

Servants in Ministry

PRINTED TEXT: 1 Corinthians 4:1-13.

DEVOTIONAL READING: Matthew 23:8-12.

TIME: A.D. 55 **PLACE:** Ephesus

GOLDEN TEXT: " *This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.*" (1 Corinthians 4:1).

1 Corinthians 4:1-13

This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. ³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. ⁷ For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! ⁹ For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! ¹¹ To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ¹² We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³ when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Examine a passage in which Paul addressed those who were judging him superficially.
2. Affirm that God's judgment is the only judgment we need to be concerned with.
3. Encourage other believers to be more concerned with God's evaluation of them and less concerned with what others might think about them.

INTRODUCTION

Do you know that you are being watched on a daily basis by non-believers as well as by fellow believers? In fact, you are continually being judged by these same non-believers on how you carry yourself in certain situations. This observation is not something that can be changed or affected by you—nor should you really want it to be. It's of benefit to you because it allows you to remain held responsible to the faith.

Good, bad, or otherwise, people will continue to observe what you say and do, where you go, what you read, how you dress, what your pastimes are, where and how you worship, and how you get along with others.

Likewise in the line of observation is Christ's church-which we the body of believers all represent. If the saints are not exemplifying Christ in their words and actions and lifestyle, and in their relationships with one another, this sends a very poor message to those who might want to get to know Christ better and eventually make Him the Lord of their lives.

Christian leaders especially need to be out in front showing the way by example, but they also must be modeling faithful servanthood-the practice of serving others according to what the master expects.

Psalm 133:1 says, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" Not only is unity a great blessing from God to His people, but it also opens the door for evangelism (see John 17:20-21). A lack of unity speaks volumes to the non-Christian world the church is trying to win to Christ.

Such an approach is contrary to what is usually heard in the corporate world, where power and assertiveness are greatly valued. We must remember that Christ's kingdom is not of this world (see John 18:36). It does not have the same goals, nor does it utilize the methods so frequently employed by the world at large. All believers need to aspire to be servants of Christ.

LESSON BACKGROUND

In last week's lesson we saw how Paul took his readers-The Corinthians-to task for allowing themselves to be divided over personalities. In today's text, Paul pursued this matter further as he compared the true judgment of God with the faulty judgments of men.

Faithful Stewards-1 Corinthians 4:1-2.

The word "minister"-as Paul uses it in this verse-translates as servant, or "any subordinate acting under another's direction" (Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, Revell). Paul was emphasizing the fact that he and other Christian workers were subordinates of Christ, who called them to serve. We should never forget that Christian leaders are to point others to Christ, not seek to make a name for themselves or divide the body of Christ in any way.

1. What is the meaning of the word translated "ministers" (1 Cor. 4:1)?

The word translated "stewards," chiefly relates to a person who manages another's estate or household. Stewards were common in the ancient world, and Christ used this concept to illustrate service in His kingdom (see Luke 12: 42; 16:1).

Whereas the word "ministers" (vs. 1) looked at the subordinate role of Christian leaders, "stewards" emphasized the responsibility given to those teaching or otherwise ministering to God's people. Though he was a very important servant in an ancient household, the steward was never to forget that he was still only a servant and ultimately answerable to his master.

2. What was the role of a steward in an ancient household (1 Cor. 4:1)?

The Greek word for mysteries referred to that which could not be comprehended apart from divine revelation. (See Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:9; Col. 1:27; 1 Tim. 3:16). Paul used the term "mysteries" to mean the spiritual truths of the gospel that had been revealed through Christ. As gospel preachers, Paul and

Apollos had been entrusted as stewards with what God had revealed to them (see Gal. 1:11-12). Factual judgment-1 Corinthians 4:3-5.

3. How is the word "mysteries" used in Paul's writings (1 Cor. 4:1)?

Factual judgment-1 Corinthians 4:3-5

Paul-as both a servant and a steward-was not particularly concerned about whether he passed the scrutiny of the Corinthians. As the Lord's servant, it was a "small thing" to be judged by another servant, since all will have to answer to the one Master.

The reference to "man's judgment (v. 3)" is likely an allusion to a human court. And since Paul had already stood before civil courts for preaching the gospel and had suffered their wrath, he was not terribly concerned about this because he knew that in the end, the judges who judged him would themselves be judged by God Almighty. He was saying that it would be better to suffer the wrath of mankind for preaching Christ than to answer to God for failing to do so (see Psa. 9:16). What a powerful statement! Can we say the same-that we would choose to suffer at the hand of man for the cause of Christ rather than to answer to God for not doing the same?

The statement, "I do not even judgement myself (1 Cor. 4:4)" means that Paul's conscience was clear regarding his actions. However, he didn't want to give the impression that he was either proud or presumptuous, so he added, "*but that does not make me innocent.*" His own ignorance of any guilt on his part did not thereby acquit (or clear) him of any wrongdoing before God. God would still judge him accordingly-minister, steward, or not.

4. What points was Paul trying to make when talking about judging in verses 3 through 5?

Fools for Christ-1 Corinthians 4:6-13.

Because Paul and Apollos were the primary preachers in the earliest days of the Corinthian Church, it was appropriate for Paul to use himself and Apollos as examples.

5. Why did Paul use himself and Apollos as examples (1 Cor. 4:6)?

The picture Paul used was probably that of a victorious Roman general being met by enthusiastic crowds. At the head of the procession were the conquerors, followed by the spoils of war-trophies, as it were, of a great triumph. The very last people in the procession, though, were prisoners who were condemned to death. These men would be taken to the arena, where they would be forced to fight the champions of Rome or to be devoured by wild beasts. This was the lot of the apostles too. According to tradition, all the apostles except John died martyrs' deaths. They were therefore "*We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings* (v. 9)."

6. What scene is pictured with the apostles being "last" and "appointed to death" (v. 9)?

They were without proper food, clothing, or housing-even as they labored to supply their own needs (v. 12). Reviled (insulted or berated), persecuted (harassed), and defamed (slandered or talked about)-these godly men were treated like the "*scum of the world*" and the "*garbage of the world*" (vs. 13). (See Question 9 for a definition of "garbage.")

7. What were some of the things the apostles and others had to suffer in the early days of the church (v. 11)?

Paul wanted the Corinthians to see how different their conceited view of themselves was from the circumstances of faithful Christian servants, who were reviled and persecuted.

8. *In contrast, how were the Corinthians depicted by Paul?*

The word "offscouring" depicted refuse or rubbish and was used in reference to criminals or those of lower class and who were sacrificed especially so because of their wrongly perceived lesser value as humans.

9. *What is the meaning of the word "garbage" (v. 13)?*

That the world still sees believers as "fools for Christ's sake" is very evident. We are ridiculed for our moral stands, our belief in prayer and the Bible, our time spent in worship, and our confidence in the Lord's return. From the standpoint of unbelievers, none of these things make any sense. For those who know that they will one day stand before the Lord, though, it makes all the sense in the world-and all the sense for eternity too!

10. *How are believers still seen as "fools for Christ" (v. 10)?*

CONCLUSION

The Corinthian Christians had the common problem of holding a high opinion of themselves while being highly critical of others, such as the Apostle Paul. Paul assured them that their superficial evaluation of him was inconsequential. He was more concerned with God's judgment. Paul encouraged his critics to remember that all they had came from God. He also reminded them that he and his fellow apostles suffered while the critics prospered. Who were they to judge? Many today should ask the same question.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Faithfulness is the true measure of a servant of Christ (1 Cor. 4:1-2).
2. The Lord, not man, is our Judge and the one we should strive to please (vss. 3-4).
3. We should not be quick to judge ourselves or others, for only the Lord and judge perfectly (v. 5).
4. Loyalty to Christ's servants must not distract us from loyalty to Christ (vss. 6-7).
5. Christ's loyal followers will always be branded as fools by the world (vss. 8-10).
6. Service for Christ never precludes suffering (vss. 11-13).

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER "Man's judgment is always faulty, but God's judgment is always true."

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, in the Name of Jesus Christ we praise You for being the most righteous Judge that there is. May we be reminded today to not quickly judge others because this responsibility is Yours all alone. Thank you for humbling us to realize this. May we be more concerned with what You know about us than what man thinks about us. Thank You for helping us to do all things to Your glory and never to ours-for we are Your ministers and stewards. In Your precious Name we pray-amen.