

Servants and Stewards of the Cross

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

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July 12, 2009 – Trinity 5

I want to look at the fourth chapter of First Corinthians this morning, but before we get into that, remember that in the first three chapters St. Paul has been addressing the problems of divisions and factions in the Corinthian church. Paul went right to the root of the problem: they were looking to the ways of the world when it came to evaluating ministers. They were doing the ancient equivalent of judging a minister based on the size of his church, or his eloquence as a speaker, or the quality of his suit – and then becoming groupies of one preacher to the exclusion of all the others. And so we've seen how St. Paul has told them: It's not about the person or the delivery, it's about the message. And the message is *always the cross*. And then in chapter three we saw how he told them how we're all in ministry together. Each of us has our role to play. He had gone to Corinth to plant seeds. Apollos has gone there to water those seeds. But in the end, it was God who coordinated the planting and the watering and who ultimately gave the growth. And because of that, they – and that means us too – have no business saying that we want only this person or that person to the exclusion of the others. If the message they preach is the message of the cross, then they're in it together with us – in fact, they belong to us just as we belong to each other. To reject them as the Corinthians had rejected Paul is to reject a gift that God has given his body.

In Chapter 4 St. Paul goes on to deal specifically with their criticism and rejection of him, but what he says applies to every body of believers and every minister of the Gospel. Look at verses 1-2:

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 trustworthy.

Paul uses some words here that especially pack this passage with a lot of meaning. How are God's people to regard a minister? First, Paul says, as a *servant* of Christ. The

Greek word he uses for servant is *huperetas* and the first time we can find of its use is in Homer's *Illiad*. It literally means "under-rowers" – not slaves, but warriors who are also responsible for rowing the Greek war galleys to get themselves to the battle. Think of the story of the Greek armies setting sail for Troy in their warships: the captain was up on deck and he would call out his commands and then a big burly guy down with the rowers would call out those instructions to the rowers and beat his drum: boom...boom...boom...boom...battle speed. And then he'd speed up: ramming speed. You guys have seen that in the movies. Under-rowers. Later this term that we translate as "servant" was used to describe Hermes, the messenger of the gods, who would fly off with his winged sandals to carry their messages to mortals on earth. Eventually it came to refer to anyone, but especially those in the army, who were responsible for seeing that the orders of the commanding officers were carried out. And interestingly, it also referred to the officers in the army who were responsible for equipping the troops for battle. St. Luke tells us in Acts that when Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey, they took John Mark with them as their "servant" – as their *huperetas* – the guy who made their travel arrangements, looked after their baggage, ran their errands, and basically did what they told him to do.

The Corinthians had the wrong understanding of who and what a minister is. They're not big-shots, they're not generals, they're not CEO's, they don't have the last word. *They serve under the leadership of Christ and answer to him*, just like those warriors in the ship were under the leadership of the captain.

I think we really do understand this, but we forget it. It seems that more often than not that church vestries and boards tend to view their ministers as *their* servants and not as *Christ's* servant. Yes, just as we're all ministers to each other in the Body of Christ, the minister is the servant of his parish, but when it comes to his role as preacher and teacher, *he is first and foremost a servant of Christ*. When it comes to the message, he's answerable to Christ, not to the vestry or the board. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ" (1:10).

When I was in seminary a lot of the other guys were already in ministry and I learned a lot listening to them talk about the things they dealt with. One of my classmates once asked our professor for advice. He said that his church board called him for a meeting and told him, "We want you to understand:

This is our Church, not yours. We were here before you and we'll be here after you. We want you to do what we want you to do, not what you think you should do." Our professor told him, that he needed to call a meeting of his own to remind them that it wasn't "their" church – that it's Jesus' church and that Jesus gives the marching orders. We live in a democracy and so we're prone to forgetting that the church is not a democracy. Every member of the church is under Christ's authority. Second, he told this man: "You need to remind them that even though they've hired you and are paying you a salary, you haven't come to 'work for 'their' church' – you've come to share in the ministry of the church with the rest of the members."

Well, he did what our professor advised and got fired. The good news is that another church heard about it and sought him out and hired him, knowing that he was going to be faithful to the things of God and not the desires of men.

Now Paul also uses the word "steward". A steward was someone, usually in a large household, who was put in charge of the master's affairs and possessions when he was away. And so not only are ministers servants of Christ, but they're also stewards of the mysteries of God. The mysteries of God are the truths he's given us in Scripture and the duty of the minister is to guard those truths and to dispense them to Christ's people so that they can learn to live out the new life they have in the Saviour.

In verse two Paul stresses: The most important thing a minister can be is trustworthy – that he be a faithful to his master — to Christ — and that he take good charge in guarding and dispensing the mysteries of God. The Corinthians didn't get this. Most of them had reject Paul as a minister of the Gospel because he didn't live up to a variety of standards. They were looking for the big church or the eloquent preaching or the expensive suit. And so Paul's saying that what they really need to be looking for is faithfulness to Christ and the message of the cross. That's number one! Eloquence as a preacher, a big church, a fancy suit – that's gravy on top, but it's not our focus. We need to ask: "Is this minister faithful to his master, to Christ, or is he wanting to please men?" and "Is he dispensing the message of the cross, or is he preaching something else or watering down the message?"

And so because Paul knows who his master is – to whom he ultimately answers, he goes on in verse 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. 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.

My guess is that the Corinthians probably didn't like hearing those words, because that's exactly what they were doing: judging Paul – and not just that, but judging him by all the wrong standards. So Paul tells them: "Your judgement doesn't matter to me. Really, it only matters in the sense that I'm saddened that you're so confused. Ultimately," he says, "I'm not answerable to you." And he adds, "or by any human court" as the ESV says. Literally the Greek says "by man's day." It's a direct contrast with what he says in verse 5: that his judgement will come from the Lord when he comes back to judge all men and women. That's what we do when we judge: we put ourselves in God's place and condemn someone as if it were Judgement Day. What God does call us to do is to know his standards and offer correction to our brothers and sisters out of love *so that* they won't stand condemned on Judgement Day.

Paul even says that he doesn't judge himself. That's kind of a weird one, because he tells us in a lot of other places that we *do* need to examine ourselves. But his point is judgement. He's not saying that he doesn't examine and evaluate himself to make sure he's being a faithful servant and steward. He's done that with the Spirit's help and he says, "At this point in time I'm not aware of any shortcoming in my ministry – any places where I'm failing in my stewardship." He knows he's not acquitted by that, but his point is that the only judgement that counts for a minister is God's judgement on the last day.

Paul's biggest problem was the judgement and pressure of the congregation and I think that's where we have to be the most careful. When we judge a minister, we first need to ask if we're judging based on the criteria Paul gives here. Just last month I was confronted by someone, because they didn't like what I was preaching. I was told that what I was preaching was all wrong; that I shouldn't talk about sin and that I just needed to preach about the love of God and how he wants to befriend us. This person

judged that I must be doing something wrong because this church isn't as big as a few others they named. That's exactly what Paul was dealing with in Corinth. They were judging him based on the world's standards. They wanted a message like the pagan teachers were teaching – a message that made people feel good about themselves – and Paul says, "No. The wisdom of the world is foolishness. I preach the cross – that's what I've been entrusted with. Preaching about the love and mercy of God is pointless if you don't first preach the cross and why we need it."

You can't judge a minister by the size of his church. In fact, if anything in our culture, a big church might even make you suspicious. In this case the churches named are big, precisely because what is being preached is worldly wisdom and not the cross – and it's really easy to attract big crowds when you stroke their egos and promise them health and wealth. The problem is that ministers who do that are failing at the most important part of their calling. They're not being faithful servants of Christ and stewards of the message of the cross.

That is something you can judge a minister on. Let me make one thing clear: we *do* have a duty to hold our ministers accountable. But the reason why Paul wasn't concerned with the Corinthian's judgement of him was because they were judging by the wrong standard. When we know the *right* standard, then we should evaluate our ministers. A minister who is failing as a servant and steward of the gospel needs to have it brought to his attention. And if a minister refuses to be true to that calling, that's when it's time to either fire him or to find another church.

The good news is that if we understand all of this, we won't have the kind of rivalries they had in Corinth. Look at verses 6-7:

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 favor 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?

I spent a year in a church where there was a rivalry between two of the ministers. The supporters of each were very much "puffed up" in favour of one against the other. It not only destroyed the ministry of the church, but it damaged the ministry of the two

ministers, who were both feeding on the adulation from each of their camps. Eventually it meant that the senior of the two was forced out, but that didn't fix the problem. The guy who was left, because he was so full of himself, was unable to minister to those who had supported the other minister and the people themselves remained split down the middle. It was an ugly thing.

Paul says the way to avoid that problem is to remember that we have nothing to boast of except Christ himself. If you have a gift to use in the Church, you need to remember that that gift came from God, not from you – and that goes for the preacher as much as it does for any of the laymen. Does it make any sense for the servant or the steward to boast about the things in his charge? Of course not, because those things aren't his own – they belong to his master!

You see, the Corinthians were puffed up because they had forgotten that their gifts, their ministry, and even their redemption were all ultimately from God and not of their own making. Look at verse 8. St. Paul strikes right at the pride they had in their accomplishments:

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!

They're puffed up and think that they've arrived at their spiritual destination when in reality, as Paul said in Chapter 3, they're spiritual babies who have never grown up. They're full of pride thinking they've made themselves and that they're responsible for all the great things that have happened in their church. In contrast Paul says about himself:

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 honor, but we in disrepute. [He's being kind of sarcastic just to make the point that their pride in themselves is misplaced and that what they scorn in him is exactly what they should aspire to themselves.] To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, 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.

He's basically telling them what he'll write later in 2 Corinthians: "When I am weak, then I am strong." God shows his strength by working through our weakness. They criticised Paul like he was some kind of loser, but it was precisely his "loser" status that allowed him to be an instrument for God's glory. He had nothing to lose, and so he became a servant of Christ and a steward of the cross. And yet the Corinthians couldn't see past the outward appearance. They judged him based on his humble appearance and attitude instead of judging him based on his faithfulness to the Gospel. He gets pretty sarcastic to make his point, but then he goes on in verse 14:

I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. [Paul reminds them: I'm not trying to be jerk. But you need to be admonished because you're way off track.] **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.** [Paul had a special charge in the Corinthians. He had planted the seeds. In a sense he was like their father and he had special concern for them. And as their spiritual father, he wanted to do anything he could to help them to mature. That's why when they strayed from his teaching, he sent this letter. And that's why he sent Timothy to them when he couldn't be there himself. He goes on:] **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.** [Finally, Paul leaves them (and us) with a choice. Are we going to submit to the message of the cross or not?] **Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?**

Paul switches gears suddenly. You see, this isn't about him. As a fellow minister I can guess that this was probably not the easiest thing for Paul to write. This is something that could easily be mistaken as some self-serving writing on Paul's part. And so here he's basically saying, "This isn't about me. It's no skin off my nose if you reject my authority as an apostle. I'm secure in the

knowledge that I'm being a faithful minister and steward of Christ." And that's where a less faithful minister might shake the dust off his feet and walk away. But not Paul – and not any other minister worth his salt. He's writing this for the benefit of the congregation. It's no skin off his nose if they reject him, but it *is* skin off their noses even though they don't realise it.

If they reject Paul, they reject the Gospel with him – or at the very least they reject the full message and ministry of God and they kiss off any chance of real maturity. And so like a father with a rebellious child, Paul goes back for more – ready to take the abuse that might come – because he loves these people like his children. He's going to try to correct gently, but if that doesn't work, he says, he just might have to come and give them some "tough love." We might not realise it, but there are both those sides to ministry: the gentle and the tough.

It's scary to think what the Corinthians might have done to Paul if this were happening today. They didn't like his style and his message. Today that could easily mean cutting off his support – firing him. Telling him not to come around anymore. Maybe it might mean starting a new church that would exclude him or they might reject him and go running to Apollos or Peter, asking them to be their apostle – because they liked their message and delivery better.

Friends, that's our problem today. We've democratised the Church. We've rejected her authority and with that the authority of Scripture. We say we believe that Scripture is without error, and that's great; we *should* affirm that. But what does it matter if we reject Scripture when we hear it? If we decided to approach it like a buffet: a little grace, two helping of love, three spiritual gifts, but no sin and no dead Messiahs please? What's the point? We've reached a place where, just as the Corinthians did with Paul, we often judge the Church and her ministers based on criteria other than the ones Paul lays out here. We hear something we don't like so we get mad, we berate the messenger, or we leave for some other church with a message we like better. And it's scary that we can do that. The fact that we can, speaks volumes to the sad state of the modern church: that someone who doesn't like hearing about sin *can* go somewhere where they don't have to hear about it. It means that there are churches and preachers that aren't preaching the Gospel and that are offering a Scripture-buffet.

And so we need to ask when we evaluate ministry (and really this is something that applies to everything we do in the church and to each and every one of us as ministers of the gospel in some way): are we faithful in being servants of Christ, or are we serving someone or something else? Who are we trying to please? Are we trying to please people, or are we trying to please Jesus. And second, are we being faithful stewards of the message of the cross? Are we proclaiming the cross? Does our message humble the sinner, exalt the Saviour, and promote holiness? Or are we watering it down into some kind of pop psychology or self-help seminar?

Friends, do you want power? Do you want to bear fruit? St. Paul says, the power of God is in those churches and ministers and ministries that are faithful servants and stewards of Christ and his cross. That's what's going to bear fruit. That's what God will bless. Anything else is a spiritual dead end.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for calling us to be your fellow workers for the Gospel. We ask that as we grow in maturity of faith and in the knowledge of your Word, that your Spirit dwelling in us will encourage us to be both zealous to proclaim the cross of Christ and to be discerning of those who minister in the Church, that we might judge rightly both our own ministry and the ministry of others. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.