

1 Corinthians 4:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 July 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 1 to 17 This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

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. 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. 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 favour 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.

[1:05] 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. For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men.

We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands.

When reviled, we bless. When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

I urge you then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

[2:20] In 1 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul continues the argument of the preceding chapter. For the Corinthians, who have been elevating ministers and missionaries above their proper station, it is important to establish some sense of proper proportion.

Paul, Apollos, Cephas and others are simply servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. They must be faithful and ultimately are answerable to the judgment of the Lord alone.

The court of human opinion is not the court about which Paul is most concerned. In chapter 2 verse 15, he made a similar point. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.

Because they aren't acting for the court of human opinion, the whole game of status seeking that the Corinthians are so concerned about is abandoned. Rather, the apostles must seek the approval of the Lord, who is their master, the one to whom they are ultimately answerable.

The judgment and the praise of the Lord must be patiently awaited, and until it comes, the ministers of Christ must be trustworthy, recognizing that they must give an account of their service to God.

[3:25] They don't indulge in boasting and the pursuit of status, because this is to seek approval from the wrong source. It's also characteristic of the flesh, which is pompous, prideful and puffed up, is overly concerned with the praise of a human audience, and unmindful of God.

Paul has to this point spoken as if he were merely writing about how other people viewed him, Apollos and Cephas and a few others. Yet it becomes apparent that Paul was speaking to broader and deeper problems in the church by using himself and Apollos as examples.

The real parties causing the problem are modestly veiled by the fact that Paul uses himself and Apollos as the case studies, so that the Corinthians might learn the proper principles by examining their cases.

The principle here is that they should not go beyond what is written. In this case, I think that Paul means by this strange statement, the message of the gospel. Going beyond that message would involve adding to the truth of the cross in ways that the Corinthians had clearly been doing, with notions of super-spirituality, status-seeking and human wisdom.

And recognizing the scriptural testimony to the truth of the cross as God's wisdom, their competitive struggle for honor and status would be abandoned. The cross is the most basic and foundational truth and they must never leave it behind.

[4 : 47] Once the Corinthians have grasped the basics that Paul has been teaching, they should recognize that there is nothing in them, considered in themselves, that sets them apart from or above others.

As Paul wrote back in chapter 1 verse 30, Everything that they have in the way of standing has been received as a gift from God, so it is ridiculous to act as if they hadn't received it, as if they naturally possessed it.

The next section of this passage drips with irony. The Corinthians seemingly had extreme notions of conversion, notions of conversion characterized by what some have called over-realized eschatology.

They were acting as if they already enjoyed the fullness of the kingdom and the full measure of the spirit, failing to appreciate just how far short they fell and how far off these things were in their full enjoyment.

This sort of super-spirituality had little place for the cross. It was about power, about elevated spiritual status and radical freedom. And Paul will have a lot to say to challenge such a spirituality over the course of this letter.

[5 : 58] Here, he tackles it by presenting an ironic portrayal of such a spirituality. He holds it up for some ridicule and contrasts it with the reality that he and the other apostles face on the ground.

The Corinthians think of themselves as kings, as those who are rich, as people who reign and who have the fullness of what they want. They are already acting as if they were living in the age to come.

They have seemingly entered into this consummation of the kingdom in the absence of Paul and his companions. The Corinthians seem to imagine themselves as if in some great triumphal procession leading the way at the front.

And yet, in that great triumphal procession, where are Paul and the apostles to be found? They're not the kings leading at the front. They're more like the gladiators at the very rear. They're condemned to struggle to the death in the arena and their sufferings are like a grand spectacle before the whole cosmos.

Isn't it strange that the Corinthians see themselves as wise, strong and honoured when the apostles' experience is the exact opposite? In the starkest of contrasts, Paul describes the positions of the apostles and how completely alien to the supposed experience of the Corinthian super-spiritual Christians it is.

[7 : 10] Far from experiencing constant victory, from reigning like kings, from enjoying extreme riches, superior wisdom and radical liberty, the experience of the apostles is one of suffering, daily hardship, lack, hunger and thirst, persecution, rejection, ridicule and dishonour.

However, in this difficult situation, they respond according to the mind of Christ. They respond to cursing with blessing, to persecution with endurance, to slander with kindness.

Just as Christ was cut off by the world at the cross, his faithful followers are regarded as if they were the scum of the earth, refuse to be thrown out. The point of all of this is not to shame the Corinthians.

However, of all the people that ministered to the Corinthians, few could claim to stand in the position of a father. Paul, however, can speak to them like a father. He became their father as one who first delivered the gospel to them.

They are seen as his dear children. He has a peculiar interest in and concern for their spiritual well-being, greater than any of those who are simply like their guardians. As a father figure, he has a special responsibility to give an example and training to them.

[8 : 23] And for this reason, he is sending Timothy to them, whom he describes as his loved son. Timothy is the appointed son who represents and acts on behalf of his father. He is also a model son.

He is the image of his father. He will remind them of Paul's way of life by his own behaviour. Timothy will provide them with a good model to emulate and a pattern for their own growth.

A question to consider, what are some of the forms that the error of the Corinthians discussed in this chapter can take in the contemporary church?

