Faithfulness in Service

# 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

1 Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. 3 But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. 4 For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. 5 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.

## Let a man regard us…

Regarding ‘regarding’ the saints in Corinth were to regard, or take account of, Paul’s ministry as servant and steward. Paul does not use a definite article in this sentence (the) so that he can refer to the body in general. If you’re a person in the body, you should be regarding ‘us’ - Paul, Apollos, and Peter – as humble agents of God.

*In the body how do our estimations of other believers impact our ability to listen to both brothers and sisters as well as leadership?*

## Servants of Christ

The servants of Christ are not out seeking their own. The servants of Christ are abiding and doing the will of the Father by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to the glory of Christ. This removes the ability for the sheep to claim the glory of one leader over another, to drag the names of the apostles and teachers through the mud, or to misattribute the motive of the servants. If Christ is the one being served, and not the body, then the body gets the side benefit, but none of the credit and none of the glory.

## Stewards of the mysteries of God

Paul uses the word mysteries here and it refers to the new revelations of and for the church to the saints in the epistles of the New Testament. Paul writes about 9 mysteries he was steward of:

1. The mystery of the Incarnation [1 Timothy 3:16, 1 Corinthians 2:7-8, Ephesians 3:4, Colossians 2:2]
2. The mystery of the gospel [Ephesians 6:19]
3. The mystery of the church [Romans 16:25-26, Ephesians 3:9]
4. The mystery of Christ in the Believer [Colossians 1:26-28]
5. The mystery of the rapture [1 Corinthians 15:51-55]
6. The mystery of Israel’s partial hardening [Romans 11:25]
7. The mystery of lawlessness [2 Thessalonians 2:1-12]
8. The mystery of the church as the bride of Christ [Ephesians 5:22-33]
9. The mystery of God’s timing [Ephesians 1:9-10]

The mysteries were not prophesied previously so we don’t get to treat prophesies as mysteries. For example: Abraham was told that his seed would bless all the nations [Genesis Genesis 22:18] and later we find out through the historical accounts and New Testament revelations of these very mysteries that Christ would die for all of the world’s sin and bless every nationality that believed.

Paul and those included in the ‘us’ were stewards of truth, not to be esteemed in an unhealthy way because of the truth they were to preserve and protect. Paul’s writing to Timothy carries this same stewardship of preservation forward. His instruction to Timothy (one who had been given the stewardship) that he maintain the sound doctrine [2nd Timothy 1:13-14], and furthermore in 2 Timothy 2:2 he instructs Timothy to entrust these same doctrinal truths to faithful men who will then pass these truths on to other faithful men as well.

*What are the responsibilities of an elder? Why are those so critical to the preservation of doctrinal truth?*

## It is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy

If there is one quality to Paul’s ministry it would be his faithfulness with the message given him. He was trustworthy. Paul faithfully served for several decades and proved himself out. In 1 Corinthians 4:17 Paul writes about Timothy being his faithful [same Greek word] child in the Lord. In the analogy of the steward of a household a dishonest steward could bring a house to ruin. However, a faithful steward is given the responsibility of a whole house and is entrusted to bring further value to the home.

*What is the consequence of a stewardship that has been abdicated or abandoned?*

## But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court;

Paul was well aware of his shortcomings in the flesh, but he knew precisely what the Lord had done in his life and how his abiding walk with the Lord showed his position manifested in his condition. Paul knew that his life was constantly being scrutinized as the bearer of the gospel. He knew that how he was preaching, what he was preaching, and what he was doing when he wasn’t preaching were all being evaluated. This is reflected in his approach in Acts 17:1-4 where he reasons with the Jews and gentiles from the scriptures. In addition his admonition to the Ephesians [4:28b] where he reminds them to work with their hands as well as 1 Thessalonians 4:11 where he tells them to work quietly with their hands. The believer is constantly being examined because Christ’s name draws attention.

Paul is willing to be examined by others because he knows Who they will see. He knows that his life will reflect Christ and it will match up with the gospel.

## 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.

Paul’s not examining himself is not a reference to the idea that he is not evaluating his state of abiding or not within his moment-by-moment condition. Instead it has to do with the idea that he is not constantly bringing himself into question because he knows that he is abiding and the fruit of the Spirit does not bring about judgment [Galatians 5:23].

*When a believer abides what happens instead of judgment?*

Paul’s acquittal is not based on the fact that his conscience is clean. It is based on the fact that there is a perfect judge in the heavenlies. Due due to Christ’s perfecting work on the cross Paul is able to know that despite his previously murderous ways, despite his carnal desires sometimes (see Romans 7), his standing is secure before the Lord as he abides.

The Lord’s examination is perfect and just.

## Therefore, do not go on passing judgment before the time

Paul’s command on judgmentalism here is imperative: don’t do it. The Greek words underlying this sentence carry with them the idea that you should deny the thought emphatically. Now we have to ask ourselves an important question: *what’s the difference between being judgmental and having discernment?* Imagine in any body that the elders were treated in this manner. The consequences for this are divisive, which is precisely what Paul was trying to avoid all together.

## 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.

Carrying a similar theme to 1 Corinthians 3:12-14 we see Paul calling to the believers to defer to God’s perfect judgment and perfect reward. When we defer to God it puts us in a position of humility and in right alignment with Him. When we take this mantle on ourselves we usurp God’s authority and position and we wrongly interact with other believers. We should see that Paul, who tells us we should be waiting with anticipation for the Lord’s return, wants us to have anticipation with hope and that our living carnally brings about fruitlessness.

God knows what happens in secret. In my own life this verse and others like it have caused me great fear for God’s judgment because I did not understand my position in Christ. Paul’s concern is the rewardability of our actions and the fruit that we bear as abiding believers. The church in Corinth was so carnal that there was no way they could have a proper eternal perspective.

### Motives

*Why does it matter what our motives are?*

He knows even more than what actions happen in secret: He knows the motives we have. Motives reveal what actions may not. I can help someone for selfish gain or I can do it because the Holy Spirit empowers me. An abiding life is motivated by the empowering of the Holy Spirit and many of the day-to-day activities will be rewarded because the house we’re building is gold and precious stones.

## Closing Thoughts

Carrying through the theme of divisions in the church body at Corinth we can see strong warnings that started with divisions in arrogance over foolish thinking and continued to escalate between preferred teachers and then further to split into the tearing down of saints through spiritual abuse and judgmentalism. These very issues cause atrophy in the church today. When we see each other outside of the light of Christ and who we are positionally in Him and instead break each other down we violate the core truths of the scripture. Instead of seeing one another as growing and in process of being conformed to the image of Christ we can be tempted in the flesh to see failings, divisions, and actions in ways that do not reflect spiritual truth and God’s holy judgment.

*How have we been empowered to step past division and into deeper intimacy with one another in Christ?*