

Iglesia de Carne

Studies in First Corinthians

Text

First Corinthians 4:1-21

Topic

The apostle Paul challenges the believers in Corinth to be like himself

Title

“Apostle-like Now”

The world’s most dangerous jobs have spawned a few television shows besides *Deadliest Catch* and *Ice Road Truckers*. The most recent, on the Discovery Channel, is *Hard to Kill*. Here is the description:

As a Green Beret Special Forces sniper who has served tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, Tim Kennedy is uniquely familiar with tough, dangerous jobs. Now, Tim risks life and limb by tackling some of the most dangerous jobs in the world.

Episodes feature bomb techs, bull fighters, and avalanche rescue workers.

Researchers recently conducted a study to determine the 25 occupations with the highest fatality rates. (They reviewed fatal injury rates for 72 occupations from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries). I find the list surprising. Here are the top ten:

1. Fishermen and related fishing workers
2. Loggers
3. Aircraft pilots
4. Roofers
5. Refuse and recyclable material collectors
6. Structural iron and steel workers
7. Truck drivers
8. Farmers, ranchers and other agricultural managers

9. First-line supervisors of landscaping, lawn service and groundskeeping workers
10. Electrical power-line workers

Since you're wondering, Law Enforcement was 18th and Firefighters 24th. I couldn't find any lists for the most dangerous jobs in the First Century, but I'd put "Apostle of Jesus" in the top five, if not at #1. As far as fatality rates, of the eleven original apostles who remained after the resurrection, ten were martyred. That's a 91% fatality rate. John was the only original not martyred - but it wasn't for lack of trying.

There were other First Century apostles. The apostle Paul described apostling as being hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, beaten, homeless, reviled and persecuted. In verse nine he said, "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."

Aren't you glad we are not apostles? Before we finish breathing that collective sigh of relief, however, we read in verse sixteen, "Therefore I urge *you*, **imitate me.**"

This isn't the only time Paul will play the imitation card:

- In verse one of chapter eleven we read, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."
- In his letter to the Philippians he wrote, "The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do..." (4:9).

Before we ask of ourselves, "Am I imitating Paul?" we'd do well to get more of his behind-the-scenes insight into the life of an apostle. I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 The Life You Are To Imitate Is Costly**, and **#2 The Life You Are To Imitate Is Compassionate.**

#1 The Life You Are To Imitate Is Costly (v1-13)

I hate hidden costs. They come in a variety of sneaky ways. *Consumer Affairs* calls one "the grocery shrink ray." A couple of years ago the magazine found that companies have reduced package sizes by as much as 20% without reducing prices:

- Ivory dish detergent, which used to come in a 30 ounce bottle, now comes in a 24 ounce size.
- Haagen Dazs ice cream containers used to hold 16 ounces, but now hold 14.

Companies make subtle changes to the packages but generally keep the price the same because consumers are more attuned to changes in *price* than *packaging*.

There are no “hidden costs” with Paul. He didn’t portray the Christian life as a walk in the park; he said it was like a march of captive, condemned men. Let’s count the cost with Paul.

1Co 4:1 Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Jesus said He did not come to be served, but to serve. To be Christ-like is to be a servant; to be Apostle-like is to be a servant. We’ve come to think a servant is a volunteer for some relatively easy, temporary task; something we ‘sign-up’ for. We think that we can quit at any time. Serving God is costly, not convenient. A “steward” was a devoted servant who was in charge of the master’s house and household. He was the administrator, the manager, the overseer, of the master’s property and people.

Paul’s spiritual stewardship was to preach the “mysteries of God,” which means to reveal things previously unknown - like the church. Perhaps this was a gentle reminder to the Corinthians that they were saved only because God had directed His obedient steward to bring them the Gospel at great personal cost.

1Co 4:2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

I love this because it is doable. You may not have much in the way of talent or ability. Your gift-set might seem weak compared to others. But all of us can be “faithful” to what the Lord has given us to accomplish.

I like the phrase, “**found** faithful.” Can you be “found” when it comes to serving? *You can be.* It’s doable.

1Co 4:3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself.

Paul was, in fact, being “judged,” or criticized, by the Corinthian believers. He describes himself as looking like a homeless guy. I’m guessing they’d have been embarrassed to introduce him as their pastor - even though he was their founder and pastor for 18 months.

A few weeks back I referenced an Instagram account, PreachersNSneakers. It’s a site about church leaders wearing expensive designer shoes. It started when the Instagrammer saw a pastor preaching in Yeezy 750 Boost sneakers. “They are “super rare” and retail for upward of \$1800.” There’s a lot of Gucci belts and jackets on there, too.

I have mixed feelings about the site, but I think it is safe to say that the apostles didn’t wear rare Yeezy sandals.

1Co 4:4 For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.

He wasn’t trying to justify himself. He had been faithful to Jesus and that was the only judgment that should matter to a servant. You answer directly to your master. (That doesn’t cancel out reasonable accountability to others).

It’s natural to want to justify ourselves; it’s supernatural to ignore that natural bent and keep working as unto the Lord, despite criticism.

1Co 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.

- The “hidden things of darkness” are probably those things we do when we think no one is watching or listening.

- The “counsels of the heart” are our motives. Even good works can have wrong motives. The Lord will sort out all of that and reward us accordingly.

In the church we are to “judge nothing before the time.” It doesn’t mean we ignore things like sin and disobedience. No, we must “judge” them and we’ll see an example of that in chapter five as Paul tells them to put out of the church a sexually immoral man.

It means that we are to quit passing judgment on one another’s earthly service.

“Until the Lord comes” is a good everyday philosophy. The Lord could come at any moment. When He does I want to be found serving Him as His steward.

1Co 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” were the “figures” - the illustrations - that we looked at earlier in this chapter and in chapter three. He compared himself and Apollos “figuratively” to farmers, builders, servants, and stewards. He used himself and Apollos as examples to imitate so the believers could “learn in” them how to serve on the earth.

The Corinthians were “thinking beyond what was written” in God’s Word by bringing human wisdom to bear on spiritual things. One result was that they were being “puffed up” by embracing one teacher or teaching over another.

1Co 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*?

“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?

“What do you have that you did not receive?” 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.

“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 is always carnal.

1Co 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!

I don’t think we have to wonder if this was sarcasm. Since it is in the Bible, however, it is *sanctified* sarcasm. I’m sarcastic... *And now I have a biblical defense for it.*

A recent study published in the *Babylon Bee* found that, “People who pepper their speech with sarcasm are great witnesses - way better than Christians who are nice all the time.”

The Corinthians were living like kings while the apostles were grinding out the ministry. They had no spiritual cred because they were short on sacrificing and suffering.

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 serving, and for stewarding while the Master is away.

1Co 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.

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.

The word “spectacle” refers to the custom of parading conquered people chained through the streets on the way to the amphitheater.

While the believers in Corinth were armchair quarterbacking the church, the apostles were going about risking their lives, persecuted by the world, in order to take the Gospel everywhere.

“Made a spectacle... both to angels and to men.” Interesting that Paul mentioned angels, and before men.

Apparently the angels don’t know everything God has planned either. I’m sure they look down on the earth and wonder why God insists on using people when they would do a much better job.

1Co 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!

The Corinthians thought of Paul as “foolish... weak... and dishonored.” His comparison is more of his sarcasm. The value system by which the believers were judging was exactly the opposite of what it ought to have been. No matter how hard we try, the world’s value system is always creeping in to the way we evaluate ministers and ministries.

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

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

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

Most of these words need no further explanation - except to point out that Paul was not exaggerating. He and the other apostles suffered all these and much more. He could have added imprisonments and shipwrecks and many other terrible things.

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

Alternate translations are *scum* and *garbage*.

Put THAT on a poster announcing an outreach:

- “*One Night Only! The Filth and Offscouring of the World Come to Hanford!*”
- Or think of it as a name for a Christian Band - *Filth & Offscouring*. (*Skillet* comes close - although that’s not why they chose it).
- Or a best selling book, “*40 days of Scum*.”

This was the knitty-gritty of being an apostle and, therefore, being Apostle-like. I’m not saying we must have these experiences as imitators of the apostles. I know few people in the west who do, although elsewhere many of our brothers and sisters in Jesus are being mistreated in just these ways.

We are to imitate the apostle’s faithfulness as servants.

Faithfulness will sometimes be costly. We need to embrace the reality of suffering as servants, and thereby be ready for it.

#2 The Life You Are To Imitate Is Compassionate (v14-21)

We haven’t mentioned one of the toughest jobs of all. It’s not going to appear on any list... But it should. It’s **parenting**. If you’re a parent, no argument. If you’re not a parent... *Better to just keep your opinions to yourself*.

The apostle Paul suddenly becomes Papa Paul. He compares himself to a father who will discipline the children “with a rod” if necessary.

The way the Corinthians were treating Paul, you'd think he'd write them off and devote himself to the believers that liked him in Philippi. Instead, he had the compassion of a parent.

1Co 4:14 I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn *you*.

Paul dealt with believers in a context of loving them, and of always having their best interests in mind. If he used sarcasm, or spoke bluntly, it was because he considered them his spiritual kids.

1Co 4:15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *you do not have* many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

There were no believers in Corinth when Paul arrived. As a steward of the mysteries of God, Paul preached the Cross and people responded and were saved. Why dishonor him by criticizing his style, and preferring the 'sneakers' of others who had made no real investment in them?

There's a poignant moment in *Rocky V* when the young fighter Rocky had been training gives all the credit to his new manager. It hurt.

1Co 4:16 Therefore I urge you, imitate me.

Certain words and phrases get introduced into discussions and make the rounds before they become overused. For a while now, believers have been describing certain distinctives of their church or beliefs as being "in our DNA." You might say future prophecy is in our DNA, for example.

Well, since God had sent Paul to be the founder of the church in Corinth, they ought to have imitated him. It ought to have been in their spiritual DNA to be like him - to have his values. Really, he should not have needed to remind them to be like him.

1Co 4:17 For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.

Timothy was one of the best known of Paul's companions and fellow-laborers. But check this out: the apostle describes him as his beloved and faithful son in the Lord; and in First Timothy he writes to "Timothy my true child in faith" (1:2); and in Second Timothy he addresses him as "Timothy my beloved child" (1:2). You can bet Timothy was like Paul and could and would restore Paul's philosophy of ministry.

1Co 4:18 Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you.

1Co 4:19 But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power.

Apparently some of the believers in Corinth thought that Paul was afraid to visit them. Seriously - with the dangers Paul faced every minute of every day, do you really think a puffed-up carnal Christian would strike fear into his heart?

Paul trusted in "the power" of the Cross, not the "word" of those integrating worldly wisdom with God's Word.

1Co 4:20 For the kingdom of God *is* not in word but in power.

One commentator remarked, "The final test of wisdom is power; the word of the Cross not only has the power to mentally illumine, but also to morally save."

Whatever so-called 'wisdom' the Corinthians were being drawn to had no power to save or to sanctify. Only the Gospel promises that enabling through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

1Co 4:21 What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?

Dads and moms always prefer “love and a spirit of gentleness.” I always despaired at the “wait until your father gets home” days. Had to “come... [with] a rod.”

Paul was filled with compassion for them. Now you might think that was easy because, after all, they were his children. Not so. It’s much easier to disown, or abandon, spiritual children. His so-called kids were, after all, dishonoring and disowning him.

Factor in that apostling was life-threatening, and you see how incredible it was that Paul maintained compassion. All that mattered to him was that they were in danger. Their attitude toward him was a symptom of something that could ruin them.

Their treatment of him hurt, but it could not cause him to quit on them.

In English, the word “imitate” can mean two almost contrary things:

- It can mean *to pretend, or to do an impression of.*
- It can mean *choose or take something as one’s own.*

I’ll know if I’m pretending to be Apostle-like if I refuse to pay the cost as a servant; or if I have no compassion upon others - especially those who wrongfully malign me.

Hopefully, we can all be found choosing to be Apostle-like - taking the example as our own - as we wait patiently for the Lord’s coming.