

Under Rowers for Christ Outline

1st Corinthians Chapter 4

- I. The Christian life as “counter-cultural”.
 - A. Counter-cultural definition— *A way of life and set of attitudes opposed to or at variance with the prevailing social norms.*
 - B. The true church has ALWAYS been counter-cultural.
 - C. The true church is only “affective” and “successful” if it is counter-cultural.

“The most counter-cultural act one can perform is to bind oneself in obedience to something higher” -- Robert Bellah

- II. The passage.
 - A. Identify the personal pronouns.
 - 1. The “**us**” in verse 1 refers to pastors (in Corinth and for all time).
 - 2. The pronouns “your” and “you” refer to the laity of the church at Corinth.
 - B. The passage if for all Christians.
 - 1. The apostle Paul admonishes all to be imitators of him (who is an imitator of Christ). Verse 16
 - C. The problems in the Corinthian church.
 - 1. They were becoming “imitators” of the world.
 - 2. They had become arrogant—they didn’t need anything.
 - a. Paul’s hyper-sarcasm to give his point—verses 7-13
 - 3. The contrast between the apostles/pastors and the church.
 - a. The apostles as “scum” and “dregs”
 - 4. The apostles were counter-cultural, the church was cultural.
- III. The spiritual family—Verses 14-15.
 - A. Paul the spiritual father who loves and admonishes his children.
 - B. The church are his children (who need admonishing!).
 - 1. Tutors—A trusted slave who was responsible for the master’s child.

- C. “**Be imitators of me**”—carried great cultural meaning.
- IV. Paul and Timothy—an example of true discipleship (Verse 17).
- V. When someone thinks of you....
 - A. A servant of Jesus Christ—Verse 1
 - 1. Greek word *huperetes*—*Huper* = *Under*; *Retes* = *Rower*
 - a. Comes from the rower of a Trireme warship in the Greek military.
 - b. The lowest slave—a “third level galley slave”.
 - 2. Characteristics of a third level galley slave.
 - a. An under-rower had to row to the captain’s beat.
 - b. The under-rowers had to row together.
 - c. An under-rower had to trust the captain.
 - d. An under-rower was committed for life....he had no life!
 - e. An under-rower received no honor, only the captain would receive the honor from all their work.
 - B. A steward of the mysteries of God—Verse 1
 - 1. A manager of a household estate for the owner.
 - 2. Mysteries of God = What was unknown (in the Old Testament) that has been made known (in the New Testament)—the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
 - a. We are to know the gospel, understand it, preserve it, share it, love it, defend it.
 - 3. A steward is to be faithful—Verse 2.

Faithfulness is the PROOF, the indicator, the validation that confirms what we profess is true.

- VI. We are to be accountable to God—Verses 3-5
 - A. There is not a human being alive that is qualified to determine the absolute legitimacy, quality or faithfulness of another’s spiritual life. NOT EVEN OURSELVES!
 - B. When Jesus returns, and only when He returns, only He will turn on the lights and expose the truth of who and what each one of us are.

Under Rowers for Christ Pastoral Notes

1st Corinthians Chapter 4

It is good to be back!... we had some great time with nearly the entire family in one place...this was the first time that weather in California was worse than the weather in Idaho in January... we were in the center of all that flooding you watched on the news...it was quite a spectacle... In just a couple of days we received over 400% of the yearly amount of precipitation for the area... so much for drought.

Something else that was remarkable... I'm sure God ordained it... the night before we left I received a text from our cell-phone provider... Inland Cellular and it said that for those travelling outside of Inland Cellular range...the entire world... roaming... you will have no voice or texting services.... In other words... no phone....

So...no phone for 18 days... that's a vacation!...that's getting away... the whole time I'm angry at Inland Cellular but happy my phone didn't work....

We are back in 1st Corinthians after a long break... our last message was on December 11... we have arrived at chapter 4... We are going to look at the entire chapter this morning... in fact... for the next few weeks we will be taking on entire chapters (except for possibly chapter 7) giving you the false impression that we are speeding through 1st Corinthians!

The reason is that the next nine chapters present complete singular messages...I think they will be best understood in their entirety...we are arriving at the meat of the epistle...until now...Paul has been preparing us for this meat.... Some of these topics will be difficult to hear...they will mess with us....so let's begin all this with prayer:

[Prayer]

If I was to choose one passage in the Bible to speak on what it means to be a mature Christian... 1st Corinthians chapter 4 would be near or at the top of the list...

One thing that stands out is that what Paul is showing us is that the Christian life is unapologetically counter-cultural.

By definition "counter-cultural" means *a way of life and set of attitudes opposed to or at variance with the prevailing social norms*. For the Christian to be counter-cultural is to go against the grain of the world around us... to go against the flow... to resist.... To stand firm when everything around you is flooding downstream.

The Word of God is stable... it never fluctuates... never changes... the word of the world is in constant flux... because of that... we must be counter-cultural.

The tension for all Christians in all ages... at all times ...in all of history is to resist becoming like the ever changing world around them.... to keep the distinctions of a life living for and pleasing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The true church has always been counter-cultural.... It goes counter to the culture here in Moscow Idaho, the United States of America in 2023... it was counter-cultural in Judea and Galilee in 33 AD... it countered the culture of the Greeks and Romans in the first century...it has countered every culture throughout all of history since the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The church is only truly affective...it is only successful if it models the gospel of Jesus Christ... but that means going against gravity... it means going against every force the world throws at us...It means to go against your very nature... it means to be counter-cultural.

Sociologist Robert Bellah from an earlier generation said accurately... *“the most counter-cultural act one can perform is to bind oneself in obedience to something higher”*....that is exactly what the Christian is called to do....to bind ourselves in obedience to Jesus Christ.

The world says bind yourself to yourself...

I'm going to take this in three sections this morning... the meat of this passage is verses 1-6... we will spend most of our time there...after we look briefly at verses 8-13 which reminds of us of the condition of the church at Corinth... then verses 14-21 which ties the church... the believers with Paul's example.....which are the first six verses.

It is important to identify the personal pronouns in this entire passage so as to understand just who is supposed to identify with what Paul is saying...exhorting. Who are the “us” in verse 1?... is it the church at Corinth?... Is it you?... the “us” here are those who are ministering to the church at Corinth....the pastors of the church...the leaders... the elders...and all pastors of churches for the rest of history.

Verses 1-5 are directed to those in the church who are ministering to the church... so you say then *we who are not ministers need not hear what Paul has to say*.... Wrong!... in verse 6 there are the pronouns “your” and “you”... not directed to ministers.... But to the flock... the church.

I have showed you these things that are for the pastors (myself and Apollos) FOR YOUR SAKES

In other words... this teaching to the pastors of the church are teachings for everyone...in fact... Paul's exhortation... what he wants his church to go home with... is for all of them to live as pastors are to live... as servants of Jesus Christ.... That's why he says in verse 16 **I exhort you, Be imitators of me....** so there are DEMANDS here of Christian leaders for all time... Christian leadership DEMANDS a flow of the kind of characteristics that OUGHT to be present in ALL Christians everywhere. D.A. Carson

All that to say... this passage is for everyone who claims to be a Christian.

Remember the problem at Corinth?... there were many... but the result of all their problems was that they began to have little distinction from the culture around them... to look at the Corinthian church was to see the world of Corinth.... **They were becoming imitators of the world.**

In Paul's absence... remember he had left them to eventually go to work in the church at Ephesus... he had been gone for over a year... the church began adopting the model from the surrounding world... embracing form over content... truth.

Prestige above humility... they became individualistic...elevation of the self... *"it's what I want"...* *"what I like"...* *"what pleases me"...*...exchanging Godly wisdom for human knowledge All this resulting in squabbles... jealousy...one-upmanship... and tragically... divisions within the church.... *I like Paul... I like Apollos... well I'm superior to all of you for I follow Jesus!*

Sounds like much of the church today!...you can see why we need this book!...

And did I mention arrogance?...a sense of superiority to others?

Read verse 7

Do you think you are above others in the church?... who gave you this idea?... what makes you think you're so special?... everything good that you have was given to you!... but you go around acting as though it wasn't given to you... that you are so special... so superior that it was your ability...your cleverness... your superiority.

[the elevation of the self...]

And then some of the most sarcastic words in the Bible.... *You are really something! You don't need anything! You're so good!...you're the best!...You are kings!...* Paul's addressing the attitude you get when you embrace the World's view...

These are penetrating words for the church today... so much is about "ME"... [expound]

Read verse 8

Paul uses hyper-sarcasm to expose the Corinthians conceit...he piles on fake praise!... *You guys have arrived!...You don't need anything.. you have it all!...* they are like the Laodiceans in

Revelation 3... verse 17...you say **“I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing”...yet you do not know that you are wretched and pitiable and poor and blind and naked.**

Paul continues to reveal the sad state of the church by sarcastically comparing them to him and the other apostles... *You have arrived! You are so much better than your leaders!... Your Christianity is privileged... ours is lowly... you are rich we are poor.*

Read verses 9-13

You church are on top!.....We have become **scum of the world**...The Greek word translated as “scum” in English... the English flatters.... Scum referred to the scrapings from a dirty dish... the **grime of all things** or **the dregs of all things**.... Wine was kept in wineskins... after time, at the bottom of the wineskins would be pieces of the grapes that didn’t make it to wine... they were disgusting rancid pieces of grape skins that were waste materials... those were the “dregs”...

Which one’s are counter-culture?.... Paul and the apostles?... or the Corinthian church member?... Paul deliberately contrasted the extreme differences between the world and the true Christian.... And he’s not trying to be mean to them!...

Read verse 14

Some of the most shaming sarcasm... Paul expresses great love to his church... *You need to change!... You are going down a road of destruction... I don’t want you to miss the blessings of living for Christ by embracing living for the world!...*

To have life you must lose it...to be strong you must become weak... the paradox of the Christian life....

Paul “admonishes” them... to admonish is to correct them... to encourage them in the right way...he calls them his “beloved children”... Paul lead these people to Christ... so he uses the metaphor of the “family” to make his point.

I am like your spiritual father...you are my spiritual children... I led you to Christ... I am now “admonishing you”... correcting you as a loving father would correct his child.

Read verse 15

The tutor in the 1st century Greek household would have been a trusted slave who was put in charge of a child...He would take the child to and from school...he would make sure the child behaved properly... the tutor had authority over the child... but nothing close to the authority the father had....not to mention the love.

I’m more loving.. more caring... more concerned over your spiritual condition than anyone else...even if you had five-hundred tutors in Christ.... so all that sarcasm?... all those tough

words?... they were for your spiritual good....and then he says in verse 16... **Therefore I exhort you to be imitators of me.**

Set me as your example... instead of adopting the model of the surrounding world... adopt the model that I have been displaying through my own life. ...Boy... this was a convicting verse for me these last few weeks as I worked my way through them.

It's way easier for me to tell you to do what I tell you to do... not do what I do!...Paul is showing all who are leading people in Christ.... All pastors.... All teachers of the word... all shepherds... to live lives that should be imitated!

This statement... be imitators of me would have resonated with the Corinthian church in a more nuanced way than it does us... today... there is no pressure for a son to imitate his father... in fact... most children today crave independence from parents!

But in the first century... especially in that culture... the son was EXPECTED to imitate his father... to become LIKE their father.... If the father was a baker... the son would become a baker... the son was expected to carry on the family values... the family name,... the family heritage...

Be imitators of me means to imitate Paul's passion to live in the light of the cross... imitate his values... his priorities...his value of the exclusive centrality of the crucified Messiah Jesus Christ.

Before we get to the meat of the message in the first six verses... I have to share this... this brought this home to me these last weeks... we know that the apostle Paul took some heat from the church by not coming to them personally to speak to them....*you should be here Paul... you're our pastor.*

In 2 Corinthians chapter 10... Paul defends himself from this criticism... some on the church accused Paul from being brave in his words when he was hundreds of miles away... but was humble and careful in his words when he was present with them.

2 Corinthians 10:10 says **For they say "His letters are weighty and strong but his personal presence is weak and his words contemptible.** "If you have something to say to us Paul... come here in person!"

Back in chapter 4...right after he says **be imitators of me** he says:

Read verse 17

This is really a beautiful picture... this is discipleship... we know that Paul spent time with Timothy... coming alongside Timothy in preparing him for the ministry... **preach the word**

Timothy,... be ready in season and out of season...reprove...rebuke... exhort... with great patience and teaching...

And now... here in chapter four... we see the results of that discipleship... Timothy is now prepared to disciple the church at Corinth... how?... by teaching them how to be imitators of Paul which is what?...arrogance on the part of Paul?... NO!... **Timothy...who will remind you of my ways WHICH ARE IN CHRIST**

Paul clarifies this up in Ephesians... **Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.**

I'm not trying to tell you that Randy and I have the same relationship as did Paul and Timothy... but what I am saying is that about 18 years ago Randy in a time of need ended up sitting in this church... And through the years was disciplined in this church...you could say he was a beloved and faithful child in the Lord...

And now...I can be absent for several weeks and have my phone shut off and know that this church is in good hands!... that's the way its supposed to be!.... Paul is saying... I don't have to be there... Timothy is completely capable of teaching you to be imitators of Christ.

So let's get to the meat... the first six verses... remember here he is talking specifically to the leaders of the church...**us** the pastors... the fellow apostles... and extended to all pastors through out all time... and it is addressed to all of you as well so as to be imitators.

All pastors...me... and all of you... need to ask yourselves... when people think of you... what do they think?...that's frightening isn't it?... in verse 1... Paul says **let a man consider us in this manner...** when someone thinks about you...literally... all who come into our contact... this is what they should think of you... **as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.**

1. Servants of Christ

Again... not much more counter-cultural than the idea of being ANYBODY'S servant.... Unless there's a big paycheck!... The New Testament has six different words that we translate as "servant"... we often talk of "doulos" which means "slave"... not a word for servant... *doulos* describes a relationship...

The Greek word here is a unique word... it is *huperetes*... *Huper* means "under"... and *retes* has to do with rowing a ship...literally a "under-rower"... What's that?... In Paul's day and through ancient Greek history...the Greeks had a very powerful weapon...a warship called a "Trireme".

If you're old enough to remember the great movie *Ben Hur* starring Charlton Heston... you saw a Trireme... and you saw Charlton Heston as a "Under-Rower"...

The Trireme was a long...sleek tri-level ship designed for ramming other enemy ships... there were three banks of oars...one man to an oar... there were 30 oars on each side running down three tiers of the ship...making up to 90 oars per side of the ship... 180 total...that's a lot of man-power!...

But 90 rowers... you HAVE to be in sync... no individualism or creativity here!

Out of the three levels of rowers... the bottom level was called the Thalamoi...or a "*third level galley slave*"...considered the lowest... worst position in the ship... you did not want to be a "*third level galley slave*".

- An under-rower had to row to the captain's beat.
- The under-rowers had to row together.
- An under-rower had to *trust* the captain. (they can't see where they're going...)
- An under-rower was committed for life...he had no life!
- An under-rower received no honor...only the captain would receive the honor from all their work.

So Paul begins with saying... *when people think of you as a pastor... they should be thinking of a "third level galley slave"*... Paul wasn't telling us to do anything he wasn't doing...

Paul modeled the attitude of an under-rower.

- He was submissive because he rowed to the captain's beat....Jesus Christ
- He was sensitive because he rowed in harmony with others.

There are 35 "**one another**" passages in the New Testament....no stars or celebrities in Christ's church!

- He was trusting because he didn't care where he labored.
- He was dedicated because he was willing to die at his post.
- He was humble because he wanted no glory for himself, only for his captain.

How counter-culture is this!... how counter modern church this is?... pastors are the lowest!...there is no elitest position of pastor in the church...pastor is not a position of privilege...we are third level galley slaves!.... and this is the model all Christians are to follow!

2. Stewards of the mysteries of God

A steward here is a manager of a household estate... literally the word means “*The Law of the house*”...one who rules over the possessions FOR ANOTHER.

[An interesting use of this word is found in Ephesians 1:10... especially as the King James Versions says it... **in the dispensation of the fullness of time he (God) might gather together in one all things in Christ....** “dispensation” is the word “steward”.. *how things are managed during a specific period of time...*]

People are to think of us as “stewards”... we are managers of something **for someone else!**... what are we managing?... I think this is important... this isn’t talking about managing money... or the lawn... or the building... the operation of the church... many people see pastors as stewards of the physical stuff of the church... that’s not what Paul is talking about.

He says we are to be “**stewards of the mysteries of God**”... what are the mysteries of God?... Mystery here refers to “**having knowledge of the inside**”...Inside knowledge... we are managers of some inside knowledge that God has given us.

I had some extra time a week ago and I thought it would be interesting to look up every place in the New Testament that speaks of these “mysteries” of God... just for kicks:

1. Mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven Matthew 13... all the parables... the sower...the mustard seed...the Tares... if you are in Christ... you can understand these mysteries and now you are to manage them.

2. Mysteries of the blindness of Israel Romans 11:25... many Christians are still blind about this mystery... they think God is done with Israel... that all His promises will not happen... **For I do not want you, brothers, to be uninformed of this mystery...that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the gentiles has come in...and so all Israel will be saved...**

3. Mystery of not all believers will die 1st Corinthians 15:51 **Behold I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet WILL sound...and the dead will be raised incorruptible.**

4. Mystery of God’s will Ephesians 1:8-9 **He caused us to abound in all wisdom and insight, making known to us...the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Him.**

5. The Mystery of Jew and Gentile in one body expounded in Ephesians 3 **READ IT!**

The mystery of Christ in you, the hope of glory Colossians 1:27

We are stewards... we are entrusted to the mysteries of God... in the broadest sense... we are managers of the gospel of Jesus Christ... the gospel was “hidden” before the coming of Jesus Christ... and now it has been revealed... the gospel is the content of that mystery.

And all Christians are servants of Christ and all have been entrusted with the gospel.... We are to know it...understand it... preserve it... share it... love it... defend it...

Being a steward does not add prestige to the position of pastor!.. we are simply managers of the gospel... we manage... we don't add to it... we don't deduct from it... no creativity here!...we simply are managers of someone else's property.

Something else vital:

Read verse 2

There is ONE thing required ...and that is faithfulness. Faithfulness... **faithfulness is the PROOF... the indicator... the validation that confirms what we profess is true** faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ is a validation of one's faith.

Faithfulness includes integrity...endurance...long-suffering...commitment... tenacity... single-mindedness... the word is PISTOS in the Greek.... Literally to be persuaded...convinced... to believe... Pistos identifies those who strongly believe in the gospel of our Lord.

Interesting that the Bible...in several places juxtaposes faithfulness against being "prideful"... for instance Psalm 31:23 says **O Love the Lord all you His godly ones! The Lord preserves the faithful but repays full the one who acts in lofty pride.**

Faithfulness and the opposite of pride... humility go together...one commentator said that *"faithfulness is essentially the manifestation of the long period of time of one's humble stance before the Lord.*

So what's our problem?... humility is counter-cultural... the world around us promotes pride... trashes humility... One of the true beauty's of one being faithful... is that **one's faithfulness transcends one's life.**

There is no greater legacy to leave behind than being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ...this comes to my mind every time I hear about a prominent preacher or even not so prominent preacher fall in some sin...

You can be a dynamic... gifted.... Charismatic...preacher of God's word.... Filling 5000 seats on any given Sunday... but if you are remembered for not being faithful to the Word in your personal life after you're dead... everything else is erased! Everything you said will be erased from the memories of those who listened to you!

So we are to be third-level-galley slaves....managers of the gospel of Jesus Christ... filled with humility and completely faithful to the gospel.... One more thing... ***we are to be accountable to God.***

Read verse 3

This is not saying we shouldn't care what people think about us... this is not a rude statement... *I don't care what YOU think about me*...that's not this... that's called a "arrogant bad attitude".... But this is important for us all to understand....***this is in the context of a pastor or spiritual leader***... but it could be applied to any professing Christian in light of their spiritual life... condition..

THERE IS NOT A HUMAN BEING ALIVE THAT IS QUALIFIED TO DETERMINE THE ABSOLUTE LEGITIMACY, QUALITY OR FAITHFULNESS OF OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE....NOBODY... NOT EVEN OURSELVES!

We can and are told to make judgements regarding outward sin from fellow believers... 1st Timothy 5:19 **Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses...those who continue in sin, reprove in the presence of all so that the rest will also be fearful.**

We are not making a spiritual judgement when we do that... we are protecting the testimony of the church...

You could add Matthew 18 to this as well... these are for the purpose of discipline and protecting others from sinning... but here's a fact... **NOBODY CAN MAKE ABSOLUTELY ACCURATE JUDGMENT AS TO THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE HEART, MIND, AND BODY OF ANOTHER SERVANT OF GOD OR PROFESSING CHRISTIAN.**

We can only see what is on the outside... and most of us only show on the outside what we want people to see!

Paul... apostle preacher and teacher... is saying that as long as he is faithful to the Word of God... faithful to Jesus Christ and the gospel... other people's evaluation of him and his ministry means very little....**it's a very small thing.**

If you want to be a pastor you got to get this one down!...if you need praise from others every Sunday after you preach you will need psychiatric counseling!... just be true to the word... please God in your preaching!.... be accountable to Him!

There will be people who tell you your sermon was great when it wasn't... there will be some that tell you your sermon was wrong when it wasn't... Some will see you falsely as a "good" person... some will "falsely" see you as a bad person....

And that goes for all Christians... live your lives pleasing to God... be accountable to Him not others!... they can't possible know your heart... your motives...intentions.... But God does!

I do not even examine myself!... for I am conscious of nothing against myself...yet I am NOT by this acquitted...but the one who examines me is the Lord.

I have a clear conscience... in my evaluation of myself... I can't see anything wrong right now...
A clear conscience is important... that's what we should have... that's where we want to live... we want clear consciences.... BUT... **even with a clear conscience I am NOT by this acquitted...**

“Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart.” Proverbs 21:2..... My own conscience is a defense, but it is not a perfect defense, because I am biased in my own favor. I don't trust my own judgment, because my heart is deceitful....I usually think I'm right!...even when I'm....yes.... wrong!

My way is the right way.... Right?.... that's why we can't understand why everybody is not of my political party.... I don't get that!....

So, what people say about me and even what I think about myself is insignificant; it doesn't matter. I may be underestimated; I may be overestimated; I may be a combination of both. Neither of those is the final verdict....I'm certainly not the final verdict... The final verdict comes from heaven.

Read Verse 5

When Jesus returns... And only when He returns...Only He will turn on the lights and expose the truth of who and what each one of us are...

Let's be imitators of Paul... who is the imitator of Jesus Christ... third level galley slaves... stewards of the mysteries of God... the Gospel of Jesus Christ... and be accountable to God... He is our highest standard... counter-cultural?