

Humbled and Holy

Week 3 in Our Weekly Study of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

Orchard Park Wesleyan Church

Week of September 23, 2018

Introduction

We're going to study the bulk of 1 Corinthians 4 and all of chapter 5 this week. At the outset, I wasn't planning to cover chapter 4, but God kept drawing me back to it and impressing points on me so that I really couldn't move past it without diving into it. So, we're chapter 4 because God has important things for us here.

As in the rest of Corinthians, there is not really a clear delineation of concepts. Sometimes I feel like Paul moves from one issue to the next and back to the first while emphasizing the second and bringing in a fourth. (Did we miss a third?!) To organize what I think God has for us this week has been a challenge to say the least, but God is always faithful, and I trust that He is guarding over what He wants to say to each one of us.

Our devotional this week is divided into two sections. Section One will focus on chapter 4; we'll talk about serving God and our accountability to Him. Section Two will center on holiness, humility, and dealing with sin in the body of Christ as set forth in chapter 5.

Lord, we are eager students! Please teach us and give us insight and understanding; take us to new depths with You this week. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Section 1: Serving God...

Day 1: ...in Good Conscience

"My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide."

1 Corinthians 4:4

Let's start right away today by **reading 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.**

- How does Paul say the Corinthians should look at him and Apollos (2 things)?
- Verse 2 says that a person put in charge of something must be faithful. To whom?

This opening paragraph absolutely captivates me. In just a handful of verses, we witness a crescendo of spiritual insight that brings us into Paul's concluding argument against Corinthian pride in one leader over another. He tells this church the correct way to treat such leaders, and he identifies a crucial requirement for anyone who serves the Lord. He simultaneously renders the Corinthians' judgment of him inconsequential, defends himself and his motives, refutes even the importance or validity of his own self-assessment, emphasizes Christ's authority as Judge, and gives a small glimpse into future events. In all that Paul says here, he is able to finish a strong rebuke against the Corinthians' tendency to judge one leader over another, defend his authority, yet steer clear of any puffed-up view of himself.

Although the bulk of chapter 4 specifically references Paul's apostolic ministry, we are still correct in applying this to ourselves because he urges the Corinthians to imitate him as children imitate a father - and so should we. Therefore, let's study and take to heart all that we see in this first paragraph pertaining to Apollos, Cephas, and Paul as servants of God.

- **We are servants but with profound work.** Paul says to "look at Apollos and me as mere servants," but he immediately follows this up by explaining that as servants of Christ, he and Apollos have been "put in charge of explaining God's mysteries." I can't think of much of a higher responsibility than explaining the mysteries of God. So while remaining humble in our position as servants, we must recognize the magnitude of the work to which we've been assigned.
- **Our responsibility and accountability are to our Master.** I'm just going to mention this one briefly because we'll be studying it more over the next two days. Paul, in fact, just touches on it in one sentence when he says that "a manager must be faithful." A manager is not an owner, but rather, he or she is the designated person held accountable to the owner for that which belongs to the owner. Let's leave the rest until tomorrow.
- **Judgment of work, character, or talent belongs to Christ.** Paul tells the Corinthians not to judge anyone. We'll see in chapter 5 that believers are supposed to judge sin within the church, but that's really our limit. Christ is the One responsible for judging hearts and motives. When He comes, He will bring to light that which is hidden; He will "reveal our private motives." Any judgment passed before Christ gives it is premature, uninformed, and without the proper authority.

So where does this leave us? If Christ is the only rightful Judge, should we just live as we please? Are we not accountable to anyone until the Last Day? To the contrary! Scripture overflows with encouragements, admonishments, and commandments to follow God's laws. Our Judge will hold us accountable to these on the Last Day, yes, but everything we do until then counts. And since we don't know when that will be, we need always to be ready.

On Day 4 this week, we'll consider God's standards of holiness for his people; and we'll study more about our responsibility to hold each other accountable concerning sin in chapter 5. I could leave it here and say that we have more than sufficient scriptural evidence to support living daily life according to God's standards. However, something Paul says in these opening verses reinforces this point beautifully.

Please re-read our verse for the day. Paul could have omitted any defense of himself at all and still made his point that the Corinthians had no place to judge his worthiness as a servant of God. But he mentions his clear conscience and that Christ Himself will bring all hidden things to light at the Final Judgment.

- Fill in the blanks:

"We can say with _____ and a _____ that we have lived with a God-given holiness and sincerity in all our dealings. We have depended on God's grace, not on our own human wisdom. That is how we have _____ ourselves _____, and _____ toward you." 2 Corinthians 1:12 NLT

- How does 2 Timothy 1:3 say that Paul served his God?

- Read 1 John 2:28-29 and 2 Timothy 2:15.

Having a clear conscience before God is essential to the effective ministry of any of God's servants, and it cannot be separated from a clear conscience before people. Paul said his clear conscience did not prove his innocence before Christ; and this is true. Only our Judge knows the hidden motives in each of our hearts. But in order to even begin serving Him with a pure heart and to stand before Him unashamed when He comes, we need to live in intentional righteousness. Will we be perfect? Not on this side of glory—but when we desire to live holy and pure lives, we'll be free of anything that would make us shrink back from Christ when we see Him.

Hebrews 13:18 says that "...we are sure we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things." The desire to follow God's ways is key. When we desire something, do we ignore it or actionably pursue it? We pursue it! So when we submit our desires to righteousness instead of selfishness, our actions will follow suit. We'll have a clear conscience because our will and desires will be purposefully set on pursuing that which God loves.

Consider: How does serving God with a “clear conscience” differ from keeping score with yourself and striving? Do you see any potential pitfalls for yourself here? I know one for myself, and it’s a little ironic: living with a clear conscience could cause me to take a microscope to all the ways that I fail. But let’s not lose sight of God’s grace. Romans 8:1-2 tell us that there “is [now] no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.” We are no longer crushed by sin and guilt; we are free to live righteously by the power of Christ’s Spirit within us.

Pray: Thank God that you are already counted as righteous and are free from any condemnation. Ask Him to help you live with a clear conscience, giving you the desire to live in holiness and sincerity toward the world and especially other believers.

Day 2: ...in Faithfulness and Humility

“For what gives you the right to make such a judgment? What do you have that God hasn’t given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift?”

1 Corinthians 4:7 NLT

We read yesterday that God’s servants must be found faithful to Him. Paul doesn’t elaborate on that too much in the first few verses that we read yesterday in chapter 4, so we’re going to dig for it a little today. How are God’s servants—how are *we*—to be faithful to Him? We’ll take the next two days to explore this. Today, we’re looking at faithfulness in our work and how it relates to humility. Tomorrow, we’ll look at faithfulness through purity of heart and the trials we face.

Please read 1 Corinthians 4:6-7.

- According to 1 Corinthians 4:6, what was the general attitude of the Corinthian church—the one Paul hoped they would stop perpetuating as a result of his efforts in this letter so far?
- What is it that he’s telling them?

Now read Matthew 25:14-30.

- What did the master of the house do with his own property?

- Then what did he do?

- For how long?

- In verse 21, what did he call the two servants who actually used what he had entrusted to them to invest wisely and grow his wealth? (Fill in the blanks.)

“Well done, good and _____ . You have been
_____ over a little; I will set you over much.”

Many of us are probably pretty familiar with this Parable of the Talents. We know that God wants us to use what we have for His Kingdom. But as we consider these two passages in tandem with each other, we can see that our faithfulness is deeply tied to our humility. We can't begin to serve God faithfully with everything we have until we understand with all our hearts that everything we have belongs to Him anyway. We can say that we know this. But do we *know* it? Do we really believe it? Our talents, gifts, wisdom--everything we think we possess--is from the Father, and only when we understand this can we be faithful in how we serve Him.

When we recognize that we belong to Christ as His servants and that anything we have is on loan from Him in order to grow His kingdom, we are deeply humbled--and in this humility, our priorities are set straight. Jealousy and fighting with each other come to an end. We can't judge what another person's worth as more or less than our own because God is the only Source of anything contributing to worthiness.

Paul lays into the Corinthian church for thinking that they are in a position to pass judgment on God's servants (likely Paul against Apollos), deeming one “better or worse than another.” They were basing their assessments on human giftedness. Don't we do the same? But when we consider how someone else is serving God, we have to understand that we cannot judge them as faithful or not, talented or not, effective or not, because “what do [we] have that God hasn't given [us]?” They work with what God gave them just as we work with what He gave us. Our job is not to judge other workers but simply to serve God with what He's entrusted to us until His Son returns.

Let's quickly touch on two more truths in the text today:

1. What we have been given is of great value. The gifts God gives His people are not tiny trinkets! We'll talk much more about spiritual gifts and the like later in this series, but suffice it to say for now that I believe our faithfulness in servanthood will increase exponentially when we realize that these abilities and talents God entrusts to each of us are from His own storehouse of riches. Not one is less than another. We simply must recognize what we have, Who it really belongs to, and choose how to wisely invest the gifts with which we have been entrusted.

2. Our faithfulness is time-tested. Notice that the master went away "on a long trip" and returned "after a long time." In the preceding parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25, the Bridegroom was delayed. Christ knew (and knows) what this would feel like to His people, and He tells us to keep going. He tells us to be prepared and to be faithful servants while He is away. Our faithfulness in servanthood is proven over the long haul. Though time is short to the Eternal One, we feel it stretch on and must remain faithful even though we don't know how much longer this will take! But oh, if we do hang on. If we are faithful and continue to serve Him humbly, putting to good use all that He has given us. Then we will be found faithful when He returns, and then we will receive our much longed-for "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Consider your own thoughts and attitudes about serving God. Do you tend to pass judgment on the effectiveness of another? Do you disparage or undermine what God has given you? Are you jealous of what others have been given? Have you ever really considered what kind of servant you are and the privilege to which you've been called? We get to serve the Lord of all creation, use what He gives us, and share in the glory of His Kingdom. Our work is not for earthly gain but eternal, heavenly glory. Take a moment, and inventory the abilities, gifts, talents, experiences that God has handed you. Don't focus yet on what opportunities you feel you have open; just consider what you've been given.

Pray: Thank God for what He chose to give you out of His own riches. If you're serving Him now, thank Him for that privilege. If you're not sure where to start, ask! But also, keep asking if you don't have an answer yet. Your Father will answer you—and He wants to use you.

Day 3: ...in Purity of Heart

"Our dedication to Christ makes us look like fools, but you claim to be so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are so powerful! You are honored, but we are ridiculed."

1 Corinthians 4:10 NLT

So far, we have identified that servants of Christ serve Him in good conscience, and in faithfulness and humility. Today, we get to my favorite part: the heart. The heart always means so much to me because, well, it means so much to God. He wants our whole heart; He transforms hearts; He searches hearts. He knows the depths of every heart, and He will even expose what is hidden in them to judge them one day. We'll find that God is so concerned with the hearts of His servants that He often chooses to put them to the test in order to expose weakness and build strength.

Please read 1 Corinthians 4:8-13. Take note of Paul's tone here.

Why would we read this irony-soaked passage and consider purity of heart, you ask? Paul seems anything *but* gentle, pure of heart, or filled with love here! He is coarse, sarcastic, and pointedly critical. But, in this well-deserved rebuke to the Corinthian church, we also see multiple references to conditions that marked Paul's—and the other apostles'—service to Christ. We see, as in verse 10, such a devotion to Christ that the apostles continued to serve Him though they were deemed fools.

- List the negative circumstances or attitudes that the apostles faced:

If anyone had cause to boast of spiritual status or “chosenness,” the apostles did. The original twelve served by Christ’s side—and Peter as one of His closest friends; Paul was hand-picked, struck down, and chosen to follow Christ after the Savior’s earthly ministry ended. Talk about bragging rights! Even Apollos, though not an apostle, could have boasted in human talent; he was lauded by many for his wisdom and rhetorical prowess. But here, Paul draws attention to their suffering for the sake of serving Christ, even to the point of being “treated like the world’s garbage, like everybody’s trash” (and Paul likely so explicitly by the Corinthian church, according to scholars). The apostles’ willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ indicates a humility of spirit and purity of heart that God looks for and earnestly desires in His servants.

Please read Deuteronomy 8:2-7.

- What are the two reasons that God led the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years? (v. 2)

- What lay on the other end of their time in the wilderness?

Read 1 Peter 1:6-9.

- What is one reason we endure trials?
- What will we receive on the “day that Christ is revealed to the whole world?”

Sometimes, God lets us endure trials in order to test our hearts, strengthen our dependence on Him, and refine our faith. We could easily spend many days studying the types of trials and suffering we may face for the sake of Christ and how we can come through those victoriously. But for now, our purpose is simply to understand that God will sometimes allow His servants to undergo trials for the express purpose of testing and refining--and that this is essential for us as God's servants because it reveals what lies deep within our hearts. We neither fully love nor effectively serve someone we don't trust and believe.

Furthermore, both James and Peter tell us to “consider it joy” or “be glad” when we endure such trials. Why? Because the result of the trials, after we endure them and come through them still standing in Christ’s strength, is praise, glory, and reward. For the Israelites who came through the wilderness, the reward was the Promised Land. For us, according to what we’ve just read, our reward is praise, honor, and glory when Christ comes back to the whole world. Whether the blessing is realized here on earth or only on that Day when Christ returns isn’t the point. God always brings us to the other side of a trial, and He promises blessing for those who, in the steadfastness of their hearts, prove to be faithful servants.

Consider: What trials has God allowed in your life, and how has He grown your relationship with Him as a result?

Pray: If you can’t remember a time that you went through a trial resulting in growth toward God, ask Him to help you recall. Ask Him to speak to your heart about the growth He wanted to see in you. If you’re in the middle of a trial now, take heart. Your Father loves you, and “[He] will never leave you or forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6). He will bring you through, and you will see His pleasure in your growth someday. Ask Him to strengthen your faith as He refines your heart toward Him.

Section Two: Holiness and Humility

Day 4: Be Holy

“So let us celebrate the festival, not with the old bread of wickedness and evil, but with the new bread of sincerity and truth.”

1 Corinthians 5:8, NLT

We spent yesterday wrapping up our study of chapter 4 by discussing purity of heart in God's servants—us. We'll see that that laid a great foundation for what we'll study today and tomorrow in chapter 5. This chapter is short, but it's loaded with several studies. So, we'll read the whole thing today with a concentration on holiness and humility; and we'll read it again tomorrow with a different focus.

If you'll recall from our first week of study, Corinth was not exactly the moral cradle of society. All sorts of debauchery proliferated in this seaside city. As in our society today, much of it was culturally acceptable. Also not unlike our present culture, much had found its way into the church.

That sin is acceptable in the world is not surprising to us; but sin actually condoned within the church should be repulsive. It was to Paul, and it is to God.

Please read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

- What is the particular problem that Paul points out in this chapter?
- Who was responsible for it?

Before we delve into the church's response to this in tomorrow's devotional, let's consider who God says His people are and how we ought to conduct ourselves.

Please read 1 Peter 1:13-16 and 2:9-16.

There are several concepts within these portions of scripture, but we're going to concentrate on just a few.

- **We are God's own, chosen for holiness.** Last week, we talked about all that God calls us to when we are His. Holiness and righteousness were on that list (2 Tim. 1:9). And the same is confirmed here in 1 Peter. When we are chosen by God, we are given a royal and holy status. We're not told that we *can be holy*; we *are holy when we are God's. Christ's atoning work makes us so. But holiness needs to be lived out through honorable conduct in accordance with God's rules.*
- **Holiness won't be easy.** 1 Peter 1:14 tells us that we have lingering desires from our former way of life; 2:11 tells us that these same such desires "wage war against [our] very souls." 2:16 suggests that we could misuse our freedom in Christ as permission to keep sinning. What all of this says to me is that although we have holy status before God because of Jesus, holy living on earth is not easy. It goes against our very nature, causing war within us. Holiness is so contrary to our natural self that even after we break free from the bondage of sin, our old nature will attempt to run back into it and call it freedom. That's

just what we're beginning to see in the case of the Corinthian church.

- **Holiness points to Christ and glorifies God.** Why is God so adamant about holiness in His people? We looked at this quite a bit in our study of Leviticus last spring, but in a nutshell, it's because our identity is wrapped up in God. Because He is holy and we, as His children, reflect who He is, He wants us to be holy. Our holiness points right back to Him—and to a lost, dark, and dying world that He longs to see saved, there is nothing more important than cutting through that darkness with the light of Christ reflected in holiness.

Consider yourself and the church as a whole. How are you/we reflecting God's holiness—and the holiness that we are told we have in Christ—to the world around us? Have you/we resisted our old desires and come out from sin, or do you/we gratify desires that are contrary to God's Word? How ought the church to look when compared with the world around us? How can we live holy lives without judging those around us?

Pray: Thank God that He has transferred the holiness of Christ Jesus onto you. Thank Him for the privilege of reflecting Jesus to the lost. Ask Him to expose any areas of sin in your heart and to bring you under the power of His Spirit and the freedom of His Son so that your life may shine with the holiness to which He has called you.

Day 5: Pride in Sin

"Your boasting about this is terrible. Don't you realize that this sin is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough?"

1 Corinthians 5:6, NLT

We ended yesterday with a brief discussion about how holiness in our lives reflects who God is and glorifies Him. Today, we're going to examine what happens when we don't live that way.

Please review 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

- How serious was the sexual sin within this church (v. 1)?
- What was the church's reaction to it (vv. 2, 6)?

- What should have been their reaction to it (vv. 3, 11-12)?

Not only was sexual sin present in the church; it was celebrated! The Corinthian church actually dared handle an incestuous situation with pride and arrogance, and they thereby condoned it. We may be horrified to think of such flagrant boasting in sin within the church—and we should be. But I would challenge us to look very closely at our world's view of many lifestyle sins and how that view affects us personally and our churches corporately. Do we uphold our values according to God's unchanging standards as He explains them in scripture? Or have we become desensitized to some sin because it is so intrinsic to everyday life? Do we hold true to *God's* truth in love, or do we shrink back from it, afraid of what could be said about us and God if we hold to an unpopular or "antiquated" standard? Do we simply think some things are not a big deal because we're covered by grace? Please don't misunderstand me to intend that we be harsh and judgmental of the world—or even of each other within the church. Paul isn't saying that, and neither am I. What I am saying is that sin is always serious and especially so within the body of Christ.

Paul wasted no time skirting around the issue of sexual immorality within this church. He identified the problem, expressed his horror, confronted the church's error in how they handled it, and told them the correct way to handle it, starting immediately. Why was it so important that the church break association with the man caught in sin—and with such urgency?

The answer is in verses 6-7 and in 1 John 3:4-10.

Unrepentant sinful behavior by even one member of the church affects the entire congregation. If you answered the questions at the beginning of our study today, you found that this particular sinful behavior within the church was something that not even the pagans would allow, yet the whole Corinthian congregation was proud of it. What do you think the talk would have been among the pagans about the Christians in Corinth? I would imagine that the pagan world was disgusted by the Christian church. How catastrophic! This church's reputation was in peril, and since we already know that our identity is wrapped up in Christ, His reputation was on the line, too.

- Fill in the blanks for this portion of 1 John 3:4: “ _____ sin is _____ to the law of _____.”
- What does verse 6 say about anyone who keeps on sinning?
- When we are members of God's family, what do we stop doing?

There is no such thing as sin that only affects the one committing it. Sin spreads; it damages; it destroys. The sin of one man in the Corinthian church marked the entire church and threatened the reputation of the Gospel they claimed. They supported depravity, and they tarnished the name of their King. Paul wanted the matter dealt with swiftly, and so should we.

Consider: The sinful behavior within the Corinthian church may seem dramatic and unrealistic, but we have had similar situations within churches throughout history—and even at present. Sin is never casual to God, and it shouldn't be to us, either.

Pray: Ask God to keep you sensitive to sin—in your own life and within the Body of Christ. Ask Him to give you a repentant heart when you fall and wisdom and love where confrontation may be necessary.

Notes

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