

Pins for Puffed-Up People • By Dr. David O. Dykes
1 Corinthians 4:6-21

INTRODUCTION

Paul uses the word “arrogant” or “puffed up” three times in this passage. There was a problem in the church at Corinth with pride and jealousy. And so Paul has very strong words of admonition for them in 1 Corinthians 4:6-21.

The first time he talks about arrogance in this passage, it literally means in Greek “to be inflated, puffed up.” Then he asks three rhetorical questions: For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And what if you did receive it...why do you boast as though you did not?

He uses what we could call “sanctified sarcasm.” So don't misunderstand what he's doing. He's talking about these arrogant leaders in Corinth versus the apostles when he says, “We have been made a spectacle.” That is the word from which we get our English word “theater.” Then he says, “We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ. We are weak. You are strong. You are honored. We are dishonored.” As I said, he's being sarcastic to make a point. Later in the passage, Paul says, “I became your father through the gospel. Therefore, I urge you to imitate me.” And it is the word “mimic.” He says some of you have become “puffed up,” which is the second time he uses that word, and they don't think Paul is coming back to check on them and hold them accountable. So Paul wants to find out who the “arrogant” [there is the word again] people are who are leading others astray in Corinth. The church at Corinth had a lot of problems, and one of the biggest problems they had was just being puffed up, being proud, being arrogant.

Have you ever heard very many people confess the pride of the sin? I heard about one lady who came forward during the invitation and said to the old pastor, “I want to confess the sin of pride.” She said, “I'm always looking in the mirror thinking about how beautiful I am.” And he said, “Ma'am, your problem is not pride but ignorance.”

The Bible says it is possible for Christians to be guilty of pride, to be puffed up. There is an ancient African folk tale about a frog who sees a rhinoceros drinking from the waterhole. And this little baby frog goes to his granddaddy and said, “I saw a frog much bigger than you today!” The granddaddy puffed up a little bit, as frogs can do, and he said, “Was he bigger than this?” And the little frog nodded. And the granddaddy frog puffed up some more, as only frogs can do. And he said, “Was he bigger than this?” And the little frog said, “Yes, Granddaddy.” And so the big granddaddy frog puffed up to the very limit of his ability until he exploded!

And I suppose the lesson that the Africans connect to that tale is the danger of being so swollen with pride and arrogance that you explode. I think the following principles will prevent pride in the life of a Christian.

I. EVERYTHING GOOD ABOUT YOU IS A GIFT FROM GOD – SO DON'T BRAG (4:7)

In verse 7, Paul makes this very clear. He says, “For who made you different from anyone else? What did you have that you did not receive from God? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” The Bible is full of many examples of people who suffered from pride. One of the classic examples comes from the Old Testament with King Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon during the time of Daniel. The Bible says that Nebuchadnezzar became full of himself and so proud of the fact that he was a greatest king of the world at that time. He even claimed to be greater than God. And you know what happened? The Bible says God struck him down. The Bible says, “Let him that stands take heed lest he fall. Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” And the book of Daniel tells us that for a period of time, the king was turned into a wild animal who lived and wandered around outside until finally he repented of his pride, and God restored his sanity.

And so Paul is saying here that you have no room to brag because everything that you have received comes from God. And I want you to think about this. Who you are physically, who you are spiritually, who you are intellectually, who you are socially, everything good about you comes from God. You can't brag about it.

We have some examples of pride in the New Testament as well. You remember the story Jesus told about the two men who went to church; one of them was a Pharisee and one of them was a tax collector. The tax collector was a terrible sinner. Everybody shunned tax collectors. The Pharisee was proud and stood at the front of the church in his long, flowing robes that were to represent his outward righteousness.

He lifted up his head and he said in flowery, eloquent prayers, “God, I thank you that I'm not like other men. I thank you that I give a tithe of all that I have. I give alms to the poor. I fast and pray every week.” And then he even jerked his eyes over at that poor tax collector. And he said, “I thank you that I'm not like this sinner and other adulterers.” Jesus said that's the way a lot of people act when they go to church...look how holy I am, look how good I am. But the tax collector, who would not even come to the front of the church, bowed his head, beat his breast, and said, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And then Jesus asked a question. Which of those men do you think left justified? And you know the answer. It was not the righteous religious guy who stood up and bragged about how good he was. What is your attitude at church? Are you sort of secretly proud of the fact that you go? And if you go on Sunday nights, only really

holy people go to church on Sunday night. Amen? Only the cream of the crop! Do you say, "Look at me. I'm in church on Sunday night. I could be somewhere else, but here I am in church"? Or maybe you come with the attitude, "God, I'm a sinner. I know that in my flesh there dwells no good thing. I'm just here because I need a whole bunch of mercy." Is that your attitude? That's the attitude you ought to have. There's no room for pride.

I am so blessed by the attitude of John the Baptist in John 3:30. When a lot of people were asking him if he was the Messiah, he said no. "John, are you the Messiah who is to come? You're doing miracles. You're preaching. You're baptizing. Are you the Messiah?" In fact, he said that Jesus must increase and he must decrease. That's the Christian's attitude....not always trying to increase ourselves, but letting Jesus increase in us as our own personalities decrease.

II. YOU CANNOT FIT INTO THE WORLD'S MOLD AND LIVE FOR JESUS – DON'T BOW (4:8-13)

You make a choice, whether you're going to try to succeed according to the world's standard or if you are going to try to succeed according to God's standard. And this is where he uses this sanctified sarcasm. He makes four comparisons, and he makes them with his tongue firmly in his cheek.

1. Kings and slaves

In verse eight, he says you folks have become kings. On the other hand, verse 9 says the apostles are more like those on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in an arena like slaves. That's the first comparison. He says they're trying to live like kings, according to the world's standard.

Have you ever watched some of these old movies on television about the Roman Coliseum, where they pitted the lions against the Christians? Their gladiatorial contests were bigger than WrestleMania. But the matches were rigged. There is evidence that there were promoters who would rig the gladiatorial games. After the main event, if they had a few slaves or criminals that they needed to put to death, they put them at the end of the procession and turned the gladiators loose on them. Paul says that's what apostles are like compared to those in Corinth. "We're like slaves," he says. "And you're trying to be like kings."

2. Fools and wise

Verse 10 says we are fools, and you think you're so wise in Christ. Everybody is somebody's fool. Paul says, "I don't mind being a fool for Christ's sake. And the problem with you folks in Corinth is that you're swollen on your own worldly wisdom. You think you're so smart. Whereas apostles are just content to be fools for Christ's sake."

People in the world who aren't Christians think that the preaching of the cross is foolishness. And they think that what we do in church is foolishness. I remember

several years ago when I was on an airplane traveling back to church. I got my Bible out of my briefcase, and my seatmate began asking me questions. As we were talking, it was obvious he was not a Christian because he was very interested in what I was doing as a pastor. But he made it real clear to me that he wasn't really interested. And what I had in my Bible was a commitment card that we use in church. I made a commitment to tithe my income to the Lord. He asked what it meant to tithe. I said, "Well, it means that you give 10% of your income to the church to support the Lord's work through the church." He was incredulous. He said, "You mean to tell me that you and other members of your church give 10% of all the money they make to the church?" He could not believe it. It was beyond his ability to grasp it, that anybody would do something as foolish as that. Paul says, "You folks are trying to be wise, and we're content to be fools for Christ's sake."

3. Strong and weak

In verse 10 he says, "We are weak and you're strong." When you're full of your own self-sufficiency, you don't have a need for the Lord. Paul had an impressive background and could have bragged about how strong he was, how wise he was, how rich he was. But he now counted all those things worthless because of Christ.

4. Honor and dishonor

He says the apostles like him have been made a spectacle to the entire universe. Paul says, "We are on display and the world is watching us." Not only is the world watching us today but also angels are watching us. It was Shakespeare who said, "All the world is a stage," but the Bible really teaches that. Paul even uses the word "theater" to say we have been made a spectacle to all the world. The world is watching us right now. How are you performing?

I'll never forget playing golf with a pastor friend in Troy, Alabama, at Troy State University. The golf teams practice there. We were coming up one fairway, and the ladies golf team just happened to be practicing up on that green. The golf coach was giving them some tips on how to hit the ball out of the sand trap, so she waved us on. And if you know anything about golf, when you're out there in the fairway and you hit the ball, you're supposed to hit the ball on the green. I swung the club and hit the ball, and guess where it went? Right in the middle of where they were! They were ducking the ball as it landed in the sand trap. The coach said, "We'll just let this guy show us how to hit it out of the trap."

You talk about being a spectacle, being put on display! The first shot, the ball didn't get out of the trap! What a spectacle! The second shot went straight to the hole. And there's a lesson there because the world is watching us. They really are. We're on display. The world is watching how we act and how we react. When somebody cusses at you, the world stands back and says, "Let's see how they're going to do on this." When you're faced with temptation, the world stands back and says, "I'm going to see how you react to this." Paul says we are a spectacle. You

cannot fit into the world's mold and live for Jesus. So here's the admonition. Don't bow to the world and become like it.

If you've never read the book *Through Gates of Splendor*, I'd encourage you to read it. It's about missionaries to Ecuador who made contact with the Auca Indians. They approached the area in a small single engine airplane and dropped some gifts to the tribes. And finally, these missionaries got brave enough to land their airplane there on the, on the sandbar. We don't know exactly what happened, but all we know is that the missionaries failed to call in by radio to their wives. And their bodies were soon discovered. The Indians had brutally murdered them. Jim Elliott was one of the missionaries. He had written in his journal, "He is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep in order to gain that which we cannot lose."

When Jim had told a friend of his plans to move to Ecuador to be a missionary, his friend said, "You're a fool." A lot of people don't know that Jim Elliot was an outstanding college athlete, but he made the choice instead to go to Ecuador. And in his journal, Jim Elliot said this friend couldn't believe that he was wasting his life to go to Ecuador. His friend said to him, "Jim, you're just going to go down there and die." Jim smiled and said to his friend, "No, that won't happen. I've already died." He had died to his selfishness, to his own dreams, and was willing to do what God wanted. You cannot live in the world's mold and live for Jesus at the same time.

III. LIVING FOR JESUS MEANS YOU WILL SUFFER – DON'T BREAK (4:12)

This will pop the ego and the pride of any puffed-up people. Paul says in verse 12 that we work hard with our own hands. When we're cursed, we bless who were persecuted. We endure it. When we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. That's how the world considered the apostles.

And it is a given fact that if you live for Jesus, you will suffer. If any man suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God. And so here's the admonition: don't break. Don't break down just because you suffer as a Christian. The words "scum" and "refuse" mean the sewage, the garbage that was swept out into the streets in the ancient cities. The garbage filled trenches that took it down to the river to carry the smell away. Paul says, "That's who we are. That's how we're considered in the world." So you better get ready. You're going to suffer as a Christian.

Fox's Book of Martyrs has accounts of thousands and thousands of Christians who suffered for Christ. One example is a preacher by the name of Polycarp. Before he was executed, he was allowed to pray. But he prayed with such fervency, and the Roman guards overheard his prayers and they repented and became Christians themselves. The Roman proconsul said, "I will release you if you reproach Christ

and confess that Caesar is Lord.” At 86 years old, Polycarp said, “Eighty and six years have I served him? And he never once wronged me. How then can I bless my king who has saved me?”

He was then tied to the stake but not nailed as he assured them that he would stand immovable. The flames began circling his body without touching him. The executioner was ordered to pierce him with a sword. When he did so, a great quantity of blood flowed out and the fire was extinguished! A request by his friends for a Christian burial was rejected, but they collected as much of his remains as possible and caused him to be decently buried.

Elisa, a lady of Smyrna, was a devout Christian. She had seven sons. The oldest was scourged and pressed to death with weights. Felix and Philip had their brains dashed out with clubs. Sylvania the fourth was murdered by being thrown from a precipice, and the three younger sons were beheaded. The mother was then beheaded with the same sword as the latter three. Men were seized as Christians and imprisoned. Their feet were pierced with nails. They were dragged through the streets, scourged, torn with iron hooks, scorched with lighted torches, and beheaded. I could read of the thousands and thousands and thousands of Christian martyrs through the years. How have you suffered for Christ? Can you imagine when we get into heaven, what are we going to say to these first century Christians? Are we going to say to them how tough it was in 1994? Will we say, “I got laughed at because I prayed at school before I ate my food. Somebody made fun of me because I carried my Bible to work with me.” Is that what we're going to say?

If you're truly sold out for Jesus Christ, there's no room for pride because Christians do suffer. Paul said when we are slandered, we answer kindly. What he's talking about is how we react to persecution.

CONCLUSION

I love to study about the life of Robert E. Lee, a wonderful gentleman and a committed Christian. There's a story about when he was going to Appomattox to sign the surrender papers for the Confederacy. As he was riding into the camp at Appomattox to surrender, there was a Union soldier who was lying there beside the road injured. He began to mock General Lee saying, “Union! Union! We whipped you! Union!” General Lee stopped his horse, got off, and took his canteen over to this wounded Union soldier. He gave him a drink of water, stepped back, saluted him, and got back on his horse.

How do you respond when people make fun of you and mock you and criticize you? Paul says, if you're full of pride, you'll react one way. But if you empty yourself of your own personality, your own pride, you won't respond like that. Have you ever tried to go up to a corpse and criticize it? I've never heard a corpse

sit up and say, “Same to you, but more of it!” You cannot hurt the feelings of a corpse. You know why? It's dead. That's what it means as Christians to be dead, so when you are persecuted, when you do suffer, you can respond with grace and love.

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