

**Lucy, Harpo and Paul**  
***I Corinthians 4:6-21***

**youtube.com clip: *Lucy and Harpo***

In First Corinthians 4:17, Paul writes: “I urge you, then, be imitators of me.” “Imitate me,” Paul says. The word means to “mimic” or “to strive to resemble.”

In chapter four of this letter, Paul describes himself in four ways, giving us four pictures. We looked at the first two last week:

- *Servant* (the word means “assistant”)
- *Steward* ( a “manager” of God’s mysteries, that is, hidden truths revealed by God)

Now, two more pictures: *Spectacle* and *Father*.

Turn in your Bible to First Corinthians, chapter four. Notice what he says in verse six: **I Corinthians 4:6**

Paul appeals to the Corinthians to learn from him, from his example. This word means “to learn by practice or experience, to acquire a custom or habit.” This isn’t something you learn by just reading a book. It’s not just head knowledge. You acquire a habit of doing things by doing things, practicing them.”

This word is related to the noun translated *disciple*, which means “one who practices what he is taught.” Paul uses the same word when he writes to the Philippians:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. – *Philippians 4:8-9*

Paul’s hope is that by learning from the example of Apollos and him, they would experience humility. The fact that they have lined up behind different leaders, inflating their self-importance and status, shows that they are puffed up, vain, arrogant. They had inflated the sense of themselves such that they were filled with pride.

This word “puffed up” appears six times in this letter to the Corinthians; Paul uses it once in the book of Colossians. These are the only uses of the word in all the New

Testament. In the case of the Corinthians, the shoe fit, and Paul uses the word to capture their arrogance and pride.

Paul asks three questions in verse 7:

- 1) “Who sees anything different in you?” The idea here is this: “Who made you so special?” Paul already reminded them earlier in the letter that it was God who had saved them; he chose them; he revealed his mysteries to them. They need to be reminded that who they are is because of God.
- 2) “What do you have that you did not receive?” They have no basis for boasting, for pride. What they have, they received. It was given to them through the grace of God.
- 3) “If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”

These same three questions are so applicable for us today. Why should we consider ourselves as special? What do we have that we didn't receive? And if we received, why should we boast as if we had not received?

What a reminder that all we have and all we are is a gift from God's gracious hand! There are no grounds for boasting. There is a temptation to look down on others who have not experienced what we have. Rather than having compassion and a desire to help people receive what we have received, we feel better about ourselves, perhaps seeing ourselves as more “spiritual,” more religious, superior in our understanding.

Paul says, “That's not the example Apollos and I have set for you to follow.”

With a bit of sarcasm, Paul says that these believers in Corinth possessed many things. Look at **Verse 8**.

Paul begins by saying literally, “You have been become gluttoned, satiated.” Henry Alford in his *Greek Testament* says:

You behave as if the trial were past, and the goal gained; as if hunger and thirst after righteousness were already filled, and the kingdom already brought in.

Paul will remind them that the kingdom hasn't come. They don't reign because the kingdom is yet future. This is evident by what Paul and the other apostles have suffered and continued to suffer.

One writer (D.W. Kuck) notes that the mistake of the Corinthians is that they “already see themselves as morally and spiritually perfected, without having to experience the bodily struggles which Paul sees as the sign of life in Christ.”

Paul is now going to make a point and it will be a point that will drive home what he is trying to say. This will get the attention of the Corinthians. It’s a bit like the story of the former sergeant who, having served his time with the Marine Corps, took a new job as a school teacher. Just before the school year started, he injured his back.

He was required to wear a plaster cast around the upper part of his body. Fortunately, the cast fit under his shirt and wasn’t noticeable. On the first day of class, he found himself assigned to the toughest students in the school.

The punks, having already heard the new teacher was a former Marine, were leery of him and decided to see how tough he really was before trying any pranks. Walking confidently into the rowdy classroom, the new teacher opened the window wide and sat down at his desk.

When a strong breeze made his tie flap, he picked up a stapler and promptly stapled the tie to his chest! There was dead silence. He had no trouble with discipline that year.

Paul is going to describe his personal experiences and that of the apostles in general. This is sort of his “stapling his tie to his chest” story that the Corinthians will have no answer for. Look at the recitation of Paul’s encounters with hardship:

### **I Corinthians 4:9**

There are two pictures that were probably in Paul’s mind and in the reader’s minds that would have stood out. The first is that of the Roman parade of triumph after a military conquest.

After a great victory, the Roman general was given a great parade through the streets of Rome. He would ride up front in his chariot followed by his army. Then there were wagons bearing all the spoils of the battle. At the end of the parade were the captives from the battle, being led in chains. Most often, they were killed publicly at the end of the parade.

Paul says this is the experience of the apostles. God had chosen to lead them as men under the sentence of death.

The other picture is that of “doomed gladiators in the arena.” Paul says they are a *spectacle*. The word means “theater,” “what one sees at a theater.” The apostles were exhibited on the world stage as criminals condemned to death. In Paul’s time, these people were exhibited as a “gazing-stock,” a spectacle, to amuse the spectators in the amphitheater. They were “set forth last” in the show, to fight with wild beasts.

This is the heritage we share with believers since the apostolic age. God called the apostles to a very special task that included, if you will, a death sentence. And indeed, we see that as all but John ultimately suffer a martyr’s death.

Paul uses a bit of sanctified sarcasm in verse eight when he describes the Corinthians as kings. “I wish I could reign with you and be important!” he writes. “But instead, I must go into the arena and suffer for the Lord. You are first in men’s eyes, but we apostles are last.”

Paul goes on in his description with three contrasts between the Corinthians and the apostles:

### **I Corinthians 4:10**

Paul’s point is to show the difference in those who counted themselves as wise, as strong, as honored and those (the apostles) who were fools for Christ, weak and held in disrepute. Can you see how he is tweaking the Corinthians for their pride, their air of self-importance?

Paul is using this to show their foolishness. They thought they were big stuff, having “arrived.” Instead, they show themselves to be the fools.

They’re a little bit like the young lawyer who had just opened his new practice. On his very first day, he sat at his desk waiting and hoping for a client to walk in. It didn’t take very long. He could see out into the reception area as the very first person to enter his office came in through the door.

The lawyer decided that he should look busy so he grabbed the phone and started talking: “Uh, huh. Uh, huh. Look, about this merger deal. I think I’d better come down there and handle it myself. Yes. No. I don’t think three million is gonna cut it. We better have Rogers from NY meet us there. OK. Call you back later.”

He hung up the phone, looked up at the prospective client and said, “Good morning! How may I help you?” The visitor said, “Well, I thought I was here to help you. I’m from the telephone company and I’m here to hook up your phone.”

Paul goes on to list six examples of the tribulations he and other apostles were facing. This isn't just stuff in the past; he says, "To the present hour." Look at them:

1) We hunger

2) We thirst

3) We are poorly dressed

4) We are buffeted. The word means "to strike with clenched hands, to buffet with the fist." Paul experienced many beatings as he tells them in his second letter.

5) We are homeless; that is, they were wanderers.

6) We labor, working with our own hands. "Labor" means working to the point of weariness." Paul often spoke of how he chose to work rather than be a financial burden on the churches he served. There were those in Corinth who saw this as a sign that Paul wasn't really an apostle, because the other teachers, false teachers, who called themselves "super-apostles" expected to be cared for materially by the church. Paul defends himself against these accusations in the letter of Second Corinthians.

He continues with a description of how they handled suffering at the hands of their opponents – **I Corinthians 4:12b-13**

This isn't a pity party. Paul is simply stating the facts as they were. As opposed to the Corinthians who felt they were so wise, so blessed, so honored, the apostles were viewed as the scum of the earth. And that was okay! That was the condition into which the apostles were called by God.

Paul wants the Corinthians to have the right attitude, the right perspective, about him and those in his position. It wasn't that they should suffer in the same way as him and the other apostles. That's not what Paul wanted them to imitate. But it was the perspective that one should not over-inflate oneself, one should not exalt himself over others, thinking oneself as wise, as having "arrived."

Paul will tell those in Rome the same thing. Writing in Romans, chapter 12, he says:

For the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. – *Romans 12:3*

Now, Paul changes course at this point. He has spoken to the believers in Corinth rather harshly and with some very pointed sarcasm. But now, the tone is much more tender, speaking less as an apostle and more as a parent.

### **I Corinthians 4:14-17**

Paul says his intent here is not to hammer the people into shame, but rather to appeal to them as his children whom he loves. He reminds them that he was their father spiritually. He was the one who had introduced them to Christ.

Paul often uses this parental picture when speaking to those who were his children in the faith. He writes to the Thessalonians:

Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. – *I Thessalonians 2:6-8*

A little later he says:

For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. – *I Thessalonians 2:11-12*

In Galatians 4:19, Paul appeals to those believers as:

....my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!

He says of Timothy, Titus and Philemon that they were each his “true child in the faith.” Paul had a deep sense of joy, affection and responsibility for those he had led to a saving faith in Christ.

Paul certainly knew that he was not the one who had saved these folks. That was the sovereign work of God through grace. But he was the human instrument whom God used to share with them the good news of the gospel.

It’s such an amazing thing that God desires to use us to introduce others to the Savior, who is Christ – even though we are sinful, imperfect, flawed human beings.

We are the human instruments in his gracious work of birthing people into God's kingdom.

Paul distinguishes himself from other guides, as he calls them. The Greek word is *paidagōgos*. In an upper class family, there was a slave who was entrusted with the work of supervising the young boy or boys. He would take them to and from school and was responsible to see that they didn't get into any trouble.

There are pictures on Greek vases that show the *paidagōgos* holding a stick, which was used to keep the child in line.

Paul draws a contrast between that slave and the father. He desires to be the parent, not the stern guide. And so he appeals to them, in the way a father would – to live in such a way that reflects the character of the father. From this whole passage, we see that he desires that they would share with Paul the attitude of humility and of servanthood.

After all this, Paul urges the Corinthians believers to imitate him, to mimic him. Now, he isn't asking them to form a following around him; that would be contrary to everything he has said in this section. I think it is that in imitating Paul, they would learn the ways of Christ. In chapter eleven, verse one, he writes:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Paul is not on an ego kick here. He has already shown this by stating that he is a fool for Christ's sake. He has suffered much according to God's will for him. But through all that, he has learned what it was to depend upon Christ, to find his joy and perseverance in faithful obedience.

He longs for these children in the faith to share in the discovery that all they have is from the gracious hand of God, that they are nothing in and of themselves, and that God is calling them to a walk of humility and submissiveness in the simplicity of the gospel.

In light of that, he says that he is sending Timothy who would remind them of these things. Paul's desire was to come to see them personally, as God wills. But he is also afraid that he will have to come not as a loving Father but as a disciplinarian.

Let's read on: **I Corinthians 4:18-21**

Paul is laying a choice before these folks. "Shape up or I will be forced to come to discipline you." He would much rather come with love in a spirit of gentleness. It

is really up to the Corinthians. He will find out if those who consider themselves wise in the world's ways are just full of hot air. Or as they say in Texas: all hat and no cows.

Paul was capable of either response. In fact, he will take on some other pretty major issues in the next few chapters, issues including sexual immorality, frivolous lawsuits against each other, lack of love towards weaker Christians, and the abuse of their spiritual gifts.

I think Paul hopes that this letter will bring the Corinthians to their senses; they will realize that they are not living as they ought to live, so that when he does come, it will not be to discipline them but to share in their joy.

So, what do we take away from the passage this morning? Let me suggest some thoughts:

1) God desires that we walk humbly before him, that we think rightly about ourselves. All we have and all we are, we have received from him. This should lead to a life of reflection upon God's grace and gratitude for all he has given to us.

We need to avoid the trap of spiritual pride of the sort we see in Corinth, thinking that we are the ones responsible for all our blessings. Beware of giving ourselves too much credit.

A beaver and a rabbit were staring up at the immense wall of the Hoover Dam. The beaver said, "No, I didn't actually build it myself. But it was based on an idea of mine."

2) We should be imitators of those like Paul who have been exhibited as examples of those seeking to serve Christ. This doesn't mean we should go looking for ways to suffer so we will match his experience.

Craig Blomberg is correct, I think, when he writes: "The New Testament never commands believers to seek suffering or martyrdom; indeed Jesus and Paul often fled from it. And Christ specifically ordered his disciples to escape persecution when they could. Neither does Scripture ever assign any atoning value to Christian suffering. Christ's cross-work was utterly unique in that aspect."

Yet, we do need to understand that to live like Christ will be counter to the values, mores, and standards of the world. We cannot embrace the wisdom of this world or we will betray the way of the cross.

3) We should desire that we would be the instruments of God's grace in sharing the good news of Christ with others. We should take opportunities, as God gives them, to become spiritual fathers and mothers, participating with the Holy Spirit as he births people into God's family.

4) Finally, we should be so growing towards maturity in Christ that we could dare say with Paul: "Imitate me as I imitate Christ."