

Going Deeper: The Five Postures of a Faithful Servant

Sermon Summary: “God’s Scorecard”

Paul's letter to the Corinthians reaches a corrective climax in chapter 4. Like a loving father who must raise his voice to wake up a wayward child, Paul employs Spirit-inspired sarcasm to jolt the Corinthians out of their spiritual complacency. They thought they had "arrived"—filled, rich, and reigning—but they had confused worldly success with spiritual maturity.

Paul redefines what faithful Christian leadership and discipleship actually look like by contrasting the Corinthians' comfort with the apostles' suffering, their pride with humility, their sense of arrival with ongoing hunger for growth.

The Central Truth: *Faithfully following Jesus looks like His cross more than it does His crown.*

The Five Postures of a Faithful Servant

1. Stay Faithful – "I do what Jesus says!"

Key Verse: "Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful." (1 Cor 4:2)

Paul redefines Christian service using two powerful images:

- **Servant (hypēretēs):** An "under-rower" at the bottom of a ship, simply rowing when commanded
- **Steward:** A household manager entrusted with the master's resources

The evaluation isn't charisma, talent, or success—it's faithfulness. Did you do what God asked you to do?

Finding Jesus Here: Jesus perfectly embodied this posture. In Gethsemane, He prayed, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). He came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45). Jesus is both our model of faithfulness and the one who empowers us to be faithful through His Spirit. He is the ultimate "under-rower"—the Son who did only what He saw the Father doing (John 5:19), the faithful steward of God's redemptive plan who completed the work given to Him (John 17:4).

2. Stay Focused – God's view matters most

Key Verses: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court... It is the Lord who judges me." (1 Cor 4:3-4)

Paul distinguishes three types of judgment:

- **Human judgment** (incomplete and often mistaken)
- **Self-judgment** (unreliable—we can deceive ourselves)
- **God's judgment** (ultimate and true)

This isn't license to ignore all feedback, but a call to relocate our final source of approval.

Finding Jesus Here: Jesus lived entirely for the Father's approval. He said, "I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29). Even when misunderstood, rejected, and crucified, Jesus remained focused on His Father's mission. When the crowds wanted to make Him king by force, He withdrew (John 6:15). When Peter tried to prevent His suffering, Jesus rebuked him (Matthew 16:23). Jesus is our anchor when human opinion threatens to pull us off course. More than that, because of His finished work on the cross, we now stand approved before God—not based on our performance, but based on Christ's faithfulness.

3. Stay Humble – "All this is from God"

Key Verse: "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor 4:7)

The Corinthians were "puffed up"—inflated with pride over gifts they had received as if they were personal achievements. Paul reminds them that everything is grace.

Finding Jesus Here: Though Jesus was "in very nature God," He "made himself nothing" and "humbled himself" (Philippians 2:6-8). Jesus is the ultimate picture of humility—the Creator serving His creation, the King washing feet, the Sinless One bearing our sin. His humility makes our salvation possible. Even more stunning: Jesus, who had every right to boast, who truly achieved what no one else could, chose the path of humility instead. He shows us that true greatness is found not in grasping but in giving, not in exalting ourselves but in emptying ourselves for others.

4. Stay Hungry – "Play to the buzzer"

Key Verse: "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!" (1 Cor 4:8)

The Corinthians thought they had arrived at spiritual maturity. Paul's sarcasm cuts: they're acting like they're on a cruise ship when they should be on a battleship. The Christian life isn't a fast track to glory but a slow, arduous path through suffering.

Finding Jesus Here: Jesus never stopped doing the Father's work. Even on the cross, He said, "It is finished" (John 19:30)—the work was complete. He didn't quit, didn't take shortcuts, didn't settle for comfort. From age 12 in the temple ("I must be about my Father's business") to His final breath, Jesus remained hungry for the Father's will. And now, risen and ascended, He continues to intercede for us

(Hebrews 7:25). Jesus shows us that spiritual maturity isn't about arriving at comfort but about pressing forward in obedience until the work God has given us is complete.

5. Stay Tough – Willing to endure hardship

Key Verses: "To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless... When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat." (1 Cor 4:11-13)

Paul lists the hardships of apostolic ministry—not to complain, but to show what faithfulness to Christ actually costs. The apostles looked more like Isaiah 53's suffering servant than the world's picture of success.

Finding Jesus Here: This is the heart of the gospel. Jesus is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53—"despised and rejected," "a man of sorrows," bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows. The cross reminds us that the path to resurrection runs through crucifixion. Jesus endured the ultimate hardship so we could have eternal life. He was reviled but didn't revile in return. He suffered but entrusted Himself to the Father (1 Peter 2:23). He became sin for us, bearing the ultimate hardship. And because He walked this path first, He walks with us through every hardship we face, understanding our weaknesses and providing grace in our time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Interesting Background Facts

1. Roman Triumphal Processions: Paul's imagery of apostles as "last of all" and a "spectacle" draws from Roman victory parades. Conquering generals would parade through Rome with their armies, treasures, and prisoners of war. The prisoners came last, destined for execution in the arena—a public spectacle of defeat. Paul flips this: what the world sees as defeat, God sees as victory.

2. "Scum of the earth": The Greek words Paul uses (*perikatharma* and *peripsēma*) referred to that which is scraped off in cleaning—refuse, garbage. Historically, these terms were also used for human scapegoats—worthless persons sacrificed to ward off evil and save a city. Paul embraces this identity: apostles are treated as disposable, yet through them, God brings salvation.

3. Corinth's Wealth: Corinth was one of the wealthiest cities in the Roman Empire, a commercial hub with two ports. The Corinthian church reflected this affluence, which made them particularly susceptible to status-seeking, pride, and the belief that spiritual maturity meant material blessing and social honor.

4. Father vs. Guides: Paul's distinction between "countless guides" and "not many fathers" uses the Greek word *paidagōgos* (pedagogue)—a household slave who escorted children to school and kept them in line, often depicted with a stick. Paul isn't just their disciplinarian; he's their spiritual father who brought them to birth in Christ.

Additional Resources for Going Deeper

Books:

- *The Cross of Christ* by John Stott – A profound exploration of what the cross means and why suffering is central to Christian discipleship
- *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Classic work on what it means to truly follow Jesus, written by a pastor who paid the ultimate price
- *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund – Explores the heart of Christ toward sinners and sufferers
- *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* by Tim Keller – A short, powerful book based on 1 Corinthians 3-4 about finding our identity in Christ's approval

Scripture for Further Study:

- **Isaiah 53** – The suffering servant prophecy that Jesus fulfilled
- **Philippians 2:1-11** – Christ's humility and our call to imitate it
- **2 Corinthians 11:16-33** – Paul's "fool's speech" listing his sufferings for Christ
- **Matthew 5:1-12** – The Beatitudes show Jesus' upside-down kingdom values
- **Hebrews 12:1-3** – Enduring hardship by fixing our eyes on Jesus
- **John 5:19-30** – Jesus' complete dependence on and obedience to the Father

Finding Jesus in the Five Postures

Each of these five postures points us directly to Jesus Christ. He is not merely our example—He is our enabler. We cannot stay faithful, focused, humble, hungry, or tough in our own strength. But as we gaze at Jesus, we are transformed into His likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Jesus is the Ultimate Faithful Servant. He came to do the Father's will and completed the work given to Him (John 17:4). Even when it meant the cross, He remained obedient to death (Philippians 2:8). His perfect faithfulness secures our salvation and empowers our obedience.

Jesus Stayed Perfectly Focused. He lived for an audience of One. The religious leaders' judgment, the crowds' opinions, even His disciples' misunderstandings didn't deter Him from His mission. Because of His finished work, we now stand approved before God—not based on our performance, but based on Christ's faithfulness.

Jesus Embodied True Humility. Though He was God, He didn't grasp at equality with God but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7). He washed feet, touched lepers, and welcomed

children. His humility made our salvation possible and shows us that true greatness is found not in grasping but in giving.

Jesus Never Stopped Working. From age 12 in the temple to His final breath on the cross ("It is finished"), Jesus never stopped pursuing the Father's will. He didn't settle for comfort or take shortcuts. And now, risen and ascended, He continues to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:25), showing us that spiritual maturity means pressing forward in obedience.

Jesus Endured Ultimate Hardship. He endured the cross, despising its shame, for the joy set before Him—you (Hebrews 12:2). He was reviled but didn't revile in return. He suffered but entrusted Himself to the Father. He became sin for us, bearing the ultimate hardship so we could have eternal life. Because He walked this path first, He walks with us through every hardship we face.

Activation Questions: Seeing Jesus in Each Posture

Stay Faithful – "I do what Jesus says!"

1. **How does Jesus' perfect faithfulness to the Father (even unto death) free you from the pressure to perform perfectly?** Consider how His completed work allows you to serve from acceptance rather than for acceptance.
2. **Where do you see Jesus as the "under-rower" in the Gospels—simply doing what the Father commanded?** How does His example of humble obedience challenge your view of what makes someone "successful" in ministry or life?

Stay Focused – God's view matters most

1. **Jesus lived entirely for the Father's approval and now offers you that same approval through His righteousness. How does knowing you are already approved in Christ change the way you approach human judgment?** What fears or insecurities lose their power when you rest in God's verdict over you?
2. **When have you seen Jesus reject human approval or acclaim in favor of the Father's will?** (Consider John 6:15, Matthew 16:23, or John 12:27-28). What does His example teach you about whose opinion should matter most?

Stay Humble – "All this is from God"

1. **Jesus, who had every right to boast and every achievement to claim, chose humility instead. How does His voluntary descent from heaven to the cross redefine what true greatness looks like?** Where are you tempted to grasp at status or recognition that Jesus willingly released?
2. **In Philippians 2, we see that Jesus' humility led to His exaltation by the Father. How does this pattern—humility before honor, cross before crown—give you hope when choosing the humble path feels costly?** Where is Jesus inviting you to trust that His way of descent leads to true life?

Stay Hungry – "Play to the buzzer"

1. **Even now, the risen Christ continues His work, interceding for you at the Father's right hand (Hebrews 7:25). How does knowing that Jesus never stops working on your behalf motivate you to press forward in your own spiritual growth?** What does it mean that He who began a good work in you will complete it (Philippians 1:6)?
2. **The Corinthians thought they had "arrived," but Jesus shows us that maturity means ongoing dependence on the Father. Where have you confused comfort or spiritual experiences with spiritual maturity?** How does Jesus' example of constant communion with the Father (rising early to pray, withdrawing to pray) show you what true spiritual hunger looks like?

Stay Tough – Willing to endure hardship

1. **Isaiah 53 prophesied that the Messiah would be "despised and rejected, a man of sorrows." How does seeing Jesus as the suffering servant help you understand that hardship isn't a sign of God's absence but often a sign of His presence and purpose?** When have you experienced Christ's nearness in suffering?
2. **Jesus "for the joy set before him endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). What was that joy?** How does knowing that you were the joy that motivated Jesus through His suffering change the way you view your own hardships for His sake?

A Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for loving us enough to correct us, like Paul corrected the Corinthians. Forgive us for the ways we've confused worldly success with spiritual maturity, comfort with Christlikeness.

Help us to stay faithful—to simply do what You ask, prioritizing obedience over outcomes. Help us to stay focused—to care more about Your view of our lives than anyone else's opinion. Help us to stay humble—to recognize that everything we have is a gift from Your hand.

Keep us hungry—refusing to settle, refusing to believe we've arrived, pressing on toward the goal. Make us tough—willing to endure hardship, to do the hard thing because it's the Christ thing.

Most of all, fix our eyes on Jesus—the ultimate faithful servant who stayed faithful to the cross, focused on Your will, humble in His incarnation, hungry for Your glory, and tough enough to endure the shame and suffering that purchased our salvation.

Transform us into His likeness, that our lives would look more like His cross than His crown—until the day when, by grace, we share in His resurrection glory.

In Jesus' name, Amen.