

## The Cross and Christian Ministry

Text: 1 Corinthians 4

As we've seen in the previous chapters a perplexing issue Paul had to tackle in the church at Corinth was factionalism. Several groups in the church had their favorite preacher. Some followed Paul, others Apollos and still others Cephas. This threatened to harm the church so Paul's urged them not to look at men but at Christ as the only head of the church and the cross of Christ as then only way to the Father. Besides what are church leaders anyway? They are servants much like farm workers who either plant, water or reap. They are builders who must build on the solid foundation of Christ and his word in such a way that what they build lasts into eternity.

Here in chapter 4 Paul builds on these images to show the church at Corinth and us what Christian ministry is all about. We'll look at it in three parts.

**1. A servant ministry.** Paul wrote, "let a man regard us in this manner; as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." The word Paul used which we translated as servant literally means *under-rower*. That term means little to most of us, so we simply use the word servant, but for the Corinthians of the first century, and to anyone with any sea experience at that time, under-rower was a term they understood very well. Corinth was a busy sea port and the boats commonly used in those days were galley ships powered by sail or rows of slaves manning long oars beneath the deck of the ship. Life for the under-rower was often brutal and short. Many died in the course of their occupation. One commentator (Baugh) noted five aspects of the under-rowers task which Paul and his fellow workers in ministry, and all ministers of the gospel must be able to identify with.

First, the galley slave rowed *to the captain's beat*. A rowing mate would stand in front of the rowers and beat in time on a drum. Each slave in the galley had to pull on their oar in time with the beat.

Second, the slaves had to *row together*. Oars on galley ships could be up to 30 feet long and needed more than one rower to operate. Each slave had to pull together with his rowing mate.

Third, they had to *trust the captain*. If the captain ordered the drummer to beat faster it might mean an enemy ship was approaching so it was either trust the captain and row faster or risk slaughter by pirates or enemies.

Fourth, the galley slave was *committed for life*. Comfort was non-existent. Leg chains made sure of that and if the ship went down in a storm or in battle the slaves went down with it.

Finally, the slave received *no honour*. Under rowers stayed beneath the deck unseen and unrewarded.

That's the impression Paul gave the Corinthians of his and his fellow workers ministry. They were under-rowers for their captain Jesus Christ rowing to his beat, working in harmony with each other and working for the glory of Christ rather than their own glory

The other word Paul used to describe his ministry is *steward*; someone who manages the day to day affairs of his master. For example Joseph was the chief steward of his master Potiphar. His responsibility was to be faithful to his master and take good care of his household. 1 Timothy 3:15 calls the church God's household. Ministers therefore are those who must

make sure that every member of the family has what he or she needs and that the household is well managed. According to the text they are to share the mysteries of God with the church. In other words the riches of God's grace in his word. In the verses that follow we notice that doing so (sharing the gospel) doesn't necessarily please every family member.

But Paul knew that a good steward needs to be more concerned about what his master thinks of him rather than every other member of the household. Paul wrote, "I think it a very small thing to be examined by you or any human counsel and I am conscious of nothing against myself. The one who examines me is the Lord.

Paul knew that he was constantly being judged and evaluated. Indeed, looking at Paul's letters to the Corinthians it's evident that he was criticised for being indecisive, greedy for money, not being eloquent enough and fearful.

In verse 3-6 Paul reveals three levels of judgment. *There is man's judgment.* Was Paul was upset when people criticised him? Quite likely since one of his letters to the Corinthian church (now extant) was a tearful letter. Even so Paul knew that compared that God's evaluation of him man's assessment was a very small thing according to verse 3.

Then there was his own *self-examination*. According to verse 4 Paul wasn't aware of anything remiss in his own ministry but that didn't necessarily mean he was innocent. Every man has his flaws and weaknesses. Paul wisely acknowledges the fact that the most important and incisive judgement is not his own but *the Lord's*.

So Paul wrote, "Do not go on passing judgment before the time but wait until the Lord comes who will bring to light the hidden things and disclose the motives of men's hearts and then each man's praise will come from God. The main reference here is to the final evaluation when every believer stands before the judgment seat of Christ when the true facts are revealed and faithful servants are rewarded.

That doesn't means that there is no place for honest criticism. For example we have regular office bearer evaluations at session meetings and at our annual church visitation. Members can raise concerns at home visits. There is a place for that and it can be very helpful providing it's done in the right way.

In verse 6 Paul encourages the Corinthians *not to exceed what is written*, judging by what we saw in chapters 1 and 3 they were evaluating their leaders according to their own personal preferences and prejudices comparing ministers with each other. The proper basis for evaluation is the Bible. If we use that to make our evaluations then our judgments are likely to be sound.

As well as right standards there must be right motive. Each group in the church at Corinth seemed to be tearing the other man down Their motives were not spiritual according to Paul but natural. It is our natural inclination to do that too. We are inclined to make ourselves or our personal friends or family members look better at another's expense. To be the one who succeeds where others fail. To be the steady one where others stumble and to win people's adulation and praise. But that's not what it is about at all. Christian leadership in the church means being a faithful under-rower and steward

It means remaining obedient to our captain the Lord Jesus Christ no matter what. We cooperate with our fellow under-rowers pulling in unison rather than against each other. We

row to the captains beat and trust the LORD to take us where he would have us go. We remain in service to the Lord for a lifetime with no anticipation of personal glory. All the glory that belongs to God alone. Furthermore we don't serve because we are held by iron chains of a slave we don't serve Christ against our will. Our will have been transformed by the Holy Spirit through regeneration. . We serve because, as Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians, "Christ's love compels us." (2 Corinthians 5:14). So the Christians ministry is a servant ministry.

**In the second place Christian ministry is a humble ministry.** In verse 9 Paul wrote, "For I think God has exhibited us last of all as men condemned to death. We have become a spectacle to the world both to angels and to men." Where Paul talks about being a spectacle and last in in of an exhibition or a procession, he was using something people in the Roman Empire were familiar with; the arena! Roman Emperors used to curry favour with the people throughout the empire by entertaining people in amphitheatres. The Colosseum in Rome was one of those. At the commencement of the games which often took place after the Romans were victorious on the battle field, their generals and commanding officers would march in first followed by their legions of soldiers with prisoners of war and slaves taking up the rear. They were the ones who would die at the hands of gladiators or be torn apart by the lions.

Paul saw himself as a last exhibit at the end of the procession; a slave for Christ and as nearly as much a spectacle for the masses as Christ was when he conducted his ministry, suffered, was put on trial and put to death on a cross. Christ died underneath a mocking inscription which said to the world "this is the king of the Jews". Paul ended up as a prisoner in Rome and according to church historians was beheaded by Nero around 66AD.

On the other hand the Corinthians had become proud of their ecclesiastical achievements. The factions admired their chosen leaders, craved the honour that comes from men and were impressed with worldly wisdom.

Paul had no time for that. "You are so wise? We are fools for Christ! You are strong? We are weak. You are honoured? We are without honour! What was Paul saying? He was once again identifying with the cross of Christ which is God's power to save therefore the weakness of God is far stronger than all human strength which cannot save.

But the Corinthians were so caught up in their one-upmanship that they were losing sight of the source of true saving power. Did they need a bit more help to understand what true Christian ministry was all about? Paul continued, "We work with our hands. When we are reviled we bless. When we are persecuted we endure. When we are slandered we try to conciliate. We have become the scum of the earth, the dregs of society." That was the reality for Paul that was how the leaders of the Jews regarded him when he tried to defend his ministry to the Gentiles in Jerusalem. It is recorded for us in Acts 22:22. They abused him saying, "Away with such a fellow. He shouldn't be allowed to live!" Paul and his companions were treated the same way as Jesus Christ was treated.

Thankfully now after 2000 years of the gospel's progress preachers may no longer be regarded as the off scouring of society. We can't really compare our lot to the likes of Paul or those who were on the front lines of missions into pagan territory. They have taken a disproportionate amount of the suffering so that those who follow may be relieved of it. However there are certain principles that apply to us all. We follow a crucified Messiah and

we present to the world that same message, the foolishness of Christ crucified. There is tremendous blessing in following such a saviour for those who accept him. We have forgiveness of sins and possess the word and spirit of God. But we are also called to take up our cross die to self-interest every day and follow Jesus.

And the less the community around us knows about Jesus and believe in him the more foolish we will seem and the greater our suffering is likely to be. People in our society are gradually abandoning our Judeo Christian heritage and adopting a form of neo paganism. That means there is more and more opposition to the values of the Bible. May the temptation to accommodate worldliness be restrained by our desire for Jesus words 'well done' at the last day.

And let us remember that as Paul said in verse 7 "what do you have that you did not receive?" Everything we have, the person I am and you are; our salvation is given to us by God. Therefore there is no room for smug self-satisfaction or boasting but only for a humble thankfulness to God.

So faithfulness in service and humility in mind are the two necessary characteristics of the Christian minister and consequently since Paul says follow my example of every believer.

**3.** In the third place Paul shows us that the **Christian ministry is to be like a father**. Paul has already compared the local church to a family. In verse 14 he calls the Corinthians his beloved children and in verse 15 he wrote that he became their father through the gospel. There was no church in Corinth before Paul came and so the believers there were the result of Paul's ministry. So he was like their father in that sense, *like a parent* who gives birth to and raises a family but then in a spiritual sense. He regards them as his dear children and admonishes and encourages them as a father might do in raising up his own children.

So what kind of 'father' was Paul to the Corinthians?

a) As spiritual Father Paul was *an example* to the Corinthians to follow. In verse 16 he exhorts them to imitate him. Not that he was exalting himself! Further on in 1 Cor. 11:1 he adds "even as I imitate Christ." Paul was a good example because he was a faithful follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. As they say "like father, like son." Children will at times follow their father's example and we often see familiar traits, good or bad habits in our children. And while example isn't everything it is an important part of discipling and in the church especially ministers must practice what they preach, we must trust in the Lord for our salvation, rely on the word of God rather than the wisdom of the world not using the world's methods but God's wisdom and according to the gifts God had given us

b) Paul was also a very good *teacher* as his letters testify and the fact that knowing we are prone to forget even important things he sent Timothy to reinforce what he had taught them previously.

c) Moreover he was faithful in the task of *discipline* citing the fact that the kingdom of God does not come with mere words but with power. The power Paul writes about here can also be translated as authority which Christ first vested in his disciples when he gave them the keys of the kingdom and which has passed to the elders of the church according to Matthew chapters 16 & 18. It includes the authority to preach the gospel and exercise church discipline and we'll see how Paul exercise discipline in the next chapter with respect to the incestuous

brother. Further on in his letter there were other difficult matters to deal with. Every faithful parent must at times discipline their children. As it says in Hebrews 12 a good father “disciplines those he loves.” It isn’t enough just to teach them and be an example to them. They also need correction if they disobey and rebel. Like Paul we’d all prefer to come with meekness and gentleness, but at times in the role of parenting there needs to be as Paul says ‘a rod’.

The rod in the life of the church is church discipline, one of the marks of a faithful church. It is necessary to bring back wayward sinners, keep the church pure and vindicate the name of God. It is not a pleasant or easy thing for fathers to do. Discipline not always an easy or nice thing for sessions to do but we must be faithful to our saviour and Lord and row to the beat of his drum, no matter what the critics may say or do.

In conclusion we see clearly in this chapter *the essence of a ministry which follows Christ*. IT is a humble ministry. We follow a crucified Messiah and we present to the world that same messag, the foolishness of Christ crucified. Yet there is tremendous blessing in following such a saviour for those who accept him. We have forgiveness of sins and possess the word and Spirit of God. And just as Jesus came to serve rather than be served Christian ministry is very much a servant ministry. Finally there is a paternal aspect to Christian ministry in being an example, teaching and discipling others to trust in and follow Christ.

Amen