

STRETCH

OUR PART IN GOD'S STORY

STRETCH: OUR PART IN GOD'S STORY (WEEK 4: STRETCHED TO SERVE)

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONNECT (from last week): What are some concrete choices you can make this week to be more actively seeking to serve God's mission through your life?

WARM-UP Questions

1. Describe a person in your life who has a servant heart? What effect have they had on you?
2. Have you ever noticed a group or organisation that had a culture of service? What was it like?

READ 1 Corinthians 4:1-7

3. How did Paul want to be known? Why do you think Paul was feeling judged?
4. Who, according to Paul, is the ultimate judge of our lives? What difference does this make for him?
5. Do you find it comforting or worrying that God will expose the motives of the heart?
6. What difference does it make to dedicate our service to God and not simply to impress others (or gain a sense of merit)? How can we dedicate our service to God?
7. The Corinthian culture was all about pride and prestige. What do you think our surrounding culture values? How is this to stand in contrast with what we – as Christians – are to value?
8. Why is Paul against boasting? Do you think we can ever be tempted to boast about the ways in which we serve (if you are really brave, you might even like to share a personal example of this!)?
9. How can we be on guard against boasting about our service?

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-17

10. What is the contrast between those who crucified Jesus and the Apostles? How does this help us to see the characteristics by which our lives are to be shaped? How does this shape our service?
11. Serving others can be hard and thankless at times. How do we persist? Is it worth it? Why?
12. Why do you think Paul sends Timothy to the Corinthians? What is he hoping to achieve?
13. Paul urges the Corinthians to imitate him. Is this an arrogant thing to do? If we were more conscious of people imitating us, how might that change the way we serve and act?
14. What are the core characteristics of serving God in a Gospel way? What does it look like to serve God together, outwardly, and in a loving way?
15. What do you most love about serving in the life of our church? In what way could you grow in this?

APPLY (to this week): Think about one person you can do something for this week. What can you do this week to serve them as a reflection of being a servant of Jesus?

PRAY: *Almighty God, thank you that you sent your only Son into our world, not to be served but to serve and lay his life down as a ransom for many. Please help us as we serve in our communities and help us to find new and creative ways to serve you every day. In Jesus' name, Amen.*



GOING DEEPER

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GOING DEEPER RESOURCES & SUGGESTIONS

Each week in January, we will be providing additional resources that may help to go deeper with whatever series we're currently focusing on as a church. These are optional extras! Please don't feel under pressure to look at every resource, but consider what could be useful to you (or your group if you are a small group leader).

Resources for Families

- Discuss the way you serve each other as a family. Share some experiences of an act of service that has helped you learn more about God with each other.

Every Ministry Matters Expression of Interest Forms

- If you haven't already, spend some time thinking about and praying over the various serving opportunities at St Bart's on the 'Expression of Interest' form.

Videos & Talks

- AUDIO: The Foolish Stewards of God. A talk by Phillip Jenson on 1 Corinthians 4 See: <http://www.phillipjensen.com/audio/the-foolish-stewards-of-god/>
- AUDIO: A Warning to the Church. A two-part sermon on 1 Corinthians 4 by Alistair Begg. See: <http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/a-warning-to-the-church-part-one> and Part 2: <http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/a-warning-to-the-church-part-two>
- AUDIO: Childish Living. A lunchtime Bible talk from Dick Lucas on 1 Corinthians 4-6. See: <http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/childish-living>
- VIDEO: Stop Leading and Start Serving. A short video from Pastor Rick Warren on servant leadership. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgHQRpblOg8>

Articles and Other Reading

- BOOK: "Preaching" by Tim Keller. Chapter 4 is entitled "Preaching Christ to the Culture" and reflects on assumptions of western culture.
- ARTICLES: Bible.org is a great free resource with two articles on 1 Corinthians 4. See: <https://bible.org/seriespage/7-follow-leader-1-cor-41-21> and <https://bible.org/seriespage/12-tough-and-tender-1-corinthians-46-21>
- BOOK: "Humilitas" by John Dickson. This short book reflects on how Christ-shaped humility changed the world.

Talk 4/4 (Stretch): 22/01/2017

“Stretched to Serve” by the Rev’d David Browne

Bible Passage: 1 Corinthians 4:1-17

INTRODUCTION \ Context, Exegesis, Application

Today’s is the last sermon in our Stretch Series

- 2017 will undoubtedly be a stretch year for St Bart’s with Stage 2 starting last week,
- And a whole variety of wonderful happenings and events to enjoy in the year ahead.
- As a church we are praying that God will grow us spiritually and physically
- that more people might come to hear the good news of Jesus Christ and more people might be mobilised to serve those around us. //

Today is **Every Ministry Matters Sunday** and after the service we will be given the opportunity to learn more about the wide range of service areas in our church.

Our reading from 1 Corinthians 4 is an amazing passage that picks up on a variety of themes,

but at its heart Paul is outlining what it looks like to live as a servant of Christ.

As we look at this passage and think deeply about service *we'll examine*:

1. The Corinthian Problem

2. A Gospel Solution

3. And think deeply about our service as an outworking of God's servant heart

What we find in 1 Corinthians 4 is not a 'how to serve' manual or even a charge to make people serve. But what we find instead is a pastoral letter:

designed to bring unity,

encourage humility,

and give a gospel basis for Christian service...

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The Corinthian Problem? // Corinth and Paul

Early in the first century a firebrand tentmaker, named Paul, landed in the port-city of Corinth.

While there he preached in the local synagogue about a man named Jesus and tried to persuade the Jews and Greeks of Corinth to follow Jesus.

Paul had some success but he also encountered violent opposition

Slowly a small church formed and Paul left to preach the Gospel in Ephesus.

In Ephesus Paul received some painful news...

The church which he had fathered was being torn apart.

On the outside, it may have looked like the church was growing and flourishing, but the Corinthians had let the culture of their city take over their church.

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Factionalism

Corinth was a highly religious place with many temples and even a synagogue. People worshipped what they liked on their own terms.

This religious pluralism was second nature, so as the Corinthian church grew some put their loyalties behind a particular leader, subsequently dividing the young community.

Factions had cropped up with some people saying they followed the gifted preacher Apollos,

others followed Cephas (better known as the apostle Peter)

and others saying they followed Paul.

Cultural Drift

Corinth was also a mixed city where Greek, Roman and Jewish influences resulted in a web of ideas.

Greek philosophy, which emphasised knowledge, allowed people to reach enlightenment by learning secret mysteries.

Add to this Roman culture, which emphasised wealth and dominance and greatness, and where things considered weak and pathetic were worthless and rejected.

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These influences crept into the Corinthian church,

where people made up new teachings, and Paul's teachings were accused of being weak and insufficient.

Pride

Finally Corinth was a fabulously wealthy city with marketplaces and a flourishing port. Newly rich freed slaves lived alongside poor labourers, sailors and slaves.

Rich Corinthian Christians were having huge feasts and leaving nothing for the poor.

Some in the church were suing each other, others were sleeping with their relatives,

and those who served were looked down on by those who felt that service was below them and the community was suffering as a result.

Factionalism, cultural drift and pride was undermining the Corinthian community. Rather than living as servants of Christ, they lived to serve themselves.

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Paul's Response: Gospel Service

Paul confronts these problems in Corinth with one thing: Gospel

Solution 1: Gospel Unity

For Paul, the Corinthian problem was not a social, ideological or political problem, but rather a spiritual problem:

The Corinthian church was forgetting Jesus and all he had done for them.

In v.1 he clearly outlines what Christian service looks like:

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

All Christians are servants of Christ and are entrusted with the mysteries of God.

-By mysteries he doesn't mean that these things are unknown

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-On the contrary, by mysteries

-he's referring to the Good news of Jesus death and resurrection that are amazing beyond understanding

That's why in 1 Timothy Paul writes:

Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great:

He appeared in the flesh,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.

We're not unified by special leaders, we are unified in our Lord and Saviour

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This directly confronts Corinthian factionalism and pride. Paul is no better than anyone else and is certainly not above serving, **and nor are the Corinthians.**

This is true equality - neither the greatest of disciples nor anyone who follows Jesus is above the call to serve God.

At the end the day there is only one true judge who will judge all people and bring true justice

Likewise no one has any basis for boasting:

“who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Corinthians 4:7 NIV)

This means that every gift, every moment, even the very breath in our lungs belongs to God. So why would we boast and judge people?

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These gospel truths point the Corinthians back to Jesus: our judge and life giver

Our gifts come from, it's to him our gifts go.

Solution 2: Gospel Humility

Next Paul moves onto a comparison between the apostles and those causing trouble in the church.

He does this with cutting irony, there is too much at risk for a softly softly approach:

The troublemakers in the Corinthian church are (Table for slides):

- Puffed up
- They have all they want

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- Have become rich
- Begun to reign
- “Wise in Christ”
- “Strong”

Paul and the other apostles are:

- At end of the procession like those condemned to die
- A spectacle
- Fools for Christ
- “weak”
- Hungry and thirsty
- In rags
- Brutally treated
- Homeless
- Working with hands
- Scum of the earth! Garbage of the world

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The mental image Paul paints is that of prisoners condemned to die.

When Roman generals won a battle they would process into the city with great fanfare and pomp

Prisoners would take up the rear of the procession and were often led into the arena to be killed by gladiators and wild animals

If the Corinthians want to follow Jesus they shouldn't look like the people who crucified Jesus, they should look at the example of the apostles

**This doesn't sound like a very comfortable job description
No one in their right mind would go, 'WOW being a fool for Christ sounds awesome, sign me up!'
This is Paul's point, Christian service isn't glamorous or comfortable but it does look a lot like Christ.**

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Jesus' mandate to his disciples was just this:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24 NIV11-GK)

Solution 3: Gospel imitation

In v.14 Paul softens and changes his tone:

He's not writing to shame the Corinthians, but to warn them; and so, Paul urges them to imitate him.

While I follow Christ it's helpful to imitate those in our lives who follow Jesus, sometimes it's good to have an example with skin on

Who do you imitate, who models Christian service to you?

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Paul seems to appreciate how hard it is to imitate someone from a distance; so, he is sending his trusted companion Timothy to Corinth.

He hopes that Timothy's presence will remind the Corinthians of what being a servant of Christ looks like and stretch them back to living in response to the good news of Jesus

How we serve today? \ Service: an outworking of the gospel

Finally what does this mean for you, me and us, as a church, today?

It means that everything we do, is shaped by servanthood.

I'd like to suggest three ways this is lived out.

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1. Serve together

One of the primary goals in this passage is to bring the church back together.

As the church in Corinth was pluralistic and took its cues from the surrounding culture, it's tempting to do the same today:

Our culture is often polarised by an 'us and them' mentality that divides God's church.

Our identity as Christians however isn't in factions, it's in Christ.

Paul doesn't see church unity as some lofty goal to be realised, but an accomplished reality that needs to be recognised.

Jesus used the analogy of a vine: I am the vine, you are the branches (John 15:5).

Paul says we are one body with many parts.

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As a church we are intimately connected with each other whether we know it or not!
Every thing we have comes from God and when Christ returns to judge the world

putting all wrongs to right it won't matter what club we belong to, or what team we're on,

the only thing that will matter is our relationship with the living God

At St Bart's we're all working towards one goal,

This is why EVERY MINISTRY MATTERS

Whether you are cooking a welcome meal, driving someone to church, visiting someone who is sick or cleaning up after Mainly Music, you are serving Christ and building up his church.

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2. Serve others

In his book on preaching, Tim Keller notes that the sovereign-self is an unchallenged belief in our world today.

“Western” society has elevated the needs of the individual above anything else

This was highlighted by a 2010 volunteering survey which listed the most common reasons people did not volunteer:

- ☐ Did not have time – 67%
- ☐ Preferred to give money instead of time – 52%
- ☐ Had no interest – 27%

This list reveals a lot about people’s hearts

So many of us feel time poor and many would rather throw money at a problem than engage with it!

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The most telling stat is that 27% of people had no interest in volunteering; a quarter of people just didn’t care

This is what the sovereign-self looks like, when tending to my own needs becomes my highest priority, serving others is pointless

The gospel of Jesus Christ liberates us beyond the boundaries of our culture and frees us up to serve one another.

Paul says it like this:

“Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.” (Romans 12:2a MESSAGE)

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3. Serve in love

The final application I want to offer this morning from 1 Corinthians 4 is that a servant heart is the outworking of all God has done for us.

Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate him and is sending Timothy to them to remind them of his way of life in Christ Jesus

What does this mean and what does this way of life look like?

Quite simply, the sort of life Paul is talking about here is a life lived in response to who Jesus is and all he has done for us.

A couple of years ago some very generous people at St Bart's helped Zoe and I visit a school in Ethiopia for slum children

The school was too small for the number of students and had to be extended

That afternoon a delivery of bricks came for the school extension and the truck driver dumped the bricks outside and sped off

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thousands of bricks piled up outside the school gate. Problem!

Within minutes however the parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters of the schoolchildren rocked up and began heaving brick after heavy brick inside the school

Women with babies on their backs, toothless grandfathers, ten year olds with no shoes at all, working together to shift this pile of bricks to where they needed to go

Within an hour this makeshift army of volunteers had shifted tons of bricks

What astounded me was the drive of these people and the fact that no one had to ask them to help, they just got in there and did it, no one complained or avoided helping

I couldn't work out why these people served the school like this until I spoke to the father of one of the students

He explained to me with tears in his eyes that when he found out his son had been given a spot at the school it was like being born again. He was so thankful for this gift that carting bricks was a small way to show his gratitude

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this man from the slums who many would consider the 'scum of the earth' taught me one of the most powerful lessons about service.

Like this father, Christians have been born again.

God has given us new life and new hope.

The least we can do is serve the one who came not to be served but to serve

We don't serve to get anything or in the hope that it will make us look good

We serve as an outworking of all that God has done for us a reflection of God's servant heart

CONCLUSION \\ Stretched to serve

We are a servant shaped church because we're a Christ shaped church.

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We wouldn't be the church we are today without the gifts of people who serve so faithfully with Christ-like generosity.

But as we are stretched, the way we avoid the Corinthian problem is to find our unity in Christ, anchor our lives in Jesus, and to serve in response to all God has done for us.

Today with Every Ministry Matters we get to invest in our community and in God's kingdom

We have the opportunity to learn, think and pray about where our time can be best spent

At St Bart's there are a myriad of creative and wonderful ways to serve

-serving together

-serving others in Christ

-and serving in love

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If you're already serving give thanks to God for what he is doing
If you're looking for an opportunity to serve commit this to the Lord