

“Judgment in the Kingdom”

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 41:1–14 **Background Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 4:1–21

1 Corinthians 4:1–6, 17–21 (NIV)

¹ *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.*

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¹⁷ *For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.*

¹⁸ *Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you.* ¹⁹ *But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have.* ²⁰ *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.* ²¹ *What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?*

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To explain the issue of pride and other problems in the Corinthian church.
- **Biblical Principle:** To understand that God is our ultimate judge.
- **Daily Application:** To nurture others humbly and lovingly toward greater Christlikeness.

INTRODUCTION

“You’re Not the Boss of Me”

No one likes to be bossed around. We like to get our own way. We like to get credit for good outcomes. And we especially like others to do what we tell them. For some people, “You’re not the boss of me” has become a catchphrase, expressing resistance to authority.

But a personal desire to be independent is paradoxical (self-contradictory) for Christians. As followers of Jesus, we are to submit to the Lord Jesus, who died and rose for us; to God the Father, who sent His Son for us; and to the Holy Spirit, who directs and empowers us. Christians do have a boss, the boss of bosses, the King of kings. We also have leaders in the church to whom we are to submit (Hebrews 13:17). At the same time, those leaders set an example of humility (1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17; compare John 13:12–17) that we emulate as we submit to one another in the church (see 1 Corinthians 16:15–16; Ephesians 5:21). We are to submit to the world’s governing authorities (Romans 13:5) even as we reject the world’s principles (2 Corinthians 10:3–4; Colossians 2:20–23).

An individual Christian may have a mistaken, distorted view of what it means to follow and submit to Jesus. We rely on the understanding and correction of others to help us overcome our mistakes and distortions. At the same time that the Lord is the ultimate judge of any human, He called us to help one another overcome our misunderstandings and failings—and identifying such issues involves judgment (Matt. 12:33; 1 Cor. 5; etc.). The lesson text brings this paradox into focus. Paul writes to a church with a host of problems.

LESSON CONTEXT

The apostle Paul planted the church in the city of Corinth while on his second missionary journey of A.D. 52–54 (Acts 18:1–8). Indeed, he spent the majority of that time with this one church (18:11). But after

Paul left town for Ephesus and locations farther east (18:18–23), problems in the Corinthian church became known to him.

The problems in Corinth had become many and serious. They included factionalism (the splitting of a group into cliques, following certain leaders) 1 Corinthians 1:10–17; 3:1–9), gross sexual immorality (5:1–13; 6:12–20), lawsuits between believers (6:1–11), misunderstandings about marriage and singleness (7:1–16, 25–40), divisions over foods (8:1–13; 10:14–33), selfish behavior in the worship assembly (11:2–22), improper understanding and exercise of spiritual gifts (12:1–31; 14:1–25), a focus on self-glory to the exclusion of love (13:1–13), and false views of resurrection (15:1–58).

Paul spoke directly, eloquently, and with authority on these issues, leaving no doubt regarding the way forward for each one. As he did, a common thread that ran through all the Corinthians' problems could be seen. The solution to that poisonous thread is the subject of the current lesson.

Faithful Servants: 1 Corinthians 4:1–6

The immediate foreword to the lesson text establishes how the message of the gospel runs counter to what people generally understand as wisdom (1 Corinthians 3:18–20). And since Christian leaders are to take no personal credit for their message or their success, there is no place for factionalism in the church (3:21–23). Thus, as 1 Corinthians 4 opens, Paul has come full circle regarding his opening salvo addressing such "I am of ..." divisions (see 1:10–17).

The apostle Paul knew that the character of a faithful steward of God is that his or her ministry is centered in Christ and that that person is committed to Him. And although apostles were no more than *servants* (ministers) of Christ, they were not to be undervalued. They had a great trust, and for that reason, had an honorable office. With that office of minister came great responsibility.

The phrase *those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed* challenges Paul's audience to recognize the sacredness this task. To be entrusted with something is to be a steward, which is how the underlying Greek word is translated in 1 Peter 4:10). A steward manages the possessions of another (compare Luke 12:42; 16:1–12). "Those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."

1. How did Paul describe his role as a minister of Christ? (1 Corinthians 4:1–2)

What Do You Think?

What new steps will you take to be a faithful steward of the gospel message?

Digging Deeper

How does 1 Peter 4:1–11 inform the actions and attitudes of such stewards of the gospel message?

It amounted to "very little" that the apostle found himself subject to the judicial examination of the Corinthians. Paul was committed to living only to please *the Lord*. Paul needed no one else's approval. He didn't even trust his self-evaluation!

Older translations of this verse include the phrase "I know nothing by myself" (KJV). In this sense, Paul was speaking of his *conscience* and was acknowledging that nothing was bothering his conscience regarding the issue of being judged.

But having a clear conscience didn't mean that Paul was therefore automatically without fault before God. And so he said, *that does not make me innocent*. After all, there are evil people whose consciences don't bother them at all when they do wrong. Such people "have given themselves over" to their evil actions (Ephesians 4:19) because they have a conscience "seared as with a hot iron" (1 Timothy 4:2). Paul was confident that the Lord knew his heart and actions better than Paul himself or the Corinthians did.

2. How did Paul feel about those who may have judged him? (1 Corinthians 4:3–4)

Paul of course knows that the Lord alone is the Judge. Therefore, the examination must await His time, that is when He comes. Then He will shed light on the hidden things, which Paul defines as "motives of the

heart”: and at “that time each will receive their praise from God.” That is, God who knows the mind and the hearts will apportion to each his due praise!

3. Why was Paul’s advice on judgment? (1 Corinthians 4:5)

Paul proceeded to tell the Corinthians to refrain from judging the motives not only of apostles such as Paul but also of other leaders such as *Apollos* (see Acts 18:24–19:1). Members of the church had taken sides as to who they followed, exalting their favorites as something like heroes (1 Cor. 1:10–17).

The Corinthians were measuring different men by their own personal preferences and prejudices. They were even comparing ministers with one another. The only true basis for evaluation is “what is written”—the Word of God.

The Bible clearly reveals what kind of life and service is required of God’s ministers. There is no need for us to devise new standards.

The Corinthians were acting as if their choices were better and that approval in this regard was important. In this they were being *puffed up* with pride *over against the other* (one against another).

The issue of pride was central to the other problems that the Corinthian church was experiencing. Such pride inevitably produces conflict, as each proud person tries to rise above all others. The conflict at Corinth may have seemed as if it were about the popularity of preachers, but in fact it was about the pride of church members. Ironically, when pride is behind an attempt to rise above others, the result is the opposite. In that case, “destruction” and “a fall” are unavoidable (Proverbs 16:18).

4. How did Paul address the issue of favorites in the Corinthian church? (1 Corinthians 4:6)

What Do You Think?

How can a church congregation oppose prideful attitudes through their love for one another (see Romans 12:9–21)?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to avoid a prideful attitude that will eventually lead to destruction (see Proverbs 16:18)?

Faithful Correction: 1 Corinthians 4:17–21

In the intervening verses of 1 Corinthians 4:7–16 (not in the lesson text), Paul addressed the Corinthians with sharp sarcasm and exaggerated language. He pointed out that they exalted themselves while disparaging Paul and the others who brought them the Christian message. While the Corinthians imagined themselves to be wise and strong, Paul was living in lowliness and suffering, reflecting the attitude of Christ. As Paul finished this section, he changed his tone, addressing his readers as a father speaks to his children (4:14–16). He wanted what was best for them. Like obedient children, they were to follow his example.

Paul wanted the church to follow those humble characteristics which were common to him, and the other apostles listed in verses 11 through 13. But his thinking goes further to include his doctrine and his teaching, as shown in the expression: “my way.” If they have any questions as to how to follow the apostle, Timothy was on his way, and would clarify any problems they had.

Timothy is referred to by name 25 times in the New Testament. His name is most familiar to us by means of the two letters Paul wrote to him, namely those we call 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy. Those letters reveal that the relationship between them was that of mentor and protégé. Paul speaks of Timothy’s faithfulness not just to commend him as reliable but to put him forward as an example of Christlikeness, like Paul himself.

5. Who did Paul send as a representative to the Corinthians? (1 Corinthians 4:16–17)

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to prepare to be a mentor to a spiritual “child” regarding his or her spiritual growth and formation?

Digging Deeper

How does Paul's relationship with Timothy (see 2 Timothy 3:10–4:8; etc.) help inform this mentoring relationship?

The word translated *arrogant* is also translated "puffed up," an issue of pride (compare 1 Corinthians 4:6, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4). Every Christian should be committed not to live with pride but to be filled with edification: the building up of one another's faith for a true life of witness to the reign of God (10:23; 14:3–5, 12, 17, 26).

In their puffed-up state, some of the Corinthians believed that Paul, whom they perceived as "timid" and "unimpressive" (2 Corinthians 10:1, 10), would not return. Thus they would have free reign to do as they pleased. The apostle Paul assures them that he is coming to see them. Yet even with the confidence that Paul had—both in his calling as an apostle and in the necessity of this plan—he deferred ultimately to *the Lord*. His plan would come to pass only if God allowed it, only if it was in accord with God's will (compare James 4:13–15).

Paul was also aware that in this situation he could end up being as arrogant as his opponents, but he avoided being so. So, the confrontation to come would not be a test of who had the most persuasive words, but of who had the legitimate *power* (vs. 19b-20 of today's lesson).

Therefore, Paul poses his final question to them. "Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?" It is all up to them. The rod introduces the note of discipline which is Paul's primary concern in the next section.

6. What did the Corinthians believe regarding Paul's return? (1 Corinthians 4:18-21)

What Do You Think?

How should believers decide whether a situation should be addressed through a corrective "rod" or with a "spirit of meekness?"

Digging Deeper

What steps can believers take to restore a relationship after a necessary but unpleasant confrontation?

Paul gave the Corinthian church opportunity to set their household in order. In the following chapters, he explains how the local church ought to be governed in the will of God. Unfortunately, the church did not immediately obey. Paul had to make a quick visit to Corinth and his experience during that visit was very painful (2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14; 13:1).

But that experience was not the end of the story. As time went on and as other influences came to bear, many in the church learned to love and forgive (2 Corinthians 2:5–11). As Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he reflected on the pain of their relationship but also on the joy he had that the Corinthian Christians were indeed still growing and maturing in their faith and expressing it with greater consistency. The love of Christ, even if expressed with a corrective "rod," bore fruit in greater humility and love.

CONCLUSION

A Difficult Calling

Paul's language toward the Corinthians is sharply and appropriately judgmental. This helps us understand why Paul wrote as he did, helping us understand what it means to live in God's kingdom.

God is our ultimate judge. But God calls us into a kingdom in which His subjects, answering only to Him, nevertheless humbly and lovingly nurture one another toward greater Christlikeness. This happens even as we acknowledge our own weaknesses and submit to those who help us to grow. It is a calling that is as difficult as it is rewarding.

PRAYER God, we come to You in repentance of the arrogance that we all have been guilty of at times. May we abandon our focus on our supposed entitlements and focus instead on the entitlements Jesus voluntarily gave up so that we might live with Him eternally. In His name we pray. Amen!

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER With God as our judge, the church lives in humble fellowship.