

Being a True Servant of Christ 1 Corinthians 4

Even though Paul founded the church in Corinth, there was some conflict between him and some of the people in the church. Some were resisting his instructions, so in chapter four Paul explains why they should listen to him. He explains how as a servant of Christ he had to answer to Jesus, how he and the other apostles had suffered for Christ, and how Paul had lived a life worthy of them imitating him.

Paul and the Corinthians are long since dead. None of us care that they had a disagreement, so what is the relevance of chapter four to us? In this chapter Paul defends himself by explaining how he faithfully lived out his calling as a servant. That description is relevant to us because we too have been called to be servants of Christ and we can learn from Paul's example.

Before we get to 1 Corinthians 4 however, I want to review some of the key lessons we have already learned about being a servant of God. We went through a series on being a servant in January, so I first want to remind you of the key things we learned in that series. In the first sermon I asked, "Did you come to Serve?" Jesus said he did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. If we are becoming like Christ then we will come on Sundays and other days to serve. That will require you to be willing to sacrifice, to help even when you feel uncomfortable doing so, and to let the needs of others dictate your decisions.

The second week Phillip Ward asked the questions: Do you think like a servant? Does your own glory get in the way of you looking out for the good of others? Are you willing to lay aside your position, power and privileges to serve others? Are you faithful to God's call to serve when it requires real sacrifice?

The third week I asked the question: Are you greater than Jesus? Jesus told his disciples that if he was willing to humbly serve them, they and we should be willing to humbly serve one another, because we are not greater than Jesus.

With those lessons in mind, turn to 1 Corinthians 4 in your Bible. 1 Corinthians is the seventh book in the New Testament after the four Gospels, Acts and Romans. We're going to look at some more qualities of being a servant of Christ. The first quality is in verses 1-5.

Let's read those verses where we learn you will answer to Christ for how you stewarded God's truth. Read verses 1-5.

Paul described himself as a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God. He is referring primarily to the steward's responsibility to apportion out the resources of the household. You are probably most familiar with this concept of stewardship from traveling on a plane that has stewards or stewardesses. One of their roles is to apportion out the food and drinks the airline provides to its customers. They make sure the food is distributed. They follow certain guidelines the owner of the airline has established as to what food goes to first class, what food goes to economy, how often food or drink is served, etc. The steward apportions out the owner's resources to those who have entered into a contract with the owner via buying an airplane ticket.

Paul was a steward of the mysteries of God. God had given him divine revelation which he was to distribute to the churches. With such an important responsibility, it was imperative that Paul faithfully transmit the mysteries of God. Paul refers to God's revelation as a mystery simply because it was new truth that had not been revealed in the Old Testament. Paul received

a lot of revelation from God which he accurately transmitted to the churches both orally but also in written form which became many of our New Testament letters.

Apparently some of the Corinthians were challenging some of Paul's teachings because he says in verse 3 that as far as he was concerned, it was a small thing or inconsequential thing that some of the Corinthians were judging him as inaccurately transmitting God's truth. He didn't care what they thought. He didn't even care what he thought, because the only one who could examine and fairly judge him was God himself. Only God could fully know whether Paul was faithfully proclaiming the whole truth that God had revealed to him. So, Paul says in verse 4 that the Lord is the one who examines him. Essentially Paul is saying to the Corinthians that they were incapable of judging Paul as a steward of God's mysteries because they weren't there when God gave them to Paul. Makes sense, right?

Paul tells them to stop passing judgment, but to wait until the second coming of the Lord when God will reveal all things hidden, including the motives of men's hearts, because then each person will receive their praise directly from God.

This is a great example of where you need to read a verse in context. Paul is not warning them to stop all judging. In Chapter 5 he will tell them that they should be judging the ungodly behavior of fellow believers. In Chapter 6 he will tell them they should be judging disputes among themselves rather than taking them before unbelieving judges in courtrooms. The judging we should stop doing is judging fellow believers as to how faithfully they are carrying out God's assignments for them, because we are incapable of making that kind of judgment. We can't know for sure what God has called anyone else to do, so we can't judge fellow Christians as to whether they are doing what God has told them to do. Now we can point out when they are doing something that God's word says none of us should be doing. We can do that, but we can't judge a fellow servant on how faithfully they are carrying out God's unique calling for them.

By implication this means it is not likely God is going to tell you what some other Christian should be doing. I'm not going to receive divine revelation for what ministries you should be doing, who you should marry, how you should give your money, what job you should pursue.

None of us has received divine revelation to communicate to God's people like Paul did. That is why he was an apostle and we are not. However, we all possess the word of God and therefore we are stewards of its truth. There are many who don't know that truth and will not know that truth unless we communicate it. Some of us who preach and teach, communicate God's truth in formal settings. But all of us when we have a conversation with someone about what the Bible teaches are stewards of God's truth.

In 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 Paul says that God has given us Christians the ministry of reconciliation and that we have become ambassadors of Christ representing him and his will to the world. God speaks through us to the world urging them to be reconciled to God. You are a steward of God's truth. You are an ambassador of Jesus. God expects you to faithfully communicate his truth to people. He expects you to faithfully represent Jesus to others.

The one big difference between us and Paul is that what we communicate can be judged or tested by others against the Bible to see whether we are faithfully communicating God's word. God will judge us for how faithfully we communicate his truth. That's partly how he will determine the rewards we receive at the Judgment Seat of Christ. But the good news is that you can receive mid-course corrections from your fellow believers and the Word of God so that you can correct any mistakes now. A quality of being a servant of Christ is that you will answer to Christ for how faithfully you transmitted God's truth.

A second quality of a servant of Christ is that you need to recognize that any good you possess comes from God. Let's read verses 6-8. Read.

Remember how last week I talked about how some of the Corinthians were claiming to be of Paul and some of Apollos and how they were using their associations with various leaders to feel better about themselves, and to pump up their own ego. We talked about how that is a fleshly or carnal way to feel significant or worthwhile. Paul says he applied these things figuratively to himself and Apollos. These things refers back to what Paul wrote from chapter 3 verse 5 onward; namely that Paul and Apollos were nothing but servants of God. God did all the work. Paul and Apollos' work would be judged by God like everyone else's work. Don't boast in Paul or Apollos, but boast that you belong to Christ. Paul applied all those lessons to himself and Apollos so the Corinthians would learn not to exceed what was written so that they would not become arrogant against each other.

What was written probably refers to OT teaching like Jeremiah 9:23-24 which I printed on your sermon outline and which reads like this: Read.

In verse 7 Paul asks the question. What do you have that you did not receive? In other words, anything in your life that is good and positive and praiseworthy came from God. So, why are you boasting as if you had not received it? Before you were born did you pay God for your intelligence or your good looks or your personality strengths or your unique abilities? Of course you didn't. So why are you boasting as if you had not received those things from God? The only thing you added to the mix was sin.

Verse 8 is pure sarcasm. It is quite likely that some of the Corinthians were arguing that they no longer needed Paul, that they had gone beyond him, that he was outdated. Paul says, "You are already filled with all knowledge and wisdom and everything you need. You have become rich in everything. You have become kings or rulers in God's kingdom without any help from me and my fellow apostles and missionaries. They had accomplished all these things by themselves, not! Paul says I wish you had become kings so that we lowly apostles might come reign with you.

Now, I know that no one here ever gets the big head, right? No one here would ever think about boasting about their own abilities or accomplishments. And no one here would ever think that they are just a little better than everyone else. However, if you ever should meet such a person would you remind them that everything useful and worthwhile in them was either placed there by God before they were born or was molded inside of them by the Holy Spirit? Would you just remind them of what Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing? Because they need to know that God is the source of all good within us. As a servant of Christ, you need to recognize that any good you possess came from God.

A third quality of servants of Christ is that they can face many difficulties. Serving Christ could make your life harder. Let's read verses 9-13. Read.

Paul continues the contrast between himself and his detractors. Paul and his fellow apostles have led a difficult life with many hardships while the Corinthians have enjoyed a relatively peaceful and prosperous life.

Paul invokes a picture of the Coliseum in verse 9. He says, "We apostles are like so many gladiators condemned to die in the Coliseum fighting, while everyone else watches the spectacle. The apostles suffered beatings, imprisonment and even death for their service to Christ. The apostles were fools for Christ, but the Corinthians were prudent. The apostles became weak. The Corinthians grew strong. The apostles were without honor in the world, but the Corinthians

remained distinguished among their peers. The apostles were hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless, reviled, persecuted, slandered and considered the dregs of the world.

We may not be apostles, but as servants of Christ we can expect hardship and difficulty because of our service to Christ. In 2 Timothy 3:12 Paul writes that all who desire to live godly in Jesus Christ will be persecuted.

Being a servant of Christ brings hardship, but it can also bring blessing. David Livingstone was a missionary to Africa, spending most of his life there, living among the natives and enduring the hardships of life in the field. Nevertheless in his hardship he found joy. Listen to what he writes, "Read p. 133 of Flower book." Servants of Christ can face many difficulties.

A fourth quality of servants of God is they display lives worth imitating.

In defending himself, Paul reminded the Corinthians that he was their spiritual father and he exhorted the Corinthians to imitate him. Let's read verses 14-17. Read.

Paul explained that he did not write the previous things about them in order to shame them but in order to warn them away from self-destructive ways of thinking, because they were his beloved children. They might have countless tutors or teachers in the faith but they only had one father. One person had led them to Christ and that was Paul.

Because Paul was their spiritual father, he implored them to imitate him and to help them do so he sent Timothy to remind them of his ways. Christianity is caught more than it is taught. How to live the Christian life is communicated more clearly through an example rather than through a lecture. This is true in the home, in the church, in the workplace. Wherever Christians gather, the power of example and imitation is one of the most effective ways to change people.

Here's some scientific research to back up what I just said. All you parents listen closely. Read Research on youth. The power of disciple making and mentoring is in the modeling and imitating of how to live life. Paul had lived among the Corinthians. He had not just taught them God's truth, he lived it out in front of them. That's why they should listen to him.

A final quality of servants of God is that they address ongoing conflicts. They don't let conflicts fester and grow. They work toward a resolution. That is what Paul is doing in this chapter. He's addressing a situation where some are in conflict with him. Let's see what he says in verses 18-21. Read.

Paul's plan, if the Lord willed was to return to Corinth and settle things with the faction that was opposed to him. He would examine those people who sounded so arrogant to see if they were just a bunch of words or whether they were demonstrating the power of God in their lives because the proof of kingdom effectiveness is not in the eloquence of words but in power of the Gospel to transform lives. If those people were living by the Spirit then their lives would show real fruit in other people's lives that had been changed for the good.

Paul concludes in verse 21 by asking the Corinthians if they want him to come with the rod of correction or with a spirit of gentleness. If they don't respond well to Timothy's visit, then Paul will have to come with the rod of correction. He would rather not do that, but he would if he must.

Most people will not have responsibility for a whole church and will not have to deal with conflict to the extent that Paul did, but most of us will have personal conflicts from time to time with someone. We often want to ignore the conflict and hope that it will go away on its own and fade into oblivion. That usually doesn't happen. If not dealt with, conflicts tend to fester and grow larger over time, polluting and damaging others. One unhealthy way of dealing with conflict is to gossip about it with someone else in an attempt to recruit sympathetic allies. When we do that we poison the mind of our confidant with negative and often incomplete information

about our antagonist. Servants of Christ should seek to resolve any personal conflicts they have. Those conflicts will hinder their ministry and rob them of greater fruitfulness.

As I have observed people over the past, one of the reasons people leave our church is because they get into a conflict with another believer and rather than resolve it, they just leave. They don't want to do the hard work of confronting and talking through an issue, so they bolt. That is a fleshly defense mechanism. I don't want to experience the uncomfortableness of resolving a conflict and so to protect myself from any further pain or discomfort, I flee. I don't have to trust God when I do that. In fact, I'm not trusting in God. I'm relying on my own wisdom to protect me. That's living according to the flesh. It's so easy to do. I know I'm guilty of avoiding conflict rather than working to resolve it. But resolving conflict is the right thing to do. It is what servants of Christ should do.

As I talked about last week, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us do all these things, to be a faithful steward of God's truth, to recognize that God is the source of all good in me, to endure through difficulties, to live a life worth imitating, and to resolve conflicts. It's not easy being a servant of Christ, but it is a far better path than the alternative of not being a servant of Christ. Let's pray.