

28th February 2021

Christian Ministry

Bible reading: 1 Corinthians 4:1-13

It happened in the jungle one day. A lion with a big ego went around asking the other animals who the king of the jungle was. "Who's the king of jungle?" the lion roared at a monkey. "Why...you are, Mr. Lion," said the monkey with fear in his voice. The lion went on and found a zebra. "Who's the king of jungle?" he snarled. "There is no doubt about it...you are Mr. Lion," said the zebra. Seeing a turtle crossing his path the lion yelled, "Who's the king of the jungle?" Scared out of his shell the turtle said, "You are Mr. Lion. You are the king of the jungle." Then the lion saw an elephant and he roared, "Who's the king of jungle?" The elephant used his trunk and grabbed the lion by the tail and he spun him around over his head several times, dunked him in a mud hole, and then slammed him into a large tree. Dazed and dirty the lion said, "Just because you don't know the correct answer is no reason to get upset."

We have come to realize that the church at Corinth had its problems. They were very immature and even worldly. They were full of pride and were putting their faith in human wisdom.

Based on unspiritual, human wisdom, they were making wrong judgments. And in the end, all of this was leading to division – different groups in the church had aligned themselves with certain leaders.

As Paul has tried to address these problems, he has pointed their attention in several important directions.

1. Paul has pointed them to the centrality of the Cross.
2. Paul has pointed them to the wisdom of the Spirit.
3. And in our message last week, we noticed how Paul helped them see the church for what it is – God's field, God's building, and God's Temple.

As we come to Chapter 4, we see that Paul is concluding his appeal for unity among the Corinthian factions. Up until this point, much of Paul's discourse has been artfully indirect as he employed metaphors and irony to provoke the Corinthians to rethink their position.

In this chapter, however, Paul takes off his "kid gloves," so to speak, and he confronts them bluntly in a number of ways:

- First, he confronts their presumptuous judging of Paul himself (v1-5).
- Second, he confronts them about their arrogant boasting of their own wisdom and status (v6-13).
- As Paul brings this first major unit of the letter to a close he adopts a warmer tone as a father appealing to his children (v14-17).
- But then Paul concludes with a stern warning to those at Corinth who may be inclined to resist his authority (v18-21).

Before we look at v1-13 let make a few comments about v14-21, to put in context, or intent the rather extreme things that Paul says.

Paul makes it clear that his goal is not to leave the Corinthians in shame, but instead to warn them for their good, as a father would. He unapologetically asserts his authoritative role, he does not do so in a worldly way, using the power of intimidation or status. Instead, he asserts his authority using the language of family. Remember that he calls them children (v14) and considers himself a father (v15). Paul wants to make sure the Corinthians understand:

The kind of authority that exists in the kingdom of God is not about brute force, status or laying down the law; instead, true authority is about fatherly affection that longs to see a child grow and flourish. In Paul's mind, it is loving and fatherly to snatch these spiritually oblivious children out of the worldly oncoming traffic that they've been playing in!

The Corinthians are to relate to this authoritative love, not as if it were coming from a boss or a dictator, but from a parent, a cultivator or a gardener responsible for their maturity.

Not only is Paul's authority fatherly, but he also patterns it after the sacrificial and atoning work of Christ in v15–17. In Paul's mind, an authoritative figure does not dominate those under him, but instead serves them, as is the way of Christ Himself. Paul believes his leadership is patterned after Christ's atoning model of laying down His life for others, so he urges the Corinthians to imitate this Gospel pattern in v6.

Said differently, the Cross is the measuring stick used to scrutinize all Christian ministry, including Paul's, and the Corinthians are not above this servant standard.

While some assume, he will not come to Corinth, Paul reminds them that he definitely plans to visit. He expects a confrontation (v19) and would rely on the power of the Holy Spirit for discipline. Paul says that the kingdom of God "*does not consist in talk but in power*"

Paul offers a final question to the believers in Corinth. What do you prefer? The atmosphere of the upcoming meeting is in the hands of the Corinthians. By deciding to repent or not, they can choose whether they prefer the meeting to be brutal or gentle. Regardless of their decision, he will come as a father seeking to properly evaluate the spiritual behaviour of his children. Now back to our passage:

1. Paul confronts their presumptuous judging of himself (v1-5).

The way that Paul describes himself and leaders in the church, but really every follower of Christ here is two-fold. He says we should be regarded as servants of Christ and the word he uses for servants is a word that would be used to describe the under rower on a boat. So, picture the lowest galley of slaves on a boat. That's what the word is for servant here. Just row here, row there, do whatever your master, the captain of the ship says to do.

"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." V1-2

So, we're under rowers. We are servants of Christ. He is the captain of our lives and we do whatever he says.

Servants do not do what they want to do. They do not march to their own drumbeat. Their theme song is not "I Did It My Way." *As servants of Jesus Christ we do not live our lives our way, but God's way!*

The word steward means one who manages everything for his master. When the master returns, the steward will give an account. The steward is held responsible. Our gifts, talents, abilities, real estate, opportunities, and potential do not belong to us, but to Jesus. You are a steward of your life, time, money, influence, kids, etc.

In v3-5 we are reminded that it's not our place to judge others. The one who judges is the Lord. Only God knows what is in a person's heart and He is the only one who has the right to judge. Likewise, we shouldn't live our lives for the opinion of others. *Ultimately, there is only one opinion that matters.* It is not the court of public opinion, or even our own personal opinion, but we answer to God. Paul says we shouldn't think "*beyond what is written*" (v. 6). The bible is our final authority. Stewardship is about responsibility and requirements.

Paul discusses three kinds of judgment that he and everyone faces.

- There is the judgment of other people.
- There is the judgment by ourselves of ourselves.
- And there is the judgment of God.

The only judgment that we can fully trust, and that ultimately matters is the judgment of God. Certainly, we can learn from others and can benefit from their feedback. But the judgments of others should not be allowed to give us a big head, or strip us down to the point of discouragement and immobilization.

Paul also minimized his self-judgment. Paul knows that we can be too easy on ourselves or too tough on ourselves. But Paul did take God's judgment seriously. God's judgment is the one that counts. God knows all the hidden circumstances, and He knows our internal motivations.

God is not impressed by success symbols, nor is He discouraged by the negative judgments of others. So, let's leave the judging to God, and let's wait for God's appointed time. The business of praise and blame belong to God.

So, in effect, Paul says to the Corinthians, "Back off! It is not your job to give me a job performance evaluation."

2. Second, Paul confronts them about their arrogant boasting of their own wisdom and status (v6-13).

The apostle Paul pushes this point even further in v7. How are you different than anyone else? What makes you so superior? Now you may start answering that question by listing all that you can do, or all that you have achieved, or all the value you think you have. Listen to what Paul says. "*What do you have that you did not receive? How can you boast when nothing that you have is yours?* All that you have received is from God. Your talent is from God. Your wealth is from God. Your faith is from God? Your hope is from God? Your life is from God. Your next breath is from God. In the words of Job, you came into this world naked and you will leave this world with nothing. *How can you boast as if you did not receive it?* In sarcasm Paul declares that these Corinthians are so self-sufficient and so rich that they apparently have no need for anything. *You are already satisfied in this life. You think you have reached full maturity, ruling and reigning, rather than walking humbly with God* v8. This is what they thought of themselves. They are foolish as the Laodiceans. Rev' 3:16-17 Self-satisfaction leaves us poor and blind before God. Self-focus means you do not see who you truly are before God.

To keep away from fighting and divisions we must have a God-centred focused, seeing ourselves for who we truly are, and not have a self-focus.

Paul continues to show how ridiculous their prideful thinking is. We wish you Corinthian Christians were reigning so that we might share the rule with you (4:8)! In v9-13 we have one of the finest pictures of the difficulties that the apostles faced. Paul lists in words that tear at the brain what the price tag had been for him to be a faithful steward of the gospel.

- It is a story of danger, "*of men condemned to death*" v9
- It is a story of ridicule, "*a spectacle to the world*" v9
- It is a story of contempt, "*fools for Christ's sake*" v10
- It is the story of privation: "*we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless*" v11
- It is a story of self-support, by the work of his "*own hands*" v12

As I read this description of Paul's sufferings, wondered how many people would be faithful to Christ today if there was the possibility of that cost! Then I remembered that in many parts of the world today there are Christians who can identify with what Paul experienced.

When these 21st century "*fools for Christ's sake*" visit the US or Australia, they are sometimes offended by both the materialism and the spiritual pride they observe. They want to say to us, "*What do you have that you did not receive?*" v7

Do you see how the apostles responded to their mistreatments? They give, and sacrifice and the result is that they are like the scum of the world and the refuse of all things. This description is a Greek word that describes the scrapings of a pot or dish that are thrown away. So, you know that cooked on grime that gets stuck on a plate or pot? That is what the apostle Paul says that they have become to the world.

We have been rescued and redeemed from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light; where we've been called to be servants of Christ and entrusted to reach a lost and dying world with the mysteries of the Gospel. Each of us are simply servants of our loving God.

Our Take home Message:

- a) Because God is Faithful, we must also be faithful. I like how Max Lucado said, *"If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, He wants to listen. He can live anywhere in the universe but He chooses to live in your heart."*
- b) We must avoid pride and foolish boasting it is unspiritual and destructive
- c) Spiritual leadership is based on love, respect and humility.
- d) The unity of the body of Christ must be our personal priority. The Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but power.

Prayer: