Want to Be a Leader...” // 1 Corinthians 4:1–16 // *Cutting Through the Noise* # 3

[Nathan Q+A / Prayer](#)

I want to go ahead and give you an opportunity to give your tithes and offerings right now. We just prayed for Nathan, Iran, etc., and you need to know *that's* the kind of thing your giving goes toward. Everything you give supports our mission to be a movement of disciple making disciples here and around the world. So, for those of you who give regularly and faithfully, [thank you](#). If this is your first time, or maybe you're curious as to how you can get engaged by financially giving to TSC, just **text GIVE to 33933** or go to our website to setup a recurring gift. OK?

1 Corinthians Bumper

1 Corinthians 4, if you have your Bible.¹

We have a generation of Americans who, for the most part, distrust authority--Many will say that's because our generation inherited the legacy of Vietnam and Nixon with Watergate; we remember things like President Clinton building an entire justification for lying to the American people based on his tortured parsing of the word "is." We're pretty sure whatever institutions or powerful people tell us is not the full truth and carefully spun to protect their interests. We've seen how institutions that claimed to represent truth and morality use those powers to perpetuate unjust practices that protected the powerful.

We've long since given up on objective, unbiased media--everything feels like fake news on some level because we are aware of how selective and how biased everything we hear is. It's always funny to me to hear news commentators speak disparagingly of "the media." "Now, big media will try to make you think..." and I think, "You are big media."

If you're in a position of authority, you likely know the struggle to maintain credibility--distrust of authority is just in our bloodstream as Americans. I mean, think about it: our entire country is based on not trusting authority. Sorry Britain, no taxation without representation; we're leaving. Keep your tea. And when our forefathers set up our government we created a 3-branch government system where one branch can cancel out the other 2 because we just don't trust any of them, Amen?

My point is, for both good reasons and bad, we distrust authority.² And, of course, this attitude affects our view of leadership in the church. And sadly we see in the church a lot of the same abuses of power that we see in the world--TV pastors stealing money, Catholic priests abusing children, church leaders covering up pastoral

¹ Works Consulted: Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians For You: Thrilling You With How Grace Changes Lives*, The Good Book Company; John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series), Moody Publishers; David Platt, "Church & Culture: Viewing Our Leaders & Ourselves in Light of the Gospel," sermon preached at McLean Bible Church on March 1, 2020; John Mark Comer, "First Corinthians: Clean Lens + Fresh Ears," sermon preached at Bridgetown Church on January 16, 2011.

² Adapted this intro from John Mark Comer.

abuse. Most of you know that in my time as SBC President that was something we had to deal with--churches in our country who prioritized the reputation of the institution over the safety of a victim.

So all that makes Paul's explanation in 1 Cor 4 of how we should view leadership in the church so important!

Vs. 1 Paul says, 1 "This is how one should regard us... ('us' in this sentence being church leaders). Let me be clear right up front: **the Bible is pro-leadership, pro-authority,** and says that all of us should be submitted to it one some level. But there's good authority and bad authority, and in this chapter Paul is going to give us 4 characteristics of good authority in the church.

If you are a leader, these are what you should aspire to be.

You say, "Well, I'm not a leader--how is this going to apply to me?" Everybody, at some point, plays the role of leader in somebody else's life. Maybe you're a parent, or you lead a small group, or you teach kids; maybe you run the nursing floor at your hospital or you are a shift leader at a restaurant; maybe you are just trying to be a good influence in someone else's life. Which means all of what Paul is going to say about himself applies to you.

So, vs. 1 for the first two characteristics: 1 "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

1. A Christian leader is... a SERVANT (of Christ) (vs. 1a)

- You might be a leader of others, maybe even having authority over them--but your fundamental identity is that of servant of Christ. And that means a couple of things, practically:
- First, it's never about *your* will or desires, but his:
 - Interestingly, the word Paul uses for servant here is not "doulos," his typical word for "servant." Instead, he uses "hyperetas," which literally means "under-rower." Like, on a boat. Paul says, "Jesus is the captain; the coxswain. My job is to row in beat with him." You ever seen a crew team? The coxswain calls out the beat, and all the rowers row in unison with him. He is the only one facing forward who can see where they are going. You get some rower who starts rowing to his own beat and he'll mess up everything up, even if he's really strong.
 - The mission statement of our church begins with, "Following the Holy Spirit..." At every point we've tried to say, "God, what do you want from this church?" Where do you want it to go? It's not about my agenda or yours but his.
- So, first it means his will, not mine, but second, being the servant of Christ means that the leader sees the group of people he or she is leading as Christ's, not his. For me, I know that God is the owner of this church; it doesn't exist for me or my purposes. I am, quite frankly, dispensable. I should never look at this church and say, "What's best for J.D.?" I should say, "What's best for Jesus?"
 - One of the best biblical examples of this is JtB. At one point in JtB's ministry, Jesus was starting to get more popular than John, and some people asked him, "Doesn't this bother you? You've spent all this time building a following and then Jesus comes along and upstages you?" JtB responded in a way every leader should respond, "No--he must increase, and I must decrease."

- He then compared his role of leadership to being the best man at a wedding. How many of you men have ever played that role? Ade Oni on our staff says he has been in 30 weddings. 30! I told him “you need less friends, bruh.” Traditionally, the role of the best man in a Jewish wedding is to support the groom; to make sure the wedding happens as planned. In our tradition he always stands right behind the groom--he’s got an important role, but if he’s doing his job, you shouldn’t really notice him. **It’s a great moment in every wedding...** “He must increase, and I must decrease.” I should be fine being invisible.
- One way I had to learn to apply this was when God really started to lead us to plant churches and send out missionaries. I don’t know if you know this, but the kind of people who volunteer to go on church planting teams are not sideline people... **me around table.**
- **I read about a very famous pastor in the 1800’s named Charles Simeon.** He’d built this big church and God raised up a younger guy in his ministry who could really preach--better than he could. The problem was that Simeon wasn’t quite ready to retire. But after praying about it Simeon knew this was better for the church and so he stepped aside. It was one of the hardest things he’d ever had to do. I read that and I thought, “I hope when that day comes for me, I’ll have the same attitude.”
- **The question for you is:** If you are assigned a leadership position, do you see that **leadership position as service?** Do you see your leadership role as a place of power over others or a place of service to others on behalf of Christ?
 - If you are a boss, do you see it as a place from which you can lift up your employees on behalf of Christ--to help develop them and bless their lives?
 - If you manage a company, is your goal to produce something that blesses society and helps make people’s lives better?
 - If you are a parent, do you see yourself as Christ’s tool to grow your kids for his purposes--ready to open your hands and let them go where he wants them to go?
- The point is, any leadership position must be seen first and foremost as an act of service to Christ, where you see yourself as just a tool in his hands.

That ties into Paul’s next thing:

2. A Christian leader is... a STEWARD (vs 1b)

1 “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. The “mysteries of God” that Paul refers to here is not whether Adam had a belly-button or if there’s an Area 51 in the Bible. No, the “mysteries of God” here refer to “the gospel.” That’s what he’s made clear in chapters 1–3: the mysterious thing God has been doing all along in sending his Son to die on a cross to reconcile the world to himself.

- Paul says, “Paul says, I didn’t write those mysteries, God did. I’m just passing them along. I’m just the mailman.”
- Paul doesn’t use the analogy “mailman” here, but he uses a similar one: steward. That word is *oikonomos* and means, literally, a household manager. It might be my favorite one-word description of a pastor.

- In those days, big families often had a steward that oversaw the affairs of the house. He managed the kids; he taught them; he took care of the property. But even though he was hyper-involved, they weren't his kids and it wasn't his property. His job was to execute the Master or the father's will.
- Here's what that means for me as a preacher. I don't decide what the kids eat. The father and mother choose that. My job is just to prepare it. The father stocks the pantry. I go to the pantry and I prepare what he's chosen. Well, God is the Father of the church. This book is what he has said you should eat spiritually. My job is just to deliver it to you. I didn't choose the food. If you don't like some of it; well, take it up with DAD. You are like, "I just want my preacher to serve up Twinkie's and Hot Pockets all the time." Well, too bad, dad wants us to eat vegetables sometimes too. John Stott says that doesn't mean the preacher can't be creative in how he presents it. No cook goes to a pantry and says, "OK, let's just work through this systematically from left to right." Green beans, green beans, green beans. Next meal: Potatoes, potatoes, potatoes. No, I can use my creativity to pull from different sections of the pantry and create an appealing meal.³ But the point is, I don't choose the food--I'm just a steward in the house. The Father makes all those decisions. And when he wants to serve vegetables, well, I serve that, whether we like it or not. So don't hate on me.

Servant and steward. BTW, in the next 3 verses Paul shows us how these first two words help address something every leader faces--criticism. Believe me, if you are a leader of any kind, you're going to get it. Lots of it, good and bad. Paul got it, and he says I first process all criticism through the lens of **servant** and **steward**:

Check it out. Because I am a servant of Christ and his steward, he says: **3-But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.... Why? 4 It is the Lord who judges me.**

- At the end of the day, I don't answer to you, I answer to him. And, btw, if you are a Christian leader, you really shouldn't be surprised by criticism, either. I mean, we are charged to represent Christ in a world that murdered him. Jesus said, "What they did to me you can expect them to do to you." So expect criticism when it comes, and keep your eyes on me because you answer only to me.
- Now, let me be clear--and this a very important caveat--I welcome a lot of criticism because I know that God sometimes uses other people--sometimes friends, and sometimes adversaries--to point out shortcomings in my life. And I want to remain open to that. Over the years countless people have spoken into my life and shaped me into the leader and the man I am today.
 - One of things I've tried to lead our team in is being open to criticism--not just being open to it but seeking it out. **"The one who is wise in their own eyes, there is more hope for a fool than for him."** (Prov 26:12) I need the eyes of others.
- But... at the end of the day, as a servant and steward, my soul answers only to God. People say to me sometimes, "When I look online, you seem to get a lot of criticism, how do you handle that?" Well, first, I don't pay attention to it, **SO STOP POINTING IT OUT TO ME.** But, truthfully, criticism bothers me like it would anyone else. I want people to like me. But I have this vision in the back of mind (**E.g.** God looking down at me.)
- Y'all, I gave up long ago trying to manage everybody's opinions. I'm just worried about him.⁴

³ John Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait*

⁴ If I think responding to somebody's criticism will help clear something up or serve them, I'll do that. But I know I can't try to manage everyone's opinion or win their approval, and that's ok, because I am the servant of Christ and his steward, so

3. A Christian leader is... only a SURROGATE (vs. 6)

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.

Remember, in this whole section, chps 1–4, Paul is dealing with divisions in the church. He has said that a lot of these divisions come from the Corinthians being overly dependent on some earthly leader. Paul says my goal here is for you not to think more highly of any of us than what you should. Earthly leaders are just temporary stand-ins for Jesus; or, even better, instruments in his hand. Ultimately, he and he alone is responsible for your salvation.

Yes, God uses different people at different times in our lives, but he's always the one working in them and through them. Think of it like a hand in a glove. If a doctor puts on a pair of latex gloves and performs a life-changing surgery on you, the miracle is not in the glove but the hand that fills it. The same with God.

As I said the first week, **there will always be famous people in the church.** There were in the early church--Peter and Paul and Apollos were types of celebrities there at Corinth. And I told you that there's nothing wrong with feeling connected to one of these people or indebted to them because of how God used them in your life. The problem is when you don't eventually transfer the roots of your identity and dependence off of them and onto Christ. Being overly devoted to, or overly dependent on, an earthly leader is a sign of immaturity, not devotion.

Real quick, look at how Paul starts this section back at the beginning of chapter 3: **3:1 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ... 3 for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? 4 For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?**

Paul says, your dependence on earthly leaders is not a sign of your spiritual depth but your spiritual immaturity. The analogy with parenting here is great. For a while, we parents stand in the place of God with our kids. When my kids were toddlers, everything they learn about the authority and care and love of God comes through me and their mother. That's by design. We're supposed to learn to love and trust and obey God by learning to love, trust and obey our parents. (That's why, btw, the command to honor your father and mother comes right in the middle of the 10 Commandments. The first 4 commandments are about our responsibility to God--no other gods, honor the Sabbath, etc--they focus on our responsibility to God); the last 5 are about our responsibilities to our neighbor--our horizontal relationships. The hinge between those is the command to honor 'our father and mother' because our parents for a while are earthly representations of God. We learn to submit to authority by obeying them.)

I perform for an audience of one. Every leader should think through Paul's counsel in Galatians: "If I were still trying to win the approval of people, I would not be a servant of Christ." Gal 1:10.

So, that's all well and good. But over time, we want our children to wean their faith off of us and put it into God. And if not, they are not growing up. If your child is 18, 19, 20 years old and still obeys you and depends on you like you are God, they've never grown up. (And, btw, I know a lot of parents who seem to want this!) But that's not the point of parenting. The point is for you to transfer their obedience and dependence off of you and onto God. And then you totally release them.)

Paul says, "That's how we leaders are with you." Paul, in fact, calls himself a spiritual father to them in vv 14–15: **14 I'm writing you... as my dear children... 15 For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.** I'm not here to be a your leader or your Savior or foundational in your walk with God--I'm just here to get you to him.

I asked you the first week, "If I died tomorrow, would you leave this church, or would you stay?" And I said, "If you'd probably stay, good for you. You've grown up. Your allegiance is to this body. Your allegiance is to the mission. **But if you're like, "Well, I'd leave,"** well, that shows you are still a child. Because your allegiance is to me and that's a pretty big problem. There's nothing wrong with first coming to a church because the preaching connects with you, or the worship really engages you, or your kids love the student ministries. But over time you've got to put your roots into Christ and into his church and not into a particular personality.

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...

Who is Paul? Who is J.D.? We didn't die for you. You weren't baptized into our name. It's not our Spirit that fills you. *The Lord* is your shepherd and the rest of us are just temporary and dispensable stand-ins. Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" over and over in these verses. *In Christ*. In Christ is your identity. In Christ is your hope. God wore me like a glove for a while, but the saving hand is his. Human leaders come and go; some will disappoint you. Hear me: this church will disappoint you. I will disappoint you. But Christ will never leave you or forsake you, so put your roots in him.

Listen: There's two kinds of authority in the church: There's **bad authority** - that's where leaders use their power, privilege, or position to direct attention to themselves; Then there is **good authority** - where leaders use their power, privilege, or position to direct people to him.

And that leads me to #4:

4. A Christian leader is... a SPECTACLE OF SUFFERING (vs. 9)

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... 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.

Paul says to Christian leaders: You should *expect* to suffer. Even to be a “spectacle” of suffering.

Many leaders feel shocked or scandalized when they suffer, like God has somehow let down his end of the bargain. ‘Hey God, I did my part. I was faithful. I did what you asked me to do... and now this?’

Paul says, “That’s what we are called to!” We follow in the footsteps of Jesus. He lived perfectly and yet suffered and died.

The Corinthians had bought into something Martin Luther later call “the theology of glory.” The “theology of glory” is where you assume that God’s presence on earth will be always be accompanied by earthly vindications of success. What the NT teaches, however, he said, is not a “**theology of glory,**” but a “**theology of the cross.**” The theology of the cross: those most endowed with the Spirit of Jesus are those who should expect to suffer the most.

By the way, don’t miss the brilliant example of Apostolic sarcasm in vs. 8: **8 ...Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!... 10 We (Apostles) 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.** How do I know that is sarcasm? Well, remember how he described the Corinthians in chapter 1? Not many wise, noble, amazing. And Paul says we Apostles, who suffer more than anyone, should disabuse you of the idea that closeness with God equates to earthly success.

A Christian leader is called to suffer and shouldn’t be surprised when it comes. **A few years ago a very successful businessman** in our church and his wife and 2 kids felt called to **resign** his high paying executive job in corporate America and leave his comfortable home in Chapel Hill to go live overseas in a Muslim UPG. So they did it. He resigned his job; sold their house, and was getting trained to go. And then their son developed a medical condition. He wrote this:

*'Wait! Lord, this isn't what is supposed to happen. We're submitted to your will for our lives, we've sold just about everything we have, we're disassembling the American Dream, leaving everything and everyone familiar, and moving our family the medical capital of the Southeast to a place with little to no healthcare and hostile to the gospel to be YOUR witnesses ...and then you do **this?**'* All these feelings of “it’s unfair,” or “God, have you forgotten us?”

Later, he said, he learned that this was all part of the process. Through the suffering, or through the unfair treatment, the criticism, the slander, the difficulty, the hardship, Christ was revealed in them and then made known better through them. And he loved this quote by A.W. Tozer: **“It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly before he has hurt him deeply.”**

Or to quote Paul, Phil 3:10, **“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”** (Phil 3:10, NIV)

The fellowship of his suffering is the only way to the power of his resurrection. There's a famous story about the St. Dominic, the 12th century founder of the Dominican order of monks. He visited the Pope, who was surrounded by all the wealth and splendour of early medieval Rome, and the Pope boasted that Peter can no longer say "Silver and gold I have none." St. Dominic replied, yes, "but then again, neither can he say, 'Rise up and walk.'"

Parents, do you feel wronged by your kids? It's part of the process of God bringing salvation into their lives. Suffer well. Suffer patiently, like Christ. It's his vehicle for the power of resurrection in their lives.

Are you getting unfair treatment or pushback from friends you are trying to help? The wrongest I've ever been treated in my life is by people I was just trying to help and encourage to do the right thing. Suffer well. It's part of his appointed process.

Are you a Christian leader--a pastor, a missionary, listening in--wondering why people are treating you so unfairly? Suffer well, my friend. The power of resurrection only comes through the fellowship of the sufferings of the cross.

Conclusion:

Look at how Paul ends this: **16 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 in every church."**

Paul wants you to not only observe these things about his leadership, he wants you to become these things in your leadership of others. We want every leader at TSC to be characterized by these 4 things. And btw, I love how Paul emphasizes, "I'm no different than you. As an Apostle, I'm not on a different plane, called to sit in positions of privilege and power while you are called to serve and sacrifice and suffer. I lead in all those things.

A few years ago I heard a mega-pastor say that pastors of large churches should not really work in the church, anymore, but ON the church. What he meant was that pastors no longer serve, live in accountable relationships, do the hard work of relationship building and sharing Christ and sacrificial generosity. My greatest service is to be an effective CEO of an organization that helps you do those things. I just want you to know that we fundamentally reject that view of leadership here at TSC. We want our team to model all these things--servanthood, sacrifice, generosity, being accountable in small groups, sharing Christ with others, and etc. That's what we require of them.

BTW, tragically, the pastor that made that statement was one who would end up abusing his power and falling from ministry. God did not design leaders for the stage, for the spotlight. He designed them for the towel and the wash basin to serve others and wash their feet like he did. It's the only place there's resurrection power. It's the only place there is spiritual health.

Summit, let's champion that culture of leadership here--and let's raise up a generation of leaders--in the church, the business place, in the home, that lead like this.

Now, let me close with one special and very important word:

- Some of you in our church have been hurt in the past by a spiritual authority. And I want to say "I'm sorry. For a person to abuse their spiritual authority is a horrible sin. And I want you to hear this, from a pastor, you should always feel free to flee from spiritual abuse."
- We'd like to be a help to you in this if we can. After the service is open, we'll have some of our team--men and women, staff members and volunteers down front at every campus. Please tell us if you've suffered. We want to pray with you and help bring healing where there's been pain.

As you bow your heads, let me ask you a question:

- If you are a leader, are you seeking to lead like this? Servant, steward, surrogate, and sufferer
- Let me ask another to all of you: Have you put yourself under spiritual leadership? Who do you submit to? If the answer is no one, that's a huge problem. **Prov 18:1 says**, "An isolated man will end up seeking his own desire and will rage against all sound judgment." Or, as we often say around here, "Things that grow in a secret garden always grow mutant." God wants you to be under godly leadership and authority. To surround yourself with people who will push back on you and call out things in your life. Have you put yourself under leadership like that? One the best ways you can do that is to join this church.
- Do you feel like you are just now starting this process and ready to learn more about Jesus? Let us know that. Text the word READY to 33933 or come talk to one of our prayer counselors down front as soon as service is over.