

The Dissatisfied Life?

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

As you look around Christian bookshops these days, you get the feeling many Christians must be rather dissatisfied with their Christian lives. There just seem to be so many books wanting to encourage us to get more out of our Christian lives.

- There are books that focus on our personal well-being and happiness.
- There are books that focus on our self-esteem.
- There are books that focus on our hunger for significance and worth in our lives.
- There are books that offer us more spiritual power.
- There are books that offer ten simple steps to the Spirit-filled life, or the joyful life, of the self-fulfilled life.

It just seems an endless barrage of advice as to the secrets on offer to move you up to the next level of the spiritual life. So many Christians seem to be searching for the secret to the victorious Christian life – in the many different ways that's defined these days.

Now, I assume there's some truth to this search. Book publishers aren't stupid. They produce books that people demand. They make their living from this. If they print books no one wants to read, they'll go out of business. So I assume plenty of Christians want to read these sorts of books. Either that, or the publishers do a very good job convincing us we want to read these sorts of books.

So why is there all this seeming dissatisfaction with the Christian life? What's going wrong?

- Well, it could very well be that the booksellers have

manipulated us. They may generate all this demand simply by their marketing ploys. That's a definite possibility, and I think there is some truth in that.

- But I think there's more to it. A big part is that some Christians evaluate their Christian lives from a worldly perspective. That is, they use our world's values to determine how "good" (or otherwise) their Christian life is. They use the wrong standards to measure what's going on in their Christian lives. And, when they do that, they decide there must be something missing from their lives.

In short, they make the same mistake as these Christians in Corinth.

The New Factor

As we come to chapter 4, we're still dealing with the situation of the various quarrels in Corinth – the different parties: I'm of Paul; I'm of Apollos; I'm of Cephas; I'm of Christ. That issue is still being dealt with by Paul. But in this chapter, a new element's introduced – an anti-Paul element. It isn't just that some preferred Apollos and Cephas; it's also that *some* (not all) decidedly did not prefer Paul and made some rather negative evaluations of him. They spoke against Paul himself. This comes out at the end of the chapter – verse 18:

Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

Notice the change of pronoun: until then, Paul basically addresses all the Corinthians; at this point, he changes the

pronoun to *some*.

Now, while those people aren't identified till the end of the chapter, I think they're in view throughout the chapter as a whole. It's not that Paul addresses only them in this chapter. He doesn't – he addresses the whole church. But I think this more personal attack on Paul is also behind what Paul writes here.

- He still addresses the problem of their quarrels and their turning back to worldly wisdom; but
- He also addresses some negative things being said about himself.

I think that's behind the opening paragraph about whether or not the Corinthians can judge Paul.

Judging God's Servants

So, let's go back to the beginning of the chapter. Verse 1: *So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.*

This is fairly straightforward. The *us* are especially the people he's referred to – himself, Apollos and Cephas. Yes – they belong to the Corinthians, as he just said in 3:22. However, even more importantly, they belong to God. He said that back in 3:5-9; he repeats it again in 4:1

- They're servants of Christ.

• They're stewards of the mysteries of God. As such, their primary responsibility is to God. Sure, they have obligations and responsibilities and duties to the Corinthians:

- They're to preach the gospel to them.
- They're to evangelise within Corinth.
- They're to teach them about God.
- They're to nurture them in the Christian faith.
- They're to provide leadership.
- They're to demonstrate a godly lifestyle.
- And so on.

They do all those things for the Corinthians – but the reason they do is because God told them to. They're God's servants and their primary responsibility is to Him.

Suppose some of our friends were going overseas for three months and asked us to look after their children while they're away. To whom is our responsibility?

- Well, at one level, we have a responsibility to the children. We have to look after them. We need to clothe and feed them. We need to get them to school and soccer. We need to stop strangers interfering in their lives. We need to censor the TV they watch. At that level, we serve the children. In that sense we belong to them.
- But our ultimate responsibility is to the parents. We will answer to them. Suppose the children say: "You don't look after us properly because you don't give us a block of chocolate each day." Or suppose they say: "You restrict our mental development because you won't let us watch R-rated movies." Will we pay attention to such complaints? Will we immediately go to the supermarket or Video Ezy? No, because we know our primary responsibility is

to the parents and we know they wouldn't approve.

Paul's a servant of Christ. God entrusted certain things to him. His responsibility is to God. And so his concern is what God wants. The Corinthians may make judgments about Paul – and it seems they did that in several different ways. They can even haul him off to a human court if they like. That isn't what's important to Paul. For Paul, the only verdict that matters is God's – what God says at the time of judgment. God gave him the task. God's the One to evaluate how well Paul does that task.

In the long run, Paul doesn't even judge himself – not at that ultimate level. Certainly, Paul evaluates his own ministry. Paul isn't saying he has absolutely no idea how well he's doing as a steward. He examines his own conscience. As far as that's concerned, he's doing OK. But he knows that's not the final standard. His evaluation isn't the important thing. The issue's not whether Paul thinks he's doing OK; the issue's whether God thinks so.

What's required of stewards? What's required of those to whom something's entrusted? It's stated in verse 2: that they be *faithful*. The Corinthians looked for power and eloquence and wisdom – but they aren't the real measuring sticks. God's interested in *faithfulness* – to Himself and to the gospel. We all know that in our heads, but do we know it in our hearts? How do people evaluate pastors today?

- The entertainment value of their sermons?
- The number of people drawn into the church?
- The size of the offerings?
- The number of innovations they introduce?
- The success of their ministry – in whatever way

you want to measure success?
Are these God's standards? Or have we imported worldly standards?

Does this then mean churches can't make any judgments about pastors? What if the pastor leads the church into heresy – does the church just sit back and cop it sweet? No, that isn't what Paul's saying here. Other parts of the Bible refer to dealing with false leaders. It's not that churches don't make any judgments at all.

- In the next chapter, Paul tells them they should've made a judgment about one of their own members sleeping with his step-mother.
- In chapter 6, he tells them they should be able to judge disputes between themselves.

Paul isn't against making evaluations and judgments as such. That's always part of church life. The problem was the Corinthians used worldly standards. They used the wrong measuring stick to judge Paul. They weren't using God's standard of measurement on what makes a good apostle or a good servant.

- We've seen that already in chapters 1 to 3.
- It comes out again later in this chapter.

In order to judge aright, you have to follow God's perspective of things – not simply a worldly perspective that's baptised with some sort of spiritual language.

Claiming a Present Arrival

The major way the Corinthians showed they followed a worldly perspective was their boasting about their current victorious Christian lifestyle. Verse 6:

Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond

what is written." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

Paul uses some fairly strong language here, doesn't he? What's he saying about the Corinthians?

- In verse 8: *Already you have all you want. Already you have become rich. Already you are reigning.*
- In verse 10: *You are wise. You are strong. You are honoured.* That reminds us of Paul's language in 1:26 – describing what they were *not* like when they became Christians.

It seems the Corinthians have a very victorious attitude. They think themselves a very lively, successful, mature church. They believe they're blessed with lots of spiritual

gifts. They're satisfied with their own great spirituality. They enjoy their spiritual experiences as a church. They seem to think they're already in heaven. They act as if the full reality of God's promises is already present in them.

At one level, Paul agrees with them. Turn back to 1:4

I always thank God for you because of His grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in Him you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.

As a Christian church, God blessed them greatly in all sorts of ways – but that doesn't mean they're in heaven yet. As Christians, God brings us into His family and gives us magnificent gifts and privileges. That's true. However, we've not yet reached our final state. We've not yet attained the perfection of heaven. We've not yet arrived at the full completion of our salvation.

What's the Christian life supposed to look like on this earth – before Jesus returns? Paul contrasts the Corinthian claims with his own experience, and that of the other apostles:

- Verse 10: we're foolish, weak dishonoured.
- Verse 11: hungry, thirsty, in rags, brutally treated, homeless.
- Verse 12: hard work, cursed, persecuted, slandered.

The contrast is huge, isn't it? Yet, it's the way Paul lives that reflects God's wisdom. Paul's lifestyle reflects the way of the cross.

The Corinthians boast about their spirituality – even that

they're better than the apostle Paul. They think they reign without Paul. It seems they think they've travelled further towards the victorious Christian life than Paul. They think they're doing so well, and Paul needs to become more like them. They're mistaken. Paul's life reflects the reality of the gospel. The way he lives is the way they should also live. They went back to the wisdom of this world to evaluate things. They abandoned God's wisdom – for the way of the cross didn't look victorious to them.

The very fact they boasted should raise alarm bells in their minds. The gospel's all about God's grace and God's gifts to sinful people like us. Once you start boasting, you move into the area of thinking you somehow have something in yourself to boast about – you did something to earn this "grace" or these "gifts"; that somehow you deserve them. Once you do that, you leave the wisdom of the gospel behind.

The Call to Imitate their Father

In verse 14, Paul makes an appeal for them to change their thinking and to change their ways.

I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

Paul realises that what he's just written may cause shame to them. In fact, it should. They've thought and behaved

in a shameful way. But Paul's primary purpose isn't to shame them. His primary purpose is to warn them. He's interested in their spiritual well-being.

He reminds them he's their spiritual father. Yes, several others were also involved in their spiritual upbringing – Apollos, Cephas, some unnamed teachers presently in Corinth. But none of them can supplant Paul as their father. Humanly speaking, he was first to preach the gospel in Corinth. He founded the church. That was an historical fact. No one could change that. The ridiculous option of divorcing their parents wasn't open to them.

As their father, he calls them to imitate him. That's such a natural part of life. The most significant way children learn is by copying their parents. It happens all the time. They copy our actions, our words, our attitudes, our mannerisms – all sorts of things and especially the bad ones. It's important to be consistent. We must live in our actions what we teach with our words.

Paul asks the Corinthians to imitate him. How? In the context, it's in terms of what he's just written.

- In the immediate context, that includes the concept of suffering for the sake of the gospel – going hungry and thirsty and being badly treated; showing good to those who treat them badly.
- In the overall context, that includes giving up their worldly categories of wisdom and fully adopting God's wisdom: the wisdom of Christ crucified.

Of course, if they get their thinking about God's wisdom right, then that should lead them to have their behaviour right as well.

Before we conclude, we should think briefly about one further issue: What's Paul mean in verses 19 and 20 when he talks about finding out about the *power* of these other people? Does this contradict what he said earlier? What sort of *power* is this?

Some people take these verses out of context. They say the gospel isn't just a matter of words, but also a matter of miracles – that's how they interpret *power* here. And so some talk about power evangelism – this is evangelism where words are accompanied by miracles. You don't just explain the gospel to someone; you also expect God to supply some special miracle to confirm your words:

- It may be a miracle of healing.
- It may be a miracle of some secret knowledge about the person you're talking with.
- It may be a miracle of some prediction.
- It may be a miracle of some physical demonstration or the appearance of an angel or whatever.

Now, I have no doubt God may do that – it's certainly within His capabilities. And sometimes God has done that. But to suggest that's what Paul talks about here and to use this verse to support those claims, ignores the context of this verse. It goes back to the categories of chapter 1 that Paul actually argues against.

The power Paul looks for here must fit the context of his whole argument. What's the power Paul looks for? In chapter 1, Christ is identified with the power of God – especially in His crucifixion (not His resurrection, but His crucifixion). It's of Him that Paul writes:

The weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

That's the message Paul preaches. That's the message that brings salvation to people. That's the message that

has the power to transform people's lives.

The message being preached by these others wasn't transforming the Corinthians' lives. It moved them back to worldly standards. It meant they looked more and more like the non-Christian Corinthians – and thought more and more like them as well. They thought they moved beyond the message of the cross. They failed to recognise that, when you do that, you actually lose the power of the cross.

Conclusion

What is it that you look for in the Christian life? In the highly individualised Western world, there's the very real danger Western Christians will answer in a very individualised way – and in a very self-centred way. There's the danger we'll think of the gospel only in terms of "what's in it for me?". After all, that's how our culture trains us to think. Some gospel presentations focus very much on that aspect – on what the gospel can do for *you*:

- Give *you* forgiveness.
- Give *you* the abundant life.
- Give *you* a right relationship with God.
- Give *you* the Holy Spirit.
- Give *you* a place in heaven.

And all those things are right. We do get those things when we become Christians – but it's always on God's terms and always in the context of our submission to the rule of King Jesus in our lives.

Some people, for example, hear this offer of the abundant life and think in worldly terms: more money, more status symbols, more sexual partners, more success in business, better schools for my kids, better house in a better suburb,

and so on. Some people actually teach that as part of the gospel they preach – they offer health and wealth and wisdom in this life to Christians. Isn't that like what the Corinthians were doing?

I have a suspicion all of us think this way at some level – because that's the way we're trained to think by our culture. That's why the Christian book-sellers can keep attracting us at that level. Many of those books are written at the level of worldly wisdom. Yes, you get into the Christian life via the cross – but if you want to progress and become *really* spiritual or *really* victorious, then you need to add this piece of knowledge or ritual or formula or whatever.

That isn't Paul's approach. You get in via the cross and you continue via the cross. It's through the cross you're saved and it's through the cross you live the Christian life. Christian growth always follows the contours of the cross. Those who'd be Jesus' disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. That's the power and wisdom of God for our salvation – in all its aspects.