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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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The Danger of Seeking the Crown without the Cross

1 Corinthians 4:6-14

As we come to 1 Corinthians 4:6-14, we come to one of the most challenging passages for thoughtful American Christians

As I wrote this sermon, I sat in comfort, in a heated room, with books opened on a nice desk, with nice clothes on and no threat of being arrested and dragged away.

We just passed a very pleasant and comfortable Christmas in which many of us experienced lavish earthly comforts... comfortable clothes, sparkling sights, beautiful sounds, delicious flavors, festive occasions... a prosperous American Christmas

BUT I am also very mindful of the glorious trail of blood that has marked the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. I am aware of our courageous brothers and sisters during the years of the Roman Empire, whose blood wet the sands of the Coliseum; I am mindful of the monks trained by Columba, who were filled with fiery zeal and spread the gospel amongst the fierce barbarian tribes of Germania, often at the cost of their lives; I am aware of the humble brothers and sisters slaughtered by conquerors like the Vikings and the Huns and the Mongols, as those bloodthirsty men built worldly empires and ripped apart the bodies of humble Christians to do it; I am aware of the deprivations of missionaries who travelled to the inland regions of China and Africa and who were poverty stricken, sometimes starving, generally rejected by the people they were seeking to reach; I am also aware that these kinds of sufferings are going on right now in the worst persecuting countries on earth, led by North Korea – the hardest place on earth to be a Christian

As I read of the warning that Paul gave the Corinthian Christians, a warning to not seek the Crown without the Cross, a warning to not think their unsaved Corinthian neighbors would soon be showering them with honors, a warning to imitate Paul and the Apostles in a life of suffering for the cause of Christ – a life in which Paul was hated and rejected and beaten and imprisoned – and I look at how we are here, how comfortably

we pass our days, how we have the best of everything – the best technology, the best clothing, the best food, the best medical care, the best jobs, the best comforts that human ingenuity can devise... I ask God “How can I read this and NOT feel ashamed?” Paul said he did not write it to shame me but to warn me... so, Lord, what do I need to be WARNED about? How can I live a life pleasing to you in this comfortable affluent American setting?

I. Following Christ to Die “Outside the Gates”

A. Christ’s Call is to Join Him Outside the Gates

Hebrews 13:12-13 Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

Outside the gates = rejected by the unbelieving society

This is the timeless call over ALL Christians... to not seek to be welcomed and celebrated and esteemed and applauded and rewarded by our present age... this is our hardest trial!

II. Paul Warns His Dear Children of Their (Our) Danger

A. Overpowering Irony... Even Sarcasm

When I was a mechanical engineer, we would have certain metal pieces cleansed in a strong acid bath... a very caustic environment intended to clean the most stubborn materials from the surface of these metals

The verses we are about to study are some of Paul’s strongest language that he ever wrote... uses CAUSTIC techniques, extreme irony, and powerful sarcasm

B. His Powerful Words Display a Great Danger for THEM and US

C. Easy for us American Christians to Feel Ashamed, Given Our Context

D. Believe Paul’s Tender Words (vs. 14)

1 Corinthians 4:14 I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.

III. The Danger of Boasting Pridefully in God’s Gifts

A. Paul Applies His Teaching to Himself and His Fellow Apostles

1 Corinthians 4:6 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.

B. Basic Lesson: Do Not Take Pride in One Over Another

1. Factions... "I follow Paul, I follow Apollos..."

C. To Slay Their Pride, Three Searching, Probing Questions

D. Question #1: "Who Makes You Different Than Anyone Else?"

1. In some ways, we are NOT different than anyone else

2. We are all sinners saved by grace; we are all going to die; we are all going to give Christ an account for our lives; we will all be in heaven someday, raised by the power of God

3. BUT there ARE differences... as Paul will teach later, there is one body, but different members, with different roles, based on the spiritual gifts and calling God gives to each one

4. But the issue is this: In whatever ways you ARE different, the real issues is **WHO decided that you would be different? GOD!!**

E. Question #2: "What Do You Have That You Did Not Receive?"

1. Powerful, searching question!! It has divine power to cut to the heart and make us quiet and humble and THANKFUL

2. Everything in my life of worth and value is a GIFT FROM GOD!

F. Question #3: "Since You Did Receive It, Why Do You Boast As If You Did Not?"

1. See how ARROGANT it is for anyone to boast in their gifts!

G. Cumulative Effect Should Be Total Humility at All Times

IV. The Danger of Seeking a Crown Without a Cross

A. Now Paul Rolls Up His Sleeves... and Pours On His Strongest Cleanser, his ACID BATH

B. Fundamental Problem: Seeking a Crown Without the Cross

1. In other words, wanting the comforts of heavenly glory without the suffering needed to achieve it

2. Our flesh seeks a life of comfort and praise and success and pleasure; no one naturally wants to BE HATED and ASSAULTED and IMPRISONED and IMPOVERISHED and SLAUGHTERED
 3. The Corinthians are just like us... and the danger is the same for us as it was for them
 4. The more we avoid the cross, the more we will build with wood, hay, straw... and will suffer loss on Judgment Day
 5. ALSO: The more we avoid the cross, the more alluring the world will be to us and the greater damage we will do to our souls
- C. So... Paul Seeks to SHOCK US out of our complacency and into a lifestyle more aligned with him as he follows Christ

D. Already vs. Not Yet

1. "Realized eschatology"... the end is already here, but not yet here
 - a. Christ has **already** triumphed over Satan, sin, the grave by his death on the cross and his resurrection
 - b. Christ has **already** received from his Father "all authority in heaven and on earth"
 - c. Christians on earth are **already** fully forgiven of all our sins, alive spiritually, adopted as sons and daughters
 - d. ALREADY... ALREADY... ALREADY
 - e. BUT... there's a NOT YET to the Kingdom of Christ as well
2. NOT YET
 - a. Christ's Kingdom has **not yet** fully come... so we pray "Your Kingdom come, your work be done on earth as it is in heaven"
 - b. Many of the elect are **not yet** converted, living in places all over the earth and have to be won at great cost to the Kingdom
 - c. Satan and his evil forces are **not yet** removed from earth, and will still fight Christ's Kingdom every step of the way
 - d. We are **not yet** free from indwelling sin
 - e. We have **NOT YET** come into glory; **not yet** in heaven free from death, mourning, crying, or pain
 - f. NOT YET... NOT YET... NOT YET!!

BUT the Corinthians were acting like all the work was done... they were already THERE!

They wanted a separate peace with Christ's enemies in Corinth and in the world; they wanted to be esteemed and loved and welcomed and celebrated and given the pleasure of a comfortable, easy, successful life

They were SLEEPWALKING toward the edge of a cliff; they thought they were already in glory, and if they didn't wake up to the spiritual REALITIES of the Christian life in this present evil age, they would fall over a cliff and severely damage themselves

So, Paul has to JAR THEM WIDE AWAKE

E. "Already You Have All You Want! Already You Have Become Rich!"

1. He starts with their feelings of complacency about their riches
2. They were satisfied, like someone after a rich Christmas feast... lying on a couch, with a full stomach and a drowsy smile
3. But the fact was that their true spiritual condition was far worse

F. "Already You Have Become Kings"

1. They had so much pride, walking around like they were kings and queens, already in their eternal kingdom!
2. They had forgotten that the majority of their fellow Corinthians looked on the message of the cross as UTTER FOOLISHNESS

V. The Apostles' Lifestyle a Shocking Contrast

1 Corinthians 4:8 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!

A. "Left Behind"

1. Paul says "Already you have become kings... but we apostles were LEFT BEHIND"
2. We weren't included in your kingly luxury, your kingly honors, your kingly prosperity, your kingly comforts

B. "I Wish It Were True!"

1. Paul says he wishes it were actually so, because then the apostles would have been included along with every Christian on earth!!

2. BUT LOOK AT OUR LIVES!

C. The Condition of the Apostles

1 Corinthians 4:9 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.

1. Powerful image: a horrifying SPECTACLE

- a. Paul uses the Greek word from which we get our word “theater”
 - b. We have been put on display... and the whole universe is watching us... both the physical world and the angelic world
 - c. The image is perhaps the ARENA, like the Roman Coliseum, where gladiators would soak the sands with their blood every day... standing before the Emperor, calling out “We who are about to die salute you!”, and much of the Roman population sitting in seats to view the spectacle—the blood and guts
 - d. Other commentators prefer the image of a Roman Triumphal procession... a parade consisted of a conquering hero, the Roman general who had won a great victory on some distant battlefield over a barbarian foe; this conquering hero would be riding a fierce warhorse at the head of the parade, and his loyal troops would follow; and at the end of the parade, in chains, would be the VANQUISHED ENEMIES, prisoners of war; especially the hated enemy commander at the end... these enemies would be mocked and spat upon and have dirt and gravel pelting them until they finally arrived at the arena, where they were to be executed to the delight of the frenzied Romans
2. This is a very different picture than what the Corinthians wanted from their unsaved neighbors... they wanted to be held in honor; but everywhere the Apostles went to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, they were hated and opposed and humiliated

D. The Angels Watch the Suffering of the Messengers of the Cross

1. The angels see from heaven what the servants of Christ are doing
2. Though they could intervene at any moment, and rescue a martyr who is being slaughtered by an enraged nationalistic mob in India or coldly executed by a Communist guard carrying out the commands of an atheist government... though the angels could stop it, they don't... held back by the plan and purpose of God

3. But in the Book of Revelation, when the time comes for angels to pour out the wrath of God on a Christ-hating, blood-thirsty world, they do so with great zeal, very aware of the abuse of the church

E. Paul Continues the Contrast

1 Corinthians 4:10-13 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! ¹¹ To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ¹² We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³ when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

1. “Compare and Contrast”: We Apostles vs. You Corinthians

- a. The Corinthians, by making peace with a Christ-hating world were actually acting like his enemies

Image: the Corinthians wanted to go UP, UP, UP in the eyes of Corinthian society – to be seen to be wise, and prosperous, and powerful, and therefore be HONORED by them... up, up, up

But Paul and the Apostles, as they spread this hated gospel in more and more places were experiencing more and more rejection, hostility, hatred, opposition, attacks... they were going down, down, down

So I picture the escalators in a large city department store, like a Macy’s or Belk’s... the Corinthians were on the UP escalator, and Paul and his Apostles were on the DOWN escalator; and they were passing each other; and Paul is looking them in the eyes and saying to them, “You are going the wrong way!” Get off immediately, on the very next floor, and get on the DOWN escalator, before it’s too late!

2. Details

- a. “We are fools for Christ... but YOU... you are WISE in Christ!”

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

- i) There was NO WAY to make the bloody cross and the dead Jesus look pretty or seem wise to an unconverted population
- ii) The Apostles had lost everything for the message of a dead Jewish carpenter on a Roman cross; how could the Corinthians seek to be seen as WISE?

- b. “We are weak; but YOU are strong!”
 - i) The weakness was seen when they would preach a message that was almost universally mocked in both the Jewish synagogue and the Greek marketplace
 - ii) The weakness was seen when they were arrested and dragged places they did not want to go
 - iii) The weakness was on full display when they were in chains or stocks and could not move
 - iv) But the Corinthians wanted to be strong in this world... counted among the powerful and influential
- c. “You are honored; we are dishonored”
 - i) In the same vein, the Corinthians wanted to be held in honor by the world... celebrated and loved and esteemed
 - ii) BUT HOW CAN THIS BE?

John 15:19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

3. “To this very hour...”... NOT a distant memory, but present reality

4. Physical Trials

1 Corinthians 4:11-13 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ¹² We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³ when we are slandered, we answer kindly.

F. Final Indignity

1 Corinthians 4:13 Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

Disgusting image! Like the scum at the bottom of a trash can, something that stinks and causes people feelings of UTTER REVULSION... that’s what we Apostles are.

What about you Corinthians???

VI. Applying This to Ourselves: Not Shame, But Warning

A. Paul Takes Some Heat Off... But Leaves Some ON!!

1 Corinthians 4:14 I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.

Though it seems like the right response after this verbal pounding, filled with irony and overt sarcasm, is to hang our heads in shame, that is NOT what Paul – or God – wants

Any thoughtful commentator in an American setting must read these words with a deep sense of awareness of HOW DIFFERENT our comfortable lives are compared to the life Paul describes here for the Apostles

We can easily feel ashamed... deeply guilty... for our love of pleasure and ease, for the fact that every facet of our lives is in some ways “climate controlled”; everything is geared to our comfort and convenience; our national government was set up with freedom for religion, expressly in reaction to the persecution genuine Christians had experienced for centuries in Europe, so our government guarantees our freedom to assemble, our right to preach the gospel freely with no fear of government reprisals; there is no organized persecution of Christians here in America in that any beatings Christians receive are from criminals who are breaking the law; any imprisonment by the government happens only after due process of law and has nothing to do with the gospel; our society is blessed with a lavish array of opportunities to make money and prosper; our land offers remarkable natural resources; our freedoms have attracted some of the best minds from around the world who have brought their genius to America and enabled us to set up a staggering display of industrial and technological might, guaranteeing freedom from want for most people

Some of our brothers and sisters around the world live in constant fear of arrest, seizure of property, incarceration... in some places, death is threatened by zealous family members who slaughter their sons and daughters and brothers and sisters who defect from their false religion to follow Christ; some missionaries live in these lands and face high levels of danger for the cause of Christ

BUT most of us will never know those kinds of sufferings.

And though we want to see ourselves like the Apostle Paul in his courageous stands for Christ, we are much more like the Corinthians who need to hear these words

We need NOT TO BE ASHAMED but rather to be WARNED

1 Corinthians 4:14 I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.

But, warned about what?

The best way we can answer that is to fit into what Paul is saying

The danger is that we would misunderstand our lives in this world... that we will forget that this world is NO FRIEND to our faith;

We should not seek to be seen as wise and strong and honored and kinglike by an American society that is becoming more and more HOSTILE to biblical Christianity

We should expect opposition and hostility as we pursue the TWO JOURNEYS

Internal Journey: As we grow in holiness, we will become more and more unwilling to fit in to the generally hedonistic style of life in America

External Journey: As we grow in faithfulness to evangelism and missions, we will be persecuted in the American fashion... nasty comments in the cyberworld, where RUDENESS LIVES; dirty looks and snide comments; lost friendships at work, and coldness from neighbors; lost opportunities for advancement in our jobs when we get bypassed for promotions

If we go out more and more and talk to the thousands of people who are moving into this region, if we are bolder and bolder, we will start to be seen as FOOLS and TROUBLEMAKERS. But if we cherish our quiet, comfortable, prosperous lives in this America of ours, we need to hear Paul's warning more than ever before.

We are essentially comfortable Christians whose lifestyle is very different from what Paul describes of his own life

So what should we be warned about?

- 1) Be warned that this world is no friend to your faith, and that you should take a strong defensive stance against the lusts and idolatries that flow like water through the pipelines of our American culture and its electronic outlets
- 2) Be warned that biblical Christianity is becoming much more unpopular in America; biblical views on sexuality and marriage and gender and holiness and politics and justice and money are going to be seen to be more and more foolish
- 3) Be warned that Christ and him crucified will never be acceptable to the unconverted mind, but will always be offensive and a stumbling block or a laughingstock

- 4) Be warned that the overwhelming push toward prosperity and health which is part of the American dream is the opposite of the lifestyle that Paul and the Apostles followed
- 5) Be warned against the PROSPERITY GOSPEL... this passage should destroy it! But all around the world, people are following false teachers in pouring out the lie that following Jesus results in material prosperity and healthy bodies
- 6) Be warned of the effects of the world on your spiritual disciplines – your prayer lives and bible intake; as well as your assembling with Christians and your Christian service; the world will tell you that these things are a foolish waste of time, but Judgment Day will reveal the opposite
- 7) Be warned against thinking that we American Christians are higher and better than those in poorer, less educated regions simply because we have had the leisure to study in universities and seminaries and read lots of good Christian books; God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit a HIGHER PLACE IN HEAVEN than we who have suffered far less than they have
- 8) Be warned against living in ignorance and unconcern about the suffering church around the world; care about those imprisoned for the faith; be aware of the top fifty countries where our Christian brothers and sisters are suffering for Christ...

Final word... we are not saved by our suffering but by faith in Christ's sufferings for us

1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Our suffering and poverty and abuse in this world will not atone for a single sin... our salvation is worked by CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS, not our own!