

## Commended!

Lesson for August 20, 2023

### Unit III: God's Eternal Reign

**Scriptural Background:** 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

**Printed Text:** 1 Corinthians 4:1-6, 17-21

**Key verse:** *“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.”* (1 Corinthians 4:5, NIV)

It is said that when the British and French were fighting in Canada in the 1750s, Admiral Phipps, commander of the British fleet, was told to anchor outside Quebec. He was given orders to wait for the British land forces to arrive, then support them when they attacked the city. Phipps' navy arrived early. As the admiral waited, he became annoyed by the statues of the saints that adorned the towers of a nearby cathedral, so he commanded his men to shoot at them with the ships' cannons. No one knows how many rounds were fired or how many statues were knocked out, but when the land forces arrived and the signal was given to attack, the admiral was of no help. He had used up all his ammunition shooting at the "saints."

*Daily Bread.*

So it is with Christians, the time we spend being judgmental takes the “fight” out of us that should be aimed at fighting the devil. This week's lesson helps us to understand this better.

### Key Terms

1. **Faithful** (verse 2) – A steadfast in affection or allegiance; reliable; trustworthy; believing.
2. **Heart (s)** (verse 5) – Mind; character; inner self; will; intention; center.
3. **Servant** (verse 2, NIV, NRSV) – "Minister" (KJV) is *hypēretēs*, frequently used as technical term for a governmental or other official, "one who functions as a helper, frequently in a subordinate capacity, helper, assistant.
4. **Shame** (verse 14) – A painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety, a condition of humiliating disgrace or disrepute.
5. **Steward** (verse 2, NRSV, KJV) – "One entrusted" (NIV) is *oikonomos*, "manager of a household or estate, (house) steward, manager." This isn't the homeowner, but one of his servants who is entrusted with the task of managing.

### Lesson Background

The Book of 1 Corinthians is brutally honest in exposing the same church problems and sin patterns that still require wise insight and counsel from pastoral hearts today. The Apostle Paul reminds believers of their call to Christian holiness and unity as he exalts God rather than man as the focus for our boasting. The crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ remain the key to living out the gospel in the challenging environment of a world awash in idolatry and pride and selfishness.

Notes collected and developed by Ethel Williams

The Corinthian believers had wrongly established themselves as judges over the effectiveness of the gifted preachers in their church. This had caused them to align with particular personalities in a manner that was divisive. Paul settles the issue decisively by pointing to the ultimate accountability of the Lord when He returns to evaluate the job done by His servants. Faithfulness will be the standard. And the scope of judgment will extend to “*the things hidden in the darkness*” and “*the motives of men’s hearts*.” There is the prospect of great reward and praise in that day; but let no one usurp the Lord’s prerogative of judging His own servants.

## Lesson in Depth

### I. For the Lord (1 Corinthians 4:1-6)

**Let a man so consider (account) us:** Paul asks that he, and the other apostles (**us**) be regarded by the Corinthians as **servants**. Paul had a real problem with the Corinthians; they tended to look down on him and not respect his apostolic authority. In carefully chosen words, Paul will show the Corinthians how to have a proper regard – not too exalted and not too low – of himself and the other apostles.

**So consider us, as servants of Christ:** There are several different words in the language of the New Testament to describe a servant. Here, Paul uses the word “*hyperetas*,” which describes a subordinate servant functioning as a free man. He does not use the more common New Testament word for a servant (*doulos*) which designated a common slave.

The word *hyperetas* literally means an “under-rower,” in the sense that someone is a rower on a big galley ship. So, though it is not the most lowly word for a servant, it certainly not a prestigious position. Under-rowers serve “Christ the master-pilot, helping forward the ship of the Church toward the haven of heaven.” (Trapp)

Morgan describes this “under-rower” as “one who acts under direction, and asks no questions, one who does the thing he is appointed to do without hesitation, and one who reports only to the One Who is over him.”

**And stewards:** In addition to a **servant**, Paul asks to be considered as a **steward**, who was the manager of a household.

In relation to the master of the house, the **steward** was a slave; but in relation to the other slaves the **steward** was a master.

“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)

**And stewards of the mysteries of God:** What did Paul and the other apostles “manage” in the household of God? Among other things, they were **stewards of the mysteries of God**. They “managed” (in the sense of preserving and protecting) and “dispensed” (in the sense of distributing) the truth of God.

Whenever Paul would hear criticism of his style or manner, he could simply ask, “Did I give you the truth?” As a good steward, that’s what he first cared about.

**It is required in servants that one be found faithful:** For stewards, the important thing was faithfulness. They had to be efficient managers of the master’s resources. A steward never owned the property or resource he dealt with; he simply managed it for his master and had to manage it faithfully.

**But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you:** There seems to be a group here, that is questioning Paul. Paul reminds them that he will not be judged of these people. He says he cannot even examine himself, but he reminds them that all are judged of God. I do not know why they were questioning Paul, perhaps, because some of them had known him before he became a Christian. We must remember though all the laws in the temple at this time were not even similar to the laws God had given Moses. Jesus even called them man’s laws. The priesthood had greatly deteriorated, and they were making up laws as they went along, so that they could have greater control of the people. The priesthood was being bought and sold instead of coming through the Levitical tribe.

Paul insists that their low estimation of him really mattered little; it is what God judges that is important (**he who judges me is the Lord**).

Can, or should, every Christian today have the same attitude? Should we have no or little regard for what other Christians think about us, and just say he who judges me is the Lord? We can only say this, in the full sense that Paul means it, if we are apostles. If the Corinthians claimed that Paul could not judge *them*, and that *they* would simply wait for God’s judgment, Paul would remind them that he is a father to them and has the right to correct their behavior.

**I do not even judge myself:** Even our estimation of ourselves is usually wrong. We are almost always too hard or too easy on ourselves. Paul recognizes this, and so will suspend judgment even upon himself. In the end, he who judges me is the Lord.

**For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this:** Paul also recognizes that he does not stand in a perfect state of justification or innocence just because his conscience was clear. Paul knew his righteousness came from Jesus, not from his own personal life – even though he had a godly walk.

**Therefore, judge nothing before the time:** It is as if Paul were saying, “You Corinthians act like judges at athletic events, qualified to give some the trophy and to send others away as losers. But Jesus is the only judge, and you are judging before the events are over.”

**Who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of men’s hearts:** When Jesus judges, it will be according to the motives of the heart, not only the outward action. This is another reason why human judgment is often wrong, and why Paul feels free to disregard the harsh judgment of the Corinthian Christians towards himself.

**Each one's praise will come from God:** Paul knew he had little praise from the Corinthian Christians, but that did not concern him. He knew there was a day coming when our praise will come from God, not from man.

**And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself:** “These things” is referring to the analogies that Paul used to depict those who minister for the Lord, including himself and Apollos: farmers (3:6-9), builders (3:10-15), and servant stewards (verses 1-5).

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 or the other apostles.

i. Many people today evaluate a pastor or a minister on unbiblical standards. They judge him on his humor, his entertainment value, his appearance, or his skill at marketing and sales. But this is to **think beyond what is written** in the sense Paul means it here.

In a broader sense, it is an important lesson: **not to think beyond what is written.** We must take our every cue from Scripture. It used to be that something was considered *Biblical* if it came from the Bible; today, people say things are “Biblical” if they can’t find a verse which specifically condemns it. This is to **think beyond what is written.**

**That none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other:** When the Corinthian Christians used unbiblical standards to judge the apostles, they could easily like one and hate another based on bad standards. But if they learned to **not think beyond what is written**, they wouldn’t proudly take sides behind certain apostles as 1 Corinthians 3:4 says they did.

## II. For the Love (1 Corinthians 4:17-21)

The understanding of this passage is incomplete without at least addressing verses 7 through 16.

Paul uses sarcasm to describe their attitude of pride and self-reliance instead of humility and dependence on God. Why would they need anything from God? They already have everything they want, right? They are rich. They have become kings. Paul satirically wishes they really were kings, so he could be a king, too, instead of living under persecution and in poverty. He begins to show the differences between his life as an apostle and their lives of status-seeking and wealth-gathering in Corinth. He is not complaining. He sees his life as an apostle as one put on display by God before the world as a man condemned to death (1 Corinthians 4:8–9).

Paul and the other apostles appear to the world as fools for Christ's sake. The Corinthians see themselves as wise. The apostles are weak and dishonorable in worldly terms. The Corinthians wish to be strong and respected in their culture. Paul and the other apostles live in poverty. They are hungry, homeless, and beat up by life. They must do manual labor to support themselves, in addition to the work of ministry. They are mistreated, insulted, persecuted, and slandered, though they follow Jesus' example of blessing those who harm them. In short, they are considered the scum of the earth in the world's eyes (1 Corinthians 4:10–13).

Paul insists that he does not write these things to make the Corinthians feel bad about living for status and wealth and comfort. Instead, he hopes his strong words will help them to change the course of their lives. Since he led them to Christ, he is like their spiritual father. Paul is not attempting to claim some title, or honor (Matthew 23:9), but only to explain his loving care for their spiritual growth. These are his beloved "children," spiritually speaking. He wants them to go beyond understanding his teaching; he wants them to imitate how he lives it out in his own life. He is sending Timothy to them to show them how to do that (1 Corinthians 4:14–16). This is where this week's lesson picks up.

**I have sent Timothy:** Timothy seemed to be Paul's chief "troubleshooter," often being sent to problem churches. Timothy had been an understudy of Paul. Timothy had been instructed (tutored), in the teachings of Paul about Christ and would perfectly represent him. Timothy in that sense was an extension of Paul. Notice, it was Paul's ways that Timothy would remind them of. Timothy had been faithful to Paul's teachings.

Paul could not be in all the churches at once that he had started. There was no one better to carry on the work that Paul had begun here than Timothy. Paul knew that he could trust Timothy to do it his way, and therefore he sent him.

**Some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you:** Some Corinthian Christians were so arrogant they thought Paul was afraid to visit them. When they thought Paul was afraid of them, it made them all the more proud in their hearts.

**Not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power:** Those among the Corinthian Christians who loved high-sounding words and their successful image had their own **word**, but Paul had the true power of the gospel. The final test of wisdom is power; the word of the cross not only has the power to mentally illumine, but also to morally save.

**Puffed up:** Essentially, Paul threatens to pop the bubble of these puffed-up gasbags.

**What do you want?** Paul leaves the ball in their court. Which Paul did they want to come – the Paul with the rod of correction (used by shepherds to smack disobedient sheep), or the Paul with the spirit of gentleness? There is no doubt Paul would prefer to come in gentleness, but he'll leave that decision up to the Corinthian Christians.

In this section of the letter, Paul faced some of the real challenges of ministry: how to confront sin without being too harsh or implying that you are above sin; how to get people to conform their lives to the gospel when they think too highly of themselves. This is tough work to do in a heart, and only a great work by the Spirit can accomplish it!

## Lesson Summary

Paul's words to the Christians in Corinth become sterner and more pointed as he comes to the end of the first section of his letter to them. Paul has pointed out that these believers are acting like spiritual children (1 Corinthians 3:1–2). One of the things Paul has been challenging the Corinthians about is how they have divided themselves based on which of their Christian leaders they are loyal to (1 Corinthians 1:10–13).

In doing so, they have set themselves against some of the other leaders, such as Paul, Apollos, and Peter. They have made themselves judges in this way. Paul begins 1 Corinthians 4 by agreeing that he and the other ministers are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In that role, it does matter that they are faithful, and the Lord will judge their works when the time comes. Paul, though, is not worried about the opinion of the Corinthians or anyone else. They are not his judges. He refuses even to judge himself. That is the Lord's work (1 Corinthians 4:1–5).

The Corinthians must not puff themselves up to put themselves in the position of judging one of their ministers against another. In doing so, Paul strongly affirms the principle that God's written Word—and not human tradition or opinion—is the ultimate arbiter of our faith. When personal opinion is elevated to the same status as God's Word, bickering and division will result. As Paul says, believers are far from perfect, themselves. The good that is in their lives has been received from God as a gift. Why would they boast about something that has been given to them as if they had it all along (1 Corinthians 4:6)?

In verses 17–21 Paul shows his concern. Paul's life and ministry methodology were consistent with his teaching. *"I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me."* What spiritual mentors have provided helpful examples for us? What are the limitations of such models?

Paul is confident in demanding that the Corinthians change. Paul was also planning to come to see them himself, to confront those who are arrogant with the genuine power of God as displayed in the Holy Spirit. In the ancient world, just as today, people often "talk tough" when they don't think they'll be confronted face-to-face. Paul asks a very question: would they prefer him to come with a rod of correction, or in a spirit of gentleness (1 Corinthians 4:17–21)?

Paul's appeal here is very wise, because there is no real spiritual growth until each of us personally, volitionally responds to the correction of the word of God. The Lord Jesus desires that each one of us be fully alive, vital, and truly effective for him. He wants to destroy our complacency. He wants to change our illusion of having arrived and of needing nothing more. He wants to replace our sense of self-sufficiency with his own sufficiency. The Lord Jesus desires white-hot, passionate intimacy with us, not just lukewarm congeniality, or being on pleasant speaking terms with him. He wants us to be passionately in love with him. The apostle Paul has appealed to us with great sensitivity, clarity, and gentleness. The Lord Jesus is equally gentle in his appeal in Revelation 3:20: *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me."* Jesus says, *"Let's have a meal together. I would love that sort of intimacy with you."*