



Many of you have probably watched the movie *Finding Nemo*, but in case you haven't, I want to give you a little backdrop before sharing a scene from it. The movie is an animation about two fish (a father and a son), and the son gets lost in the ocean. The father, who is afraid of almost everything, sets out to search for his son, overcoming many fears because of the love he has for his boy.

Early on in the father's journey, the dad (Marlin), comes across a fish named Dory and while she suffers from memory loss, sometimes her instincts (and even her memory) are right. Enter the scene. Dory had been given directions of where to go, and she quickly forgot. But one of the instructions was quite clear. When they got to the trench, swim through it not over it. Of course, when they arrived at the entrance of the trench, Marlin chooses to swim over it because he's always afraid and chooses the path that he thinks will have the least amount of fear. But Dory's memory kicks in. Something's telling her they should swim through it, not over it. In the end, Marlin doesn't listen to Dory. She follows him. At first, things look great. The water's clear. It's beautiful, and then all of a sudden, a whole swarm of jellyfish begin descending upon them and they barely make it out alive.

I think it reveals, many times, our human tendency. We don't merely want the path of ease, but we want the path of exaltation and beauty. Marlin didn't want the trench because it looked like the path of death. Yet, the path he chose was the path that almost lead to his death. If this is the tendency with human beings, then I think we who call ourselves Christians should be especially aware of this tendency. We shouldn't live with this mindset, and yet many Christians do live this way. This was the mindset of Corinth. In essence, **the Corinthians used the Christian message in order to elevate themselves culturally. Even today, professing Christians live this way. We make much of us. We refuse to sacrifice and we blur the picture of the gospel.** The problem is that it's the wrong path – and it's a deadly one. Many Christians have chose to swim above the trench, when the dark, deadly trench is what Jesus calls us to.

The title of the sermon is "The Cruciform Life." Cruciform refers to being in the form of the cross. The cruciform life means that our lives are to be shaped by the cross. All Christians are to take the path of the cross. Yet, again, we are so bound to think that the gospel has freed us to fight for ourselves and to elevate us. Again, this is the problem in Corinth. The believers there were not sacrificing for one another. They were elevating one person over another, and Paul is gravely concerned. He actually says that they're acting carnal. Meaning that they're simply living according to a worldly mindset. The path of the world that is elevated, looks nice at first, but leads to death. Whereas **God calls all Christians to the trench (the cruciform life) – a live modeled by Jesus himself where we die to ourselves for the glory of God and the good of others in the church and in the world.**

As Paul continues to address the Corinthians, he just finished stating that he believes that he is begin faithful to the Lord, but ultimately the Lord is the judge. Now he's calling them to judge themselves and compare themselves to their stated Master, Jesus. It would be good for all of us today to judge ourselves.

Now, remember in judging ourselves we're not the ultimate judge. Even our judgments can be wrong. But may we pray that the Spirit guides us to evaluate if our lives are conforming to the cross of Christ.

I believe the basic command of Paul found in these several verses is to call the Corinthians to **Follow those who live out the sacrificial message of Jesus**. In verses 8-13, Paul gives contrasts between the apostles and how the Corinthians are living. Then in verses 14-21, Paul urges them to follow him as he follows Christ. What I'm going to do in this sermon is actually start with 14-21 because I think that shares his point, and verses 8-13 support his point. So, in starting with those verses, we see we are to

1. Follow Paul's example (vv. 14-21).

Read verses 14-18 with me: ¹⁴I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶I urge you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.¹

In the middle of this text we're studying, Paul emphasizes his love for them. He's not writing just to make them feel ashamed. By the way, that's what we can tend to think because when our pride is hurt, we don't like to admit we're wrong. So, what do we do? We blame the messenger. And, we could blame them for not being loving. But Paul says he dearly loves them. Oh, how I can relate to this phrase as a pastor. Pastoring in the midst of this pandemic has been one of the most difficult times for me, and I've pastored in the midst of adulterous marriages, church discipline scenarios, and a building project that amazingly had much unity! *This* scenario has been one of the most trying, if not the most. And yet do you want to know the one message I want you all to believe of me and the other elders? God's glory in Christ matters supremely and we elders love you dearly. We spent hours upon hours upon hours praying over you, deliberating over decisions together and then deliberating at home – even taking time away from our families because we're so overwhelmed with the "right" action. I pray you know we love you in Christ.

This is what Paul wants them to see. They are dearly loved (that's what beloved means) children. Now, Paul moves on to emphasize this illustration. The Corinthians have countless guides in Christ, but they don't have many fathers. What does that mean? The idea of the word "countless" could be like if someone today said "zillions." The Corinthians have so many resources they can turn to. They can pick and choose which person they like. OH my! If the Corinthians had that choice, what about us today?! If you don't like one church, how many other churches could you go to in Holland? If you don't like one author, how many other authors can you turn to? But Paul has something special with the Corinthians. He's their "father."

But what does it mean that Paul is their father? Paul explains. He says he became their father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. In other words, Paul was the one who actually shared the gospel with them. And, through the power of the gospel, these people were rescued by God and reconciled to him through faith in Jesus. Their hearts and lives were transformed because God worked through Paul to share the message of Jesus. As a result, Paul says that he's their father. Does he love them? Yes! Why would he not care about them? These zillion other people don't care as much for the Corinthians as Paul does!

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 4:14–17.

This reminds me of what I've told my little girls. I said that if a boy tells them that he likes them, just ask them, "Do you love me as much as my daddy loves me?" One of my daughters said, "That's impossible!" And I said, "exactly." While I was being humorous, I was a little serious, too. Don't fall for any boy that comes along and gives you what you like. Isn't that also true within local churches and between Christians? "I'm of Paul." Or, "I'm of Apollos." Or, "I'm of Cephas." Or, we can say, "I'm of this tribe who likes this information," and another can say, "I'm of that tribe who likes that information." Then, you have Paul who contradicts the Corinthians and some or many are ready to be done with Paul. Again, this happens in local churches. People expect the pastor to agree with them and if he doesn't, then they're out.

What does Paul say here? I love you like no other spiritual leader loves you. Doesn't that count for anything? Ventura, I can tell you that the elders of Ventura love you deeply and dearly as well. You may not believe it, but we ache for your godliness. The emotions and burdens we are feeling are real and deep. Whether or not you agree with us on certain things, doesn't genuine gospel-based love enter the equation when evaluating leaders and listening to them?

This is what Paul's emphasizing, but notice Paul's emphasis isn't merely on *him*. He's a father to them because of the gospel. We must ask ourselves again what the gospel is. The gospel is the message of Jesus' self-sacrifice in the place of sinners so that sinners could be reconciled to God. Jesus, who alone is worthy of worship, became a servant of humans. Jesus, who is exalted to the highest place, was lifted up on the cross of shame. This past week, Cody Boerema shared a quote that I found powerful: **"So completely was Jesus bent upon saving sinners by the sacrifice of Himself, He created the tree upon which He was to die, and nurtured from infancy the men who were to nail Him to the accursed wood"** (Octavius Winslow). The emphasis of following Paul's example is the emphasis on the gospel. Paul is saying to them that his life is imitating Jesus. This is the life of the Christian: in the trench, not the life above it! This is how the Corinthians, and we also, ought to be living. We may not like it, but Jesus endured the cross and despised the shame, too. We may have thought that Christianity was to elevate us and make us look real good in this world. But God didn't save us to make much of us in this world. In saving us, he reveals how our joy is found in knowing how much he is worthy. Therefore, we make much of him through death to self, through the cruciform life.

Even while Paul couldn't be there with him, he sent Timothy, another child in the faith, to be an example in the flesh so they could see how to live. Again, Paul emphasizes the point is that Timothy shows forth obedience in Christ. Obedience on the basis of Christ. And, this message from Paul is consistent in every place he goes. He hasn't changed his mind. The gospel hasn't changed and it doesn't change from place to place. The gospel is always the same – and its call to the lives of Christians today is the same forever – even to us today.

But do you think the Corinthians are prone to listen to Timothy? Why won't they? Why would they choose the people with less love and interest in them? Why would they turn to people who might change their minds and give various opinions? Ask yourselves these questions. Notice the people who love and sacrifice and pray for you. Through this type of life, Paul has revealed his love. Through this type of life, you can evaluate church leaders. Keep in mind, our evaluations can be skewed and ultimately God is the Judge. But if you see a leader who loves Jesus and lives a life of sacrificial love for others, that's a wonderful sign of gospel growth.

Now, Paul goes on to verses 18-21: ¹⁸ Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their

power. ²⁰For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. ²¹What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? ²

The “some” here are referring to some of the zillion teachers they have. They’re arrogant thinking Paul’s not going to follow up. If Paul didn’t love the Corinthians, he wouldn’t come back. A good leader always seeks the welfare of the people and keeps coming back. They follow the example of Jesus, that though one leaves the 99, he rescues the one. This is what Paul is going to do for the Corinthians. He’s jealous for their welfare and zealous for gospel-growth. So, he says he’s coming.

I get the mental picture here of children who are home alone, and there’s a kid who is also with the family, but he’s kind of a bad influence. He tempts the kids to do things they shouldn’t do. He says, “Oh, your dad isn’t coming home for a while.” Somehow dad finds out. He sends a FaceTime message to the family. I’m coming. How should that affect the children? Well, it could just be fear. But have you ever known someone who has immense love and then they find out they’ve been ignored? My dad is a great example of that. When my dad was angry, it felt like righteous anger because he also had a deep sorrow that he’d express at the sin we chose to commit.

This is the idea of Paul. He’s loves them dearly like a father. They’re acting like rebellious children, ignoring the life of the gospel. They’re believing these arrogant teachers. Now Paul asks, “What’s going to happen when he comes?” But before he does this, he says something interesting. He’s going to find out not just their words, but their “power.” What does he mean by that?

Do you know that it’s only by the power of God that we can live the cruciform life and follow the examples of those live out the sacrificial message of Jesus? In Matthew 5, I’m going to paraphrase, Jesus tells us not simply to love those who love us back. The Gentiles do that. Jesus tells us earlier in this that we’re blessed if we’re persecuted. Elsewhere we’re told that we are to love our enemies. But what’s our tendency? If we’re against someone, we’re going to make it known. Yet, Jesus says that if they take from you, you are to give them even more. Wait a second? Am I supposed to just let people take advantage of me? That’s a loaded question. But I’m going to answer and say that for the gospel’s sake, we ought always be willing to be taken advantage of because Jesus taken advantage of? “I don’t like where you’re going with this, Pastor Timothy.” Does it sound like a trench? This is why the apostle John tells us that we know we have passed from death to life if we love. Love isn’t just being nice to people we agree with or who treat us nicely. Love is sacrificial to the core! When you read about God’s love in the New Testament, it’s often connected with the word “give.” So it is to be with us – a radical giving of ourselves so that God’s glory is put on display and others might know the God who saves. We are not making much of us. We are making much of him through this cruciform life – believing he will work miracles and even take care of us as we live this way.

So, Paul says that the kingdom of God – which refers to his rule and I think refers to the citizens of the Kingdom as well – does not consist in just talking. It exists in power – actually living it out. So, it’s great that you can articulate the gospel. You can talk about Jesus and how he lived and died and rose again, but if you’re cursing at your neighbors or mocking your enemies or creating factions within the church – you are not living in gospel power.

Now, again, Paul doesn’t say this to shame them. But he does ask them if he’s going to come with discipline or with a spirit of gentleness because they’ve repented. In all this, remember that he’s saying

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 4:18–21.

this because he loves them and wants them to know the power of the gospel – the freedom of the gospel, the glory of the God of the gospel! So, let’s go back to verses 8-13. Here we are called to:

2. Follow the apostles’ example (vv. 8-13).

We’ll read all the verses: ⁸Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! ⁹For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹²and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. ³

Has God really called Christ’s followers to a life of self-sacrifice? A man named David Garland wrote this, **“The suffering so visible in the lives of the apostles is not some tedious detour . . . but the main highway for all Christians. By contrasting the cross-centered lifestyles of the apostles with the Corinthians’ vainglory, Paul hopes to supplant their egotism with the wisdom of the cross”** (Garland, p. 139).

Paul is calling them to contrast their lives with the lives of not only him, but the apostles. If I were to ask you about the apostles, you’d probably say, “Wow, they were so great. They were so committed!” But if I said, their death-to-self life is to be exhibited in us, too, what would you say? I’m not saying you have to go to jail or be homeless. But, self-sacrifice should be exuding from us!

Paul uses sarcasm and contrast to show just how off the Corinthian Christians are in their living. Let this be a test for us as well. Paul states the Corinthians are rich kings. In verse 10, he says they’re wise, strong and honorable. From my understanding all of these phrases were cultural terms to describe someone who was high up and respected. Again, the Corinthians *used* Christianity, but their real love was in the world. Is that the case for you? Do you use the Bible or do you argue things with this world in order to make life easier for you to make it in this world? Paul says to the Corinthians, “And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!” This is sarcasm. They’re only rich in the world, but they’re not living in the riches of living a cross-life.

In contrast, Paul shares what the Jesus-focused, cross-based life is: I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death. . . . They’re sentenced to death. They’re fools in the eyes of the world. They’re weak in the eyes of the world. They’re held in disrepute in the eyes of the world. They hunger, thirst and are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless. They work with their hands, meaning in that culture, they’re low on the social order. When the apostles are reviled, they bless! Isn’t that what Jesus said? Bless those who revile you. When persecuted, they don’t fight back. They endure. Why? Jesus endured the cross. When slandered, they entreat. Do you know what entreat means in the Greek? To encourage. When they’re slandered by people, they encourage those same people.

Test time. Take a mental note of your interactions with people either in your home, on social media, in the workplace. You name it. When you feel persecuted by someone (or others), what do you do? When slandered, what do you do? When reviled, what do you do? Paul, and all the apostles, reveal what our actions should look like because these actions are simply the living out of Jesus’ commands!

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 4:8–13.

But I want you to get one specific thing. If this sounds too great and awful, and you think I'm way off here, think back to Jesus himself. What did he say? "Yeah, well, this time period is different," you may say. True, it's a different time period, but is the gospel different? Is Jesus' Kingdom of greater value? Then we're called to follow the examples of those who live out the sacrificial message of Jesus.

Paul actually usually profound wordplay within these verses to emphasize his point of sacrificial love for one another. The phrases he uses with "men sentenced to death," the imagery is that of people being carted off to the colosseum for gladiatorial fights. Paul says that's the life of the apostles. They're a spectacle. All they're good for, according to the world, is to give a good fight to people while they watch the apostles die.

Listen, if you came to Christ in order to emphasize you and make much of you, you don't understand Jesus. If you think Jesus gave you salvation so that you can have high status, you don't understand salvation. Again, this doesn't mean that we all experience the same amount of suffering, but the life of self-sacrifice is the life of the Christian because the life of a Christian is determined to now nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified! The sooner we come to terms with the fact that the world views us this way, the better! And, how freeing!

I know that sounds odd, but it is freeing. Yes, the world views us this way, and Paul goes even further. They are treated like scum and refuse. The word refuse can be translated trash or excrement. You may say, "If I live this way, people are going to treat me like trash." Yep. So what? That's what they did with our Savior, and didn't that type of love revolutionize your heart and many throughout the ages? Also, wasn't Jesus' death what leads to life? Paul shows us here and elsewhere in Scripture that follow Christ in this way, while a trench, is the right path. Driving to go up is the path down. Jesus says if we try to save our lives, we'll lose them, but if we lose our lives, we gain them!

Think again about Jesus' sacrificial life for you and let that influence your love for others in the church and in the world. I mean, didn't you treat Jesus sinfully before salvation? And yet, what did Jesus do for you and for the world? And when you're tempted to say, "If I live this way towards the world and even towards Christians, then I'm going to be used." Sure. Paul admits that. But Paul and the apostles have a greater faith in the power of God through the gospel. Neither your glory or mine matters supremely. What matters is that God's glory be seen, and his glory is seen through making his powerful gospel known through weakness.

So, what about you? Where do you need to repent? Have you missed Jesus? Neither Paul nor I say these things to shame you. We say this out of love for Christ and I personally say this out of great love for you, Ventura. I dearly love you and pray we grow in pursuing Jesus together, sacrificing for one another and living a life of self-sacrifice towards the world around us. **Follow those who live out the sacrificial message of Jesus. Live the cruciform life.**

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