



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

1 Corinthians 4:6-13

1 Corinthians

“All of Grace”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are continuing our studies in 1 Corinthians, and we’re in chapter 4, and this morning we’re going to look at verses 6 through 13.

“Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes...”

It’s referring to what he said in chapters 3 and 4 about “I planted and Apollos watered.” He referred to himself as a farmer, and then as a steward in verse 4, making these analogies between their ministry and what you see in the world around it. So he says,

“I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.

To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and roughly treated, and are homeless;

and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure;

when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we give you praise and thanks for this hour, this Lord’s Day, and this opportunity for us to be together and to read the Scriptures, as we’ve done, and to consider the things that Paul says. And how timely it is to do that, and particularly this text, which is so relevant to us. They all are, of course, but it’s as though Paul puts his finger on a sore spot in our lives.

Because he addresses what is really a nagging problem in the hearts of each and every one of us, and will be as long as we’re in this world, in this flesh, and that is the problem of pride. He addresses it in the Corinthians, but in doing it with the Corinthians, he’s doing it with all Christians. He’s doing it with us, because their problems are our problems. It’s so easy to look at this church, and even look down on it a bit, but it’s a typical church.

It’s us. It just shows us what human nature is like, because they were living out their human nature. And even as your children, we still have the flesh; we still have what Paul describes in Romans 7 as that law of sin, that principle of sin in our members. And we struggle with it, and one of the great struggles we have is pride. And yet Paul gives us the solution to it, as he seeks to address the problem that those people had, and it is for us as well.

Help us to realize that everything we have is a gift. We really cannot take credit for anything. We cannot boast in anything. Everything we have physically, materially, spiritually, eternally, is a gift from you, and that is an antidote to arrogance. So teach us that, Lord; instruct us. Help us become more like Jesus Christ. And we can only become more like him through the ministry of your Word, as we sit in submission to it, read it, hear it taught, and submit to it.

So Lord, that’s what I pray, that you’d bless all of us in that way. That the Spirit of God would open our hearts to receive what the apostle Paul is teaching here. Help us to think about it, and illuminate the page of Scripture for us. Make us to see

these things clearly and in your own special way, make the proper applications to each one of us, and draw us close to yourself through that.

So bless us spiritually; we pray that for ourselves now and then again tonight, as we assemble here for the evening service, and we remember our Lord, and we remember his sacrifice for us. All that we have is because of that; because of what you’d done through him for us. So draw our thoughts to your Son; draw our thoughts to your grace, and help us rejoice in that, and Lord, bless us materially as well.

We look at the back of the bulletin and we see all of these names that are listed, and we’re reminded that we’re just dust. We are frail people, and we can be healthy one moment, and lose it all the next. We can find ourselves in desperate conditions, and there are many in our congregation that are – that are at the end of their lives. We pray that you’d encourage them. We pray that you would strengthen them in Christ.

We are here but a short time. We need to remember that, Father, that the life that you’ve given us in this world is a gift from you, but this life is brief, and someday we will leave this world. Prepare us for that day. And for those that are preparing to leave, we pray that you would give them strength. Help them rest in the promises that you’ve made. Encourage them.

Father, some it’s your will to heal, and we pray that you’d bless them with healing; that you would allow them to experience your healing mercy. For those that are discouraged in life – and life can be very discouraging, work can be very demanding, and it can wear us down – give us stamina. Give us encouragement. Strengthen us to work well for you, as unto you in this life.

Father, bless us with conformity to Christ, and we pray that for ourselves now in this hour, that you’d use our time together as a time of worship, and a time of learning, to build us up in the faith. We commit all of this to you. We thank you for the Spirit of God, who’s at work within us right now; who is our ultimate teacher. We pray that he would go unhindered in his ministry in this hour. Bless us, we pray, and we pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] This morning, we come to one of the great questions of the Bible: what do you have that you did not receive? Ask yourself that. Do you have anything that wasn’t given to you? If you say, “Yes. No one has given me anything. I’ve worked hard for

everything I have. I put myself through school. I built my business from nothing. I earned every penny I own,” then I admire you – but you really don’t understand the question.

It’s rhetorical, meaning it’s not supposed to be answered, because the answer is obvious; at least it was obvious to the one who asked it, the apostle Paul. And the answer is, “No.” We don’t have a thing that we haven’t received. Everything is a gift. Let me give a couple examples of what I mean. No one has a good golf game who hasn’t worked at it, and no one works harder at the game than Tiger Woods – at least he did until he fell from grace with the public.

But nevertheless, he’s accomplished a great deal. But where would he be if he hadn’t had Earl Woods for his father? Earl was an excellent coach, and began teaching Tiger to play when he was an infant, literally; gave him his first golf club when he was seven months old. Used to put him in a high chair out in the garage while Earl hit golf balls into a net so he could watch him do it, and then by the age of two, they were going to the golf course regularly and playing together.

Well, what if Earl had loved sailing rather than golf? You’d never know the name Tiger Woods. Ted Williams is arguably baseball’s greatest hitter. He’s famous for his eyesight; he had 20/10 vision. He would practice hitting until his hands bled. Now, a man who does that is going to succeed. A man who’s diligent like that will be a success. But what if Ted had been born myopic, or what if he’d been born without a right hand? We’d never know the name Ted Williams.

Now, that’s not to take away from discipline, hard work, and self-reliance; those are Biblical virtues, and we can see how they work in sports, and in business, and in all areas of life. No one excels without them, and God expects diligence and excellence from us. But we don’t choose our parents. We don’t create our mental aptitude, or physical size, or strength. We don’t determine the age in which we were born, and the opportunities it affords us.

God is our creator, and he gives us everything. We must use it well, and we must be diligent, and we’ll give an account for how we use it, but we must use it in light of all of that – in light of the fact that it’s all a gift, which is to say we must use it humbly, if we’re to use it well. The only way to do that is to understand that all that we are and all that we have is God’s gift.

Now, that’s the purpose of Paul’s question to the Corinthians. It is to correct their perception of things, and to teach them how they should think about themselves, and how

they should think about their work, their ministry, their lives. They were proud. Their pride had produced rivalries in the church. People were divided against each other, and divided according to their favorite teachers. There were factions in the church.

The body of Christ was divided, so Paul has been correcting that. He has explained that the ministry is not done according to the standards of the world, but according to the Word of God and the grace of God, and he has explained this in various ways, through different images, different figures, like that of a gardener and a builder, that of slaves and stewards. God gives success; it’s his work, but we’ve been entrusted with gifts, and we’re to be faithful.

That’s what he’s been saying – 3:7, “So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.” God gives the growth. God gives us success, but he gives you the opportunity to minister, and he gifts you to do so, and so you’re to be out there watering, and planting, and doing whatever you’re gifted to do. And then he says in 4:2, “It is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.”

We’re to be faithful with what we’ve got. We’re responsible for that. Well, now he says in verse 6 that he applied these figures, like that of the farmer and the servant, to himself and to Apollos for their benefit. He wanted to teach them two lessons. First, he wanted them to learn not to exceed what is written, and secondly, not to be arrogant. When he says they were not to exceed what is written, what he simply means is didn’t want them to go beyond the Bible.

They were doing that. They were judging people according to false standards. They were being worldly in their opinions of others. They were more interested in the fashion of the world than what the Scriptures taught. Our standard and authority is the Bible; it is the Word of God. That is the blueprint of life for the Christian. It’s not about flash and style. It’s about truth and substance, and that’s what they were to look for in those that ministered to them.

It was about the Scriptures; it’s about doctrine, and that, he says, is what they were to stay with. So that’s the first lesson; that’s the lesson that he’s been teaching them so far in the book. The second purpose, the second lesson that he has here, is that they will not be arrogant in behalf of one against the other. They were to stop playing favorites, in other words. There’s no place for that in the church.

There’s no place for what we call “one-upmanship” among believers, those who have been bought and saved by the blood of Christ. We are all in the body of Christ, and

we’re equally in the body of Christ, and we’re equally valuable and loved by the Lord in the body of Christ. He died equally for us, and we’re not to look at some as less than others. We are to rejoice in all that we have.

That’s not wrong, to appreciate the work of those who minister in the church. It’s not wrong to appreciate an elder or a Bible teacher; it’s good to do that. But when we favor one over another, for reasons of personal preference, and we write off people because they don’t seem to meet our special taste, well, that’s wrong. That’s due to pride, and there was lots of pride in Corinth.

The verb “become arrogant” or “take pride” is used six times in this book. It characterized the Corinthian believers, and what that expression, “become arrogant,” means is it means “puffed up.” The Corinthian Christians were like the blowfish, which is also known as the puffer fish – strange little fish that can inflate itself several times its normal size to become inedible to predators. That’s a God-given defense for that fish.

The Corinthians were just as full of nothing as the puffer fish, but their condition wasn’t given by God, and it wasn’t good. In fact, it was quite harmful. So in verse 7, Paul deflates them in the only way that can be done, and that is by reminding them of what God had given to them. And what he had given to them, very simply, is grace, and grace is sovereign grace. He’d given them everything.

He asked them a couple of searching questions, which amount to “who do you think you are, anyway? Do you really think that you are self-made men? For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive?” And again, these are rhetorical questions; they don’t expect an answer. They are asked for effect, and the obvious answer is – at least the intended answer is – you aren’t superior, and all that you have is a gift.

Now, they didn’t understand that. They thought just the opposite, but that’s the point of the question, and that would’ve been understood by them. I call this one of the greatest questions in the Bible because it makes us consider the reality of who we are and why we are the people that we are. It’s all of grace. It’s also an important question historically, because it was one that Augustine cited frequently in his debate with Pelagius in the fifth century. Now, that’s a long time ago, but this isn’t an archaic debate. This is a very modern debate.

It goes on with people in every generation. Pelagius was a British monk who had come to Rome and had a very influential ministry there. He was the champion of free will.

He was the champion of the self-made man. He taught a gospel of self-improvement. He believed the only grace that God had given to man was the gift of the Ten Commandments, and that’s all we needed because we had the natural ability to keep them.

We could possibly reach perfection, he said, if we just do it. Now, he was a moral man, but that’s what his religion was; it was a religion of morality, and of personal ability. He hated Augustine’s prayer in his *Confessions*, “give what you command, and command what you will.” In other words, Augustine was saying in his prayer to God, in that prayer, “I can do what you command, but only if you give me the ability to do it. I can accomplish anything you enable me to do, but left to myself, I can’t do a thing.”

That’s the opposite of what Pelagius was teaching. So they had their debate, and it centered on that issue of free will or the bondage of the will; human ability or God’s sovereign grace. Now, Augustine was not a perfect theologian. He was confused about the sacramental system in salvation. But he understood a lot about grace, and he used this verse, 1 Corinthians 4:7, frequently in his debates with Pelagius and the Pelagians, Pelagius’ disciples, because it applies to our salvation and our sanctification; our development in the faith.

We find illustrations of it in athletics, and in business, and in the most basic things. We are completely dependent for everything. You think about it. We’re dependent every moment for the air we breathe; we don’t create the air. Take it away, and we’re gone. We’re dependent every moment for the gravity that keeps our feet on the ground. And what is true in material life is true in the spiritual life. God creates it and supplies it.

Everything we have is from him. Your faith is a gift from him. It’s the product of the life that he has given to you. It’s the result of the new birth. Now, you put that in the material realm, and people will recognize immediately that they didn’t cause their birth; that’s illogical. They didn’t choose their parents. They didn’t choose the age in which they live.

They didn’t say, “Well, I chose to be born in the 20th century because I didn’t like the 16th century or the 17th century. I liked all the amenities of the 20th and 21st century, so that’s when I chose to be born.” Nobody thinks like that or talks like that, but oddly, that’s exactly the way people think and talk theologically when it comes to the new birth. “Well, I caused my birth through my faith. Faith originated with me. I saw the truth, I believed, and I freely chose Christ.”

Well, you did, if you believe, freely choose him, but only because God enabled you to do that, and you read the Scriptures, you’ll find that we are described as being “born again,” and we no more chose our birth and caused it spiritually than we did physically. Everything we have is a gift from God, and that’s really what Paul is saying here. God is the source of every blessing we have, materially and spiritually. He creates it, he supplies it. If we have strength, and abilities, and spiritual gifts, they have all been received from God.

That’s what Paul is saying. So he asked, “If you did receive it” – and that word “if” is not in the sense of well, maybe or maybe not – no. He means, “If you did, and you certainly did” – “why do you boast as if you had not received it?” In other words, stop boasting in yourself, and in your teachers. Teachers are a gift to the church, just as each of the skills and the gifts that you have personally are gifts.

God raises up teachers. He raises up abilities in each one of us. It’s his doing; it’s all his gift. The knowledge of that – the knowledge of God’s sovereign grace in the life of each and every one of us, at every moment of our lives – should be fatal to pride. It should kill arrogance, and end the divisions and the feuds that often happen in the church. It should lead to gratitude and humility.

Now, that’s what Paul has been seeking to achieve in his instruction to them. He’s asked these questions in order to awaken them to their lack of personal merit, and awaken them to their absolute debt to God. Now, in verse 8 through 13, he compares the ease of their lives to the difficulty of the apostles’ lives, in order to shame some sense into them. He has asked, “What haven’t you received,” and now what he basically is doing is asking, “What have you done?”

They were looking down on Paul. They had made choices. “I prefer So-and-so to Paul,” or “I prefer this to Apollos.” They were making those kind of judgments, so he’s saying, “Okay, you think you can judge between us. What have you done? How does your life compare to ours?” And so the tone here in these verses seems a bit rough; in fact, it’s been described as sarcastic, and I think that’s a fair description. Only the problem with that, from my mind at least, is it implies mean-spiritedness.

That’s often how sarcasm comes off, and I don’t think Paul is being mean-spirited at all, so perhaps a better way of describing it is irony. And he uses it, or sarcasm without rancor, to show them the absurdity of their sense of self-importance. It’s what the Old

Testament prophets would do when they would try to convince the people of the stupidity of trusting in idols.

And it gets a bit comical when Isaiah begins to describe how an idol is made, and the idol maker, and how he’ll take a block of wood and he’ll make a god out of it. And he’ll take the rest of the wood and use it to heap the fire. It’s absurd. And so Paul is using that same method here to, in a sense, make fun of the Corinthians’ conceit. They had been Christians for only a few years, but they were behaving as though they had already reached perfection, had already arrived, and were wiser than Paul and Apollos.

So Paul says, tongue in cheek, “You are already filled. You have already become rich. You have become kings without us.” Well, so they thought; so they behaved. And they did have something – they did have a lot, for that matter. In fact, all Christians do. We have a glorious future. When Christ returns, we will reign on the earth with him – that’s the promise that we’re given in Revelation 5:10 and Revelation 20:4, 6.

You put those two verses together, that’s the promise of the millennial kingdom. We are pilgrims on earth in the present, but we are also citizens of heaven. We’re equipped to travel through this world and serve Christ as ambassadors here. We have the Holy Spirit; he is the earnest of our inheritance. He’s the down payment. Think of that. You, as a believer in Jesus Christ, have the third person of the trinity literally dwelling within you. He guides us into truth. He gives us power and protection in this world.

We are sealed with the Spirit for the day of redemption. That means we’re secure – we can never be plucked out of God’s hand. We are blessed and rich, and we should realize that and act upon it. We don’t lack anything. There is nothing that we lack in the Christian life to prevent us from being successful. We have the Word of God, we have the Holy Spirit, and hopefully we have the support of the church all around us to help us bear one another’s burdens.

We are blessed greatly; all of that’s true. We have much. But we haven’t yet entered our inheritance, and we are far from full or complete. We have a lot of growing to do. We have a lot of maturing to do in the Christian life. In fact, we’ll spend the rest of our lives in this world doing just that. But the Corinthians were acting like they had already arrived – that they were the smartest guys in the room. We have a word that describes them: *sophomoric*, from the word *sophomore*, which is really made of two Greek words, *sophos* and *moros*.

Sophos, which is “wise”, and *moros* is “fool”- wise fools. A student gets past his freshman year in college, he gets a little knowledge, and he thinks he knows everything. He shows off his learning, becomes inflated and a bit pretentious; we’ve all done that, we’ve all been there. Get a little knowledge, and we become sophomoric. Now, that’s the Corinthians; that’s what they were. They were sophomores.

They had a little knowledge, and a little experience, and it had gone to their heads. They thought they knew better than everyone else. A young church is a dangerous place to be. It needs some graybeards, as they say – it needs some older people who have a little more than just a little bit of knowledge and a little bit of experience. Now, having said that, we also need youth and vigor; we need people with vision who do more than look back.

But a church needs the wisdom that comes only with age; that comes with experience in the Bible. Paul was that for the Corinthians, so he continues. “Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we also might reign with you.” In other words, I wish it were true. I wish that we had all entered into the millennium. The race would be over, the battle would be finished, we’d have all entered into the joy of our master – that would be wonderful.

“But alas,” Paul says, “Apollos and Peter and I are still out on the track, running the race. We’re still in the field, fighting the enemy.” And in the rest of the passage he describes what life is like for God’s servants, and what the world thinks of them – doesn’t think much of them. In fact, they’re the “scum of the world,” he says. They’re fit only for death.

They’re like gladiators being marched off to the arena to die, or prisoners to be thrown to the wild beasts for people’s amusement. That’s what he says. “ We are as men condemned to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world,” or literally, become a theater. That’s the Greek word that he uses there is *theatron*; we get our word “theater” from it. They have been put on public display, just like someone who’s put on a stage, and the world is the audience.

And the world is watching the apostles on stage, and what they’re doing, and what they consider them to be doing is just a comedy. They don’t take it seriously. In fact, Paul says the universe is watching them, the *cosmos* is watching them, both men and angels. The angelic host is watching the church. The angelic church is watching you, watching your life, watching this church, what goes on in this church – what goes on in the pulpit, what goes on in the pew, what goes on in the daily life of God’s people.

Paul tells us that in Ephesians 3:10. They see what we do. The world sees it; the angels see it. They see how we behave under pressure, under duress, or in prosperity; they’re watching. Now, Paul wasn’t complaining about this, as though this were some cruel twist of fate. He recognizes that God’s hand was in this; that this is God’s purpose. He says, “I think God has exhibited us last of all.” There are no mistakes in this.

This is God’s purpose. God has arranged things like this. But what a contrast – the Corinthians had considered themselves to be first in the parade, first in importance, but Paul says that God had appointed him and the others to be last of all. Last only in the world’s opinion, and in the opinion of the Corinthians. They were embarrassed by Paul. They were uncomfortable with him being a condemned man.

They wanted him to be more like those peripatetic philosophers that would come through Corinth, and who spoke so well, and had such lofty ideas, and really entertained the people, and were so interesting, and created such enthusiasm. That’s what they wanted in their apostle. They wanted him to fit more nicely in the world. But Paul says, “We don’t fit in the world. We don’t fit, and this is God’s way.”

We have been called out of the world, all of us; every believer in Jesus Christ is a believer in Jesus Christ because God called us out of this world. And he made us different, and we’re to be different. We are round pegs in square holes. We’ll never fit. This is the way it is for the people of God in this fallen world. This world is in rebellion, and we’re not, and so it’s not going to accept or treat kindly the servants of Christ.

So the Corinthians shouldn’t be embarrassed by Paul, or anyone else who preaches the cross of Christ, proclaims Christ as the only way of salvation. They should, in fact, join with him. He explains further what it means to join with him. He explains further what it means to be a spectacle to the world. He says, “They are fools for Christ’s sake,” and no wonder. Look at what he writes in verse 11.

“To this present hour, we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and roughly treated, and are homeless.” Now, they were that in one sense because they were victims, but this was a path they had chosen. Paul had been called to be an apostle; called to suffer much, as the Lord said back in Acts chapter 9, when he is saved and called – he would suffer much. And Paul gladly chose that path; chose the ministry for which he had been called.

But the world doesn’t understand this. It doesn’t understand people like this. People who don’t live for the world, who don’t make it their great goal in life to own a

house, and settle down, and enjoy life. They don’t know what to do with people who willingly go cold and hungry in order to preach the gospel; and I wonder if I understand it. I’ve never in my life gone hungry, or without clothes on my back, or without a roof over my head.

I’ve never experienced this life that he describes here. If you have done that, you have made the sacrifices that the apostle made. The Corinthians certainly hadn’t made those sacrifices, and they didn’t much value the sacrifices that Paul made. So Paul says he was a fool, but they were prudent. That is, in their judgment, they were wise, and they were smarter than all of the apostles. They knew what they were doing.

And what he’s saying in all of this is, “Watch out.” He’s really giving them a warning against compromising with the world. They were far too comfortable with the world, and they were far too confident in themselves. Paul was the opposite. They were strong and distinguished; he was weak and without honor. And of course Paul was weak – he was weak in himself.

But when he was living by the Spirit, and when he realized his weakness and walked by the Spirit, then he truly was strong. The problem was that was what seemed weak to the Corinthians, and what seems weak to the world. Paul describes it, what appears weak to them and what is really strong, in the last two verses; how he was generous with the ungrateful and the unkind. Now, that’s a real strength.

The world may dismiss it, and not understand it, and think that’s a weak response to those who are hostile to you, but it’s really an unnatural strength. He said he worked with his hands. He didn’t want to be a burden to people. He had the right to be supported by the congregation; he would teach that later, in chapter 9. Instead of receiving support from the congregation, Paul chose to labor. He worked as a tentmaker. He did that in Corinth.

In fact, Luke records that in Acts 18:3. The Greeks looked down on that. They considered manual labor the work of slaves, and they despised slaves. A teacher of any worth, in their opinion, supported himself by his instruction. If he wasn’t getting paid for his instruction, he must not be a very good teacher. So the world wrote them off, wrote off the apostles, as amateurs, as mere pikers.

And then, of course, there was just the general ridicule that came from the world; the ridicule of the doctrines that they preached, the doctrine of the cross. They despised that. “The shame of the cross,” is what Paul speaks of. They rejected as foolish the idea of

the resurrection, and all the doctrines of the grace of God. There was that just general ridicule that came to the apostles.

But Paul didn’t respond to their ridicule with ridicule of his own; just the opposite. He said, “When we are persecuted, we endure. When we are slandered, we try to conciliate.” Now, that takes strength. That is not the natural response of an individual. We don’t naturally endure that. We want to strike out at those who offend us. Paul didn’t. But the world doesn’t understand that; it didn’t understand him, as Paul puts it in summing up things.

He and his fellow apostles “have become the scum of the world, and the dregs of all things, even until now.” They were the world’s garbage. Think of that – the apostle Paul considered to be scum. Probably no individual, humanly speaking, has affected world history, has affected the thinking of the Western world in particular, as much as the apostle Paul in his epistles. And yet in his day he was dismissed as a fool, dismissed as the scum of the world.

That was the life of an apostle. That is a minister of the gospel. That is a Christian in the eyes of the world. The Corinthians didn’t like that. They wanted the world’s approval, but we won’t get that – not if we are living by the standards of Scripture. We’ll get that if we adopt the standards of the world, and try to conform to it; but if we live strictly according to the Word of God, and are faithful to that, we won’t get that approval.

Paul says, “We are the scum of the world.” We have glorious promises of the future – a new heavens and a new earth; we will reign with Christ – that’s our future. That’s a reality. But that’s still future. Paul says, “Even until now, we suffer.” That is life in this world, and the more faithful we are, the more it will be our experience. Not health and wealth; not private jets for evangelists; sacrifice.

And in a few verses, Paul will tell the Corinthians to follow his example. He is a model for them. He could tell them to do that because he was following the model of Christ. He’s not simply saying, “I’m your standard” – not at all. He could say, “Follow me. I’m a model because I’m following Christ.” That’s his point. He followed Christ. Well, who is Christ? How does the Word of God define him, and describe him?

Well, we have a good description of our Lord in Isaiah 53. The prophet describes him as the suffering servant. He describes him in these words: “He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to him.”

He wasn’t an attractive man. He wasn’t what the world admires. “He was despised and forsaken of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

Now, if we have believed in him, if we have joined ourselves to him through faith, should we expect anything different from the world? The Lord told us not to expect anything different. If they persecuted him, they’ll persecute us. Paul was following Christ. He was going the way of the cross, and when we take up our cross and follow him, we will be reviled, and we will be rejected, and we will be persecuted. That’s life now.

Well, the obvious question that we must ask ourselves is how are we serving Christ? What sacrifices have we made or suffered for him? I don’t ask that because I think, “Now, we need to go try and suffer somehow. We need to make great sacrifices. We need to make that a goal.” Those things will come to us if we’re simply living a faithful life; if we’re doing what we should do.

If we’re following the pattern of Paul and the apostles, who were following Christ, that will happen. If we’re following the model of the Corinthians, we’ll escape that, and life will be a lot easier. Well, how are we doing in regard to that? how do we measure up? Are we following Paul, are we following Christ, or are we following the Corinthians? That’s a question we must ask ourselves.

I think the question is pertinent and this passage is particularly relevant to us, because we are living in an age of change. In fact, I would say just reading the newspapers this week I’m reminded of the great sea change of morality that is going on presently in society, and in mainline denominations. A generation ago, when I was growing up, 40 years ago, the West largely followed what we speak of as the Judeo-Christian ethic.

They may not have followed the Bible – in fact, they didn’t when I was growing up; there wasn’t much interest in it – but there was a general morality that conformed to it. But as our world slips deeper into secularism and atheism, we are becoming increasingly materialistic and pagan. It is becoming, the age in which we’re living is becoming like the world the apostles lived in, and we will face greater challenges to our faith.

Some Christians already are; that’s a reality for some members of the church in places in the world. Back in November, the *Wall Street Journal* had an editorial about China and the house churches there. And one, in Beijing, has 500 members. It doesn’t meet in the house; it meets in a theater. When the article was written, the government forced the church to hold its meetings outside – they couldn’t go in the theater anymore.

They had to meet outside, so the people had their services in a snowstorm. And they all gathered, and they all met; it didn’t turn them away, the elements. They could identify with Paul’s description of the Christian life. How do you get there? How do you have that attitude? How do you simply become the kind of person who blesses those who revile you? I think we do it by going back to this important question in verse 7: what do you have that you did not receive?

Nothing; we have received everything, from our physical life to our eternal life – everything. So in light of that, isn’t it a small thing, and isn’t it the right thing, to live for him, to live faithfully for him before the world, in the midst of the world; to take our place on that stage; to be in that theater? Well, it was Shakespeare who said, “All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players,” but it’s Paul who said that first.

He said it of God’s servants. He said we’re a theater, and what the angels should see in us is humility and sacrifice. There’s no place for pride in the Christian life. It’s there – it’s in our hearts, in each one of us. I know that; I know it’s in my heart. But in light of what God’s done for us, there’s no excuse for that. God has given us everything. I have nothing, and you have nothing, to boast in. You don’t boast in a gift.

You become thankful for it, and particularly when you realize you’re unworthy of any gift. Well, we should be thankful. We should be humble. We should be faithful people. If you’re here without having believed in Christ, you don’t have anything. You’re lost. You’re so lost that only God can find you; only he can give you what you need. And what you need is forgiveness and eternal life, and that’s found only in Christ, so believe in him.

He’s God’s Son who died for sinners, so that all who believe in him would be saved, and he receives everyone who comes to him. He receives without exception everyone who believes in him. So look to him, believe in him, and receive everything; receive forgiveness, receive the inheritance to come, become a member of his family – God will give you all of that as a free gift.

And you who have believed, rejoice in what you have. Praise God for it, be thankful, and live a life of faithful service to him and to one another. May God help us to do that. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we pray for that. We pray that you’d make us a thankful people – to realize that there’s nothing that we have that we haven’t received. Everything is a gift – our physical life, our spiritual life, every

breath that we take is a gift. Every moment of life that we have is a gift from you. That’s true of everyone in this world; regardless of their relationship to you, that’s true of everyone.

Every moment of life is your gift to them, but you’ve done something far more for us who have put our faith in Christ – you’ve given us life everlasting. You’ve given us a glorious inheritance. Someday we will reign. We’ll reign with Christ, and we’ll reign –