

Holy by Grace. Bound for Glory. Now What?
Servants of Christ
 I Corinthians 4:1-8

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!

- I Corinthians 4:1-8, ESV

Introduction: Whose Opinion of You Matters?

On Friday, a pastor friend of mine who now pastors the church I used to pastor in South Carolina posted a funny meme on Facebook, which Beth then shared. It was a Forrest Gump meme that said, “Then Suddenly We Were All Televangelists.” I am really thankful for technology that allows us to connect and communicate in these strange and difficult times. I’ve enjoyed doing a couple of live Ask the Pastor sessions and a couple of live morning devotionals. I am especially happy that we can gather virtually this morning for Lord’s Day worship.

One side-effect of being online and streaming is that it makes me even more self-conscious and even more subject to being distracted by things that don’t matter. We live in a social media age, an age where we post things we think are funny or clever or worth sharing, and then we wait for validation to come in the form of likes, comments, shares, etc. Our self-worth can rise and fall so quickly in response to such superficial measures.

On the other side of social media – the receiving end – we can all be so quick to be judgmental, can’t we? We can make judgments based on all sorts of superficial and truly irrelevant criteria, sometimes tempted to dismiss someone because of their accent, their clothing style, or almost anything,

Well, superficial and baseless judgments are nothing new. They may have been accelerated and taken to new levels of absurdity in our social media age, but people have always judged one another on the most superficial grounds. Just read any Jane Austen novel, and you’ll see what I mean.

All of this superficial judging should cause us to ask ourselves two basic questions:

- I. **Whose opinion of me really matters, anyway?** And before you rush to the Sunday School answer of “Jesus” - which is obviously correct – think about the difference between the weight you should give to the opinion of your spouse and the weight you should give to some random commenter on Facebook

or Instagram.

2. **What the right basis for making sound judgements?** We all need to make judgments, or else life would be impossible. You can't really live by accepting everything everyone says with equal weight, nor would you want to. While the Bible condemns being judgmental toward others, it calls us to make right judgments according to a right standard.

So, whose opinion matters and why? And what is the right standard for making judgments? Paul will address these questions and others as we unpack this passage together.

A. Servants of Christ

Paul is still working to correct the divisions in the church. We can tell how important this issue was to Paul not only by the fact that he addressed it first, but also by how much time he spent on it. We began with this issue in chapter 1, verse 10, and here we are still dealing with it in chapter 4. We have seen why it is so important, because it is a manifestation of the root sin of pride, and it reveals how deeply distorted the Corinthians' view of the Gospel, themselves, the church, and Christian leaders really is.

Paul addresses first how the Corinthians are viewing him, Peter, and Apollos by reminding them how they should be viewing them: *"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."* (4:1)

The first identity Paul assigns to himself and his fellow ministers is *"servant of Christ."* The term Paul uses for "servants" here literally means *"under-rowers"* and has its origin in the rowing ships, where the under-rowers had the lowest jobs – in fact, this was one of the worst places to be a slave. Over time, the meaning of the term expanded to mean any servant who works under another, as an assistant, diligently serving the interests and desires of another.

Rather than being seen first as leaders of the church, Paul says they need to be seen first as assistants to Christ, as under-rowers of the Lord and Master. Clearly, this short term clarifies to whom they are accountable and what standard should be used to evaluate their ministry. They serve Christ, and they must do what He has called and commissioned them to do.

B. Stewards of the Mysteries

What Jesus had called and commissioned them to do is found in the next phrase Paul uses to identify these ministers: *"stewards of the mysteries of God."* A steward is a servant given a responsibility and held accountable for the exercise of that responsibility. If a master of a large estate had an assistant who served under him in the management of the estate – his under-rower – then it makes sense that he might leave this assistant in charge of the management of the estate if he goes away for an extended period of time.

So, in the Roman world, military commanders were usually men who owned vast estates. When they were on a military campaign, they might be gone from their estate for years, but they left a steward in charge, one who would manage the estate, exercising the authority of the Master in his absence and accountable to the Master upon the Master's return.

Paul says that he and Apollos and Peter were not stewards of an estate but stewards of the mysteries of God. This is not a reference to things which God has not revealed to anyone but certain apostles and prophets by some secret, hidden knowledge. Rather, it is a reference to things contained in shadows, types, promises, and prophecies in the Scriptures for centuries which were then fully and personally revealed in Jesus Christ. This is a term that comprehensively speaks of how the plans and purposes of God given through the 39 books we now call the Old Testament were fulfilled in Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming return.

I. Required to be faithful to the Master

What is the standard for judging a steward? One simple and powerful word: faithfulness. *“Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.”*

A steward is judged on whether or not he acted as the Master would have wanted him to act. If the Master gets back to his estate and finds that the steward has greatly expanded the estate and made a tremendous profit, but he has done so through a poisonous combination of extortion, bribery, blackmail, and thievery, so that everyone in the vicinity now hates and resents the name and estate of the Master, then the steward is going to be judged harshly. On the other hand, if the steward diligently did all that the Master required of him and acted consistently as he knew the Master would act, and yet the estate suffered loss through bad weather or a raiding band of robbers, then the steward will not be punished but commended for his hard work and diligent faithfulness.

Now, stewards do have responsibilities and do have to make decisions, sometimes very difficult decisions. But if they act conscientiously as those who serve their masters' interests, they will be commended.

2. Will give an account

Almost always, when the Bible speaks of being a steward, it also speaks of the reality of giving an account. Every steward faces Judgment Day, when he must give an account for his stewardship. This is almost essential to the definition of being a steward. It is a charge to take responsibility for a period of time, at the end of which is accounting day.

C. Judgment

Many people in the church want to hold their own Judgment Day, and call others to give an account to them, for whether or not they have met their expectations according to their standards. The joke in the Bible belt is that many family dinners on Sunday afternoon feature a healthy course of Roast Preacher:

- Did the preacher go too long?
- Did he tell too many stories?
- Did he not tell enough stories?
- Did he tell enough jokes? Is he always telling too many jokes?
- Does he talk about himself too much?
- Does he never talk about himself and so he's so impersonal that you never get a sense of who he really is?
- Are his sermons too theological, too weighty?

- Are his sermons devoid of theology and too light and fluffy?
- Is he BORING (Oh, the horror!)?

When we hear the word of God, we can either let it do its work of judgment and exposure on us, or we can seek to sit in judgment over it. Hebrews 4:12-13 tells us: *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”* - ESV

If we’re honest, the penetrating, searching nature of Scripture, especially as it is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, often makes us uncomfortable. We squirm under the gaze and deep examination, and so we want to shift the focus back somewhere else, and what better place than back on the preacher?

1. The limits of the human judgment

But there are profound limits to any human judgment, which is why Paul says, *“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.”* – vv. 3-4

Paul is not being arrogant or dismissive when he says, *“It is a small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.”* He is being realistic. Any human court, even the best human court, has its limits. Human judgment is limited in knowledge, in wisdom, and in power. No group of human beings, no matter how knowledgeable and wise, know everything. We can never know another person’s heart or their true motives. Studies have shown that we can almost never tell when someone is lying to us or when they’re being sincere. We are too easily taken in by personality and charisma.

Even if a human court has accurate knowledge and the wisdom to make a right decision, the range of options they have the ability to pursue is also severely limited. Human courts, no matter how powerful, can neither change the heart nor can they either justify or condemn the human soul. Courts have no power over the inner life or the eternal life of human beings. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus expressed the eternal limitations of human courts when He said, *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”*

2. The only right standards for human judgment

Paul says he does not even judge himself, but he does examine himself. That’s how he can say that he’s not aware of anything against himself. Later in 1 Corinthians, when Paul gives directions for the Lord’s Supper, he says, *“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”* Even later still, in 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul will write, *“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”*

So, we are all called to examine ourselves, but we know our judgment of ourselves is limited, as all human judgments are. We don’t know ourselves as well as we think. We don’t discern our own motives very well, and we can only do so much to change our own hearts. We cannot redeem or even sanctify ourselves. And so, we examine, but we do not pass final judgment, even on ourselves.

My favorite example of this is a very sad case from church history, William Cowper, who wrote the words to many hymns, including “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” and “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood.” Yet William Cowper became convinced that he was not regenerate, not elect, not saved. He was convinced there was no hope for him. He didn’t disbelieve the Gospel; he disbelieved his own assurance of salvation. I think he passed judgment on himself incorrectly, and I think when he passed from this life, he was shocked to be received graciously into the heavenly kingdom.

Just as we are called to examine ourselves, though our judgment is limited, so we are also called to examine ministers of the Gospel. We are not supposed to accept every Christian teacher, because many false teachers have always infested the church. And while we cannot judge anyone, we can use discernment to examine teachings and teachers to see if they are faithful. So, what is our standard for doing so?

Paul tells us in verse 6: *“I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.”* Paul is correcting their evaluation because they have gone beyond what is written. Stewards of the mysteries of God must be faithful to the mysteries of God, which are contained in the written word of God.

Not everyone who quotes the Bible or teaches from the Bible is actually being faithful to the Bible. Faithful stewardship of the mysteries of God involves Christ-centered, Gospel-rich Biblically faithful preaching and teaching. False teachers will take things out of context, put the central focus on human beings instead of on Christ, and will tend to exalt themselves and not Jesus.

But the Corinthians weren’t really dealing with false teachers, at least not in their divisive camp affiliations. Paul, Apollos, and Peter were all faithful teachers, faithful stewards of the mysteries of God and dedicated servants of Christ. The Corinthians were making judgments based on things that went beyond the word: on credentials, personality, eloquence, and miraculous power. None of these things qualifies a minister for special exaltation over anyone else.

3. The judgment to come

Paul is not too concerned about the Corinthians’ petty judgments largely because he is relentlessly focused on the judgment that is to come. He knows God will judge his faithfulness in service in the end, and he is content to wait for God’s sentence.

Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. – v. 5

God’s judgment will be deep and penetrating, perfect in knowledge and wisdom and eternal and unopposable in power. Verse 5 is talking about the judgment of believers, which is not a question of justification or condemnation, but of rewards for faithful stewardship. *“Then each one will receive his commendation from God.”* Paul is looking forward to the *“Well done, good and faithful servant!”* The only reward worth having is the smile on the Master’s face!

D. Boasting

Just as the Corinthians have been engaging in improper judging before the time, before the Day of the Lord, so they have also been engaging in improper boasting, being puffed up with pride:

that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!

We've already seen in our study that these factions were really about pride. They exalted Paul and Apollos and Cephas against each other because it allowed them to claim superiority. In reality, they're trying to find ground for boasting about the differences between them, but Paul asks, "For who sees anything different in you?"

1. What we have

In other words, all of them have heard the true Gospel and have received true salvation from the Lord. God sees no difference in the redemption each one of His children has received: All of those who trust in Jesus for salvation . . .

- are fully and freely forgiven of all of their sins
- are adopted as children of God forever
- are declared righteous in the sight of God because of the righteousness of God given to us as a gift, and
- are given the Holy Spirit, who lives in each believer.

We all have received the same blessings of salvation; there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

2. What we've been given

And what we all have is what have been given. None of us has earned any of it. Jesus paid for all of it with His precious blood on the cross. That's why Paul asks them, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"

One of the marks of false teachers is their tendency to boast about some level of human achievement or performance. One such group in the early church were the Judaizers, who boasted in their circumcision and their observance of certain aspects of the Mosaic law, like the dietary laws and feast days. Here's what Paul said in response to them in Galatians:

For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

– Galatians 6:13-15, ESV

Paul was determined to preach nothing but Christ and Him crucified, and he was determined to boast in nothing but the cross of Christ.

3. What we will be given

But part of the problem with the Corinthians is that they not only want to judge before the Day of the Lord, but they also want to act like they are reigning in power and authority before the Day of the Lord.

This is the real significance behind verse 8: *“Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!”*

Paul is not just being sarcastic; he is making a point. The Corinthians had a very high view of themselves. They had high self-esteem and accompanying high expectations. We could say they had kind of a spoiled, entitled attitude. Why wasn't the world celebrating them? Why weren't they more prominent and powerful?

They were acting like Judgment Day had already come in their judgments, and they were acting like the Glorious Kingdom of the New Heavens and the New Earth had already come in their boasting and seeking of glory.

In the kingdom of God, the cross precedes the crown. In this life, the call of Jesus is to take up our cross daily and follow Him. In the age to come, we will be crowned as overcomers and will sit at the table feasting in the Glorious Kingdom. We will reign with Christ. We will inherit all things with Him. But that is then and not now.

During this Coronavirus time, people have been posting some things on social media claiming that Christians have power to rebuke coronavirus in the name of Jesus, exercising authority over the coronavirus and telling it to be gone. Um. No. That's not what we've been given . . . yet. One day, when Jesus returns, all sickness and disease will be banished forever, but we are not the Christian equivalent of witch doctors or shamen. We don't exercise power over creation. We have not yet been glorified. That is yet to come.

We can pray, and ask God for healing, and God can heal, even in remarkable, unexplainable ways, but we do not rebuke diseases or claim authority in Jesus' name. That kind of authority to rule and reign will not be given to us until we are freed from all sin. For now, it remains in Jesus' hands and we remain His under-rowers.

Conclusion & Application

What does all of this mean for how we live out our faith in Jesus in such a time as this?

Well, we need to know the difference between making discerning evaluations based on the Word and passing judgment based on our own opinions. We need to be examining ourselves more and judging others less.

We need to realize and accept the limitations on our knowledge, wisdom, and power and **walk in more humility**.

We need to realize that all we have that's worth having has been given to us freely by the grace of God through the death & resurrection of Jesus Christ and **walk in more gratitude**.

We also need to realize the great glory that is coming with the return of Jesus, the commendation we will receive and the freedom and glorious inheritance that awaits us and **walk in more hope**.

In all of this, we need to seek and savor and depend on Jesus more and more, for He is the Only One who knows us, loves us, blessed us, and saves us, now and forever.