



Sermon Transcript October 17, 2021

An Appeal for U.N.I.T.Y. “Y” - Yielded Lives 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 17, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

1 This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. **2** Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. **3** But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. **4** For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. **5** Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

6 I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. **7** For who sees anything different in you? 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?

8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! **9** For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. **10** We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. **11** To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, **12** and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; **13** when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

14 I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. **15** For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. **16** I urge you, then, be imitators of me. **17** That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. **18** Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. **19** But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. **20** For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. **21** What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

Introduction

Perhaps you are familiar with the slogan, “there is no ‘I’ in TEAM.” It is a creative way of getting a point across. Teamwork involves thinking of others and not just yourself. There is a classic example of this in the sports world. In 1991, Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls won their first of six NBA championships. The Bulls coach, Phil Jackson, knew that if Michael Jordan wanted to win a championship he would need to learn how to trust his teammates. Whenever the game was on the line, Jordan had a habit of trying to do it all himself; he was that good. But as he would drive to the basket, the defense would collapse on him leaving his teammates wide open and making it difficult for him to score.

At a critical moment in the game, and with their first championship in sight, Phil Jackson called a timeout. He didn’t like what Jordan was doing. With the team huddled around him, he looked at his star player and asked, “Who’s open, MJ?” Jordan didn’t answer him, so Jackson looked directly into his eyes and asked again, “Who’s open?” “Paxson,” Jordan replied. “Okay, so get him the ball!” Paxson went on to hit the game winning shot and the Bulls won their first NBA Championship. Many analysts are convinced that what took place in the huddle at that moment is what enabled possibly the greatest basketball player of all time to win six championships. He had to learn to trust his TEAM. He had to learn that there is no “I” in TEAM.

But have you noticed that there is an “I” in unity? It is spelled u-n-I-t-y. What do we do with that? As Paul makes his appeal for unity in the church at Corinth, we have noticed that whenever self is exalted over others in the church, it leads to disunity. Just like teamwork involves thinking of others and not just yourself, so does unity in the church. Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2:4. *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also on the interests of others.”* So, what do we do with the “I” in unity? Well, obviously, we can’t spell the word without the letter “I.” But in order for unity to exist in the church, the letter “I” needs to embrace the letter “Y.” The letter “Y” stands for “Yielded Lives.” Just like Michael Jordan yielded to his coach and to the talents of his teammates, unity in the church requires us to learn to live yielded lives.

This morning we are in 1 Corinthians 4 and what is unique about this chapter is that it is very personal. In this chapter, Paul addresses the tension that exists between him and the church at Corinth. It you recall, the division in the church seemed to be centered around personalities. Some people liked this leader but not that leader. He described the disunity this way in 1 Corinthians 1:12. People in the church were

saying, “*I follow Paul,*” or “*I follow Apollos,*” or “*I follow Peter.*” And Gordon Fee says that what you discover in 1 Corinthians 4 is that the people were not just saying “I am *for* Apollos or I am for Peter.” Instead, “they were decidedly *anti*-Paul, in the sense that they were rejecting both his teaching and his authority.”¹ There was a strong “anti-Paul” sentiment within the church. “We don’t like Paul.” This ongoing tension between Paul and this church continues into 2 Corinthians. Here, Paul is in the difficult position of having to defend his authority as an apostle. He says, in his defense, in 2 Corinthians 12:11, “*You have made me act like a fool. You ought to be writing commendations for me.*” He is saying here that he feels foolish having to vouch for himself while he ought to be able to call on them to write him a good reference letter. He went on to say, “*I am not inferior to ‘super apostles,’ even though I am nothing at all. When I was with you, I certainly gave you proof that I am an apostle.*” So here in 1 Corinthians 4, Paul is trying to work out the tension that exists between him and this church. He is appealing to his authority without wanting to come across as an authoritarian. It is an awkward position for him to navigate.

This chapter exposes the tension that can exist between a congregation and their pastors. That tension can be there for many reasons. Craig Blomberg captures the tension this passages raises. He says that on one hand, many churches seem enslaved to powerful leaders who abuse their authority and on the other hand there are churches who fail to let their pastors lead . . . On one hand you have church leaders unwilling to submit to appropriate accountability and on the other hand, there are churches where there is rapid turnover with their pastors because of discouragements that come their way, indicating that their leadership has not really been accepted.²

I too feel a bit awkward talking about the authority of the pastor not wanting to come across as an authoritarian. But unlike Paul, I am coming off of a Sunday where you affirmed Mike and I and John prayed over us. I told John last week that the way he honored us was lifegiving and affirming, especially coming out of the challenges of the past 18 months. And yet, unity in the church can feel like a fragile thing. It requires me, as your pastor, to yield to the calling that God has placed on my life and to be faithful. But it also requires you, as a congregation to yield to the spiritual authority God has placed over us here as a church family. And so, the only way the letter “I” can remain in the word ‘unity’ is if we embrace the letter “Y” and live *yielded lives*.

As we look at Paul’s very personal response to the situation between him and the church at Corinth, I would like to point out three areas where we need to yield ourselves. We need to be yielded to God, to the cross and to following a way of life.

“Y” - Yielded to God

Paul begins by telling the church at Corinth how they ought to regard those in leadership over them within the church. He says in verse 1, *“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”* When you look at me, your pastor, this is how you ought to view me. I am a *servant of Christ* and a *steward of the mysteries of God*. That is my calling. I think Paul is providing a corrective here. He is saying, “don’t put me up on some pedestal and don’t rank me compared to other leaders like Apollos or Peter.” Besides, they had different gifts and different callings . . . Paul planted and Apollos watered. He said the same thing last week in chapter 3. *“What then is Apollos? What is Paul?”* Answer: We are both *servants*.

It is interesting, in chapter 4 he uses a different word for *servant* than he does in chapter 3. In 1 Corinthians 3:5, he uses the word for servant from which we get the word “deacon.” It is a word that reflects the servant nature of his task. I am taking the posture of a servant. I am here to serve. But in 1 Corinthians 4:1 he uses a word that describes someone who “administers the affairs of someone else.”³ We saw last week that the church is *God’s field . . . God’s building . . . God’s temple . . . You are Christ’s as Christ is God’s.* Paul is a servant administering what belongs to Christ. It is a sacred trust given to Paul, given to pastors and elders. It is a word that is paired well with the word *steward*. A *steward* is someone who is entrusted with managing someone’s household. It is a position of trust and it comes with accountability. And that is Paul’s point. He says in verse 2, *“Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.”* No matter what the Corinthians think about Paul, his major concern is whether or not he is being faithful to the charge God has given him. He is yielded to God.

The reason Paul brings this up is because this church was making all kinds of judgments about Paul and his ministry. In fact, he warns them in verse 6 that in their judgments to *not go beyond what is written*. In other words, their judgments about him were not about whether he was being faithful to his calling—guarding the good deposit of the gospel, the mysteries of God, entrusted to him—but their judgments were more along the lines of worldly standards: personality, looks, comparison to others . . . what they like and don’t like about the person.

Apparently, Paul wasn’t much to look at. The only physical description we have of Paul comes from the second century. Stephen Miller, writing for the magazine *Christian History*, paraphrases this picture we have of Paul: “He was a bald headed, bowlegged short man with a big nose and an unbroken eyebrow that lay across his forehead like a

dead caterpillar.”⁴ In fact, in 2 Corinthians 10:10 the common thought about Paul in the church was that he would throw his weight around in his bold and direct letters he would write, but they would add, *but in person, he is unimpressive*. “He has a face made for radio.” You also get the impression, compared to Apollos, we wasn’t that polished of a speaker. It is easy to do and we all tend to do it. There are things about me, after eighteen years of being your pastor, I am sure, that you like and don’t like. Like anyone else, I have my strengths and weaknesses—things I am good at and things I need to work on, areas to grow. I just had a conversation with the elders this week asking them to speak into those things in my life so that I can grow as a leader. And yet, these kinds of judgments are often rooted in expectations that Paul—or your pastor—can’t meet.

And so Paul says to them that if this is what your judgment of me is based on, it is of little concern to me. And he adds that even his own assessment of himself is of little consequence. He may assess himself and feel as though he has a clear conscience, but at the end of the day, that is not the standard by which he will be judged. Instead, he says, that it is God *who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart*. In other words, Paul is saying that as a *servant* who administers what belongs to someone else and as a *steward* called to manage what belongs to God, I am yielded to what God has called me to do. Sometimes, that can put a pastor at odds with the people because he needs to say the very thing that people—in the church—don’t want to hear and may not receive . . . but at the end of the day, my calling is to be faithful to God and I will give an account to God.

We have easy access to podcasts and videos that allow us to have a steady diet of the best preachers out there. I benefit from having ready access to some of the best thinkers. Creative minds have utilized technology in powerful ways. But the vast majority of pastors are just simple pastors. Many of them, myself included, feel inadequate to keep up with all the trends and to remain relevant in how we communicate. One thing that has been lost in this is that the authority over the lives of people in the church has shifted to our favorite preacher or the person we follow online—when the authority for the local church is the local leadership. And just like the pastor has to give an account for the *things now hidden in darkness* so will all of us give account for the things whispered and for the judgments made. To which we all say, “God have mercy.” As we make that cry, together we yield ourselves to God. That means as a pastor my calling is to be faithful. And as a congregation, your calling is to yield to the spiritual leaders who steward for you *the mysteries of God*. As we yield ourselves to God, the “I” in unity occupies its proper place. Paul says in verse 5, “*Then each one will receive his commendation from God.*” We live to hear those words from God, “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*”

Yielded to the Gospel

As Paul makes his way through this chapter, he comes to verse 8. This verse is dripping with sarcasm. Paul is mocking their view that they have somehow arrived, spiritually speaking. They have a high assessment of themselves. He says to them, sarcastically, *“Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!”* Theologians diagnose the Corinthians with having an “over-realized eschatology.” It is a view that espouses the idea that since the kingdom of God has arrived in Christ, there is the anticipation that we would live in a constant state of miracles and victory and ministry success. This mindset puts them at odds with Paul because he is constantly facing the opposite: hardship and suffering. It is this very “weakness” of Paul that calls into question whether or not he should be viewed as an apostle. If he were an apostle, we would expect a little more success to point to on the resume.

And so how does Paul respond to this? He reminds them that his way of life is yielded to the gospel. His way of life, is aligned with Jesus, the suffering Servant. This paragraph gives illustration to what we have been talking about when we were at letters “N” and “I” in this series on U.N.I.T.Y. “N” - Never leave the cross. We never graduate from the cross. “I” - Impart the mindset of Christ. The cross shapes how we live. Well what does a life look like that never crawls out from the shadow of the cross? What does a life look like that is shaped by the mindset of Christ? It means that like Jesus, the ultimate “servant” we go the way of the cross. It is moving away from power and moving towards weakness. Paul says that we are like those who have been captured in battle and we are paraded into the arena where we have been sentenced to die.

I am going to let Paul’s words speak for themselves. I had a hard time deciding what to include and what not to include in my limited time this morning and I decided I couldn’t overlook any of it. I want you to first hear the contrast between Paul’s mindset and their mindset. *“We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute”* Now listen to how closely Paul’s mindset mirror’s the mindset of Jesus. *“To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”* Gordon Fee says that “their ‘theology of glory’ must finally yield to that which alone is Christian, the theology of the cross.”⁵ Are you marked more by a “theology of glory” or a “theology of the cross?”

Gordon Fee says that when we read these words from Paul we may say “Amen” to what Paul is saying, but we are probably more on the side of the Corinthians than we are on the side of Paul. He says, “we are rich, well-filled, and all too often that blinds us to our desperate needs.”⁶ So we are attracted to success and power more than we are to the way of the cross.

Henri Nouwen wrote a book for Christian leaders called *In The Name of Jesus*. In the book, he uses the temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness to identify three temptations Christian leaders are prone to feel. The first temptation is the temptation for relevance. He describes the temptation for relevance this way. “It is the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things . . . accomplish things.”⁷ They are the standards we tend to use to evaluate ministry by. And yet, most pastors feel as though they are making very little impact. Often, with this comes little praise and much criticism which leads to discouragement and depression. Nouwen suggests that we shouldn’t run away from that, instead we should run with it. He said, “I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his own vulnerable self. That is the way Jesus came to reveal God’s love . . . God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has redeemed us in love.”⁸ And so we embrace our weaknesses, our hardships, our shortcomings, our inadequacies because in our weakness, he is strong. We yield our lives and our ministries to the way of the cross.

Yielded to a Way of Life

Finally, we recognize that our unity as a church is anchored in a shared desire to be more like Christ. We don’t just gather here because we have a shared belief. We have a desire to be more like Christ. And so Paul says what every pastor ought to say to the congregation he serves, “*I urge you, then, be imitators of me.*” He is calling them to yield themselves to the way of the cross. As a pastor, I find these words to be challenging, humbling, daunting . . . and yet it is my calling to *watch my life and doctrine closely—to set an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity*, all the while humbly acknowledging my own weakness in these things.

And so Paul says that he sent Timothy *to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church*. That phrase *my ways in Christ* is steeped in the Jewish tradition where the rabbi would impart to his disciples more than just what he believed, but how he lived: a way of life. They would follow the rabbi to watch how he lived out the law of God. There was a saying back then about “walking in the dust of the

rabbi.” The rabbi’s disciples—students, followers—would walk so close to the rabbi that the dust of his way of life would fall on them and they would imitate his way of life. That is what Paul is calling the church at Corinth to do. He is calling them to remember the way of life—the way of the cross—that he taught them when he was with them. He is calling them to yield their lives to this shared way of life.

We have a “way of life” here at WEFC that is built on the teachings of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew. Our way of life has five principles and five practices.

Kingdom Life: Love God and love others. Practice: Pray the Lord’s Prayer

Kingdom Now: Daily seek the filling of the Holy Spirit. Practice: Let God’s Word dwell richly in you.

Kingdom Now: Affirm God is at work. Practice: Good works, Good will, Good News

Kingdom Community: Devoted to a shared life together. Practice: Gather for worship and in community

Kingdom Come: Steward the gifts God has given us. Practice: We serve one another by using our gifts

We yield ourselves to this Way of Life. We seek to love God and love others . . . Seek the filling of the Holy Spirit . . . Live with the conviction that God is at work . . . Devoted to a shared life together . . . Serving one another by using our gifts. When we do this, the “I” of unity is yielded to the “Y” and God deepens our unity. Yielded to God. Yielded to the cross. Yielded to a way of life. We are called to live yielded lives together.

Conclusion

This brings us to the end of our series looking at Paul’s appeal for U.N.I.T.Y. And why is this important? It is our unity that gives proof that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. It is our unity that enables us to point people to Jesus. And yet, we all know how fragile that unity can be. So, let’s rehearse the five methods that help us maintain our unity.

“U” - Unceasing gratitude for one another. Don’t stop giving thanks for WEFC.

“N” - Never leave the cross. Living under the shadow of the cross keeps us humble.

“I” - Impart the mindset of Christ. Christ crucified is the upside down wisdom of God.

“T” - Together we serve, we build, we worship, we love—as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

“Y” - Yielded lives. We yield our lives to God, the cross and a way of life.

I appeal to you brothers and sisters of WEFC, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that you be united. Why? So the world will know that Jesus Christ is Lord.

¹Gordon Fee *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 169

²Craig Blomberg *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 97 Not an exact quote but an overview of what he said in applying this passage

³Fee, 173

⁴Stephen Miller “Bald, Blind and Single?” <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org> 1995

⁵Fee, 192

⁶Ibid. 198

⁷Henri Nouwen *In The Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989)17

⁸Ibid., 17

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What are you celebrating? What is a challenge you are facing?
2. What were some key takeaways you had from the sermon? If you had to boil the sermon down to one thought, what would it be?



Diving Into The Word

3. Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-7 - Yielded to God
Who does Paul report to and what does this mean for the way he relates to the Corinthians? How does this relate to how you relate to church leaders?

Pastors are not the only ones who should look for God’s approval over the approval of people. How are you prone to seek the approval of man over the approval of God?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-13 - Yielded to the Cross
How does Paul’s attitude differ from the Corinthians?
How does the “American Dream” conflict with yielding to the way of the cross?
5. Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-21 - Yielded to a Way of Life
What do you think Paul is saying, “be imitators of me?”
Who looks to you to show them how to live as a follower of Jesus?
What is your “way of life” that you seek to model?



Taking It Home

6. What is one thing you are taking from your study?
7. Spend some time praying for WEFC in light of what you talked about in your study.