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Title: FOLLOW THE LEADER

Text: 1 Corinthians 4

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 4 if you have your Bible. We are in a study through Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Today we are looking at the life and words of the Apostle Paul – the founder of the church at Corinth. I've entitled today's message "Follow the Leader." We will be looking at some characteristics that should mark any GODLY LEADER. The key verse of this passage is verse 16 – *"I urge you, then, be imitators of me"* (ESV). Here Paul is the leader, and his admonition is for the church at Corinth to follow him as he followed Christ.

We have a generation of Americans, many of whom distrust authority. Many here today are of the generation that inherited the legacy of VIETNAM and NIXON with WATERGATE. Some among us will remember things like PRESIDENT CLINTON building an entire justification for lying to the American people about his marital fidelity. Did not our past presidential election consist of accusations, fraud, deception, slander and lies? No wonder we are often reluctant to receive as the full truth anything we are told by institutions or powerful people, in that THEIR STORIES ARE OFTEN SPUN TO PROTECT THEIR PERSONAL INTERESTS. We've seen how institutions that claimed to represent truth and morality use those powers to perpetuate unjust practices that protected the powerful. I'm hesitant to ask this question – Has anyone here given up on OBJECTIVE, UNBIASED media? Is it me or does nearly everything feel like "fake news" on some level because we are aware how selective and how biased everything we hear is. Watch Fox and CNN and it's like they are two different worlds. I find it entertaining when news commentators speak disparagingly of "the media." They'll say something like, "Now, big media will try to make you think...", AND... I think, "You ARE big media."

If you are in a position of authority, you likely know the struggle to maintain credibility – distrust of authority seems to be in our bloodstream as Americans. I mean, think about it: our entire country is based on not trusting authority. I may have this wrong, but when our forefathers set up our government, they created a 3-branch government system where one branch can cancel out the other two because sometimes, we just don't trust them. My point is, for both good AND BAD reasons, we distrust authority. Of course, this attitude affects our view of leadership in the church. SADLY, we see in the church a lot of the same abuses of power that we see in the world – TV pastors stealing money, (Catholic) Priests abusing children, church leaders covering up pastoral abuse. It seems we live in a day where even churches in our country prioritize the reputation of the institution over the safety of a victim. So, all that makes Paul's explanation in 1 Corinthians 4 of how we should view leadership very important. Verse 1 says, *"This is how one should regard us..."* ("us" in this sentence being church leaders). Let me be clear at the beginning: the Bible is pro-leadership, pro-authority, and says that all of us should be submitted to it on some level, BUT... There's good AND bad authority.

In this chapter, Paul is going to give us 4 characteristics of GOOD authority in the church. IF you are a leader, this is WHAT YOU SHOULD ASPIRE TO BE. You say, "Well pastor, I'm NOT a leader – how is this going to apply to me?" For ONE, these are the traits you should champion in those you elevate in the church. As church members, you can nominate and vote for some of your leadership – deacons and trustees particularly. One day you'll have the opportunity to vote on a new pastor. The qualities Paul lists in chapter 4, should also characterize THIS church's leadership. It has been said that some evangelical churches tend to elevate leaders who are BIG on charisma even if LOW on character. We MUST avoid that. More importantly, is that EVERYBODY, at some point, plays the role of leader in somebody else's life. Maybe you're a parent or you lead a small group, or you were a counselor at Kids Camp or teach in one of our kids' ministries. Maybe you are the head nurse on a floor at the hospital OR you are a shift leader at a restaurant. Maybe you're just trying to be a good influence in someone's life. In ALL those places, YOU are leading others. Which means that what Paul is going to say about himself applies to YOU. So, verse 1 gives us the first 2 characteristics: *"This is how one should regard us, as SERVANTS of Christ and STEWARDS of the mysteries of God."*

1. A Christian Leader is ... a SERVANT (of Christ) (v. 1a). Even though you may be a leader with authority, your fundamental identity is that of a SERVANT OF CHRIST. That means a couple of things. ONE – As a servant, it's NEVER about your will or desires, and it's always about HIS will and desires. A servant doesn't execute his own will; he follows the will of another. The word Paul uses for servant here is NOT "doulos," his usual word for "servant." Rather, he uses "hyperetas," which means "under-rower." Like, on a boat. Paul says, "Jesus is the captain, the coxswain. My job is to row in beat with Him." Have you ever seen a crew team? (Here Pastor showed a video.) The coxswain calls out the beat, and all the rowers row in unison with him. HE is the ONLY ONE facing forward who can see where they are going. You get some rower who starts rowing to his own beat and he'll mess up everything, even if he's really strong. The mission of our church is basically to follow the Holy Spirit. The question we must ask AND answer regularly is "God, what do YOU want from this church?" Where do You want it to go? It's not about my agenda or yours, but His. So, first it means His will, not mine, but... SECOND, being the servant of Christ means that any leader sees the group of people he or she is leading as Christ's, NOT his. God is the owner/head of this church; it doesn't exist for me or my purposes. I am dispensable. I need to always look at this church not through the lens of "What's best for Jim Lloyd?" but "What is best for JESUS?" If what's best for Jesus goes the opposite way of what's best for Jim Lloyd, WE GO WITH JESUS! Perhaps the best biblical example of this is JOHN THE BAPTIST. There came a time in John's ministry that Jesus was becoming more popular than John. Some people asked John, "Doesn't this bother you? You've spent all this time building a following and then Jesus comes along and upstages you." What was John's response? "NO – He MUST increase, and I MUST decrease." He then compared his role of leadership to being the best man at a wedding. Any of you ever play that role? Traditionally, the role of the best man in a Jewish wedding is to support the groom; to make sure the wedding happens as planned. In our tradition the best man generally stands behind the groom or off to the groom's right. His role is important, but IF he's doing his job, you shouldn't really notice him. Kind of like – "He must increase, and I must decrease." The best man should be fine with being invisible. In the 1800's there was a well-known pastor named CHARLES SIMEON. He'd built this big church and God raised up a younger guy in his ministry who could REALLY preach, BETTER than he could. The problem was that Simeon wasn't quite ready to retire. But... After praying about it, Simeon knew this was better for the church and so he stepped aside. It was one of the harder things he'd ever had to do. (I hope when that day comes for me, I'll have the same attitude.) The question for you and I is, "If you are assigned a leadership position, DO YOU SEE THAT LEADSHIP POSITION AS SERVICE?" There was a day when we called politicians PUBLIC SERVANTS. I don't hear the title so much anymore. Why might that be? Do you see your leadership role as a place of power over others for the benefit of yourself, or a place of service to others on behalf of Christ, for the benefit of others? If you are a boss, do you see it as a place from which you can lift your employees on behalf of Christ – to help develop them and bless their lives? If you manage a company, is your goal to produce something that blesses society and helps make people's lives better? If you are a parent, do you see yourself as Christ's tool to grow your kids for HIS purposes – ready to open your hands and let them go where HE wants them to go? The point is that any leadership position must be seen first and foremost as AN ACT OF SERVICE TO CHRIST. You should see yourself as a tool in His hands. That ties into Paul's next characteristic...

2. A Christian leader is ... a STEWARD (v. 1b). ¹"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." The "mysteries of God" here refer to "the gospel." That's what he's made clear in chapters 1 – 3: the mysterious thing God has been doing all along in sending His Son to die on a cross to reconcile the world to Himself. Paul says, "I didn't write those mysteries, God did. I'm just passing them along. I'm just the mailman." Paul doesn't use the analogy "mailman" here, but he uses a similar one – STEWARD. That word is "oikonomos" and literally means "a household manager." (It might be my favorite one-word description of a pastor.) In those days, big families often had a steward that oversaw the affairs of the house. He managed the kids; he taught the kids. He took care of the property. Yet even though he was hyper-involved, they were NOT his kids, and it was NOT his property. His job was to execute the master's will. Here's what that means for me as a preacher. As a pastor, I am a steward. The Bible is what OUR FATHER has

said we should eat spiritually. My job as a steward is to prepare a meal of God's Word and deliver it to you. If you don't like some of it; well, take it up with your father – your HEAVENLY Father. You are like, "I just want my preacher to serve up Twinkies and Hot Pockets all the time." Well, too bad! Abba Father knows what we need to be healthy and sometimes He prescribes veggies for us. So don't hate on me. I'm just the steward – Servant AND Steward. BTW, in the next 3 verses Paul shows us how these first two words help address something every leader faces – CRITICISM. Believe me, if you are a leader of any kind, you're going to get it. Probably lots of it, good and bad. It goes with the territory. Paul got it, and he says, "I first process all criticism through the lens of servant and steward": Check it out. Because I am a servant of Christ AND His steward, he says: *"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court..."* Why? ... *"It is the Lord who judges me"* (v. 3-4). At the end of the day, I DON'T answer to you, I answer to HIM. BTW, if YOU are a Christian leader, YOU REALLY SHOULDN'T be surprised by criticism, either. I mean, we are charged to represent Christ in a world that murdered Him. Jesus said, "I am a better version of you. What they did to Me, you can expect them to do to you." So, expect criticism when it comes, and keep your eyes on Jesus BECAUSE you answer ONLY to Him. Now, let me be clear – and this is a very important point – I try to welcome criticism because I know that God sometimes uses other people – sometimes friends and sometimes adversaries – to point out shortcomings and inconsistencies in my life. Proverbs 26:12 – *"The one who is wise in their own eyes, there is more hope for a fool than for him."* I need the eyes of others. I want to remain open to that type of feedback. Over the years, countless people have spoken into my life and shaped me into who I am today. At the end of the day, as a servant and steward, my soul answers only to God. Social media is a popular place where you can jump on someone's page and tear them up. Perhaps you've read some that were directed toward me. "Pastor, how do YOU handle that?" Well, first, I try NOT to pay attention to it, SO STOP POINTING IT OUT TO ME! Truthfully, criticism bothers me like it would anyone else. Of course, I'd PREFER people to like me. I can't manage everybody's opinions. That's exhausting. So, I pretty much concern myself with Him. I perform for an audience of ONE!

3. A Christian Leader is ... only a SURROGATE (v. 6). *"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."* Remember, in this whole section, chapters 1 – 4, Paul is dealing with divisions in the church. (Let's keep egos out of the way.) He has said that a lot of these divisions come from the Corinthians being overly dependent on some earthly leader. Paul says, "You need to stop that." We would certainly do well here if you would not think more highly of any of us than you should. Earthly leaders are just TEMPORARY stand-ins for Jesus. Really, we are just instruments in His hand. Ultimately, He and He alone is responsible for your salvation. Yes, God uses different people at different times in our lives, but HE IS always the one working in them and through them. Think of it like a hand in a glove. If a doctor puts on a pair of latex gloves and performs a lifechanging surgery on you, the miracle is not in the glove but the hand that fills it. The same with God. Several weeks back, we said that there would always be famous people in the church. There were in the early church – Peter and Paul and Apollos were types of celebrities there at Corinth. There's nothing wrong with feeling connected to one of these people or indebted to them because of how God used them in your life. The problem is when you don't eventually transfer the roots of your IDENTITY off them and onto Christ, or when you don't transfer the roots of your DEPENDENCE off them and onto Christ. Being overly devoted to, or overly dependent on, an earthly leader is more likely a sign of immaturity than devotion. Real quick, look at how Paul starts this section back at the beginning of chapter 3. ¹*"But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ..."* ³*for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?* ⁴*For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human? (Or childish)."* Paul says that your dependence on earthly leaders is not a sign of your spiritual depth but your spiritual immaturity. The analogy with parenting here is great. For a while, we parents stand in the place of God with our kids. When my kid was a toddler, everything she learned about the authority and care and love of God came through me and her mother. That's by design. Were supposed to learn to love and trust and obey

God by learning to love, trust and obey our parents. BTW, that's why the command to honor your father and mother comes right in the middle of the 10 Commandments. The first 4 commandments are about OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO GOD – no other gods, honor the Sabbath, etc. – they focus on our responsibility to God. The last 5 are about OUR RESPONSIBILITIES TO OUR NEIGHBOR – our horizontal relationships. The hinge between those is the command to honor “our father and mother” because our parents for a while are earthly representations of God. We learn to submit to authority by obeying them. That's all well and good. BUT... Over time, we want our children to wean their faith off us and put it into God. If not, THEY are NOT growing up. If your child is 18, 19, 20 years old and still obeys you and depends on you like you are God, they've never grown up. The point of parenting is for you to transfer their obedience and dependence off you and onto God. You totally release them because they never belonged to you in the first place. They are His, and you were just a temporary stand-in for Him. Paul says, “That's how we leaders are with you.” Paul, in fact, calls himself a spiritual father to them in v. 14-15 – *“I'm writing you... as my dear children... For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”* I'm not here to be your leader or your Savior. I'm like John the Baptist – I'm here to point you toward Jesus. The Corinthian church had a weakness toward following a PARTICULAR leader (“I'm of Paul; I'm of Apollos; I'm of Peter”). Your allegiance should be to this body. Your allegiance is to the mission of our church. If your allegiance is to Paul or Peter or Pastor Norm or Pastor Jim – that's a big problem. There's nothing wrong with first coming to a church because the preaching connects with you, or the worship really engages you, or your kids love the student ministries, BUT... Over time you've got to put your roots into Christ and into His church and not into a particular personality. *“I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brother, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written...”* (v. 6). Who is Paul? Who is Pastor Jim? We didn't die for you. You weren't baptized in our name. It's not our spirit that fills you. The LORD is your shepherd and the rest of us are just temporary and dispensable stand-ins. Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” over and over in these verses. In Christ. In Christ is your identity. In Christ is your hope. God may wear you like a glove for a while, but the saving hand is His. Human leaders come and go. Some will disappoint you. Some will disappoint you bitterly. Hear me – at some point this church will likely disappoint you. I will disappoint you. If I've never disappointed you, it's probably because you're new here. The people I'm closest to are the ones MOST disappointed with me. But... Christ will never leave you or forsake you, so put your roots in Him. Listen: There's two kinds of authority in the church: There's BAD authority – that's where leaders use their power, privilege, or position to direct attention to themselves. Then... There is GOOD authority – where leaders use their power, privilege, or position to direct people to JESUS.

4. A Christian Leader is ... a SPECTACLE OF SUFFERING (v. 9). ⁹*“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. 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.”* Here Paul says to Christian leaders: You should expect to suffer. Even to be a “spectacle” of suffering. Many a leader has trouble with this. When they suffer, they feel like God has somehow let them down and not kept His end of the bargain. “Hey God, I did my part. I was faithful. I did what you asked me to do. You were supposed to reward me, but instead I get this?” Paul says, “Yeah... That's what we are called to!” We follow in the footsteps of Jesus. He lived PERFECTLY and yet suffered and died. We, TOO, have a cross to take up. The Corinthians had bought into something Martin Luther calls “the theology of glory.” The “theology of glory” is where you assume that God's presence on earth will always be accompanied by earthly vindications of success. What the New Testament teaches, however, he said, is not a “theology of glory,” but a “theology of the CROSS.” The theology of the cross: the One who was MOST perfect on earth suffered the MOST; so those most endowed with the Spirit of Jesus are those who should expect to suffer the most like Him. By the way, don't miss the brilliant example of Apostolic sarcasm in verses 8 and 10 – *“...Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!... We (Apostles) 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." Why do I say that is sarcasm? Do you remember how Paul described the Corinthians in chapter 1? *"Not many wise or noble..."* And Paul says we Apostles, who suffer more than anyone, should disabuse you of the idea that closeness with God equates to earthly success. A Christian leader is SOMETIMES CALLED TO SUFFER and shouldn't be surprised when it comes. I recently read of a very successful businessman who was married with 2 children. He felt called to resign his high paying executive job in corporate America and leave his comfortable home (in Chapel Hill) to go live overseas among a Muslim Unreached People's Group. So, he resigned his job; sold their house and was getting trained to go. Then their son developed a medical condition. He wrote this in his journal: "Wait! Lord, this isn't what is supposed to happen. We're submitted to your will for our lives. We've sold just about everything we have. We're disassembling the American Dream, leaving everything and everyone familiar, and moving our family from the medical capital of the Southeast to a place with little to no healthcare and hostile to the gospel to be YOUR witnesses... and then YOU DO THIS?" All these feelings of "it's unfair," or "God, have you forgotten us?" LATER, he said, he learned that this was all part of the process. Through the suffering, or through the unfair treatment, the criticism, the slander, the difficulty, the hardship, Christ was revealed in them and then made known better through them. And... He loved this quote by A.W. Tozer: "It is doubtful whether God can use a man greatly before he has hurt him deeply." To quote Paul, Philippians 3:10, *"I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."* The fellowship of his suffering is the only way to the power of his resurrection. (If there was no suffering, there would have been no resurrection.) Ira Stanphill taught that thought in his song "He Washed My Eyes with Tears."

He washed my eyes with tears that I might see,
The broken heart I had was good for me.
He tore it all apart and looked inside,
He found it full of fear and foolish pride.
He swept away the things that made me blind,
And then I saw the clouds were silver lined.
And now I understand 'twas best for me.
He washed my eyes with tears that I might see.

There are things that we are ONLY taught through suffering. Lessons we'd never learn otherwise. There's a famous story about St. Dominic, a sort of early Reformer of the church. He visited the Pope, and the Pope was surrounded by all the wealth and splendor of early medieval Rome, AND... The Pope boasted that the church can no longer say like Peter did – *"Silver and gold have I none."* St. Dominic replied, "Yes, but then again, neither can we say, *'Rise up and walk.'*" Parents, do you feel wronged by your kids? It may be a part of the process of God bringing salvation into their lives. Suffer well. Suffer patiently, like Christ. It's His vehicle for the power of resurrection in their lives. Are you getting unfair treatment or pushback from friends you are trying to help? Probably the worst I've ever been treated in my life was by people I was just trying to help and encourage to do the right thing. Suffer well. It's part of His appointed process. Are you a Christian leader – a pastor, a missionary, listening in – wondering why people are treating you so unfairly? Suffer well, my friend. The power of resurrection only comes through the fellowship of the sufferings of the cross.

CONCLUSION. Look at how Paul ends this: ¹⁶*"I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent 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."* Not only are these things to observe in Paul, but THEY ARE THINGS TO PUT INTO PRACTICE IN OUR LIVES AS GOD USES US TO LEAD OTHERS. I love how Paul emphasizes, "I'm no different than you. I'm not called to sit in positions of privilege and power while you are called to serve and sacrifice and suffer. That's NOT how it works. EVERY leader at Marlowe would do well to model these qualities of character – servanthood, sacrifice, generosity, being accountable, sharing Christ with others. These are requirements not options. Based on Paul's words in this chapter, I'm not so sure that God designs leaders for the spotlight. I AM

SURE that He has designed them for the towel and the washbasin to serve others and wash their feet LIKE JESUS DID. There's never been a time when Godly leaders are more needed than now. We MUST pray that God would raise up a generation of leaders – in the church, the business place, in the home, that lead like Paul did. God calls His leaders to be a servant, a steward, a surrogate, and a sufferer. Let me close with one question – Have you put yourself under spiritual leadership? Who do you submit to? If the answer is no one, that may be reason for concern. Proverbs 18:1 says, *“An isolated man will end up seeking his own desire and will rage against all sound judgment.”* God has designed that you be under godly leadership and authority. It is a good thing to surround yourself with people who will push back on you and call out things in your life. Godly leadership directed by God's love. A servant, a steward, a surrogate, and a sufferer.