

United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
Countering the Corinthian's Judgment (1 Cor. 4:1-6)

Intro: In our lessons so far we've seen that the Corinthian church was divided because they were being influenced by values that were a part of their culture. Because they weighed the wisdom of their teachers by human standards (what they knew and how they spoke) they had resorted to comparing teachers and divisions resulted from their loyalty to those who had taught them. As we have seen so far, Paul has met their issues methodically and powerfully. He had to correct their whole mindset piece by piece.

They needed to understand that God did not save them by human wisdom, but by what human wisdom could have never conceived—by the message of the cross.

They needed to understand that God saved them in that way in order that He might eliminate the kind of human glorying and boasting that they were practicing.

Consequently Paul points out that his preaching was in harmony with God's purposes. He determined to knowing nothing but Christ, and to speak, not with words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and power. However to say that men like Paul and Apollos did not speak with human wisdom did not mean that the message they preached was not wise. The Corinthians needed to understand that the message that Paul and Apollos preached was God's wisdom revealed by the Holy Spirit.

Likewise they needed to understand that the messengers of the gospel were God's servants and they should not divide over them. Or to put it another way, they were plants in God's field; they were stones in God's temple.

Consequently Paul uses the occasion to tender a practical word of warning to both those who would seek to build the temple of God or to those who would seek to tear it down.

Finally as the chapter closes Paul brings together the themes of these three chapters into a summary exhortation and observation urging them to put things in proper perspective.

As we come to chapter four Paul continues to discuss the issue of dividing over men; but his tone changes dramatically. He becomes much more confrontational. Having laid the Scriptural groundwork for his remarks he now applies them personally and powerfully to the Corinthians. There are three things he must do:

Counter the Corinthian's judgment

Deflate the Corinthian's pride

Call for the Corinthian's repentance

Let's hear what Paul says to the Corinthians:

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found

trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. (1 Cor. 4:1-5)

As we read this paragraph we can clearly see that Paul is using the language of a court room, raising issues of accountability and judgment. But what is Paul's point?

The Corinthians as judges

If we've carefully followed the text, we can see that some of Corinthians have assumed a position to which they were not entitled. They have become Paul's judges.

Using the standards of the world, they have become a judge of his wisdom. Perhaps they were expecting Paul to present to them knowledge of things unknown and to do it with powerfully persuasive rhetoric like the professional philosophers so popular at Corinth. Consequently they have concluded that Paul didn't know very much and that he was not very impressive in his presentation. There must be wiser teachers than he.

This has caused some of them to claim superiority over the others, since they were taught by teachers "wiser" than Paul.

But how will Paul counter this human panel of judges?

Paul as servant

For Paul, the answer to the Corinthians was not to assert himself as ruler over the Corinthian to compensate for the Corinthian put downs. Instead he accommodates their low views by simply saying:

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. (1 Cor. 4:1)

It is as if Paul first says, "Just think of Apollos and me as household servants in God's house."

Paul begins with the phrase "servant of Christ" which simply is a reminder that his role is one of ministry in God's behalf.

To this he adds a second description "stewards of the mysteries of God." The word "steward" meant a household servant who governs the affairs of his master. In this case, his charge is to faithfully proclaim the "mysteries of God," i.e. the gospel.

Though the word might have some implied authority over the household, Paul is probably using it to bring out another truth. A steward is ultimately accountable only to the master who has placed him in his position of service.

In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. (1 Cor. 4:2)

As a servant of God, Paul is concerned that his service be pleasing to the master who placed in him in the position he occupies, not whether he meets the standards of human judges like some of the Corinthians.

Then Paul says, “Since we are servants and stewards of God, then it is God who is our judge, and to whom we must ultimately give account.”

But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. (1 Cor. 4:3-4)

Notice how Paul responds to the Corinthians as judges of his work. It is as if he says, “It really doesn’t matter very much whether I perform in accord with the dictates of people obsessed with human wisdom.” “In fact, it doesn’t even matter if I pass my own performance self-test. Even if I don’t see anything in myself that I would disapprove, that does not make me free of guilt.”

“I must at last answer only to the Lord for my work, since I am His servant!”

Now on the basis of this point, Paul makes an application to his Corinthian judges.

The Servant’s application to his Corinthian Judges

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God. (1 Cor. 4:5)

Since the Lord is the one to whom God’s servants must give account, Paul urges the Corinthians to surrender the role of judge. He urges them to stop passing judgment on men based on the human standards they’ve been using and wait for the Lord to declare his verdict upon the work of His ministers. He can see what men cannot see—“the hidden things in the darkness and “the motives of men’s hearts.” He will give His word of approval to those who have served well.

Application of Paul’s Message

How did Paul’s message apply to the Corinthians?

Hopefully we’ve already answered this. The Corinthians had assumed a role they did not have—they had become judges of God’s servants like Paul. And not only that, they were judging with an improper standard and without knowledge of the servants’ true inner motivations and intentions. That is the mix for some really bad judgments. Not only that, but they were using these judgments as justification for arrogance and division.

Paul’s words are intended to remind the Corinthians that they are not a panel of judges to grade the performance of their teachers. Instead like all disciples, they are servants of God subject to His judgment.

How does Paul's message apply to us?

Paul's point in this paragraph provides useful information for evaluating what kind of dynamic that exists between those who teach and those who are taught, between the minister of the word and the church which he serves.

Some questions the church might ask:

Do we feel the need to rate those who teach God's word?

On what basis of what criterion do we measure their performance? Do we impose unrealistic or unattainable expectations upon those who serve us?

Do we allow these judgments to affect our words of appreciation and support for those who teach? Do we allow these judgments to result in disagreements and divisions in the body?

Can a servant of God feel free to teach the word of God as he understands it without recrimination or is political pressure put upon him to say what the church already believes and wants to hear?

Some questions preachers/teachers might ask of themselves:

How do I see myself? Do I see myself as a servant of God for the sake of His people?

To whom do I see myself as ultimately accountable—God or the people who provide my support?

Do I long for the praise of men more than the praise of God?

Do I use their approval as the legitimization of my ministry?

Do I even use my position as justification for misconduct or refusal to hear what God may be saying through others?

Do I claim an authority besides that which is resident in what is written?

Would I speak the truth knowing that the message might not be popular?

Hopefully as we ask these questions, we already know what the answers ought to be and we use them, if needed, as a corrective to avoid the kind of judging Paul found unhealthy in any congregation.

Conclusion: When both those who teach and those who are taught conduct themselves according to the principles Paul reveals in this text, the relationship can accomplish God's purposes and bring a blessing both to those who teach and to those who are taught. Appreciating God's standards of ministry will help us be "united in Christ."