

1 Corinthians 4 – “Faithful Servants”

In the previous chapter Paul had to contend with those of the church at Corinth who had an improper diet of the Word, which led to unhealthy debates and divisions within the church at Corinth.

Party lines were drawn and Paul comes along and simply says, *“Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. ²³ And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.”* (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

- They didn’t need to lean so heavily on others, and they certainly shouldn’t be using others to puff themselves up, and this is what was happening. They had all they needed in Christ.

So as we move along into chapter 4, Paul is looking to show what their lives are really to be all about.

1. Faithful Stewards – 4:1-5

4:1 - *Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*

First of all, Paul says, *if anyone wants to build one of us up, let him first consider our true role: **as servants of Christ.***

Now the word servant means minister (of which the KJV uses here). But Paul uses a different word for minister than he usually used. He would typically use the word *doulos* but here he uses the word *hyperetas*. This word meant ‘under-rower’. It spoke of the men who would be down in the galley rowing the big ships.

- I’m sure you’ve seen this scene depicted in some movies. The men in this position would often be kept in rhythm by someone beating the drum and giving orders.
- By Paul giving this description of themselves he would have changed the perception some would have had of these church leaders. Paul is in a sense saying, *we’re not holding any positions of prominence or power. We’re just chained up in the galley doing our job.*

Paul simply wanted to follow the Lord.

- Some today like to say, *well, I march to a different drumbeat.* That may sound neat and all, but there’s only one beat worth marching to, and that’s the one the Lord is giving to us as under-rowers.

- With Him at the helm we know we're going to arrive safe and sound. Whereas those that try and do things their way will often find themselves just rowing in circles and getting out of rhythm.

Paul would rather be seen as a lowly servant under the leadership of Jesus, than a person who was doing his own thing yet getting nowhere.

And stewards of the mysteries of God.

Not only was Paul a servant, he was a steward (*oikonomos*). A steward was the manager of a household. Joseph was a steward in Potiphar's house.

"The **steward**... was the master's deputy in regulating the concerns of the family, providing food for the household, seeing it served out at proper times and seasons, and in proper quantities. He received all the cash, expended what was necessary for the support of the family, and kept exact accounts, for which he was obliged at certain times to lay before the master." (Clarke)

- Stewards were themselves slaves, but were viewed by other slaves like a master.
- So as ministers, no matter how high or lofty an individual may seem, he is still a servant under Christ.

And Paul says that they were stewards ***of the mysteries of God***. Sounds cool doesn't it? In other words, Paul and others with him (like Apollos and Peter) were entrusted with the things of God. He was the master, and they were to handle the affairs of His house.

Now, the mysteries of God spoke of those truths that were once concealed, but now have been revealed. These guys were to be handling and distributing the truths of God.

- **Matthew 13:52**, *"Then He said to them, 'Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.'"*
- In God's word we have much treasure that we need to be sharing. And He has put that treasure within each of us for His glory.
- **2 Corinthians 4:5–7**, *"For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us."*

Paul is simply saying that he and others are simply carrying out the orders given to them by the Lord. Why build them up?

4:2 - *Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.*

As a steward, Paul knew that there was really only one thing required of him – faithfulness. A master needed to be able to depend completely on the one who was handling his estate. This is why I only hire people I know to be solid Christians when I'm looking for a new butler. But faithfulness was key.

- I think we can at times get so caught up in doing a job perfectly, or we may fear doing a job imperfectly to where it actually hinders us from doing it. God's not looking for people who are only able to do a job perfectly, He's just looking for people who are willing to serve Him and do it faithfully.
- Don't let things of this earth distract or discourage you in ministry
- Illustration: Man who didn't want to get up and go to church [he was the pastor].
- Be faithful to what God wants you to do and He will bless it.

So regarding the debate between who was the better minister between Paul, Apollos or Peter, the real issue was have they been faithful to do that which God has called them to do. We've already seen that one plants and another waters.

- Jesus spoke of this faithfulness in **Luke 12:42-43**, *"And the Lord said, 'Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?' ⁴³ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes."*

4:3-4 - *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.*

Paul didn't put too much stock into other people's opinions. There were in fact many people who were judging Paul, questioning his authority as an apostle, or suggesting his lack of integrity. Paul would also have many people who would come into a place after he would minister there and try to refute the things he would say. *Oh you can't really live by all that grace stuff he's talking about, you need to keep the law to be saved.* People were just stirring up trouble and talking down on Paul.

This sort of stuff was just a minor thing to Paul, he didn't get too stressed about it.

- Now I admit, I would like to be able to have this kind of attitude. I don't think too many of us enjoy having people judge us or come down on us. But we must be careful that we don't let those things weigh us down.
- And on the other side, we are certainly not to just dismiss everything that may be brought before us by other Christians. If we just say to everybody, *say what you want about me, it doesn't bother me, I have little regard for your opinion.* Then we just come across as arrogant and self-righteous. There are definitely times when people may be able to see things about us that we ourselves don't see. And we need to evaluate what is being said.

And sometimes we can be our own worst critic or judge. We can really come down hard on ourselves. But Paul says, ***I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself.*** Now this is amazing that Paul could say that. I confess, I am certainly not there yet.

- Now Paul would speak of his life in Philippians 3 and he stated, *concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.* As a Pharisee, Paul lived meticulously according to the law. To the point where he could stand up against the law and not be guilty.
- Yet even in all this he says ***I am not justified by this.*** Paul knew his righteousness didn't rest in what he was able to do.

How was Paul able to not get stressed out over people's opinions and judgments? Because he knew it was the Lord who judged him.

- Now this in itself would stress some people out. But for Paul it was all that mattered. A steward didn't have to worry about the evaluations from the rest of the servants in the house. He just had to worry about the assessment given by his master.
- Paul knew that in that day everything would come to light and be shown for what it really was. And in that Paul had confidence.

4:5 - *Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.*

There is a time coming when all things will be judged and judged accurately and perfectly. So don't try doing the job that first of all doesn't belong to you and then do it before it's time.

Judgment belongs to the Lord, and we must wait for His timing in that. Our judgment is flawed. We don't always understand the things that people do, or we certainly don't know their motive or heart behind it.

- If I see Pastor Randy

Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Barclay said, "man sees the deed, but God sees the intention". And we can never judge the intention, that's something that can be easily hidden.

- It's hard to know our own heart let alone someone else's. In other words, let the Lord do the judging. For only He can ***bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels*** [motives] ***of the hearts.***

Now one way we can be helping ourselves out in this process and preparing for this day is to be getting into the Word of God. It says in **Hebrews 4:12**, "*For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*"

- When Jesus comes again as described in **Revelation 19** it tells us His eyes were like a flame of fire, and out of His mouth goes a sharp sword. This is the judging power. All that was done for self will be cut away and burned up in the fire spoken of in 1 Corinthians 3:13.

Now remember, as Christians, we don't go through the judgment of God to see if we made it into heaven or not. We will stand before the *bema* [judgment] seat of God which speaks of rewards. Just as they would crown the athlete for being victorious in the games, so too we will be crowned for having run the race. We will be rewarded for that which we've done for Christ. In other words, our ***praise will come from God.*** We're not looking for praise from man here. That only robs our reward (Matthew 6). We want to do that which has eternal value, that which is rewarded in heaven. But before you get too excited with the crown and rewards, remember, we're just going to be throwing them down before the throne of God anyways. We'll realize we're not worthy of anything like that. We're there by the grace of God completely.

2. Humble Servants – 4:6-13

4:6 - Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond

what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.

Paul has been speaking figuratively to convey the roles that Apollos and he were operating in. They were farmers, under-rowers, stewards, though not in a true sense, but in a descriptive sense. It was describing their ministry. And Paul's point was for them to learn of their examples and not go beyond what the Word says. Paul wants their view to a Biblical view. And if you're going to judge someone, may it be done through the Biblical standard. We can become very judgmental when our standard is skewed.

And this Corinthian church was becoming puffed up with pride by choosing men to align with. In so doing they were using unbiblical practices and cutting down others.

4:7 - For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Paul asks some questions to try and get them back on track and have the right perspective.

Who makes you differ... Is it not Christ? Could you imagine if we were all the same? How boring and mundane life would be. But there's such variety that only speaks of God's creativity. The fact that He works through the likes of us speaks of His sense of humour.

What do you have that you did not receive... All has been given to you by Christ.

Why do you boast... When we understand that all has been given to us by Christ, why should we try to take credit for it ourselves? It's simply a source of pride.

4:8-9 - You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! ⁹ For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

Paul steps into some sanctified sarcasm here. He states how they already (in their own minds) have all they need. They've been living like kings. To which Paul says, *I wish this were true so we could also take part in that blessing.*

God has displayed us... Paul really presents now what the Christian life is like. He likens it to the Roman general who would come home after a great military campaign and would show off his trophies in a parade into the city. This was called the Triumph. But at the end of the parade were the captives who would be led into the arena to fight with the beasts and die.

- Is this not really what the Christian life is all about? Dying to self. Too many people want to live the life sitting atop the float waving to everyone in the parade. But the mention of being led at the back as one who's ready to die is just too much for some.

Yet this is God's purpose. He's put us here as a **spectacle**, which literally means theatre [Gk=*theatron*]. We are a theatre to the world and to angels. There may be suffering and difficulty, but that's where the glory comes into plain view. And the world is watching to see how Christians handle these things. And when they see people go through these difficulties with a faith in God and a supernatural preservation, it changes the hardest heart.

4:10 - *We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!*

In comparison of the way the believers were behaving in Corinth, Paul and his colleagues were seen as fools. They didn't come with a powerful persona of their own wisdom and ability. They came in humility and weakness as they relied on Christ. The Corinthian church failed to recognize that in Paul's weakness lied his strength. "Strength that knows itself to be strength is weakness; but weakness that knows itself to be weakness becomes strength." ¹

4:11-13 - *To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. ¹² And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; ¹³ being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.*

Paul didn't have it easy. Yet whatever he encountered he used it to be a blessing to others.

"What life does to us depends on what life finds in us. When Paul was reviled, he blessed—just as Jesus commanded (Matt. 5:44). When persecuted, he endured

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 584). Victor Books.

it by the grace of God and did not retaliate. When he was slandered, Paul tried to conciliate. In all things, he sought to respond in love.”²

3. Spiritual Parents – 4:14-21

4:14-16 - *I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. ¹⁵ For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. ¹⁶ Therefore I urge you, imitate me.*

Paul's heart as a father shines through. He's not trying to hurt the folks in this church. He's not trying to humiliate them. He wants to see them grow. And he needs to point out the destructive patterns that have surfaced there.

Paul had a special relationship there for he was the founding father of the church. So he tells them, ***imitate me***. This was not Paul being prideful, this was Paul being helpful.

- This would have been a difficult thing for the Corinthian Christians after just reading what Paul has been through. Perhaps they were thinking, *no way!*
- How many of us would feel comfortable telling someone to imitate you?
Would that be a good thing or a bad thing?

Paul could do that because the church was still acting like babies in Christ. But in imitating Paul, they were essentially imitating Christ.

4:17-19 - *For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. ¹⁸ Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power.*

As Paul shares word that Timothy would be sent to them to continue in person the things Paul is instructing, those in the church may have gotten a little critical or mockful saying that Paul was afraid to come to them. They were boasting in their own strength and chiding Paul's apparent weakness.

In expectation of their criticism, Paul confirms that he will come to them, as long as the Lord wills it.

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 584). Victor Books.

- And that is a very important way to live life. It's not to say you can't make plans, but it's to say we need to hold on to our plans lightly and allow the Lord to lead.
- **James 4:13–15**, *"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit';¹⁴ whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.'"*

4:20-21 - *For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power.²¹ What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?*

There were those in Corinth who were big talkers. But they could never back it up. So Paul shows that the kingdom (Christ's rule in the heart) is one of power. Jesus never said by their words you will know them, but by their fruit you will know them. Christianity is about following Christ, taking action, not talking the talk but walking the walk.