



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 4:6-13

Topic

Paul challenges the believers in the church at Corinth to live less like the world and more like himself and the Lord's other other apostles

Title

"Apostle-like Now"

Introduction

Senator Barbara Boxer got a little miffed the other day while questioning Army Corps of Engineers division leader Brigadier General Michael Walsh. Although it is polite military protocol to address a woman as "ma'am," Boxer took exception to it and said,

"Could you say 'senator' instead of 'ma'am'? It's just a thing. I worked so hard to get that title. I'd appreciate it."

It's a good example of a person who has arrived at some plateau in life and who wants to be treated accordingly.

The believers at Corinth were acting as though they had 'arrived' at some plateau. They were judging and critiquing the teachers God had given them, choosing favorites and dividing the church over personalities.

First Corinthians 4:6-13
"Apostle-like Now"

If anyone had 'arrived' it would have been the apostles - men like Paul - whom the Corinthians were judging and quick to criticize.

With a masterful use of spiritual sarcasm, Paul pointed out to them that the Christian life isn't about who has arrived. It is about anticipating our future arrival in Heaven. We are to live now by looking forward to our arrival.

I'll organize my thoughts around two questions: #1 Are You Living In Christ As If You'd Already Arrived?, or #2 Are You Living For Christ Anticipating Your Arrival?

#1 Are You Living In Christ
As If You'd Already Arrived?

(v6-8)

It should be obvious from even a Cliffs Notes version of the New Testament that our life on earth ought to be characterized by sacrifice and a measure of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus. The believer is always a pilgrim, a stranger, who is wandering through on his or her way to the city in the future whose builder and maker is God.

In the world, in our secular sphere, the opposite attitude prevails. We are mostly working to get ahead and do less work until we get to the point where we do no 'work,' when we retire, and do *what* we want, *when* we want.

In Corinth those attitudes got mixed together. The believers had a worldly, secular approach to their spiritual lives. H.A. Ironside summarized it like this:

The Corinthians were settling down to enjoy the benefits of the Gospel without the self-denial that should go with it and were making themselves comfortable in the world.

They were living as if they had already arrived. Are we? *Because I know we don't really want to!*

The next few verses can help us gauge whether or not we're living as if we'd already arrived.

1 Corinthians 4:6 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.

The “things” Paul was talking about were the illustrations we looked at earlier in this chapter and in chapter three. He compared himself and Apollos “figuratively” to builders, farmers, under rowers and overseers. He used himself and Apollos as examples, as models, so the believers could “learn in” them how to serve on the earth.

It's good to have an example, to have a model. Whatever you are doing it should end up looking like the model.

In Corinth the believers definitely did **not** look like the model! There were two glaring differences in them:

1. The believers in Corinth were “think[ing] beyond what is written.” Commentators have a tough time with this phrase. It seems to mean, in context, that they should reject the wisdom of the world in favor of the wisdom of God as revealed in the Word of God. So much of their trouble was being caused by bringing in to the church a worldly, secular mindset. They were running the church the way you'd run a secular enterprise.
2. The second difference between the Corinthians and the model was that they were “puffed up on behalf of one against the other.” They were dividing the church into groups depending on which personality they supported rather than supporting the church itself as something the Lord had raised up and then gifted with certain men to lead it.

When there is worldly wisdom and personality conflict, a secular model prevails.

No Christian in their right mind wants to fall into a secular model. What can we do to avoid it? We can ask ourselves a series of questions - like the ones in verse seven.

1 Corinthians 4:7 For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Question #1 - "Who makes you differ from one another?" Paul's point seems to be that each of us has our own unique gifting and personality from the Lord. If it is from Him then who are we to judge one another or to prefer one another? We're not always the best judge of what we need. We know what we want and think we need. On a practical level, we should let the Lord raise-up ministers and ministries because He knows best what we need to grow and to mature.

Question #2 - "What do you have that you did not receive?" You have been fearfully and wonderfully made by God. Even your natural abilities are gifts. Certainly any supernatural abilities are His gifts. So when I look at a Christian I am looking at God's vessel, the way God made them and then gifted them. I should thus be awfully careful judging them or criticizing them as long as their ministry is godly. I may not like their particular style but who am I to judge that?

Question #3 - "Why do you boast as if you had not received it?" In other words, *Why are you filled with pride, drawing attention to yourself, because of your supposed abilities?* The man or woman who draws you to themselves or who causes division is always acting carnally.

These are all reasonable things to ask ourselves so that we might check ourselves and be certain we are proceeding spiritually rather than growing more secular.

The Corinthians were way beyond checking themselves! So Paul launched into what commentators agree is sanctified sarcasm.

1 Corinthians 4:8 You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us - and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!

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It's best to understand this verse in terms of Bible prophecy. We believe that after Jesus Christ returns to earth in His Second Coming that the church will return with Him. We will reign with Him over the earth in our glorified bodies.

The Corinthians had skipped a few steps. **The Corinthians were acting as though they had already arrived back on the earth to reign with Jesus!**

The Corinthians were living like kings while the apostles were grinding out the ministry. They had no spiritual credentials because they were short on sacrificing and suffering but they acted as if they were the experts.

Now is not the time to think we are reigning. It's not the time to enjoy being "rich" with this world's goods or to work only to be "full" and satisfied with earthly pleasures. No, it's the time for farming, for building, for under rowing, and for overseeing while the Master is away.

It's surprisingly all too easy to fall into thinking "I've arrived" as a Christian or as a church. In fact, we need to work hard to avoid the secular mindset. The Lord wants to stretch us, wants to challenge us, wants to put us in places where we must continually depend upon His Holy Spirit. We tend towards ease and comfort and then convince ourselves God is blessing us with it because we've 'arrived.'

God is probably not going to lead you into places where you feel more comfortable and have less to do! If that's the direction you are going, or if that is your goal, then it may be worldly wisdom and a secular mindset taking hold.

Really, you don't want to go backward, do you? *Of course not!* You want to be led by God forward, learning to trust Him and witnessing His amazing grace and power.

Ask yourself,

#2 Are You Living For Christ Anticipating Your Arrival?

(v9-13)

There is an interesting play on words in this next section. Look at verse ten for just a moment where Paul said, “we are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ.”

- The Corinthians were definitely “**in** Christ.” They were believers.
- But they were not living “**for** Christ.”

No matter their getting together and exercising various gifts; no matter their exuberant worship. They were “in” the Lord but not living “for” the Lord.

The apostles were living “for” Jesus. Paul explained some of the differences.

1 Corinthians 4:9 For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

There are a couple of illustrations here that we are at first unfamiliar with. They both refer to the games in the Roman amphitheaters.

1. The word “displayed” might refer to the doomed gladiators who were forced into the amphitheaters to fight and die. I say ‘might’ because other scholars say it refers to condemned criminals who were exhibited last, *after* the gladiators, to be devoured by the wild beasts as a sort of finale to the festivities.
2. The word “spectacle” refers to the custom of parading conquered people chained through the streets on the way to the amphitheater. Its use gives credibility to the definition of “displayed” as condemned criminals.

The “apostles” were God’s top guys. They were His primary representatives on the earth. They were building His church, speaking forth His Word, performing miracles, signs, and wonders. They had amazing and far-reaching spiritual authority.

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While some of the believers in Corinth were vying for position and rallying people around them, the apostles were going about risking their lives, despised by the world, in order to bring the Gospel to men.

Think of it. Some guy or gal in the church at Corinth was judging whether or not Paul's ministry was 'good.' Maybe he or she didn't like a few things Paul emphasized. Didn't like a few of his decisions. So they went around rallying folks to some other teacher, maybe Apollos. All the while Paul was living on the edge, constantly at death's door, faithfully sharing the Gospel.

1 Corinthians 4:10 We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!

If the apostles were God's men, and that is how they were treated, then that is how all believers potentially will be treated if they are serving the Lord. If we want the world and even other believers to think of us as "wise" and "strong" and "distinguished," then we are *not* following the model set forth by the apostles.

Or by Jesus, for that matter. Did the world love Jesus? Was He respected by the religious establishment or the political authorities? The Lord told us neither would we be loved and honored by the world. It hated Him and it will hate us.

You don't have to go out of your way to be despised by the world - just walk in the Way with the Lord and you will be.

Who is your Christian hero? Is it someone who is successful by the world's standards? Or some humble servant laboring at serving the Lord?

Paul gave a sort of spiritual resume in verses eleven, twelve, and thirteen.

1 Corinthians 4:11 To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless.

1 Corinthians 4:12 And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure;

1 Corinthians 4:13 being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.

First Corinthians 4:6-13
"Apostle-like Now"

When you apply for a job it is not uncommon for your prospective employer to ask a series of questions regarding your expectations and your experience.

In serving the Lord, are you expecting to be richly rewarded and have your every need met? Or are you willing to be hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, beaten, and homeless?

Are you expecting to have all your needs met? Or are you willing to “labor, working with your own hands?” In context it meant to have a job by which you supported yourself if necessary to not be a burden upon others. I’d expand it to mean that you need to be willing to do whatever needs to be done in order to serve God’s people.

As to your experience, when you are reviled do you bless in return? When you are persecuted - when things get rough - will you endure it? When you are defamed will you entreat?

I think you get the idea! But just in case you are missing the point Paul adds that God’s choicest servants are “the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things...”

- “Filth” is the dust and dirt of the ground swept up and thrown away.
- “Offscouring” is the stuff that soils your pots and pans after cooking and needs to be scrubbed off.

Did Paul have self-esteem issues? No - **he had Christ-esteem**. He esteemed himself a servant of Jesus Christ and understood that until he arrived in Heaven he would sacrifice everything and suffer many things for the sake of the Gospel.

Most of us will not suffer the kind of things the apostles suffered. But do we suffer at all? Are we living sacrificially? Are we apostle-like now?

It’s an individual question we must each ask ourselves.

We don't want to be merely "in Christ," as glorious as that may be. We want to be living "for Christ."

In other parts of the world our brothers and sisters are being asked by Jesus to live a lot more like the apostles of the first century. Their faith is costing them things that are very dear to them - even their lives in some cases.

We may or may not be called upon to do the same. Nevertheless we must develop and maintain a mindset that it is normal, the normal Christian life, to both sacrifice and to suffer for the Lord.

Live in a way that anticipates your arrival!