

# 1 Corinthians 4:1-21 Sermon – “The Power of the Cross”

Rev. Bruce Stanley. Sermon audio and text available at [www.waitara.anglican.asn.au](http://www.waitara.anglican.asn.au)

- **III** – Who are you going to vote for in the next election?

Julia Gillard or Tony Abbott? Labour or the Coalition? Or maybe someone else? More importantly, how are you deciding who to vote for? How do you judge our leaders? Of course, we can look at their policies and what they’ve done in the past. But one thing we **can’t** do is look inside their hearts. We cannot know their true motives. Because only God knows the hearts. Only God knows our motives.

- **The Kingdom of the heart**

Now think about the people in your church. We can make judgments about each other. How others live, the way they use their money, the way they raise their children, the way they treat others, the way they speak. And those judgments **might be** wrong or right. But we cannot judge people truthfully because we cannot judge their heart and we cannot judge their motives. All we can judge is from the outside.

- *Judging the outside*

The apostle Paul says:

*<sup>3</sup>I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup>My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup>Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.*

There were people in the church in Corinth who were questioning Paul’s motives and his teaching. They were judging his heart. And Paul says: You don’t know my heart. You don’t know my motives. What you do know, as he says in chapter 1, is my message – the message of the cross of Jesus. That’s all you can judge. From the outside. You can hear what I say and see what I do, but you cannot judge my heart or my motives.

- *Judging the inside*

**III** – X-rays revealing inside. This is an X-ray of my son Flynn’s chest. It shows his lungs and ribs and other stuff. When he was sick a few years ago, he had these X-rays to reveal what was hidden. X-rays reveal what we can’t see from the outside. They make clear what we can only guess from the outside. Even a doctor needs an X-ray to get a better understanding of what’s happening inside.

What we see from the outside of a person does not always tell us the truth about them as a person. We cannot clearly see inside someone’s heart. We cannot clearly see their motives. But God can. And we will all be judged by God on that final day when Jesus returns to this earth. And he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness. He will reveal our true heart and our true motives.

**III** – Perhaps an illustration will help. Just last week I was angry at someone. I judged him because of the way he acted towards me. I was angry. Disappointed. I judged him from the outside. A week later I found out that there were circumstances in his life at the time which completely justified the way he was acting. Things I didn’t see from the outside when I judged him. I judged from the outside. I did not see his true heart. I did not see his true motives. I didn’t know him the way God knows him.

God alone can and will truly judge us for who we are. Until that time, Paul says, we cannot judge people's hearts.

- **The Kingdom of the weak**

As Paul moves on, he wants us to now think about our **own** hearts. There are people in the Corinthian Church who are boasting about their faith and showing off. And maybe we have a tendency to do that as well.

- **III** – Checklist – we always have a shopping list when we go to the shops. And when I take our list, I like the sense of achievement when I've managed to get everything on the list.

Sometimes we might tend to treat our faith like a shopping list. We can boast that we've filled up our shopping trolley with lots of good things. Church on Sunday. Check. Bible study. Check. Prayer. Check. Bible reading. Check. Go to a church event. Check. Give money to church. Check. Invite a friend: double points. Check check.

And these important things in our Christian life can be like a checklist and source of pride for us. A way to boast about our faith, and a way to look down on others who don't have a faith like ours.

That's why Paul is sarcastic with the Corinthians in verse 10. He says to them: "Look at you, with your entire shopping list ticked off! Aren't you clever! You're so proud of yourself. So self righteous. You think so highly of yourself. And Paul then reflects on the life of an apostle for him:

- *<sup>11</sup>To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. <sup>12</sup>We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; <sup>13</sup>when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.*

"But look at you!" Paul says. You have everything! You've got your whole Christian life together! Good for you! The Corinthians think so highly of themselves. But Paul considers himself the scum of the earth. The bottom of society. Looked down upon by the people of the world. And, he says, I'm not writing this to shame you, but to **warn** you! Don't be puffed up. Don't be proud and arrogant about your faith. Instead, be prepared to be the scum of the earth. Be prepared to be laughed at, to be ridiculed, to have people look down on you.

- **III** – Let me tell you an amazing story from World War II.

On October 10, 1943, the Bishop of Singapore, Bishop Leonard Wilson, was tortured by Japanese soldiers, along with 56 other prisoners from Changi war prison; they were accused of being spies. At one time, 7 different men took turns flogging him. And one of them asked him why he didn't curse them. The Bishop said it was because he was a follower of Jesus who taught us to love one another. After 8 months of torture, he was released back to Changi. After the war, he returned to Singapore, and, as Bishop, ended up one day baptising one of the men who had tortured him.

Leonard Wilson became the scum of the earth. He was looked down on and treated like the refuse of the world. He wasn't arrogant, but he was merciful and forgiving. In a world who often looks down upon us for our beliefs, are we self righteous? Do we boast in our wisdom, our strength and our honour? Do we think people who don't believe in Jesus are stupid? Do we look down on others?

Or are we prepared to be fools for Christ, persecuted, cursed and slandered? Are we prepared for people perhaps not to even like us because of our faith in Christ?

- **The Kingdom of Power**

So Paul talks about how only God can judge a man's heart. Then he talks about looking at our own hearts and the way we might boast and look down on others. Finally, at the end of this chapter, he tells us why this is so important. Verse 20:

- <sup>20</sup>*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.”*

Paul is concerned that the church has become about words, and forgotten about the power of the cross of Jesus. And we should be concerned about that too. The message of the cross, Paul says in chapter 1 verse 18, is the power of God. The power of the church is not in talking. It's not even in “doing”. Paul wants us to get back to the power of the message of the **cross** of Jesus.

Even in our church today, we can easily be puffed up with “talk”. Talk about what we're doing, talk about what we've achieved, talk about what we're planning. But God's power will not be found in those things. Where is the **real** ministry happening in our church? Where is the **real** power?

- **In the message of the cross.**

The real power in this church is not in our numbers, our leaders, our growth, our missions, our buildings, our staff, our programs, our vision. The REAL power in this church is in the message of the cross of Jesus that is changing people's lives every day.

When you come to God in prayer because you're moved by what Jesus has done on the cross; when you forgive others because you were forgiven at the cross; when you show mercy to people because you understand the mercy God showed you at the cross; when you reach out to your neighbour because the love of the cross compels you to; it is that power of the cross that changes our life every single day, the power that brings people to Christ, the power that changes the lives around us, the power that moves us to speak and to act.

When we truly understand the cross of Jesus, and what he has done for us, and the cost he has paid to save you and me, **that** is when we will see God's church really revived. THAT is when we will see many people saved. THAT is when we will see **true** generosity in giving, true obedience to God's word, true commitment to ministry, and true faithfulness in difficult times.

This is not to shame you, Paul says. But to remind you to always return to the power of the cross.