1 Corinthians 4:6-21 Sermon Manuscript

“Not Going Beyond What It Written”

D.L. Moody, the famous Chicago evangelist from the 1800s once said “the Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep from the Bible.” Isn’t that so true? The times in my life where I have been closest to the Lord are the times when I am consistently in God’s Word. And the times where I feel distant from the Lord, and there is not much spiritual enthusiasm to glorify Him are the times when I am neglecting God’s Word. And there’s a reason for that, because God’s Word is alive. It is according to Hebrews 4:12 “*living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*.” The Word of God convicts of sin and makes alive in Christ. It is sufficient for us and the Bible is all that we need to learn how to live a faithful and godly life.

But sadly, the Corinthian believers at the church of Corinth were not relying on God’s Word and using God’s Word as the measure and standard of greatness and glory. Instead of seeing the Word of God as sufficient, they went beyond it looking to themselves and to the world and what the world counted as great, awesome, or glorious. And as soon as you go beyond what is written in Scripture, as soon as you start thinking “I know the Bible says this, but there has to be something more…or I know the Bible says I should do this or not do this, but I think I need to do more…” As soon as you start to think like that, you have gone beyond what is written and entered into the realm of subjectivity and pride. The Word of God has the power to keep us humble and to keep us from being puffed up in pride because God’s Word knows what is best for us. And as soon as we think we know better how to live our lives, we enter into Satan’s domain of pride which only results in tearing down others for the sake of building oneself up. It’s the same trick Satan used all the way back to creation when he tempted Eve. What did he say to Eve? “Did God really say?...” It’s the same temptation the world, our flesh, and the devil poses to us whenever we read God’s Word. Did God really say that? Did God really mean that? That sounds unreasonable to carry out, that seems too difficult to carry out, therefore it must have not been God who said it. Maybe the critics are right in that the Bible contains errors. What if this is one of those errors?...Can you see how the question “Did God really say?” can lead to so many destructive conclusions? No, God commanded Eve you shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil not because He’s a kill joy, not because He withholds anything good from His children…no it’s because He loves us and He knows what’s best for us! And as soon as we begin to think WE know best what’s good for us rather than God, then we sin and fall into Satan’s snare. But God doesn’t want us to get to that point because He cares for you and me, that we would “*learn to not go beyond what is written so that we wouldn’t be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.”*

Now chapters 1 through 4 have been talking about a big issue that the Corinthians were having, which is the issue of division in the church…specifically division caused by putting up one apostle or leader in the church over and against others apostles and leaders. But we learned last time that the different factions being formed saying “*I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, and I am of Cephas, and I am of Christ*” are not just surface level issues, but they reveal a deeper root issue of the heart; namely pride. And the way I explained how this root issue of the heart came about last time I preached in 1 Corinthians was arguing that the Corinthians were failing to put their sufficiency in Christ. And when you don’t have your sufficiency fully in Christ, you will be insecure about the uncertainties of life, about life and death. When you don’t have Christ as your treasure, your security, and your anchor, you will inevitably treasure in something or someone else. You will inevitably find your security in something or someone else. And you will inevitably anchor yourself in something or someone else. The Corinthian believers were neglecting the one Savior that could provide the security and anchor for their souls and be the treasure of their hearts, yet they were failing to see Christ as sufficient. And because Christ is turning all things in our life, both the good as well as the bad, for good and His glory, therefore the Apostle Paul told the Corinthians that “all things belong to them,” meaning that there is nothing that can threaten them or undo their security in Christ or their access to Christ and all heaven and earth. We are sufficient in Christ.

And how do we continue to find our sufficiency and remind ourselves of our sufficiency in Christ? It is by depending on God’s Word, which means you have to pick up your Bible and actually read it. Which leads us into our section for today, verse 6 of chapter 4: “*Now these things, brothers, I have applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to go beyond what is written, so that no one of you will become puffed up on behalf of one against the other.”* What are the “these things?” What he’s referring to are the various analogies and illustrations he has given of who an apostle or prophet is. He talked about Paul and Apollos and the like as farmers, as builders, as stewards and as galley slaves. What do you notice about all these positions or descriptions? They are all humble. He didn’t say, “now we are kings and princes that are going to rule over the kingdom, so therefore listen to us!” No, no, no, how can you exalt each of us over against the other and be puffed over the other when we are nothing but farmers, stewards, builders and slaves?

Then he reinforces his argument in verse 7 with a series of powerful rhetorical questions? “*For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it*?” I don’t know if this line of questioning would have been considered the “Socratic Method” back then in Paul’s day, but now today it’s known as the Socratic Method, coming from the Greek philosopher “Socrates,” where you ask questions for the purpose of probing and exposing the underlying beliefs upon a person’s statements, arguments and assumptions are built. I think it’s one of the most powerful forms of argumentation and it helps the person being asked these questions to see the faulty assumptions and/or faulty worldview by which he might be operating from. Questions help strip away the issue at hand down to its root form so that you can more clearly deal with the exact issues at hand.

So let’s look at Paul’s line of reasoning here, the Socratic method. Verse 7 “*For who regards you as superior*?” In other words, where do you find or on who’s authority are you considered as superior? Does the Scriptures say you are superior than others? Does Paul say you are superior than others? Does Apollos say you are more superior than others? Tell me, who regards you as superior? So that leads me to my next question: “*What do you have that you did not receive*?” I noticed dear Corinthian believers that you are boasting an awful lot in these leaders. Boasting is showing off to others that you have something that is better than what others have right? You don’t boast if you have received something as a gift. So therefore, you can boast in something you have that you did not receive, but that you earned. So what is something that you have earned (that’s essentially what this question is asking)? Nothing! In other words, you have received all things. Which leads to the last question, Okay, so “*if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it*?” The implication: your boasting is not legitimate.

Then, to add fuel to the fire, Paul switches to some sarcasm here to prove his point, this time using his own experience and understanding of him as an apostle as the lens through which we can rightly view ourselves. Verse 8 “*You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have ruled without us—and how I wish that you had ruled indeed so that we also might rule with you.For, I think that God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, and to angels, and to men.We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are prudent in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are glorious, but we are without honor! To this present hour we hunger and thirst, and are poorly clothed, and roughly treated, and homeless; and we labor, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to plead; we have become as the scum of the world, the grime of all things, even until now.*”

Paul was using sarcasm here to cut at this type of overrealized triumphalism that some of these puffed-up Corinthian believers had. They thought they already arrived at the finish line and have all transformed into kings, ready to rule the earth with Christ. Now Paul was not denying that one day, believers would rule and reign with Christ and it will be glorious, powerful, and wonderful, and beyond words. Of course Paul wished he was at that stage too, and that’s why he says, “*and how I wish that you had ruled indeed so that we also might rule with you*.” But the reality is Paul, Apollos, Peter, and other prominent leaders that Christ has chosen to lead the church are anything but ruling and reigning. He says that God purposely lifted them up as his prime examples of being a spectacle to the world, as “men condemned to death.” That whole language in verse 9 and the word choices in verse 9 is a military image of a Roman victory. When a Roman army would have victory, they would put captive some of the key leaders and figures of that army or nation and parade them through the town as captive spectacles for the Romans to watch. The end of the parade would lead to these captive men eventually being condemned to death by being fed to the lions, other deadly creatures and being forced to kill each other. The reality is just as Christ suffered mistreatment, betrayal, hatred, and ultimately death at the hands of sinners, so his followers will suffer the same. After Paul was persecuted, he and Barnabas encouraged the disciples at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch saying in verse 22 of Acts 14 “*through many afflictions, we must enter the kingdom of God*.” In other words, to receive the crown, we must first receive the cross. Suffering must come before glory just as Christ suffered and then was glorified.

But the Corinthian believers wanted the crown without the cross. They wanted glory but not to suffer for it. The way they were acting is almost like those name it and claim preachers of the prosperity movement who claim that if you have enough faith, God will grant victory, success in life, and riches and whatever else you desire. Often these name it and claim it preachers are millionaires who live in mansions, drive fancy cars, and fly private jets. They will say if you are poor, and not successful in life or have the things that you want, it means you are somehow sinning and not having enough faith. It is one of the most successful deceptions and frauds that Satan has ever invented and millions upon millions fall victim to it every year. The Corinthians believers were evaluating things according to worldly standards of greatness. And it seemed like the way they were acting and thinking they were doing great. They considered themselves prudent in Christ, strong in Christ, and glorious in Christ. But the apostles would then be considered fools, weak, and without honor in Christ based on those same standards! In fact the world views Christians as the scum of the world…you know that frothy yucky stuff that floats to the top in an ocean or when you are cooking like a soup and that yucky foamy layer floats to the top and you need to scrape it off? Christians to the world are the grime of all things, like scrapings and offscourings that are wiped away from a dirty dish.

This sarcasm must have been pretty biting to hear for the Corinthians. But Paul didn’t say all of this to give them the beatdown and the hammer. No, he found it necessary to say all of this because he cared for them enough to desire for them to change. Which leads us to verse 14 “*I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children*.” To purely shame someone, you are pointing out just the wrong that they have done. But when you admonish someone, you are not only trying point out the wrong, but pointing them to do the right thing as believers. And he calls them “my beloved children!” How could Paul call such a people rife with so many sins and issues his “beloved children?” Because in a spiritual sense, they are his spiritual children because he gave birth so to speak to their spiritual life through the gospel! (Of course, we know Paul was just as a vessel, God was the one who caused these Corinthian believers to be born again just as He is responsible for anyone becoming born again). Verse 15 “*For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel*.” As a loving father would handle and discipline his wayward child, so Paul is doing it in a spiritual way with these Corinthian believers.

And as a child should imitate the actions and example of his father, so the believers at Corinth were called to imitate the apostle Paul, verse 16 “*Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me*.” To help with that, Paul will send Timothy, the one that is addressed 1 and 2 Timothy in our Bibles Timothy, that one, as an extension of Paul. Verse 17 “*For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and who will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church*.” Timothy was one of the few people that was called “man of God” by Paul which was an honor, because that signified someone who was especially devoted and faithful to Christ. Paul trusted Timothy to be an extension of himself as a model for godliness to the Corinthian believers. By way of application, do you have believers that you can look up to and imitate that are in your life? It doesn’t have to be necessarily meeting one on one every week for a set time, but do you surround yourself around other believers because you desire to imitate their faith? If not, I encourage you to do that because surrounding yourself with believers more mature than you are and who are farther along in the faith than you are will greatly grow your faith and encourage you to greater faithfulness. That is how God has designed the church, that we would be a community of “togetherness” and grow in faithfulness because of one another.

And to round out this topic of divisions in the church, he closes with these verses. Verses 18-21. “*Now some have become puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall know, not the words of those who are puffed up but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness*?” There were among those who were puffed up people who arrogantly acted like Paul was never going to come and correct them or was going to be too scared to do so. And Paul let them know that he won’t be easily duped by their persuasive words and smooth talking. There are many who profess Christ and even know the right theology….but the real test is does their life match their words? And that’s what Paul means by saying that the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power. These people may have an “appearance of godliness as 2 Timothy 3:5 says, but deny its power,” meaning the power of the gospel to transform a life that loves sin into a life that loves righteousness is missing. And Paul ends with a choice in verse 21, “*What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod*?” Do you want it the hard way?! “*Or shall I come to with love and a spirit of gentleness*?” Or do you want it the easy way?

That same choice is offered to you as well. You may not be sinning as terribly as the Corinthian believers, but are there any sins you have been harboring or treasuring in your heart? If so, there is a hard way and an easy way to be disciplined. The easy way is to recognize your sin and repent of your sin and turn back to your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The hard way is to ignore the call to repentance and keep digging yourself further and further into the ground with sin. The end result? God may intervene Himself and discipline you painfully by letting the consequences of your sin reach its full effect. So dear believer, I plead with you don’t let yourself go about it the hard way not only because it will be painful, but because the more you allow sin to be in your life, the more worse off you will be when you started. Just like how we are studying in the book of Judges in adult Sunday school, it’s a downward spiral for the people of Israel, they’re not just going in circles staying in the same level, but they are circling or spiraling downwards each time they sin and rebel against God and ask for deliverance. Every time that cycle of sin happens, they are worse off than they were before.

And for those of you who have not yet trusted in Christ, there is also an easy way and a hard way to go about your salvation. The hard way is to refuse to acknowledge your sinfulness and refuse to turn away from your sin and refuse to trust in Christ as your Savior and keep on living a life of full-blown rebellion against God. There are consequences for that, only for the unbeliever, it’s not only temporal consequences but eternal consequences that you will not be able to recover from. But there is an easy way, you can recognize that Jesus is the Son of God and trust in Him as Lord and Savior, and as the One who died to take away your sin and the One who rose from the dead to defeat your sin and your death. So believe in Jesus Christ and Him crucified and He will grant you a new life that desires to life a live that is dependent on what is written, which is the Word of God.