

Follow the fools

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Date: 07 February 2021

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[0 : 00] And do make sure 1 Corinthians chapter 4 is still open in front of you. And again, there's also a sermon outline that you can also download from our website if you don't have it open in front of you already.

That could help you follow along. Well, let's ask God again to speak to us. Let's pray. Father, thank you so much for the way that you've spoken to us through the previous chapters of 1 Corinthians already.

And we just pray again that you would speak to us as we consider chapter 4 this morning. Would you prepare our minds, Lord, to be ready to accept your wisdom and submit ourselves to your wisdom, that we might follow you and show ourselves to be the distinctive people that you want us to be.

So be at work today by your Holy Spirit, we pray. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. You know it's coming. You've been sitting in a job interview.

You've answered lots of questions already. But finally, the interviewer asks, What's your greatest weakness? How should you answer? Career coaches typically suggest a variety of strategies.

[1 : 11] One approach is to disguise your weakness as strength. And so you say, I'm too much of a perfectionist. I make sure that I and those under me come up with the perfect product.

Another strategy is to minimize your weakness by showing how you've overcome it. And so you say something like this. You say, oh, my biggest weakness is that I get too worked up when we miss a deadline.

But to avoid this, I now seek to control my own emotions and to motivate others to be more efficient and get projects done on time. Now those strategies make sense, don't they?

After all, who wants to project their weaknesses at a job interview? Isn't it foolish to do so?

Shouldn't we be highlighting just how great we are? That's worldly wisdom.

And that's how the Corinthians would have wanted their church leaders to answer. They wanted leaders who projected the best image. Who showed that they were the best candidates for the job.

[2 : 12] What you don't want is a leader who answers the way Paul does in 4 verse 13. Actually, I'm the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world.

Okay then, Paul, thanks for your time. We'll call you in two weeks' time to tell you if you got the job or not. But don't get your hopes too high.

But if you've been following along in our series in 1 Corinthians, you already know that God doesn't operate by worldly wisdom. Let's recap what's been going on so far.

Paul begins this letter by reminding the Corinthians of their identity in Christ. Remember who you are. You've been called by God to be holy.

Enriched by God with generosity. We're with many spiritual gifts. And you're sustained by God for your destiny. To stand blameless before God on that final day.

[3 : 15] But as Paul knows, this is a church with many problems. And the root of their problem is this. They are still worldly. They have adopted the values of the world.

They believe in worldly wisdom. They have not let the cross shape how they do life together. And so they quarrel, fighting over who's their biggest hero.

But Paul says, Your heroes aren't where the power lies. The power of God lies instead in the weakness and foolishness of God. The power lies in the message of the cross.

And it's this message that provides the basis of your relationships you have with one another. After all, regardless of ethnicity, or social standing, or family upbringing, we all stand equal at the foot of the cross.

And the church must be built on the foundation of Christ and Him crucified. With builders building with care. And God alone giving the growth.

[4 : 27] God's church must be a cross-shaped church. But how would we know if our church is truly a cross-shaped church?

One good way to figure that out is, to figure out if a church is truly cross-shaped, is to see what they look for at the job interview. What are we looking for in our leaders?

Because what we look for in our leaders reveals what our values are. It reveals what our priorities are. What we think is important. And you already know what the Corinthians have been looking for. Impressive, eloquent, powerful speakers they can boast in. But God is looking for cross-shaped leaders.

And so today we're going to see three qualities cross-shaped leaders should have. Firstly, cross-shaped leaders serve as cross-shaped messengers.

[5 : 36] Now, as you know, ever since this pandemic started, the government has designated a few groups of people as essential workers. So that obviously includes hospital staff, those involved in the food supply chain, security forces like the police, and so on.

We've also come to place people like grab-food riders in the same category. And here, Paul now explains how Christians are to designate pastors.

Regardless of how the world regards them, this is how a cross-shaped church are to regard their leaders. Verse 1. This, then, is how you ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.

And so Paul says, the first thing you need to know about us is, it's not that we are essential, but that we serve. More specifically, we serve one master, Jesus Christ.

And the way we serve is by being a steward. We are entrusted with his gospel. That's what the mysteries here refer to.

[6 : 53] If you go back to 2 verse 7, you would see that's how the gospel is described, as a mystery that was once hidden, but now revealed. So it's not that church leaders are bormors, or fortune tellers, or seers, who somehow have secret, higher knowledge, because they're somehow closer to God.

Rather, they are messengers, ambassadors, representatives, who are entrusted to relay the message given by the king, as revealed in the spirit-brief words of Scripture.

All that was covered back in chapter 2. You know, it's quite interesting to occasionally hear how people pray for me. I'm very grateful for their prayers. Let me just hasten to add.

But it's interesting to hear them pray, as if I'm supposed to wait in my study for a shining light and an audible voice to declare to me some new, super-spiritual message that I'm supposed to bring to the congregation.

But verse 1 states my job description more in terms of proclaiming, protecting, and passing on the gospel in all its fullness, with all its implications.

[8 : 14] That's what leaders do. They are not cultural or political or social commentators, although they will show how the gospel affects how we approach culture and politics and social matters.

But fundamentally, they are cross-shaped messengers. Of course, this stewardship is not unique to leaders.

Every Christian is a servant and trusted with this message. But leaders especially must lead the way. As they serve the gospel, they serve as models.

And so that's why, verse 2, God looks for faithfulness more than fleshiness. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

The Corinthians had been looking for people who were eloquent and notable. God says, what really matters is trustworthiness and dependability.

[9 : 24] What really matters is that leaders are able to keep teaching the gospel when the pressure is on. What really matters is that leaders won't get off track and end up majoring on other things other than the biblical Jesus.

For if leaders forget Jesus, so will the church. If leaders don't make the gospel the main thing, the church won't learn to make the gospel the main thing.

And so that's why, verse 3, Paul says, I care very little if I'm judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself.

Now at first glance we could mistake Paul as saying, oh, I don't care what you think. You have zero right to say anything. This is just between me and God. But that is not what Paul is getting at. He's not saying that he's a lone ranger, unwilling to listen to any feedback, always rejecting the counsel of others. That would truly be foolishness.

[10:33] If you turn to the last chapter of 1 Corinthians, you can see that he's a team player. But here, he's simply making the point that ultimately he's accountable to his master, not anyone else.

after all, servants have a boss. Stewards are accountable, not to other stewards, but to the one who has given them their responsibilities.

And so Christian leaders are ultimately answerable to Christ, not to anyone else. You see, church leaders are not supported by the church simply to do what the church members want.

They are supported by the church to do what God wants. That's an important distinction to make.

Pastors are not religious service professionals pandering to the customer.

Their work is not measured by how many weddings and funerals they have conducted, how many social events they attend, how comfortable they make people feel.

[11:53] Rather, it's all about what they are doing with the gospel that has been entrusted to them. Here's an illustration I've personally found helpful.

Just as a hospital pharmacist dispenses what the doctor prescribes, and not their own remedies, no matter what the patient demands, so a cross-shaped leader must faithfully proclaim the wisdom of God that has been entrusted to them, and not substitute it with something else, even if some don't like it.

And so that means leaders should be constantly asking themselves, how am I stewarding the gospel? Am I feeding the church with it to help them to grow up, to digest meat in obedience to Jesus' command to make disciple making disciples?

Am I trying to multiply the ministry of the gospel by equipping others? Maybe you're a home fellowship group leader today, or in some other leadership position.

Well, what are you doing with the gospel? Is it to you like a long forgotten gift that you've been given, now collecting dust on the shelves?

[13:20] If Jesus came back today, would he see you stewarding the gospel or neglecting it? And if you are not a leader today, are you encouraging your leaders to steward what they have been given by God well?

or do you badger them to give you something other than the gospel? As someone entrusted with the mysteries that God has revealed, I hope you see that's why we've bothered to put on our recent personal evangelism webinars and why I'm teaching our Bible overview class once again.

For at the end of the day, God will ask me, did you fulfill the task entrusted to you? God will judge me.

Now, I could of course judge myself. I could say, as Paul does in verse 4, that my conscience is clear. But as Paul also realizes, that does not have a bearing on my final assessment.

After all, a student could write 100% on top of his exam paper. But his personal assessment of himself doesn't mean anything. It is the examiner's score that counts.

[14:45] It's not that there is no place for self-examination. Knowing our strengths and weaknesses are important. But it's that the most significant thing is God's evaluation.

And so, if a cross-shaped leader is a servant and steward of the gospel, ultimately answerable to God, then stop evaluating leaders according to worldly criteria.

If you're the job interviewer, don't be like a Corinthian. And that's basically what verse 5 is all about. Now, Paul isn't saying stop all judgments completely.

Because in the very next chapter, the church has to exercise some pretty big judgments in regards to a serious case of church discipline. But he is saying, if you want to be God's kind of church, a cross-shaped church, then you need to stop looking for leaders who you think will simply make you look impressive in the eyes of the world.

cross-shaped leaders aren't obsessed with flattery or criticism.

[16:11] They simply want to fulfill the criteria of verse 1. And so Paul says, In the end, what you really need to do is to look for leaders like Apollos and I.

Because verse 6, Paul says, Apollos and I are people who do not go beyond what is written. In other words, Paul says, notice that I never move beyond the Bible.

Notice how I speak God's word, not just my own opinions to you. I've been stewarding what God has and trusted me. Now look back at 1 verse 19, for example.

And Paul says, now how do I know that the foolish cross is actually God's power? Because Isaiah 29 verse 14 tells me he's quoting Isaiah in that verse.

And then how do I know that we shouldn't boast in man, but in God alone, down in 1 verse 31? Because that's how the prophet Jeremiah applies it. Paul is quoting Jeremiah in that instance.

[17:18] And so Paul says, I am doing nothing more than applying the Old Testament. I bring you God's word, I apply it, and I show you how that is in line with the gospel.

But Corinthians, when you boast in human leaders, you are moving beyond what is written, because you're not acting in line with the scriptures.

Christians, and so stop doing that. Learn from leaders who are cross-shaped messengers, like Apollos and I, Paul says.

Recognize that all that you have, including the leaders that you boast in, are simply a gift from God that you've received. and that's what Paul is getting at in verse 7 when he asks that series of rhetorical questions.

He's just getting them to recognize that everything they have is a gift from God. And when you recognize that, Paul says, and you're beginning to apply the gospel to yourself.

[18:32] And when that happens, transformation begins to follow. humility follows, as in verse 6. Look at the end of verse 6. Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other.

And so that's who we're looking for. Leaders who are servants and stewards of the gospel. Leaders who are willing to stick closely to what is written in the scriptures.

Leaders who work hard to apply those words so that God's work of grace might begin digging deep into your heart. Leaders who want to love others but who don't seek their approval.

Leaders who know they are answerable to God. Leaders who serve as cross-shaped messengers. But that's not all there is.

Let's move on to our second quality. Secondly, cross-shaped leaders live a cross-shaped life.

[19:45] Paul's tone now begins to drip with irony. You see, how were the Corinthians beginning to regard themselves? Certainly not as servants.

Certainly not as those answerable to others. The language of verse 8 tells us how they saw themselves instead. They are rich.

They are kings. They are certainly not people who have nothing in their hands. They certainly did not see themselves as recipients of an amazing gift they did not deserve.

And so the words of verse 8 are like a pin. Paul uses to pop a balloon that's way too inflated. Already you have all you want.

Already you have become rich. You have begun to reign. And that without us. Paul is like a parent, rebuking a wayward teenager who thinks that he already knows it all, that he doesn't need anyone else.

[20:53] Well, it would be nice if you reach full maturity, Paul says, how I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you.

But the truth is, you haven't because you want glory without suffering. You want resurrection without crucifixion. There's no place for the cross in your thinking.

You see, the problem isn't just that they thought of themselves as rich and as kings. for it is true that we will one day enjoy perfectly every blessing.

It is true that we will one day reign with Jesus. We will be rich and we will be kings. But the telling word in verse 8 is already.

There's a problem of timing. The Corinthians thought all this was for right now in this world. there's nothing to wait for. It's all right now.

[22:01] And that comes out in the sort of leaders you look for. Paul says because you think you are kings now, you want leaders who look like kings now.

Because you think you have status now, you want leaders who have status now. And so you want leaders with visible spiritual power who can get the crowd all excited with their words, who promise you heaven on earth now.

But think about it. Would Jesus, who stood silent at his trial, who carried his own cross, who wore a crown of thorns, would he qualify?

Would you have considered him as a leader for your church if he looks like this? And to further make his case, Paul says, well, in case you're not convinced, why don't you consider us apostles? Consider us the acknowledged leaders of the early church. Consider my own way of life. Is it that of a conquering king?

[23 : 19] verse 9, 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. Imagine, Paul says, you're at the amphitheater, and there's a victory parade, a procession, which celebrates the triumph of a general in a battle that was pretty common in the Roman world. And so there he is, parading through the streets, arriving at the amphitheater with the VIPs and the more junior officers following behind him, shouting praise to him. But the apostles are not among them. Instead, they are right there at the end of the line. And if you are at the end of the line, that means you are the prisoners of war.

You are the trophy, the spectacle, the entertainment. For as you are led into the arena, you are providing the grand finale to the day's program.

[24 : 40] You are either going to be forced to fight with the gladiators, be thrown to the lions, or participate in the ancient version of Hunger Games.

And this spectacle, Paul says, is not merely seen by the human world, but even by the supernatural world. Heaven and earth are witness to your suffering and your shame.

They see you carrying your cross. leaders. These are our leaders. That's hardly the look of a conquering king, is it?

In fact, glance down to verse 11 and see what they actually look like right now. To this very hour, we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.

Now, imagine if Paul was your elder or your pastor. How would you feel about how he looks?

[25 : 50] Would you prefer that he looks prosperous, never look unhappy, never admit weakness? Would you be happier if Paul looked like a well-adjusted, middle-class, prominent lawyer?

happier? Would you be happier if Paul was a well-connected, a less shabby-looking guy? Would you be happy to introduce your non-Christian friends to him and to say, hey, hey, guys, this is the leader of our church?

Or would you be embarrassed? Would you say at the next church AGM, guys, I think it's really time to look for new leaders.

Let's move on from Paul. But Paul says, guess what? At this present time, leadership looks like this. Verse 13, we have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world, right up to this moment.

[27 : 01] I wonder how you feel as you read those words. After all, we all want to look good like the Corinthians.

That's natural. But how can you be so when you follow the fool? Well, that's how the apostles are described in verse 10, as fools.

And so we're left with a choice. are these the leaders we really want? The fool? The weak? The dishonored?

Are these the leaders the church is meant to follow? Paul doesn't mean, of course, that we are to follow silly, scatterbrained, and scandalous people.

What he means is that leaders who follow Christ will often look foolish, weak, dishonorable, because that's how Christ and his cross look like.

[28 : 06] Cross-shaped leaders will lead cross-shaped lives. And so are you willing to look for cross-shaped leaders like this?

That will indicate whether you are really a cross-shaped church. and are you willing to follow them? Members of a cross-shaped church won't be spectators watching the spectacle from the VIP seats.

They will be participants ready to jump out of the seats and get into the arena with the apostles. angels. And so how do you feel about that? I know I feel very challenged by these words.

Am I a fool? Am I ready to be considered a fool? Occasionally I wonder what it would be like if one of my non-Christian friends were to listen in to some of my sermons on the off-chance that one of you are listening in today.

[29 : 14] high. But I wonder what they would think. And I secretly hope that they'll be impressed by my impressive words and my impressive arguments, that they would be overcome with emotion and they'll say, oh, how cool are Christians because look at how cool is Brian.

I want them to think of me as wise and strong. But what if they think I'm a fool? am I okay with that? Am I willing to be cross shaped in that way? Or would I be willing to go beyond what is written if it means that people will think better of me?

And so this passage is challenging my assumptions and reshaping my expectations as I hope it's also doing yours. I haven't yet experienced verse 11, although I have lived below the poverty line in KL before when I was taking my first steps in full-time ministry.

But God has been kind. He has always provided. But I think I have experienced a bit of verse 12 and 13. I've been cursed and slandered, painfully so, poisonous letters and text messages.

[30 : 40] It's really no fun. But according to this passage, God is saying, well, Brian, what did you expect? That's the pattern for all Christians.

But as a leader especially, here is the pattern you must put in place. When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure it. when we are slandered, we answer kindly. That's the way of the cross.

And so that should be the way of the cross-shaped leader. It's one I'm still learning, especially when I'm tempted to reply certain messages with my own harsh words.

cross-shaped. But if I and any other leader am able to learn it well, that would be beneficial for the church as a whole.

[31 : 44] For leaders who are cross-shaped, we'll be better positioned to help others to be similarly cross-shaped. And that's the third quality to look for.

Thirdly, cross-shaped leaders provide models for cross-shaped followers. So far, Paul has given us a few images of a leader.

He's a servant, a steward, the fool, the scum of the earth. But now he gives us one more image in verse 15.

A father. That's who he is. As the one who brought the Corinthians, the gospel, and as the one who laid the foundation of the church, he has a different relationship to them compared to Apollos or Peter.

And as a parent, he wants what is best for his dear children. He's not looking to shame them, verse 14, but simply to warn them.

[32 : 50] But precisely because he is their father and they are his children, he is able to say verse 16, Therefore, I urge you to imitate me.

After all, that's what children do. They parrot their parents. And so Paul is saying, don't just watch me talk the talk, watch me walk the walk. and do likewise.

By that, he doesn't necessarily mean that we go out of our way to become hungry and homeless and seek out persecution. Paul isn't asking the Corinthians to copy the specific details of his life. But he does say, watch the pattern of my life and how the cross shapes it. That's one big way a leader will build with care.

And that's how a church will truly grow as they follow their cross-shaped leaders. Now, such talk might make us uncomfortable because we don't like to talk about following human beings.

[34 : 00] Shouldn't Christ be the only model that matters? But verse 17 blows our presupposition out of the water. Notice in verse 17, what does Paul send Timothy to do?

He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. Timothy is to remind them of Paul's cross-shaped life.

After all, Timothy knows the ways of Paul intimately, having been his apprentice and sidekick for many years. But here's the real shock. This is not just unique to the Corinthians.

Everywhere Paul goes, he has been teaching churches the same thing. Imitate me as I imitate Christ.

And so cross-shaped leaders are unembarrassed to be role models to others. They rightly point to Jesus as the saviour of us, as the one who offers grace.

[35 : 11] They rightly do not claim sinless perfection. In fact, that's part of the modelling. But it is also biblical to say that as they live cross-shaped lives and steward the cross-shaped message, they can hold that out as an encouragement to others to do the same.

Because here's the truth. We learn not just by listening, but by watching. I think back over some of the leaders that I've had over the years.

As a teenager, when our elder Dr. Hongpak was our youth deacon, I watched him both discipline and comfort one of his children in a godly way that still sticks in my mind.

I've watched my Malaysian Bible study leaders in the UK give up lucrative careers to return to Malaysia because they want to be a gospel witness in this country.

I've watched our church camp speaker in 2019, the Reverend Andrew Chia, as he modelled hospitality, hard work, and a graciousness with his words in the years that I work on his staff.

[36 : 24] I hope I can be the role models all these people were. I'm sure I have a long way to go. But choose leaders whom you are confident can model the way of the cross to you so that you in turn can model it to others.

They are a key way a church will grow up to be a cross-shaped church. So, as we conclude, what are some of the big takeaways for us?

Now, whether we are leaders or not today, I think this passage calls us to be honest with ourselves. Look honestly at our hearts and consider what are we actually looking for in our leaders?

What do we wish they look like? If you are a leader today, what do you wish you look like? And does it actually match up with what the Bible says?

And what does that say about us? Remember what I said at the beginning? One good way to figure out if a church is truly cross-shaped is to see what they look for in their leaders.

[37 : 50] leaders. Some of you younger ones might be elders in the future or serve on a pastoral search committee. As you draft the job description and think about who would make an ideal candidate, what would you be looking for?

Would you look for cross-shaped leaders or simply Corinthian shaped ones? And some of you listening in today might one day move to another church because let's say you've moved cities for work or something.

And as you look for a church, what would you look for? The ones with the fleshy pastor or the one whose leaders are big personalities?

Or will you look for more? Do you look for how they steward the gospel faithfully? Even if they are preaching, can't match the superstar preacher that you're currently listening to on your podcast.

And instead of thinking how they can serve you, the customer, are you thinking about how they can be a role model to you, the imitator?

[39 : 08] And finally, if you're in a leadership position today, whether formally or informally, or if you find yourself in one in the future, remember what God is looking for.

Faithfulness. God might bless your ministry, whether that's a cell group or Sunday school or whatever it is, greatly. You might see many conversions, you see many people visibly grow.

Now praise God indeed if that happens. But you might not. Even though you work hard, you've proclaimed the gospel, you've done all the right things. But God might decide that that is not the path he has in mind for you.

But God says, are you faithful with what you've been given? Faithfulness might or might not lead to success in the way that we usually define it.

But faithfulness itself is always success. Faith that pleases the heart of the Father reveals itself not in external measures such as numbers but in character and Christ likeness.

[40 : 25] And faithfulness results in praise from God. That's what counts. So my friends, one day you will have a new pastor.

One day you will have a new set of elders or home fellowship group leaders or youth leaders. for the sake of the gospel, choose wisely.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, as we come before you right now, as we just let the words of 1 Corinthians chapter 4 just sink into our hearts.

Will you help us to be reflective of what we've just heard? help us to be honest and to think really, really carefully about how we look at your church, how we look at its leaders, how we consider our criteria.

Father, would you help us to repent if our criteria is not the criteria that comes from you, that comes from your word, but if we have allowed our criteria to be shaped by the values of the world.

[41 : 44] Father, we pray instead that you will bless us with a new generation of cross-shaped leaders, that you will help us who are existing leaders to aspire in that direction, that we might find a whole group of people zealous for you, zealous for your name, zealous to lift high the cross, that they might be role models to us, so that we in turn can imitate them, and so imitate you, and be truly a church that will shine brightly for you.

And so that is our prayer today, we ask Lord please answer that prayer, even if we might not see that immediately in the short term, but we pray over the medium term, over the long term, may you be pleased to answer that prayer.

So help us to grow up to be a cross-shaped church. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.