

Life Group Questions

Nov 24th, 2024

Who Do You Imitate? – Pastor Ray Harms-Wiebe

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

Note from Pastor Jonathan

Hey Life Groups!

We're moving on to the Advent season. It's a perfect time to invite your non-Christian friends to come learn about the real reason for Christmas!

Bridge Group is taking a pause after this Tuesday (November 26). We'll resume in January. If you have anyone interested in being a Life Group Leader and would like some practice facilitating discussions, let me know!

LET'S OPEN UP (Pick Any You Like)

1. **What stood out to you from the sermon?**
2. **What makes the difference between constructive criticism and destructive criticism?**
3. **What role models did you have and why did you pick them?**
4. **What would you do if you saw a loved one going down a harmful path?**

LET'S DIG IN (Pick Any You Like)

5. **Why does Paul remind the Corinthians about his relationship with them?**
6. **How do you think Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate him?**
7. **What's the difference between talk and power?**

LET'S GROW (Pick Any You Like)

8. **Who are we imitating in the church and what about them do we imitate?**
9. **How can we have both talk and power?**
10. **How can we be role models for spiritually younger Christians?**

1 Corinthians 4:14–21

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?

LET'S OPEN UP

1. What stood out to you from the sermon?

Were there any questions that made you think or points that God used to convict you? Is there something from the sermon you'd like to share with others who didn't hear it or questions you have?

2. What makes the difference between constructive criticism and destructive criticism?

I'm sure someone has pointed out where you messed up. Sometimes those comments leave you feeling encouraged and enabled to do better. You gain a pep in your step and an excitement for the future. Other times you feel ashamed and defeated. You wish you could either move to another country to start a new life or find a cave to hide in for the next thousand years.

What made the difference between criticism that built you up or tore you down?

Paul begins this passage by telling the Corinthians that he's not calling them out to put them down. He's delivering this bad news like a loving dad who wants the best for his kids.

3. What role models did you have and why did you pick them?

Lots of kids grow up admiring public servants like police officers or firefighters because those brave men and women work hard to keep us safe even at the risk of their own lives. Some of us had posters of athletes like Steve Nash, Gordie Howe, Nancy Greene, or Lincoln Hawk because we aspired to be as good as them. Terry Fox's name and image are everywhere in Canada, from public buildings to monuments to stamps, because he overcame incredible trials to raise money for cancer research. Canadians hold him up as an example of not taking things lying down and going above and beyond for the greater good. Superheroes are a multi-billion-dollar industry because people want to be as strong, brave, or smart as those characters.

If you've been Christian for a while, you hopefully have some role models at Willingdon or previous churches. It could be a pastor who taught you how to appreciate God's Word or a facilities staff member who works hard to keep things clean and functioning. How about a children's Sunday school teacher who brought Jesus to life through their storytelling or a parent who demonstrated commitment to Jesus by prioritizing time with Him?

I'm always in awe of elderly volunteers who have every right to retire from serving due to physical decline but choose to faithfully and cheerfully serve others for as long as God lets them. If God allows me to live a long life, I hope to be like them someday!

Who are your role models?

Thankfully, God provided us with role models for us to follow. The Corinthians had Paul and Timothy. Who do we have?

4. What would you do if you saw a loved one going down a harmful path?

Pastor Ray asked what parents would do if they saw their kids going down a truly harmful path. Not all of us are parents, so let's expand that to if we see someone we love and care about. Imagine in your mind a relative, sibling, or friend.

How would you respond? If you're direct, you may lay down some tough truths and confront them. "What you're doing is wrong and here's my PowerPoint presentation to tell you why ..." If you're a bit less direct, you may try a gentler way to correct them. "Hey ... I see you've been doing such and such. It seems harmful to me, but I don't want to jump to conclusions. Could you help me understand why you do that?"

As people share, notice any themes or similarities. Are there any universal ways of doing things?

The Corinthians relied on earthly wisdom leading to sin and a perversion of God's message. It's led to plenty of damage in the church. Much of Corinthians is Paul confronting them because he loves them and wants to see them turn back to God.

LET'S DIG IN

5. Why does Paul remind the Corinthians about his relationship with them?

Not to shame but admonish. Paul called the Corinthians out on some tough truths. "You think you're so spiritual so you're picking super spiritual teams? That whole idea is the opposite of God's wisdom and unspiritual." "You think you think you've been building up the church? God's going to test what you've been doing." "You think the Christian life is about status and power? That's the opposite of what the apostles and I have been teaching and doing."

Back then, churches would read these letters when they met. Imagine if Pastor Ray stood up front and read Paul's Letter to the Willingdon Church and it came out like that. It would be crushing! So, Paul has to remind them that he's not writing this to knock them down.

Paul's purpose is to admonish them. Other Bible translations have "warn" (NIV, NLT) or "correct" (NET). Yes, it hurts hearing this stuff, but living like this is dangerous!

Father in Christ Jesus. Paul calls them his **beloved children**. He cares for them like a dad.

They have countless guides in Christ. The word guide is παιδαγωγός (paidagogos), meaning "one who has responsibility for someone who needs guidance, guardian, leader, guide" (BDAG). In Paul's time, a parent might have a certain slave (guide) watch over their son to make sure they're going to school and behaving right. They were often depicted as harsh and cruel.

The word countless is μυρίος (myrios) in Greek, where we get the word myriad. It means 10,000. It's clearly hyperbole, but Paul's saying they have plenty of people to guide them. Unlike cruel and mean guides, Paul loved them like a father. He preached the Gospel to them and they believed in Jesus (Acts 18). He's been there since the beginning so he has a special connection with them. And guides were only for children until they grew up, fathers stay fathers as long as they're alive.

As Pastor Ray notes in his sermon, Paul loves other churches he founded like they were his kids (Galatians 4:19; 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11-12).

6. How do you think Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate him?

Let's go imitate Paul. Time to put on first-century clothing and move to the Mediterranean! I wouldn't mind eating more lamb and olive oil. Winter's coming so I'd welcome the warm sun.

Okay, maybe that's not the stuff we're supposed to imitate. Pastor Ray shared a big list of ways the Corinthians could imitate Paul. Chances are you can't remember the whole list. Good news! I've included it here:

- Give up status-seeking and walk in humility
- Work for unity rather than divide
- Live the wisdom and power of God; that is, the way of the cross (dying to themselves)
- Resist the worldly-wise ways of the Corinthian heroes and instead rely on the power of God working through weakness, fear, and trembling
- Become fools before the world in order to be fools for God
- Respond to abuse with blessing, to slander with peace-making, to persecution with humble endurance
- See themselves as menial field-hands who are completely dependent on God to make things grow and flourish
- Construction workers who depend on God to serve as a foundation and make things stand for eternity
- Be servants who simply steward the mysteries of God

Jesus is the ultimate example of all of this. Later in his letter, Paul tells the Corinthians: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1). Don't imitate Paul because he's got it all down. Imitate Paul because Paul's imitating Jesus.

7. What's the difference between talk and power?

Talk. Some in the Corinthian church talked a big game. But it was all talk! Their lives weren't changed. Paul had to talk to the Corinthians like worldly people instead of people transformed by the Gospel of Jesus. Their minds still saw things through a worldly lens instead of a Godly lens. They thought a life following Jesus was about status and power. They were still spiritual babies.

They misunderstood and misappropriated the Gospel so they weren't transformed.

I've spent my whole life in the church so I've seen a lot. I've seen many who were good at teaching the Bible and doctrines and theology. I've seen people so eager to attend these studies. And I've seen way too many of these teachers and students not live it out.

I knew one family years ago. The mom was very involved in the church and the women's Bible study. She was part of the "in" crowd there. But her personal life was a mess. She had been married four times. She had two kids around my age from one husband and another kid who was ten years younger from another husband. Her daughter had gotten pregnant as a teen from one guy, later marrying and divorcing another guy. She had struggles with meth and alcohol. Her youngest was very involved in the church leading the youth. The daughter, son, and two grandkids lived with her.

Of course, I can't fault her for her past, but I was at their house often to work with her son on youth ministry, babysit her daughter's kids, or hang out with the family. The mom was *always* in her room just watching TV by herself. When I asked her daughter and son, they said that's usually what she does all day. She never prayed with her family or passed on what she was learning. She never attempted to model what it means to follow Jesus.

I remember how frustrated her kids were that many in the church held her in high esteem because she was so involved. But it was all empty talk. She needed the Gospel to transform her.

Sadly, this isn't unique. I've met all sorts of Christians who talked a good game but weren't transformed. The worst one I can think of was this one guy. To preserve his privacy, I won't use his full name, so I'll call him Jonathan H. Or maybe J Hsieh. I'm not sure which one to use.

Throughout seminary, he volunteered and interned with youth ministries. People loved him, from the students to the parents. They enjoyed his lessons and preaching. Kids wanted to join his Sunday afternoon Bible study. After seminary, he went to serve at a larger church. He was very successful at growing the youth ministry. Seriously, if other youth pastors were more like him, those churches would be thriving!

But he was all talk. He told people to rely on God, but he relied on himself. He told them God was gracious, but he got impatient and angry when ministry didn't go right. He told them it was all about God's glory, but his ego was inflated like a beachball about to explode. I know all these details because, if you haven't caught on, I'm writing about myself.

I've shared how God led me to hit rock bottom, so I'll share another story. A few years after I left that "successful" ministry, I had a conversation with two former youths who had eagerly served with me for four years. They shared about how harsh I was and how they were hurt by my focus on getting ministry done. Ouch. I thought I had successfully loved those students and that they all had fond memories of me. I remember one of them said they don't hold it against me. Instead of "Jonathan was such a great, loving youth pastor!" it was "Yeah ... I don't hold a grudge against him." Of course, not all the youth felt this way, but it still hurt knowing some of my closest ones felt that way. Now I have a much more sober opinion of my past ministry.

I **talked** a lot about God's love, but the **power** of God's love didn't transform me. I was all talk, no power.

I'm sharing these two examples as a warning to others (and myself) because it's so tempting to be all about the talk without the transformational power of the Gospel.

Power. You don't have to look far to see stories about Christian leaders with big pulpits preaching about Jesus. But then news breaks that they had a terrible personal life. They hid affairs, lived ridiculously lavish lifestyles, abused volunteers and staff, and more. Those lives lacked the power of God.

Thankfully, God provided Paul's life as a positive example. He was a devout Pharisee (Philippians 3:3-6), meaning he thought he could be perfect before God by following the law perfectly. He believed it so much that he persecuted and tried to kill people who believed Jesus freely forgave sins if people believed in Him (Acts 9:1-2). But God's power changed him (Acts 9).

Instead of believing he could win God's favor by following the law, he realized he could never meet God's standards (Romans 3:23). Only by believing that Jesus died on the cross for his sins could Paul be saved. (Ephesians 2:8-9). Paul could do nothing to earn his salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9). All of the works he did to earn

God's favor suddenly meant nothing (Philippians 3:7-8). Instead of persecuting Christians, he began facing persecution for trying to spread Christianity. The power of God transformed Paul and turned him around 180.

LET'S GROW

8. Who are we imitating in the church and what about them do we imitate?

Pastor Ray notes that it's hard to imitate people who aren't present. Paul was with the Corinthians for only about one and a half years (Acts 18:11). They didn't have video recordings or Zoom, so they would have to rely on their memory. That's why Paul sent Timothy, who had been in Corinth with Paul (Acts 18). Timothy had spent around 4 years traveling with and learning from Paul, so he had a good idea of the example Paul set. Thankfully, God has given people in our church to imitate.

Here are some types of people you may be imitating.

Learners and teachers.

- Positive Role Models: They are eager to build a firm foundation on Jesus and God's Word. They're always attentive during sermons, attending classes, engaging in Life Group discussions, taking WSBM classes, or Discovery. They're so excited about what they're learning that they're eager to share it with others. As we see them, we're inspired by how their lives are transformed and you want to experience that, too.
- Negative Role Models: We may be following the example of people who don't take learning and teaching seriously. "You know what? That gal's on Facebook during the sermon. It's making me wonder what's going on in my feed." "Many people don't seem to take learning about God seriously, so I probably don't need to, either. Besides, that's the pastor's job, right?" As we see them, we're inspired to be complacent and assume we know everything we need to know.

Serving.

- Positive Role Models: We have an army of volunteers that make Willingdon function. They're using the gifts and passions God's given them to serve the body. They're passionate about welcoming and ushering newcomers so they aren't lost, praying with the suffering so they're comforted, cleaning up café tables so the next batch of people can enjoy fellowship, teaching our children so they can have a Gospel foundation, and going on mission trips to spread the Gospel around the world. Our Life Group ministry is huge with over 100 groups and over 1,000 people. It can only exist because hundreds of volunteers see the need for discipleship so they lead, support, and host Life Groups. As we see them, we're inspired to serve God by serving others, even if it means sacrificing our time.
- Negative Role Models: This is the mentality of the teenager who lives at home. Some have been around long enough and should be capable of contributing to the church but instead, simply want to receive. As we see the people who don't serve, we're inspired to justify our idleness because we're not the only ones.

Connecting.

- Positive Role Models: You see people who reach out to lonely people or those who seem a little lost. They cheerfully wave and say hello to seemingly everyone. They're like the opposite of a clique because they're trying to connect with everyone. Because Jesus loves people of every tribe, tongue, and nation, they want to love everyone, too. As we see them, we're inspired to love everyone we meet.
- Negative Role Models: In university, I used to get a ride from a friend. After the service, she would immediately leave. She wasn't interested in having lunch, discussing the sermon, or hanging out with church people. I regret not asking her why. People can be like this at Willingdon. "It's such a big church. There's no way to connect with people. Might as well leave when I'm done. What difference does it make if people know me?" "I just come to Willingdon because I enjoy the worship service experience. Good music and good preaching. That's all I need." As we see them, we're inspired to keep to ourselves.

What role models are you imitating, either good or bad? If you realize you're imitating the wrong people, that's great! Now you know what you can change. Imitate the spiritually healthy people in your group or ask them for advice on who you can imitate.

9. How can we have both talk and power?

I have a few suggestions.

Right Talk (Solid Foundation). Just last week we talked about how the Corinthians acted like kings while Paul and the apostles sacrificed heavily for the sake of Jesus (1 Corinthians 4:8-13). Why? Because the things they believed were wrong. They relied on their wisdom instead of God's (1 Corinthians 4:6). And because their belief was wrong, their talk was wrong, too.

Let's make sure we are saying (and believing) the right things. Many groups are going through *What Is the Gospel?* to make sure they know the foundation of their faith. Study the Bible. We are introducing *Habits of Grace* for the spring semester which helps readers understand some key principles of Bible study.

Other great options include taking Discovery Classes (<https://willingdon.org/discovery>) that take you through important basics of Christianity. Willingdon School of the Bible and Ministry (<https://willingdon.org/wsbm>) provides courses that cover specific topics such as a biblical worldview or an overview of part of the Bible.

As we study the Bible, we'll see that God's power is demonstrated best in changed lives. Paul went from a legalistic Jesus-hater to Jesus' apostle of grace. Peter went from a Jesus-denying coward to boldly calling out powerful religious leaders. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul wants the Corinthians to depend on God's power to transform them, too.

Self Talk (Solid Application). Have you ever read or learned something and immediately thought of someone else? Maybe you read Jesus' teaching on hypocrisy and thought, "Oh man. She *needs* to hear this! She's *such* a hypocrite!" Or you listen to a podcast on love languages and think, "Why can't my friends/husband/the world love *me* like that?"

It's easy to see others' foibles and areas of growth. But if we focus on others, we can easily ignore our own problems (Matthew 7:4-5). We forget that we are also sinners saved by grace and quickly judge others, forgetting that we deserve God's judgment.

Because we're too busy applying these things to others, we forget to apply them to ourselves. Power only comes after we let God's Spirit work in us (1 Corinthians 2:12). We need to apply these things to ourselves first (1 Corinthians 4:6). As we do, He works to make us more like Jesus.

God's Power (Solid Source). God's power is ultimately from God. We're tempted to do and say things of our own power. We want to celebrate what we achieve. We get nervous because we face problems we can't solve. As we study God's Word and apply it to ourselves, we'll learn to depend on God for everything.

Paul's issue with the Corinthians was that they talked with pride, but God's power wasn't present. They weren't changed because they still lived like non-Christians. When people ask us to demonstrate God's power, we don't need to perform miracles. We can share how God has changed us. That's talk *and* power.

We recently had an Evangelism (aka telling people about Jesus) Seminar that I unfortunately couldn't attend. Thankfully, Pastor Mark (our junior high student pastor) gave us a summary. A key point is praying to God for opportunities and boldness. God is the one who gives openings to share the Gospel. He can also make sharing the Gospel less intimidating.

We have power when we depend on God.

10. How can we be role models for spiritually younger Christians?

It may sound daunting, but the goal isn't for people to become like us. The Christian life can be described as a race (e.g., 1 Corinthians 9:24; Galatians 5:7; Hebrews 12:1). We achieve the goal (i.e., being just like Jesus) in this life. But we eagerly head in that direction. The example we can set is that we are heading towards Jesus. Paul tells Timothy, "Hey, copy me because I'm copying Jesus." (1 Corinthians 11:1).

So, what can we do to be more like Jesus? Are there things to learn, spiritual disciplines to cultivate, or sins to confess? Do you need a mentor or peers to help you get on the right track?