

As we go through life, all of us have to have difficult conversations. Maybe when you were younger you broke up with your girlfriend or boyfriend. Some of you can remember telling your parents that you were not going to choose the career path they wanted for you. Some of you have had to confront a neighbor or let someone on your staff go. No matter how hard we try to avoid them, life requires having hard conversations. Let's do a poll. How many of you hate hard conversations and avoid them like the plague? How many of you dislike them but don't shy away from them? How many of you actually enjoy them? We need to get you in to see a counselor soon. Just kidding! As we continue our study of 1 Corinthians, we are in chapter 4, and Paul has a really hard conversation with the Corinthians. He confronts them for pride and arrogance in several areas of life. As we read through and apply this passage, we are going to see that God calls us to humility in three specific areas: humility in our evaluation of people, humility in our comfort and success, and humility in our response to spiritual leaders.

Let's begin by reading the first five verses.

This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God. (1 Corinthians 4:1-5)

In these verses we are called to humility in our evaluation of people. Paul gives three reasons for more humility. First, Paul reminds us that people are accountable to God, not us. Paul begins by applying this to himself and other leaders in the church. He says, "This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ" (4:1). The emphasis here isn't on Paul and his companions being servants, it's on their being servants who belong to Christ. He says, "All of you have been evaluating me—my preaching, my leadership, my character—but let me tell you how you ought to think of me." If Paul and the other leaders were primarily servants of the Corinthians, then the Corinthians would have every reason to critique, analyze, and evaluate them. But because they are servants of Christ, it's only Christ's perspective that matters. Paul says he doesn't even judge himself. In 4:4 he says, "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent." In other words, "I think I'm doing well, but I'm not the arbiter of truth." Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that as long as our conscience is clear, that's good enough. Seneca, the famous philosopher from the first century who mentored Nero, and was later forced by Nero to kill himself, said: "Can anything be more excellent than the practice of thoroughly examining yourself at the end of every day? How delightful and untroubled the sleep that follows self examination—when the soul has either admonished or praised itself. Every day I avail myself the privilege of pleading my cause before the bar of self." Thinking about our lives is good. Examining our character and motives is helpful. But the bar of self isn't the ultimate bar. At the end of the day, it's not our opinion that matters the most. It's God's! Romans 14:4 says, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall." If I commissioned a piece of artwork and you came and watched the artist paint the painting and you said, "I don't know—I don't really like the colors you've chosen, that's not the style I prefer"—who cares!? It's not your painting; it's my painting! It doesn't matter if you like it; it matters if I like it. We are so prone to be up in people's business, evaluating, critiquing, analyzing, and judging. We are so prone to spend too much time evaluating our own actions—defending and justifying. We need to humble ourselves and say the only opinion that matters is God's.

There's another reason we need humility in our evaluation of people: we often make judgments prematurely. In 4:5 Paul says, "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes." What is Paul saying here? He is saying it's too soon to judge other people. We don't have enough information to make complete assessments at the present moment. Sometimes people surprise us and upend our initial impressions or even prejudices. In 1982, the then Washington Redskins, recently renamed the Washington Commanders, went 0-4 in the NFL pre-season. If you judged them early on, you would have thought they had no hope. They ended up winning the Super Bowl that year! Instead of being quick to judge people, which is a sign of pride and arrogance, we need to be patient and slow to speak, and allow the Lord, in his perfect timing, to reveal all things.

There's one more reason we need humility in our evaluation of people: we don't know people's intentions. Oftentimes when someone does something we don't approve of, we are quick to assume we know why they did what they did. They are greedily, self-serving, trying to be manipulative. Perhaps. But Paul says later in 4:5, "The Lord will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart." It's not our job to try to psychoanalyze other people, to pick apart their behavior and make assessments on their intentions and motivations. It's God's job to bring those things to light and expose them. He gets to justify or condemn, not us.

When it comes to humility in evaluating people, there are three lessons God has been teaching me that I think will be helpful for us. Here's the first: always begin with grace. Don't be hyper-critical. Don't assume the worst. Begin with grace. In Matthew 7 Jesus says, "In the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." We all want others to be kind and gracious and assume the best about us, so we should be kind and gracious and assume the best about them. Simple as that.

Second, never equate a critical spirit with maturity or wisdom. Some people specialize in finding flaws in other people and they say, "I have the spiritual gift of discernment." No you don't. You're judgmental and mean. Galatians 5:15 says, "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." Someone with true maturity and wisdom might be able to see the flaws or weaknesses in others, but they spend fifty times as much energy celebrating the good than they do critiquing the bad. True maturity and wisdom are always encompassed by love.

Third, speak kindly of others. You might have something unflattering to say about someone else, and maybe you are sure that you are right. Even so, in most situations, it's not right to say. Ephesians 4:29 says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." I've had to distance myself from a few friends because every time I'm around them, they constantly criticize others. God wants us to be building others up, not tearing others down. No matter how it might seem in the moment, when you throw dirt, you always lose ground.

The first part of this chapter calls us to humility in our evaluation of people; in the next section, we are called to humility in our comfort and success. The Corinthians lived in a city with a lot of wealth and influence. They were doing well, and they were proud of it. They were getting puffed up and arrogant, and Paul speaks into that situation, using a decent amount of sarcasm.

Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? Already you have all you want! Already you

have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment. (1 Corinthians 4:6-13)

Did you pick up on all the sarcasm in this passage? Paul is confronting the Corinthians for how much pride they were taking in their comfortable way of life. He says:

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| You are rich | We are homeless, hungry, thirsty and wear rags |
| You are reigning | We are cursed, persecuted, slandered, and brutally treated |
| You are wise | We are weak, dishonored fools |
| You are strong | We are the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world |
| You are honored | We are on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena |

It’s like they were going to Instagram posting pictures, highlighting and celebrating their elevated status. Then after using the words they had chosen to describe themselves (*left side of the chart above*), he describes the situation he is in (*right side of the chart above*). The final description is really interesting: he says that he is on display at the end of the procession. This is a reference to a Roman military processional. After a Roman army was successful in battle, they would be welcomed home with a huge military parade. The general would be up front, the soldiers would be in the middle, and at the end of the procession were all of the prisoners of war, the captured soldiers from the other side. They were in chains, they were mocked and spat upon, and at the end of the parade they were marched into the arena—the Colosseum—where gladiators and lions and alligators ripped them to pieces. Paul says, “You’re spending your time boasting about how good you have it and how everyone loves you, while my life is full of untold hardship and people are literally trying to kill me.”

This passage gives two reasons we are called to be humble about our comfortable way of life. The first is: we are not responsible for most of our comfort and success. Paul says in 4:7, “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” People want to talk all the time about being a self-made man or woman. You didn’t make yourself; your parents made you. You didn’t think up your existence and then create yourself; God knit you together in your mothers womb and gave you the breath of life. People want to say, “I’ve had all this success because I worked hard. I outworked everyone else around me.” Ok, if you were born in the 4th century BC, would you have been as successful? If you were born in Rwanda in the early 90s and watched your parents be killed in the civil war, would you have been as successful? The Bible says in Acts 17 that God is the one who determined when you would be born and where you would live, not you! There are some people who have to walk an hour each day to draw water from a well in order to do their laundry and cook their food. When we want water we turn on a faucet. We have safety

because of our military and police force, we have high quality public education, we drive on roads that someone else built, ride on airplanes that someone else flies, surf the internet and no one knows how it works. We benefit from so much, but what do we have that we did not receive? We need a reality check and the deep humility that comes from it.

That's the first reason we need humility in our comfortable way of life, but there is a second: Jesus and the apostles didn't enjoy comfort and success. Remember when Jesus walked the earth he was homeless; he said he had no place to lay his head at night. The world didn't look at Jesus and say, "He's so attractive and compelling." The Bible describes him as someone who had no beauty or majesty to draw people to him; he was one from whom men hid their faces. They would see him and look away. The crowds called for his execution; he was beaten and hung on a cross. It wasn't only Jesus who that happened to—eleven of Jesus' twelve apostles were arrested and killed as well, which is exactly what Jesus said would happen. In Matthew 10:22-25, he told them, "You will be hated by everyone because of me...The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master...If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!" In other words, Jesus said, since the world rejected me, it's not a good sign if the world accepts and celebrates you. Don't be worried if the world despises you. What should worry you is if the world welcomes you as its own. If we have a lot of success and comfort in the world, it's more likely than not a sign that we have accommodated the standards of the world rather than picking up our crosses to follow a crucified Messiah. Jesus said in Luke 6, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you." Obviously we live in a different day and age than the Corinthians in the first century, and yet, there is still something essential to this teaching that we have to hold on to. Instead of being like the Corinthians and aspiring to a life of privilege, luxury, acceptance, and social esteem, we need to follow the example of Paul, humble ourselves, and follow Jesus in a lifestyle of consistent sacrificial love. If you happen to have worldly blessings, don't boast in them, don't be proud because you have them; instead, be deeply humble, knowing that your life is more comfortable than the life of Jesus, the apostles, and the vast majority of Christians who have lived throughout history as well as the vast majority of Christians who are alive today.

Did you see why I began today by talking about confrontational conversations? We've already looked at Paul calling them to humility in their evaluation of people and in their comfort and success. Here's the final area: we are called to humility in our response to spiritual leaders.

I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit? (1 Corinthians 4:14-21)

Whereas Paul was sarcastic in the previous section, he shifts and writes very personally and emotionally in this section. He is lovingly admonishing them to respond rightly to his spiritual authority. There are three aspects to his appeal.

First, we see Paul cared for them as a Father. He said, "Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel." The word "guardian" can more literally be translated as "baby-sitter," someone who watches over you for a brief

period of time. Paul says, “That’s not who I am to you. I became your father, because I was the one who told you the gospel and witnessed your new birth in Christ.” Like a good father, Paul says, “You can trust me. I will not steer you wrong. I always have your best interests at heart.”

Second, we see Paul lived his life as an example for them to follow. Paul said in 4:16, “I urge you to imitate me.” In 4:17, he said, “I have sent you Timothy....who will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus.” It’s not as though Paul is saying he is the expert and everyone has to be like him, but he wants to use his life and character as an example for them to follow, a model for them to emulate. This was particularly important in this window of time. These people had only been Christians for a few years. Not one of the four gospels had been written down yet. Likely only one, at most two, of the letters that would become our New Testament had been written. The Corinthians hadn’t met Jesus personally, so they needed a real life, flesh and blood example of what it looks like to follow Jesus.

I didn’t grow up golfing. When I was 27, a friend gave me a set of clubs for my birthday and invited me to play with him. I wasn’t married, I didn’t have kids yet, so I had a bit of time on my hands. He had been playing the game his whole life and had won tournaments. When I was learning how to golf, he said, “Watch me. Follow my example. Don’t do it that way. Do it this way.” There was nothing pompous or arrogant in that statement; that’s how an experienced person trains someone to do something they have never done before. Paul says to the Corinthians, in something infinitely more important than golf, “Follow my example; let me show you how to be a disciple of Jesus.”

Finally, we see Paul wants to be gentle, not harsh, with them. Paul reminds them that he is coming to visit them, so they need to shape up before he comes. He says in 4:21, “What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?” When Paul comes back to Corinth, he doesn’t want to see people living in egregious sin. He doesn’t want to find disunity, gossip, or immaturity in the church. He doesn’t want to have to bring out his spiritual authority card and discipline them for their sin. He wants to show up and find them loving one another, building each other up, reaching the lost, pursuing a life of purity and holiness. As a father of young children, I know what he’s talking about. When I come home from church, I don’t want to find my kids running around naked, yelling, screaming, and fighting with one another. I want to find them dressed and in their right minds, playing nicely with one another and obeying their mom. I want them to approach me respectfully and say, “Welcome home, Father, we’ve missed you!” I hate when the first thing I have to do when I come home is discipline one of my kids. But because I care about them, if that’s what the situation calls for, that’s what I’ll do. That’s Paul’s heart for the Corinthians: please, please, let me embrace you warmly, not with discipline.

How does this apply to us today? Like Paul called the Corinthians to be humble before their spiritual leaders, we need to be humble before our spiritual leaders. This might seem self-serving because I’m the senior pastor here, but I’m under spiritual authority, too. There are eight other elders at our church to whom I submit my life, my character, and my major decisions. This isn’t something only for people in the pews and not for those on stage; this is for everyone in the church. Of course we don’t exercise spiritual authority in a controlling, manipulative, cultish way. Rather, like we go to a medical doctor for advice and wisdom about how to care for our bodies and we hopefully not only listen to their advice but put it into practice, we do the same with spiritual leaders who care for our souls. We seek them out for wisdom and advice, and we don’t simply listen to their council, nod dismissively, and do whatever we want. We submit to their authority.

I’ve seen people at this church respond to this in really admirable ways, and also in unhelpful ways. Within the last few weeks a family in our church reached out to one of our elders and said, “We are thinking about buying a new home. Here’s why we are thinking about moving. Here are the numbers and

the finances. We want your prayers and your wisdom to know if this is a God-honoring decision.” We’re not a cult—we don’t control people’s decisions—but here is a family proactively seeking the prayerful wisdom of their spiritual leaders. Two weeks ago a family reached out and asked to meet with a few of our elders as they are considering leaving one job and entering another. It involved a change of location, a change of careers, and they wanted the prayerful wisdom of their spiritual leaders. Again, they get to make the call, but how wise and humble to proactively seek out counsel from their spiritual leaders. Sadly, I’ve seen just the opposite, too. I’ve seen elders from our church meet with a married couple who were experiencing difficulty in their marriage and our elders implore them to make important changes in their lives. I’ve watched that couple reject the counsel and end up in a divorce court. I’ve seen our elders sit down with a man who got caught up believing conspiracy theories from the internet. Our elders confronted the lies, and exposed the misinformation, but he refused to listen and left the church. Five months later he left his wife. Absolutely tragic.

We need to be wise enough and grounded in Scripture enough, to say, “God has established order and authority in the church. We want to willingly and joyfully submit to godly authority and experience the blessing and protection that comes from it.” It is very different from the hyper-individualized way of life so prized in America. It’s the mutually submissive way of life in the kingdom of God!

I began today by asking how many of you like having those hard conversations. I want to end today by asking the question in a slightly different way. Instead of asking how eager you are to have hard conversations, I want you to consider how you respond when others have hard conversations with you. When you open the Bible, you are going to be challenged, confronted, and exposed like the Corinthians in this passage. You are going to be called to humility. Will you open your heart and let God speak to you? Or will you harden your heart and turn away? Your posture makes all the difference.