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# 1 Corinthians

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

In his words in this verse, Paul now contrasts the ironical statements made from verses 8-10 concerning how the Corinthians perceived themselves with the reality of how the apostles actually lived. The contrast is all the more striking when considering that the apostles were the schooled; they were the leaders; they were those who saw Jesus, were instructed by Him, and were granted His personal commission.

He notes their sad state and says that it persists "to the present hour." This means that the poor living conditions of the apostles didn't end with the establishment of churches, as if there were a sudden influx of power, prestige, and money flowing to them. Instead, despite what we today consider the exalted status of those early men of God, they lived in a state of deprivation. Paul says "we," indicating the general lot of the apostles, were:

- 1) In "both hunger and thirst" - Those at Corinth went to church at someone's home or elsewhere, they ate bread together, fellowshiped, and then returned to their homes for their regular life of food and drink, along with all the other benefits of a home. At the same time, the apostles were generally moving from place to place to spread the news of Christ. There were no guarantees of lodging and a meal and so hunger and thirst were a normal and expected part of their travels.

- 2) "Poorly clothed" - Some translations here say "naked." The idea is one of clothing which is worn out from continual use, even to the point of being ragged. As travelers, they wouldn't carry along a suitcase with changes of clothing, but would simply wear the same clothes continuously. In this state, they would enter a synagogue or congregation and speak to those who were wearing their normal clothes or even a set of clothes set apart for special occasions. Instead of being the height of fashion when attending, they would be the poorest dressers of all. This state wouldn't be unknown to the Corinthians and they couldn't claim Paul was making this up. They had seen him and Peter already and knew his words were so. As it was true with him, there is no reason to believe any other apostles were dressed any better.
  
- 3) "Beaten" - This is a customary theme of the book of Acts. It seems everywhere Paul went, someone was pulling at him, whipping him, slapping him, stoning him, or otherwise attacking him in some other physically offensive way. Even the high priest of Israel had him so abused -

"And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth." Acts 23:2

- 4) "Homeless" - The apostles were persecuted to the point where they would have to leave home and family. And the very concept of having a stable home was contrary to the type of ministry they conducted. They wandered about at the direction of the Spirit to whatever place was selected to hear the good news of the Gospel. The thought of a regular job and home probably never crossed their minds as they set their faces to the task ahead of them each day.

But Paul understood that these things had nothing to do with a right relationship with God. If anything, they strengthened it. Paul's words of Romans 8:35 show that none of these things have any bearing on their intimate fellowship with Christ -

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" Romans 8:35

In his follow up to this, in Romans 8:39, Paul says that none of these things, nor any other thing in heaven or on earth would be effective to "to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

He will continue with his sobering words to those in Corinth, and thus to us, of the conditions they suffered for Christ. Let us not worry if the latte machine is broken at church Sunday. It is of little consequence.

Life application: Are you timid to go to church because you don't have clothing which is as good as the others who attend? Or, do you wish the dirty person in the pew next to you would take a shower and put on better clothes when coming to church? It is with certainty that either perspective is wrong. The apostles themselves were surely in far worse clothing. Would they be accepted into your church today?

*Old clothes and raggedy shoes on his feet*

*Who let this person into our church today?*

*When we shake hands and when we greet*

*To that dirty fellow, I've nothing to say*

*But didn't Christ die for Him too?*

*Weren't the apostles dressed worse than he?*

*Lord forgive my heart for making such a to-do*

*I'm sorry for such thoughts Lord, please forgive me*

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

Paul continues to relay the plight of the apostles as they set forth to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Not only did they hunger and thirst, wear poor clothes, and receive ill treatment, they also didn't impose upon others who may have recognized their plight. Instead, he says they "labor, working with our own hands."

In Act 18, it is noted that Paul was a tent-maker and worked in that job while travelling in order to pay his way. In Acts 20, he even notes to those in Ephesus that he "provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me" (Acts 20:34). In other words, he not only worked to pay his own way, he paid for those he travelled with as well.

In similar words, he wrote in both his epistles to those in Thessalonica concerning his personal labors and the reason for it. From his first letter, we read this –

"So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God." 1 Thessalonians 2:8, 9

Despite this, and maybe partly because of it, he notes to the Corinthians that they were "reviled." As common laborers, they would have been looked down on by many whom they encountered. All they would see is a poorly dressed, smelly person who claimed to have a message of salvation and freedom. What a paradox! What a contradiction! They would have been the brunt of jokes and taunting. And yet, despite being reviled, they in turn would "bless."

Following the words of the Lord to those He instructed, they showed that this was the way to win true and sincere converts to the message they preached. In Matthew 5:44, Jesus gave this admonition to His followers -

"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."

This blessing of those who came against them was from the wisest Counselor of all and proved to be the true door to opening hearts and minds. But not only did they bless when reviled, Paul continues by saying that "being persecuted, we endure." The blessings were given and regardless of whether the persecutions continued or not, they endured. They kept blessing, they kept praising God, and they continued to proclaim their message.

In their persecution a greater reward was promised. Again from Matthew 5, we learn of the blessing for those who are so treated -

"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."  
Matthew 5:11, 12

Although these words were spoken by Jesus, under the law to those under the law, they are confirmed in the apostle's actions and by the words of Peter to those he addressed in his first epistle -

"If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed *are you*, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter." 1 Peter :14-16

Though there are no apostles today, there are missionaries who carry on this type of work in areas which have never before heard the good news. They have the words of the Lord, the examples of the apostles, and the history of many generations of missionaries who have gone before them to be assured that this is the right approach to evangelizing those who have never heard the good news before. It is an awesome and blessed life that far too few consider in this world of ease and luxury.

Life application: Take time to pray for those who are in the mission field. They are doing a task which has continued on for 2000 years and which is the only hope of life and blessing for those they encounter.

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

In the previous verse, Paul began a list of things which demonstrated the lowly and unappreciated state of the apostles. He continues that list in this verse to show the difficult circumstances they faced and yet how they handled them. He begins with "being defamed, we entreat."

In essence, they are cursed or held in great contempt by those they encounter. However, they turn the proverbial cheek and "entreat." Rather than biting back, they plead for grace between themselves and the offending party. Instead of cursing them and wishing their destruction, they look to reconciliation and hopes of their salvation.

Paul then notes how they are actually considered in the eyes of their persecutors by saying, "We have been made as the filth of the world." The word translated as "filth" carries a technical sense to it. In essence, it concerns men who are set apart for death in order to provide expiation. A comparable concept, although death is not mandated in this instance, is found in the Old Testament book of Leviticus which reads -

“Now the leper on whom the sore *is*, his clothes shall be torn and his head bare; and he shall cover his mustache, and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' He shall be unclean. All the days he has the sore he shall be unclean. He *is* unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling *shall be* outside the camp." Leviticus 13:45, 46

The unclean person is cast outside the camp in order to carry away the infection from it. This is the kind of thing that Paul is intimating in how he is treated. In addition to this he says he and the other apostles are considered "the offscouring of all things until now." The word here finds its roots in a verb which indicates rubbing, scraping, or shaving and so carries a similar idea to what he said about being filth. In order to be cleansed, they look at Paul and the others as something which needs to be first removed. If one were to think of cutting away hair which was full of chewing gum, the picture would be appropriate.

Life application: The apostles were willing to endure great verbal and even physical abuse for the sake of the gospel. A time is probably coming, and it may be prior to the rapture, where all who call on Christ will be faced with similar persecution. Be ready to follow Paul's example when the time comes.

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

Now, in contrast to his words which he has thus far spoken - words of irony followed by words which included examples of personal hardship and trial, Paul removes the irony and explains why he gave those striking examples by saying, "I do not write these things to shame you..." His words were not intended to degrade them, but to effect a positive change in thinking (and thus in life) in them.

His words of irony weren't intended as a means of embarrassment, and his words about his sufferings weren't meant to exalt him above them as if they hadn't somehow earned a right through personal trial which he had. Instead, and even if it had this effect, they weren't intended to shame or taunt them. Rather, he had

more lofty and righteous intents in mind. In contrast to this perception, he explains, "but as my beloved children I warn you."

He has been acting and speaking as a father would to his own children - for good, for edification, for building up and exhortation. Just as a father will use examples from his own life in an attempt to show the right path, so Paul was doing thus far. When a parent tells of their past hardships, it is in anticipation that the child will listen and think, "Oh, I can avoid that by not doing what he did."

Whether it concerns financial mistakes, blunders during times of schooling, faults that came up in relationships, or whatever else, the parent uses personal experience, mixed with irony, to impart wisdom to his children. This is Paul's method here and it is with a noble and heartfelt intent for his children in Christ there at Corinth.

Life application: The Bible has many notes of instruction which include examples of failure as well as success. There is also irony directed to its audience. None of these are intended to shame us in the sense that we can never measure up. Rather, they are intended as a means of getting us to think on *how* we can measure up. And then God gives the answer - by putting our faith and trust in Jesus Christ and living according to His instruction. That instruction is found in the Bible; read your Bible.

**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.**

1 Corinthians 4:15

"For" is given based on the warning of the previous verse - "I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you." The reason for the warning then was that "though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, you do not have many fathers." A father will look after his children in ways that an instructor won't. A good example to understand this is to see the only other times

that the term for "instructors" which is paidagōgous (a pedagogue) is used. In Galatians 3:24, 25, Paul uses the term twice when referring to the law -

"Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."

A pedagogue was a slave who conducted children to school and looked over the care of their schooling. In a broader sense, it is used of teachers or instructors of any general kind. This is what the law was intended to be. It was meant to lead us to the knowledge that we need more than just formal schooling, but a relationship and personal care. This is what Jesus provides us.

Paul is using this same idea in a metaphorical way about himself. Many teachers and instructors had come to Corinth, but only Paul could claim "for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." He had been the one to originally bring them the message of Christ and to plant the church at Corinth. As a father begets children, he had begotten them in Christ through his preaching ministry. And so between them in this there was a bond similar to a father for a son. He felt the same way about Onesimus when writing to his friend Philemon -

"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten *while* in my chains..." Philemon 1:10

Life application: Are you still familiar with the person who led you to Christ? If so, take time to write them a note or give them a call and tell them how your walk is going. There is a special bond in this that deserves an extra moment of your time. If you have lost contact with that person, lift them up in prayer today to your heavenly Father who knows exactly who they are and how to reward them.

## **Therefore I urge you, imitate me. 1 Corinthians 4:16**

Paul has been speaking of divisions within the church for four chapters. Such divisions can only lead to a breakdown in harmony, infighting, and other trials. Eventually, they can ruin or completely divide a church. So one might think that Paul is actually causing a new division by his words in the previous verse (that he is a father to them) and in this verse by asking them to imitate him. Is he trying to greedily have the church follow him and not Apollos?

The answer is no. His statement that he is a father to them implies that they are children to him. A father will look out for good, not evil, when guiding his children. And a father will have his own example to follow. In the case of Paul, he states his example explicitly in 1 Corinthians 11:1 by again instructing them to imitate him, while explaining why -

"Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ."

Paul's example is Christ. If this is so, then asking them to imitate him is, in effect, simply learning the greater example of Christ. This is a common theme of Paul, often implied, often explicit. In Philippians 3:17, he makes it explicit again -

"Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern."

As another example, found in Ephesians 5:1 & 2, he will actually go around himself and ask them to directly imitate God -

"Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."

The reason for speaking this way to the Ephesians as opposed to how he speaks to the Corinthians ("imitate God" rather than "imitate me") is that the Corinthians were carnal and not yet grounded in how to imitate God. If he were to have told them to "imitate God" as he did to those at Ephesus, they would have had nothing substantial on which to accomplish this admonition. One must first learn what God expects before imitating Him. As Paul knew what God expected, they could follow him and thus learn how to imitate God.

Paul's words are logical, clear, and demonstrate the wisdom which God granted him in order to handle every situation in the most effective way.

Life application: How important it is for instructors, teachers, and pastors to understand what God expects *before* teaching others. Without being God-like in their behavior, those who are instructed by them will most likely never truly learn how to imitate God.

**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.** 1 Corinthians 4:17

"For this reason" here will explain Paul's previous statement which said, "Therefore I urge you, imitate me." As it was noted, Paul wasn't trying to cause a greater division by having those at Corinth imitate him over some other apostle. Rather, he was asking them to imitate him because he was an imitator of Christ, something they lacked and wouldn't get right unless they had a proper example.

In support of that reason, he told them he has "sent Timothy to you." Timothy was Paul's protégé and would fill the need of the Corinthians on Paul's behalf. This Timothy, Paul states, "is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord." Like those in Corinth whom Paul called his "beloved children" in verse 14, Timothy was also. Because Paul looked at all of them as sons, he felt that Timothy would be a great help in understanding what he was conveying. However, later in this letter, it still

seems unsure if Timothy would actually make it to Corinth or not because he uses the word "if" concerning his travels -

"And if Timothy comes, see that he may be with you without fear; for he does the work of the Lord, as I also *do*. Therefore let no one despise him. But send him on his journey in peace, that he may come to me; for I am waiting for him with the brethren." 1 Corinthians 16:10, 11

Should he make it as planned, Paul says that he "will remind you of my ways in Christ." In other words, we can look at his petition to "imitate me" from verse 16 as a sound request because of his "ways in Christ." Paul wasn't trying to misdirect the Corinthians, he was trying to properly direct them. With Timothy confirming this, they could be certain that they were imitating that which was proper and their faith wouldn't be misdirected.

In fact, their doctrine and practice would be in a manner harmonious with all of the churches which had been established because Paul claimed that his teaching was the same "as I teach everywhere in every church." He was consistent in his proclamation of Christ, consistent in his doctrine, and determined to follow up to ensure that these things continued properly.

How nice it would be today if all seminaries taught a proper message of Christ and then occasionally stopped by to check up on the doctrine of their graduates! What we fail to do, Paul carefully and meticulously accomplished.

Life application. Discipleship is an immensely important aspect of the faith. Leading people to Christ is only the beginning of a life-long journey of discovery. If you have the necessary training to teach others what is right and sound about Christ, make an effort to impart that to those who are less informed. Paul deemed this immensely important and so should we.

## **Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you.**

1 Corinthians 4:18

In the previous verse, Paul noted that he was sending Timothy to those in Corinth for a reminder of his consistent message which he teaches everywhere he goes. Having said this, he already knows that "some are puffed up." The idea, as noted previously, is that of pride. When yeast is put into dough, it causes the bread to rise, thus picturing being prideful, full of boasting, or arrogant. And some translations do use the term "arrogant," but by doing this, the imagery is lost. It will be more especially the case as Paul will use the example of dough puffing up in chapter 5.

He then notes the reason for some being puffed up by saying it is "as though I were not coming to you." Those who were involved in these divisions and who took the side of Apollos would certainly say, "See, he's afraid to come himself and so he's sending Timothy instead of coming personally." It would then be a poke in the eye to those who claimed Paul was their man. And thus, the divisions would continue. This is why he has preempted them in his letter with this statement. He in fact has plans already to come to Corinth, but there were also other things on his plate before he could. This will be explained to them at the end of the letter in chapter 16 -

"Now I will come to you when I pass through Macedonia (for I am passing through Macedonia). And it may be that I will remain, or even spend the winter with you, that you may send me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits. But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great and effective door has opened to me, and *there are* many adversaries." 1 Corinthians 16:5-9

Life application: An effective way of dispelling problems is to think in advance what other issues may arise and then preempt them with words of surety about the resolution to those issues. In doing this, it may completely alleviate the necessity to fix a problem that otherwise could have been avoided.

*Wonderful Creator - my Lord and my God. Thank you for the unimaginable beauty you've given to us in this world - from sandy beaches and high mountain peaks, to trees of immense wonder and animals with such splendid diversity. There are a thousand shades of color when I look in any direction and there are tastes which delight my tongue. The smells of nature often overwhelm me with joy. Sometimes, it's more than I can contemplate. Thank You for every wonderful blessing of life. Amen.*

**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. 1 Corinthians 4:19**

"But" is used to contrast his previous words saying "as though I were not coming to you." He had no fear of discharging his duties as an apostle and he had no timidity in facing those who looked down on him. He intended to come and he eventually did make it back to Corinth. This occurred shortly after writing his second letter to them. However, at the time of writing, the future was unknown to him and so he uses a common term of the apostles, "If the Lord wills."

Outside of the promises of the Lord, there can be no certainty in the future, not even the near future. James explains our utter dependence on God and His hand of providence quite well -

"Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what *will happen* tomorrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you *ought* to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." James 4:13-16

This same attitude of looking to God's will, even for the immediate future, is used elsewhere by the apostles and it shows that they were willing to allow the Spirit to lead them and they had resigned their ultimate end to the capable hands of the

Lord. And so, "if the Lord wills" that Paul return to Corinth then at that time he indicates, "I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power."

This final portion of the verse tells us that Paul would be willing to listen to the words of the various factions in Corinth, particularly the leaders of the divisions, and he would be able to tell which were merely puffed up orators without a firm grounding in the word as was given, and those who had considered the power of the gospel, the truth of Scripture, and the work of Jesus Christ and had presented it carefully. Those who did so were those filled with the power of the word, the power of the Spirit, and the power of proper influence over the flock.

Life application: Running ahead, without properly handling God's word, has led to a breakdown in correct theology throughout the Christian world. Unfortunately, it is the flock who suffers the most. People have jobs, families, and responsibilities which consume their time. Therefore, their instruction comes not from self-studies, but from those who are supposed to be trained already. Extreme care and tender love and respect for the word of God is of paramount importance for the one who would be a teacher of it.

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

"For" refers directly back to what was just stated about Paul's coming to Corinth and his discernment of the power rather than in puffed up words. Those who were puffed up were divisive and they were filled with words without substance. On the contrary, Paul was filled with the power of the Spirit and the ability to affect real change in the lives around him.

Of course he did this with the miraculous - healings and the like, but more than that, he did it by the power of the words he spoke. The words of the gospel, both then and now, effect real change in those who hear them. Drunkards turn into solid citizens, prostitutes become princesses, and the proud turn and humble themselves before God. There is great power in the words of the gospel, words to

which the puffed up boastings of the world can never attain because the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

This then is "the kingdom of God." It is not an earthly kingdom, but a spiritual one. It is a group of called-out believers who have put their faith in Jesus Christ. Someday, this kingdom will be physical as Christ sits on His throne and rules among His people, but at this time, it is a kingdom of faith in Him and in the surety of God's word.

Life application: There is power in the gospel message, but the power is of no use if it isn't shared. The world is quickly getting darker as the church age comes to its close. Before that terrible Day which will fall upon all the unrepentant, isn't it right that we open our mouths and share? Go forth in the power of the gospel!

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

After his many comments of chapter 4, which are tied in completely with the preceding chapters concerning "divisions" within the church, Paul asks in a forthright manner, "What do you want?" In essence, "The choice is up to you when I come and the results will be realized upon my arrival." And the choices are given:

- 1) "Shall I come to you with a rod?" Is discipline necessary when I arrive? The idea of using a rod is for one who needs correction and redirection. If it needs to be used in a harsh way, so be it. A rod can be employed for something as simple as redirecting the head of a lamb to move where the shepherd desires all the way to smashing one's enemies with brutal force. "Is the rod what you wish?"

Or,

2) "Shall I come to you in love and a spirit of gentleness?" Paul writes about love later in 1 Corinthians 13 in a way that shows what he means. The demonstration of love is one which "does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:5, 6). Along with this would naturally come "a spirit of gentleness." There would be no rod of correction, but gentle words of direction, guidance, and a harmonious spirit. "Would you prefer love and gentleness?"

Paul will continue to write in this manner in his second letter to them. In 2 Corinthians 10:2, he will tell them, "But I beg you that when I am present I may not be bold with that confidence by which I intend to be bold against some, who think of us as if we walked according to the flesh."

And again in 2 Corinthians 13:10 he will be direct in his words to show that he is serious about what he has said -

"Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction."

Paul's direction was always for edification, not destruction. But he also knew that a strong rod of correction may be needed. It must have broken his heart to have to speak in the manner he did, but in the end, strong words are occasionally needed for keeping the body united and working toward the common goal of spreading the good news in truth and in accord with the word.

Life application: Why should we butt our heads against the word of God? If Paul was set to correct those who were disobedient with a rod, how much more do we deserve correction - we who have the whole counsel of God in written format? Let us spend our time wisely, learning, loving, cherishing, and adhering to God's precious word.

*How precious is Your word to me O God!  
More precious than oil upon my head  
It is a light to my feet and a lamp for where I trod  
Rather to have Your word, than all the world's gold instead*

*Your word I have hidden in my heart  
That I might not sin against You  
Help me from this day forward to start  
Pursuing Your word, even till my days are through*