

## **Spiritual Pride**

### **1 Corinthians 4**

We will be studying 1 Corinthians 4 today and wrapping up Paul's opening section of this book and the first problem he's been addressing in the church. It's been a big problem and he's had a lot to say about it. We've seen that they were straying into worldly thinking and using that to take sides with certain preachers – most prominently Paul and Apollos. So Paul has confronted them about it, pointed out their foolishness and immaturity, and warned the local teachers and pastors to stop leading the people astray.

In chapter 4 he makes several closing comments to wrap up his thoughts about the problem, which makes it a strange chapter to try to preach through, but there does seem to be a common theme, which is what I want to focus on today.

In America we have a cultural heritage that has been very favorable to Christianity. It feels like that's changing, but at least around here, Christians and churches still have honor and respect. We have esteemed and accredited colleges and universities, prestigious seminaries, a huge Christian music industry, and growing presence in other forms of media. Churches and denominations have an incredible amount of money and are still very influential. We have all kinds of resources, Bible studies, and access to anything we want or need in order to grow deeper in our faith.

We have all kinds of privileges and along with that I can see a general attitude that the rest of the world should probably look up to our example. We set the bar for other Christians to follow. They should send their pastors here for the best education. They should read our books and use our resources. They should learn from us.

On a smaller scale, you can see similar dynamics within the local church... You often have a group of people in any given church who seem to be the most knowledgeable, the most well-read, most educated. They have a lot of resources and end up being the teachers. They're looked up to as being the most spiritually mature from whom everyone else should seek to learn from.

It's among Christians who have the most privileges and seem to be the most knowledgeable that a destructive attitude and pattern of behavior can begin to

develop that can be very damaging to the church. I've seen and heard about it causing major problems in many churches and it's something we need to watch out for in our own lives and church. It's an attitude that Paul saw in Corinth and confronts in multiple ways in 1 Corinthians 4. I want to use this chapter to help identify if it's present in our own lives so we can turn away from it.

The attitude I'm talking about is that of spiritual pride, and in each section of this chapter you can see some different characteristics it leads to. So I want us to look at these characteristics to try to identify if spiritual pride is present in our lives and then look at what the opposite would look like, which is humility.

The general context to keep in mind as we begin this chapter is you've got an apostle who was commissioned by Christ himself, writing to a young church he planted just 5 years earlier. They should have been very humble, teachable, and respectful toward him, but weren't. They were arrogant, argumentative, and judgmental and the underlying reason that becomes apparent in these verses, is their spiritual pride.

Paul just got done describing him and Apollos as servants of God in chapter 3 – fellow workers, like gardeners in God's field or builders in God's building. And God had given them to the Corinthian church for their benefit...

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

*This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. <sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. <sup>3</sup> But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup> For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup> Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.*

Here Paul addresses how some of them had been pronouncing judgment on him, and based on the context, he's talking about discrediting his teaching and ministry in favor of Apollos. It's a surprising thing for them to do since he was the one who was with them in the beginning and devoted so much time to teaching them the foundations of their faith. I don't know what happened, but sometime after Paul left, Apollos came and did some teaching for a while. Then, after he left, it

appears that the people started taking sides – some apparently didn't care for Paul and sided with Apollos, while others stayed loyal to Paul. The ones siding with Apollos, were writing Paul off and discrediting him, even though he and Apollos were on the same team and teaching the same things.

Paul writes that as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, which were the gospel truths he and Apollos were teaching, he and Apollos should prove to be faithful to their calling, but it was not up to the Corinthians to judge them. It wasn't even up to Paul himself to be the judge. That kind of judgement belonged to Jesus, who would be the judge of all things. So Paul tells the Corinthians to not pronounce judgement on him before Christ did. "Don't write me off."

Why would they do that? Why would the students pronounce judgment and discredit their teacher? I think it's spiritual pride. Spiritual pride says: "I'm not going to listen to those in spiritual authority over me if I don't like them or agree with them. I know better than they do and I'm going to look for ways to knock them down, so I can justify my point of view." 2 Timothy 4:3-4 says: "*For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,<sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.*"

Spiritual pride is rising above sound teaching from those in spiritual authority, pronouncing judgement that discredits their teaching, and choosing to believe what you want to believe. If we see that attitude in our lives we need to go the other direction. Humility says: "I'm going to listen to those in spiritual authority, who teach sound doctrine and have proven themselves to be reliable, even if they confront my way of thinking. I'm going to consider what they have to say and seek to learn from it. I'm going to humble myself before the Lord and allow him to reveal any error on my part." So there's a teachable attitude – the ability to learn from reliable teachers who challenge you.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-7.

<sup>6</sup>*I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.* <sup>7</sup>*For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?*

So here we see some more characteristics of spiritual pride. Paul explains that the things he's written in the past couple chapters about him and Apollos – how they were fellow workers with God, preaching the wisdom of God and not straying into worldly wisdom – he wrote these things so that they would stop going beyond the Scriptures into human, worldly wisdom and arrogantly come up with reasons to side with either he or Apollos over the other. He asks them to consider if anyone sees anything different in what's going on and points out that whatever spiritual knowledge they had came from either him or Apollos so they shouldn't boast as if they came up with it.

Why would new believers come up with divisive teachings beyond what they'd been taught and then boast about their knowledge? Again, this points to spiritual pride. Spiritual pride says: "I know even more than what the Scriptures reveal. The Bible only goes so far, but by my own logic and reasoning I can go even farther and be able to understand even deeper mysteries of God." That's a dangerous road to go down and one that has led to many divisive doctrines between Christians and churches today. It's a bad idea to try to go beyond what Scripture reveals and figure out how to fill in the gaps and answer all the mysteries.

Humility says: "God has revealed exactly what he wanted to reveal in the Scriptures and I must be careful not to go beyond what the Bible teaches. Where Scripture is silent or ends in mystery, I must not fill in the gaps and act as if my ideas are biblical truth. God gave me a brain to understand what he's revealed, not to go beyond it."

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-13.

*<sup>8</sup> Already 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! <sup>9</sup> For 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. <sup>10</sup> We 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. <sup>11</sup> To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, <sup>12</sup> and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; <sup>13</sup> when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.*

I hear sarcasm in Paul's tone in these verses and, based on what he says in verse 14, I think he's scolding them for their arrogant attitude due to their position of honor in the world. Unlike many other Christians, they had it very easy in their society. They were experiencing favor. They had money, respect, and authority, which was in stark contrast to the position that Paul and the other apostles were often in. They went through suffering and persecution. They were on the run from people who wanted to kill them. They were poor and destitute. And the tendency is for Christians who are in a position of favor in their society to think they're more spiritual and knowledgeable than those who are poor and persecuted. It seems like that's what was happening in Corinth and Paul is rebuking them for it in these verses.

Spiritual pride says: "I'm a more mature and knowledgeable Christian because I have a better education and more resources, and favor and position in society. Other Christians, especially those who are poor and suffering persecution, should look up to and listen to me. I've got the education; I've got the degrees; I've got the standing."

Humility says: "I can learn a lot from those who have walked the long road of suffering for their faith. They have a more complete understanding on Christ's sufferings and biblical truth because of what they've gone through and I should seek to learn from them."

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-21.

*<sup>14</sup> I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. <sup>15</sup> For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. <sup>16</sup> I urge you, then, be imitators of me. <sup>17</sup> That 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. <sup>18</sup> Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. <sup>21</sup> What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?*

Paul is hoping for humility and repentance among the people and urges them to have a teachable attitude. He reminds them of his love for them as their spiritual

father and calls them to imitate his humility. But he also warns those who are arrogant that he will come to them and when he does, if they have not repented, he will demonstrate his power and authority as an apostle. So he calls them to repent.

Spiritual pride says: "I don't need to repent. I've done nothing wrong. (It's defensive) You've got nothing on me and nothing for me. I'm not afraid of you. Go ahead and come and we'll see who comes out ahead."

Humility says: "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Help me see what I need to do to repent."

This chapter gives us a good look into what spiritual pride looks like and helps us see if we need to repent. Maybe there was something that stuck out to you as we went along that you can see needs to change. I urge you to bring it to the Lord. James 4:6 says, "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*" Spiritual humility is precious in God's sight and part of the work he's doing in our lives to conform us into the image of Christ. It's one of the signs of true spiritual maturity – not a bunch of knowledge and the ability to impress people or win a debate or argument – humility.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* <sup>4</sup> *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.* <sup>5</sup> *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth...*"