

1 Corinthians

4:1-21

Introduce

What are some of the things you have done in the past to be “cool”? Why is there such pressure to be seen as cool growing up? We are going to look tonight at how our current attempts to be “cool” can lead us away from a life that reflects the character of Christ.

Investigate

Background

Paul has laid a strong foundation for unity within the church, talking about the superiority of God’s wisdom, talking about Christ as the source of spiritual life, giving them a proper understanding of the human teachers that were dividing them, and warning them of the consequences to those who would destroy the church through improper divisions. Now Paul seeks to defend his own ministry in the face of opposition within the Corinthian church.

Explore the Passage

[Read each section before answering the questions.]

4:1-7

- *Give the following background to the group: Paul brings them back to the idea that he and other teachers are servants of God. The Greek terms used for “servant” and “steward” in this passage are different than the word used for “servant” in chapter 3. In chapter 3 the focus was on the service nature of the role. Here the terms denote one who has been entrusted with management of a household. What is his point in bringing up the idea of faithfulness and judgment in this servant analogy? How are these related in Paul’s argument? [Paul as the steward of God is accountable only to Him and should not be judge or examined by others. Paul has been entrusted with managing God’s household and thus should not be examined by those he has authority over.]*
- *Why might some of the Corinthian believers be judging or examining Paul? [Possibly because he teaches differently than their preferred teachers or maybe he only teaches “milk” and they want solid food] Why doesn’t Paul need to be examined by the Corinthian believers or even judge himself? [Because God will examine him and “refine” him if necessary]*
- *What reason does Paul give for talking about judging Apollos and him? How might the Corinthians be going beyond “what is written”? [Commentators debate what Paul means by “what is written”. He could be referring to Scripture or to some general sense of what they know to be proper. I prefer to think that he is talking about Scripture, though there are questions as to which Scriptures he might be talking about. Whatever it means exactly, they are going beyond what they can know for certain and becoming prideful as a result.]*
- *What does Paul want them to understand through his questions in verse 7?*
- *In what ways do we find ourselves going beyond what we can know with certainty as we interact with other believers? Where is the balance in recognizing error in teaching and not going beyond what is certain in Scripture?*

4:8-13

- What is the tone of v. 8? What kind of riches or reign is Paul referring to here? What is Paul's point in making these statements? *[Paul is being ironic. They think they are spiritually superior when in reality they are spiritually poor because they are seeking the approval of men.]*
- Paul then gives a number of contrasts between himself and the Corinthian believers. What is his point in these contrasts? *[Related to what he said in 2:1-5. Life is not about us looking or sounding good or being respected by the world. Life is about allowing our lives to display the power of God.]*
- Ask yourself this question: What do seek more, the status of the Corinthian believers or the description Paul gives of his life in this passage? In what ways do we seek to be wise, strong and honorable?

4:14-21

- Paul now gives the reason for his biting irony in the previous passage. Why does he emphasize that his purpose is not to shame them but admonish them? *[Because they would have been feeling ashamed at this point]*
- What is Paul's point in talking about himself as their father? Why is it important that they see Paul as their spiritual father in light of the other "guides" they are following? (Think about what Paul will be doing throughout the rest of the letter as he teaches them in many areas of doctrine and practice.) *[It re-establishes his authority over them which seems to have eroded. This gives him a platform with which to teach them throughout the rest of the book.]*
- Why are the Corinthians in need of imitating Paul and Timothy? What is the focus of Paul's life that they need to imitate? *[His life and ministry are focused on Christ.]*
- What is Paul's tone in vv. 18-21? What problem does he face as he seeks to visit the Corinthians?

Discover the Big Idea

- How had the divisions in the Corinthian church affected their view of Paul? What gives Paul the authority and right to teach and admonish them?

Summary: Paul had lost much of his support in the Corinthian church because of their divided loyalties. This was dangerous because, in failing to follow Paul's example and teaching, the Corinthian believers were failing to follow the example of Christ himself. They were taking pride in themselves and forgetting that everything they have is from Christ.

Respond

- Think about how Paul contrasts himself with the Corinthian believers in this chapter. Why do you find yourself striving so hard to be wise, strong, and honorable?
- What is the danger in thinking you have what it takes to succeed in life or ministry? *[You fail to realize your desperate need for Christ and the work of the Spirit in your life.]*
- What do we learn about our position in Christ in this chapter that can help alleviate our desire to be seen as wise and strong and honorable?