

1 Corinthians 4

Good evening and thank you for joining us. Would you please turn in your bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 4?

Last week as Jason walked us through chapter 3, we saw the Godly growth that every believer is to have.

Tonight we see Paul's tone change a bit, he becomes more stern as he rebukes the Christians at Corinth.

You know, nobody likes to be corrected. From the 5 yr. old who's told she didn't wash up properly, to the 50-year-old whose employer criticizes their lackluster performance, none of us likes it when we're told we did something wrong.

But as Christians, we should realize that correction by God through His word, His works and His workers are a necessary part of our spiritual growth. Our heavenly father disciplines us so we can share His holiness **Hebrews 12: 7 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8 But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. 9 Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. 11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.**

This is what Paul does as he uses his pen as a rod of correction to discipline the wayward Corinthians Christians for all the problems that had sprung forth in their fellowship.

The title of tonight's message is FAITHFULNESS

Let's pray.

1 Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Notice, Paul describes a Christian in two ways: "servants of Christ" and "stewards of the mysteries of God."

The Greek word translated "servant" means "under rower."

SHOW PIC When you think of an under rower you're perhaps picturing the scene from the movie, Ben Hur. Slaves were chained to oars below deck in the Roman galley. Two columns of men rowed to the Roman cadence. They kept pace with a drum and a whip. **CLOSE PIC**

Being an under rower, the slaves had no say in the speed the boat was traveling, the direction of the boat, or even how hard they had to row. Their only job was to follow orders...

Well, welcome to Christian ministry! Our job is to row to God's cadence. If you want to be involved in ministry for God at any level, the job title is "servant or under rower."

Tragically, somewhere along the line in our culture the word "minister" gained an exalted status, but the Lord never called anyone to be a star, or a celebrity - just servant.

The Assistant Pastor for years at the first Calvary Chapel was Pastor Romaine, and he'd tell young pastors, "Serve the Lord as if you're serving in only your underwear. If so, you won't seek the attention of people! You'll serve; then you'll get out of the spotlight."

As believers, we're not only "servants of Christ," but we are also "stewards of the mysteries of God." A steward was a household manager. This was a trusted slave in charge of his Master's house.

The steward was expected to manage the affairs of the household, not for his benefit, but rather for His Master's interests in mind. And likewise, God entrusts us with incredible spiritual resources. We're to handle them wisely, not foolishly.

Some time ago I was teaching out in CA. And a pastor came to me, asking me why I was so serious in the pulpit. Well, the Word is a sword, and I want to be careful when holding a sword.

And note the steward's lone priority...

2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. A steward never owned the property or resource he dealt with; he simply managed it for his master, and had to manage it faithfully.

Notice, there is no mention of a requirement for what we deem as success, rather the sole requirement is faithfulness.

The most "successful" minister in the Old Testament, based on numbers, was a prophet who caused people to get saved everywhere he went. Not only did the entire crew of the boat in which he traveled get saved, but the entire population of Nineveh—perhaps numbering two million—got saved as well

Jonah 3:5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.

If Jonah were alive today, books would be written about his success. Conferences would feature him. Videos would be made of him. Everyone would be clamoring over the accomplishments of Jonah!

But was Jonah faithful?

Now, on the other side of the coin, who would be considered the least successful prophet in the OT? His name was Jeremiah. He preached for forty years without seeing a single convert.

Today Jeremiah would be getting the invites to Jonah's seminars! Christians would look at Jeremiah and lack of converts and absence of a thriving church, and proly view him as a failure in ministry.

But who of these 2 was faithful, Jeremiah or Jonah?

When Jesus addressed the 7 churches in revelation, He only commended 2 of them. The 2 who had remained faithful to Jesus.

Faithfulness is only revealed with time, and lots of it. Sadly I've seen many start out faithful, super faithful, but they failed to finish well for a variety of reasons.

SHOW PIC Firework or a star

CLOSE PIC

That's what makes this church so special-amount of faithful servants we have.

3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court.[fn] In fact, I do not even judge myself. Rather than rake himself over the coals for past mistakes, Paul rested in God's grace. Instead of focusing on the inward Paul looks upward.

I know some Christians who over emphasize self-examination. They spend an enormous amount of time and energy searching their own heart for hidden sins.

But that's not how Paul dealt with his sin. He was focused on knowing Christ, and trusted the Lord to bring to light the flaws he needed to address.

You know, too much introspection causes depression. When a person spends all their time looking for sin, they won't have much time to look to Jesus. Our faith grows only when we take our eyes off ourselves and fix them on Jesus.

Now this doesn't mean that Paul didn't examine himself, he did...

4 For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.

As far as Paul knew he was serving God faithfully. But he wisely realized that his conscience might not be as sensitive as it should be. **Proverbs 14:12 There is a way that seems right to a man,**

But its end is the way of death.

We're all vulnerable to blind spots that our conscience doesn't pick up.

Paul realized that the only one that had the total picture of himself, the only one with true insight, and the only one with the authority to judge him was God.

It was about 100 years ago that Harry Ironside said "No servant of God is capable of appraising his own service. That which he might think to be excellent may be so much wasted time. That which he thinks wasted time may have just the message for the moment."

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. Remember in the here and now, none of us are

in position to see the whole picture. Only the Lord Jesus has all the facts...

A pastor friend of mine told the story how once a couple came to him for pre-marital counseling. When it was revealed, this young couple was living together, the pastor immediately suggested they separate until the wedding night.

Suddenly, the girl bolted from the room in tears... My friend learned that a few weeks earlier her apartment had been broken into, and she'd been raped. Her boyfriend was sleeping on the couch for her protection. My friend apologized for jumping to a conclusion before he knew the whole story.

How often we think we know, but we don't really know!

Let's read verse 5 one more time

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

The only judgment for Christians that really matters will be at the bema seat of Christ, where all of our works will be tried by fire.

Now to be clear, verse 5 doesn't mean that when the Lord comes back, all the dark stuff and sin we did will be brought to light. No, the blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed us so completely that God will "remember no more" our sins and iniquities **Psalm 103:12 As far as the east is from the west,**

So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Rather verse 5 is referring to the things we can't fully see today. **1 Corinthians 13:12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.**

When Jesus comes back, everything that now seems dark to us will be seen in the light of His unspeakable glory.

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 uses himself and Apollos as examples to get at the root cause of the divisions that had risen in the Corinthian church.

Apparently, Corinthians loyal to Apollos were talking smack about Paul. And those loyal to Paul, were putting down Apollos.

See it wasn't just that they had a favorite teacher, the Corinthians took it even further by attempting to make their group look good by making the other group look bad.

And when you boil it all down, pride was at the root of their destructive divisions. And the cure Paul prescribes for all this unbridled judging is here in verse 6, "learn... not to think beyond what is written..."

These are good guidelines for our judging too! If it's not in God's written Word - if it's just a question of style, or opinion, or taste, or tradition - then we need to reserve our judging! Just because we don't like something, doesn't necessarily make it wrong. Again, we're not talking about sinful things here-scripture is clear on it. but when it comes to preferences, where the word of God is silent, so we should be too!

Paul hopes his writing will help the Corinthian Christians learn to keep their thinking Biblical, and to not use standards beyond the Word of God to judge him, the other apostles or other believers.

Paul now asks 3 questions to humble those who were inappropriately judging...

7 For who makes you differ from another? If there is a difference between us, it's because of what God has done in us, so there is no room or reason for pride.

And what do you have that you did not receive? Everything we have has come from God, so there is no reason for pride.

Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? If what we have spiritually is a gift from God, why would we every try to glory in it as if it were our own accomplishment?

When we apply these questions to our own walk with Christ, it should cause us to live with a spirit of humble gratitude.

Now as we move to verse 8, did you know there's sarcasm in the Bible? We're about to see it...

8 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! Paul sarcastically says wow, you Corinthians seem to have it all and we apostles have nothing!"

Though Paul uses strong sarcasm, his purpose isn't to make fun of the Corinthian Christians. He wants to shake them out of their proud, self-willed thinking.

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. The word "spectacle" was well known to Roman citizens. The Emperor ruled the people by keeping their stomachs full and their minds entertained. "Bread and circuses" was the Caesar's formula. And the various forms of Roman entertainment were known as "spectacles."

SHOW PIC Amphitheaters were built to host athletic competitions. Chariot races were held in Rome's Circus Maximus - the

Talladega of the day. At times the Coliseum in Rome was flooded to stage mock naval battles. Gladiators fought to the death on its normally dusty floor. A favorite, bloody headliner in the Roman Coliseum was to toss Christian leaders to the hungry lions. It all fed Rome's thirst for "spectacle." **CLOSE PIC**

Paul is sternly reminding the Corinthians that while they're passing frivolous judgments on each other, and causing division- there are other believers in the church who have been made a "spectacle to the world" - who have paid a steep price to follow their Lord Jesus.

In verse 10 Paul again speaks sarcastically. He contrasts the persecuted apostles with the prideful Corinthians.

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! Paul obviously says this tongue-in-cheek, how did the mighty Corinthians become so wise, so strong, so honorable in their own estimation - while the apostles who sacrificed their very lives for Jesus' sake - appear as fools?

Could it be the Corinthians were judging success by worldly criteria?

Here's the tough question for every Christian in America today- are we willing to be a "fool for Christ?" See the Corinthian Christians were proud. They cared about how other people viewed them. They wanted to appear wise, and strong, and honorable. In contrast, Paul could care less about his image. He was a "fool" for Jesus' sake!

11 To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. A steward's job is not to be rich and comfortable, but faithful - even if it requires suffering

Today, the church in America is saturated with the same attitude of the Corinthian Christians. They were concerned about the image of worldly success and power, and many of them looked down on Paul and the other apostles because they did not display that image of success and power.

Tragically today, there is no shortage of ministers who want to display the image of worldly success and power. And sadly, there's lots of Christians who will only value that in their minister.

12 And we labor, working with our own hands. (Pause here) The Corinthians, in their love of Greek wisdom, embraced the Greek idea that manual labor was fit only for slaves. It would be offensive that one of God's apostles would actually work with his own hands! But Paul reminds them of his willingness to do it (remember he was a tentmaker with Priscilla and Aquilla)

...12 Being reviled, we bless; Paul is saying that when they were slandered, the apostles would reach out in kindness to the one who spoke against them. This also was incomprehensible to the Greek way of wisdom; they thought a man was a wimp if he didn't fight back when slandered.

being persecuted, we endure; When the persecution hit, Paul didn't renounce Christ. The apostles refused to take the easy way out. Rather than step into the shadows, they continued to proclaim Christ at great personal cost.

13 being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.” Paul is literally saying, “we're treated like the scum of the earth.”

This goes to show how foolish human judgments can be. The people God crowns, the world condemns. Folks who are honored in heaven, are often mistreated on earth.

I don't know about you, but I get a little embarrassed reading Paul's description of his ministry with all the creature comforts I have at my fingertips.

My problem is that I want the anointing of God, I want the power of the HS, without the personal cost. I so often find myself in the trap of thinking that although I have a Savior who bled and died at great personal sacrifice, perhaps the ministry the Lord has given me won't come at such great cost. How my thinking needs to change!!

Before we move on, think of Paul's ministry resume for a moment. He was bounced from church to church, run out of many towns, accused of starting riots, rarely supported by the ministry, arrested and imprisoned several times. How many churches today would hire Paul as a pastor?

14 I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. Knowing full well his previous words were full of biting sarcasm, Paul doesn't want the Corinthian Christians to be ashamed. He wants them to know he's warning them of significant spiritual dangers, all rooted in pride.

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.

Paul had a unique place of authority and leadership among the Corinthian Christians, not only because he planted the church itself in Corinth, but also because of his apostolic authority.

And this made the Corinthians' doubts of Paul all the more painful to him. He felt personally betrayed.

One of the first lessons you learn when it comes to ministry is that love always flows downward. We don't love our parents, as much

as our parents love us. Our children won't love us, as much as we love our children. Love is like water. It always flows downward.

And the same is true spiritually. Just because we love and invest in someone else's life, doesn't mean they'll return the favor. The people we serve will probably never love us as much as we love them.

16 Therefore I urge you, imitate me. The first reaction of many of the Corinthian Christians would probably be in horror. "Imitate you, Paul? You're looked upon as a fool, as weak, as dishonored; you are hungry and thirsty and poorly clothed, homeless and beaten; you work hard to support yourself with manual labor. People look at you and see the scum of the earth! And you want us to imitate you?"

But Paul wasn't saying to imitate him because of all the difficulties, but despite them, and often because of them, the glory and power of Jesus Christ worked through him mightily!

17 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. It's important to remember, they didn't have printing back then, Paul couldn't just hand out Bibles. People had to learn the gospel by watching his life. So he's sending Timothy to help teach them and remind them of Paul's ways as he continues his missionary journeys.

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. 20 For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. When Paul arrives in Corinth he'll come with more than words, but power. It won't be braun and muscle, but rather power from the HS.

And Paul knows the power of the conviction of the HS will fall heavily upon them for their attitude and their conduct.

21 What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness? Paul tells the Corinthians his approach to them when he returns is ultimately up to them to choose. It'll depend on their attitude toward him.

When my kids were really little, and intent on misbehaving, all I had to do to get their attention was to grab the wooden spoon and set it on the table. When the spoon came out, words were no longer necessary. And here, Paul is grabbing the spoon. Do the Corinthians want him to come with a rod or in love?

It's tragic the Corinthians had to be corrected in such a manner, and it really stems from their lack of faithfulness doesn't it?