

1 CORINTHIANS 4 | *The Scum of the World*

1. Leave Judgment to Jesus (1 Co 4:1-5).

- a. **1 Co 4:1-5** 1 This is how one should regard us, as servants (ὕπηρέτας) of Messiah and stewards (οἰκονόμους) of the mysteries (μυστηρίων) of God. 2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful (πιστός). 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 motives (βουλὰς) of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation (ἔπαινος) from God.
- b. Paul and Apollos are to be regarded as:
 - (1) Servants of Messiah (v. 1a).
 - (a) ὑπηρέτας: “[O]ne who functions as a helper, freq. in a subordinate capacity, *helper, assistant*” (BDAG, 1035).
 - (b) ὑπηρέτας are under-rowers, which is a figure taken from the galley ships of the time. Slaves who rowed, under the authority of the man who coordinated their individual efforts, propelled the ship. The ship sailed straight ahead, rather than in circles, as the slaves followed the instructions of their leader.
 - (2) House stewards of the mysteries of God (v. 1b).
 - (a) οἰκονόμος: “[M]anager of a household or estate, (*house*) *steward, manager*” (BDAG, 698).
 - (b) μυστηρίων are the the truths of the Christian faith, especially those revealed in the New Testament.
- c. The requirement of stewards is to be faithful to their master (v. 2).
 - (1) **Mt 25:21** 21 His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.
 - (2) **Lk 16:10-11** 10 One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?
 - (3) **1 Pe 4:10-11** 10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: 11 whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Messiah.
 - (4) **1 Co 15:10** 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.
- d. It is a small thing for Paul to be judged by the Corinthians or any human court (v. 3a).
 - (1) Paul is unconcerned about his popularity or unpopularity. He is intent on carrying out his stewardship.

- (2) “[A]s long as I am faithful in opening up the Word of God I am not concerned whether my sermons particularly appeal to you or not; as long as I know that I am pleasing Him that sent me I am not greatly concerned if I displease you.”¹
- e. Paul doesn’t even examine himself (v. 3b).
- (1) Our conscience is not always reliable or as sensitive as it should be.
- (a) “No servant of God is capable of appraising his own service. That which he might think to be excellent may be so much wasted time. That which he thinks wasted time may have just the message for the moment.”²
- (2) Paul is not much given to introspection about his own service to Jesus. Rather, he concentrates on doing to the best of his ability the job Jesus has put before him.
- f. It is Jesus who judges Paul (v. 4b).
- (1) Only Jesus’ estimation of our service matters. We are to serve for the future approval of Jesus rather than the present praise of people.³
- g. The Corinthians are not to pronounce judgment before Jesus comes (v. 5a).
- (1) Do not engage in “pre-judgment seat judgment.”⁴
- (2) Of course, there are times when we must judge (see 1 Co 5), but we should do so reluctantly and with humility.⁵
- h. Jesus will bring to light the hidden things and disclose the motives of the heart (v. 5b).
- (1) βουλὰς: “[T]hat which one thinks about as possibility for action, *plan, purpose, intention*” (BDAG, 181)..
- (2) We currently see many scandals in churches. These are what Jesus will reveal.
- (3) Remember the sign above the pastor’s door: “What’s your motive?”
- (4) **1 Jn 2:28** 28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.
- i. Each believer will receive his commendation from God (v. 5c).
- (1) ἔπαινος: “[T]he act of expressing admiration or approval, *praise, approval, recognition*” (BDAG, 357).
- (2) Paul thought and wrote about Jesus’ judgment seat often.
- (a) **2 Co 5:9-10** 9 We [believers]...have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to [the Lord]. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Messiah, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.
- (b) **Php 2:16** 16 ...Holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Messiah I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.
- (c) **2 Ti 4:7-8** 7 I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith. 8 In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness that the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all [those believers] who have loved his appearing.

¹ Henry Ironside, 144.

² Henry Ironside, 144.

³ Thomas Constable, *Notes on 1 Corinthians*, 75.

⁴ Johnson, 1235.

⁵ Thomas Constable, *Notes on 1 Corinthians*, 73.

2. Don't Be a Marshmallow (1 Co 4:6-7).

- a. **1 Co 4:6-7** 6 I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers and sisters, 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?
- b. The Corinthians are to learn not to go beyond what is written (v. 6a).
- c. When they do so, they become puffed up against each other (v. 6b).
 - (1) It is when we go beyond what is written, the Scriptures, that trouble begins.
 - (2) Often we argue about gray matters (not black and white matters) and get puffed up with pride about them.
 - (3) This is why I adhere to the sufficiency of Scripture, a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic, inductive Bible study, and biblical theology before systematic theology.
- d. The Corinthians are not to boast because everything they have is from God (v. 7).
 - (1) Everything we have received has come from God, not ourselves.
 - (2) The Corinthians need to return to grace orientation.

3. The Scum of the World (1 Co 4:8-13).

- a. **1 Co 4:8-13** 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! 9 For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle (θέατρον) to the world, to angels, and to men. 10 We are fools (μωροὶ) for Messiah's sake, but you are wise (φρόνιμοι) in Messiah. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. 11 To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed, beaten (κολαφίζω), and homeless, 12 and we labor, working with our own hands. When abused, we bless. When persecuted, we endure. 13 When slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum (περικόθαρμα) of the world, the refuse (περίψημα) of all things.
- b. Sarcastically, Paul says the Corinthians are already rich kings (v. 8).
 - (1) They are behaving as if they have already received Jesus' commendation.
 - (2) Here is a huge warning against the prosperity gospel.
 - (3) The Messianic kingdom is not here yet, and we are not ruling yet.
 - (a) Before of an "over-realised" eschatology.
 - (4) Now is not the time to live like kings but to share in Jesus' sufferings.
 - (5) The viewpoint of the Corinthians is like the natural man, the unbeliever.
- c. By contrast God has exhibited Paul and the other apostles (v. 9a) as:
 - (1) Last of all (v. 9b).
 - (2) Men sentenced to death (v. 9c).
 - (3) A spectacle (θέατρον) to the world, angels, and men (v. 9d).
 - (a) θέατρον: "[W]hat one sees at a theater, a play, spectacle" (BDAG, 446).
 - (b) Think of the gladiatorial shows throughout the Roman empire.
- d. In comparison, the apostles:
 - (1) Are fools for Jesus' sake, but the Corinthians are wise in Messiah (v. 10a).
 - (2) Are weak, but the Corinthians are strong (v. 10b).
 - (3) Are in disrepute, but the Corinthians are held in honour (v. 10c).
- e. The apostles, at present (v. 11a):
 - (1) Hunger and thirst (v. 11b).
 - (2) Are poorly dressed (v. 11c).
 - (3) Are beaten (v. 11d).
 - (4) Are homeless (v. 11e).
 - (5) Labor, working with their own hands (v. 12a).
 - (6) Bless when abused (v. 12b).
 - (7) Endure when persecuted (v. 12c).
 - (8) Entreat when slandered (v. 13a).
 - (9) Are like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things (v. 13b).
 - (a) περικόθαρμα: "[T]hat which is removed as a result of a thorough cleansing, dirt, refuse, off-scouring, also as a designation of the 'off-scouring' of humanity" (BDAG, 801).
 - (b) περίψημα: "[T]hat which is removed by the process of cleansing, dirt, off-scouring" (BDAG, 808).

4. Imitate Your Father (1 Co 4:14-17).

- a. **1 Co 4:14-17** 14 I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish (νουθετέω, pres.) you as my beloved children. 15 For though you have ten thousand guides (παιδαγωγούς) in Messiah, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Messiah Jesus through the gospel. 16 I urge you, then, be imitators (μιμηταί) of me. 17 That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Messiah, as I teach them everywhere in every church.
- b. Paul writes not to shame the Corinthians but to admonish them as his children (v. 14)
 - (1) νουθετέω: “[T]o counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct, *admonish, warn, instruct*” (BDAG, 679).
- c. The Corinthians have numerous guides but not many fathers (v. 15a).
- d. Paul became the Corinthians’ father through the gospel (v. 15b).
 - (1) Properly speaking, we have only one Father. But in a sense, Paul is a father to the Corinthians.
 - (2) **Mt 23:9** 9 And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.
- e. Accordingly, the Corinthians are to be imitators of Paul (v. 16).
 - (1) It is common for Paul to speak of himself as a model.
 - (2) Immature believers, whether new or fleshly, especially need flesh and blood models to imitate.
 - (3) Believers who did not grow up in a mature Christian family also need flesh and blood models to imitate.
 - (4) Some believers need help applying the theological truths of Scripture to the concrete realities of their lives.
- f. Paul sent Timothy to remind the Corinthians of his ways in Messiah (v. 17a).
- g. Paul teaches his ways everywhere in every church (v. 17b).
 - (1) It is the Corinthians, not Paul, who have departed from the Christian way.
 - (a) **1 Co 1:2** 2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours....
 - (b) **1 Co 7:17** 17 Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.
 - (c) **1 Co 11:16** 16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.
 - (d) **1 Co 14:33** 33 For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints....

5. Power, Not Talk (1 Co 4:18-21).

- a. **1 Co 4:18-21** 18 Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you soon, if the Lord desires, and I will find out not the talk (λόγος) of these arrogant people but their power (δύναμις). 20 For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk (λόγος) but in power (δύναμις). 21 What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod (ράβδος), or with love (ἀγάπη) in a spirit of humility (πραΰτης)?
- b. Some are arrogant against Paul, as if he no longer cares about the Corinthians (v. 18).
 - (1) **2 Co 1:15-18** 15 Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. 16 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. 17 Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say Yes, yes and No, no at the same time? 18 As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No.
- c. Paul will come soon, if Jesus desires, and find out the power of these people (v. 19).
- d. The kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power (v. 20).
 - (1) The kingdom of God is the future Messianic kingdom applied to the present.
 - (2) Paul's theme of wisdom and power has continued since ch. 1.
 - (3) Living the cross way of life (vv. 9-13) is the power of the gospel.
- e. Paul can come with discipline or with love. It is the Corinthians' choice (v. 21).
 - (1) Paul prefers to use the gentle approach, but a point comes when he will be forced to use "tough love."
 - (2) "Christian leadership means encouraging—and if necessary, enforcing—the way of the cross among the people of God (4:14-21)."⁶

6. Reflections.

- a. Paul is frustrated with the Corinthians, but he doesn't give up on them.
- b. As we turn to 1 Co 5-16, always in the background is this primary theme—the cross of Messiah.

⁶ D. A. Carson, 108.