

## Topic

Faithfulness

## Theme

The believer is to be a faithful servant of God.

## Desired Learner Response

The learner will correctly evaluate his faithfulness in serving God and will take steps to correct any unfaithfulness.

**Materials**

* Resources 1, 2, and 6

Reality Check

## Scripture Focus

1 Corinthians 4

## Summary

The Lord has entrusted Christianswith ministry responsibliities,and He requires faithfulness. Instead of judging someone else's service, each of us should perform his own service faithfully to meet the Lord's approval. He will judgepride and divisiveness.

**Outline**

1. **God Will Disclose Faithful Service (4:1-5)**
	1. Steward's responsibility (4:1)
	2. Stewa rd's requirement(4:2)
	3. Steward's reward (4:3-5)
2. **Paul Demonstrated Faithful Service (4:9- 13)**
	1. Paul's purpose (4:6)
	2. Corinth's perception (4:7, 8)
	3. Apostlolic position (4:9-13)

**Ill. Paul Demanded Faithful Service (4:14-21)**

1. Paul's intentions (4:14)
2. Paul' s instructions (4:15-17)
3. Paul's interventio n (4:18- 21)

**Memory Verse** *"Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts:*

*and then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Corinthians 4:5).*

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# GETTING STARTED

#### Driveway Heroes

Children often imagine themselves as sports heroes. They play out scenar ios in their driveways,as if they were suddenly in the last seconds of the NBA finals.

While cou nting down from s, the y dribble toward the basket and heave up a long

shot just before they make the final buzzer sound . Their shots are always way out of their range and are almost never good. But that doesn't matter. In their fanta­ sies, they get as man y countdowns and chances to make the shot as they need.

And when they fina lly land an unbelievable, once in a lifetime shot, they jump around wildly celebrating their hero status as if it were real. Some even voice a broadcaster's gushing praise for making such an unlikely sho t.

**ASK:** What champi onsh ip scenarios di d you pl ay out as a child? (Ql )

**ASK:**What does it take to win an actua l basketball championship ? (Q2) *Lots of hard work. Recognition of weaknesses. A humble willingness to learn and improve.*

Paul continued his discussion about what a true servan t of God looks like.

He sa rcas tically exposed the Corinthians' fantasy tha t they were already spiritual champions. As a wise and caring coac h, he pointed them to the work and sacrifice that goes into becoming an actual champion for the cause of Ch rist.

**3** ... **2 ... 1** ... **BUZZZZ**

Set up a s mall trashcan or other container at the front of the room. Give eac h learn er a wad of pa per. Sta tion the learners about eight or more feet from the trashcan. Lead the class in counting down from five. Have them all shoot their paper wads at the trashcan when you get to one in the countd own. Make a buzz­ er sound as the wads are in the air. Make note of any celebrating by success ful

shooters.

**ASK:** For th ose w h o m ade th eir shots, di d you feel even just a t winge of satisfaction and pride for beating the buzzer?

**ASK:** Did draining your shot make you a basketball sta r?

Becom ing a star basketball player takes years of discipline and hard work. It also takes a humble willingness to learn from experie nced coaches. Even Michael Jordan had to lea rn how to play basketball.

Paul pointed out that the Corinthians' view of themselves as heroes of the faith was not reality. He burst their fantasies, confronted them with the tru th, and called them to a life of s piritual training.

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

#### God Will Disclose Faithful Service (4:1-5)

Although Paul held an importan t position as an apostle, he was humble. He

understood his position came with a serious responsibility, a requirement, and the potential for great reward.

### Steward's responsibility (4:1)

Referring to himself and other spiritual leaders such as Apollos and Peter, Paul wrote: *Let a man so account of us,as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God* (4:1).

The word for *ministers* is *huperetes,* meaning *under-rowers.* An under-rower was

a slave aboard a ship. Working at the bottom level of the vessel, he manned a set of oars and rowed hard as the pilot shouted commands. One can only imagine the dif­ ficulties, discomfort, and dishonor that accompanied such a role. Paul's point is that being a servant of God is not necessarily glamorous or luxurious in this life.

**RESOURCE:** Display resource 6. **ASK:** How does the mean ing of the word *min­ isters* help you see the importance of being faithful in service to the Lo rd? (Q3) (Reveal or record answers.) *Everyone in the shipcounted on theunder-rowers todo their job well and faithfully, especially if they were running from an enemy. The task of rowing demanded humility, which is intrinsic to fait hfulness.*

**ASK:** How does the under -rower metaphor help you understand the le vel of commitment demanded of a faithful servant? (Q4) (Reveal or record an­ swers.) *It shows that being faithful to serveGod may require every ounce of strength and courage that* a *person has to give. Faithfulness is necessary even though the*

*work is difficult.*

A *steward* (4:1) in an ancient household functioned as its manager. As a wise servant, he made the best possible use of everything the owner placed in his cus­ tody. He was personnel manager, paymaster, purchasing agent, and treasurer.

God entrusted Paul and the other apostles with *the mysteries of God* (4:1). He

disclosed to them truths about the gospel, the nature of the church, and the be­ liever's standing in Christ. Some of the truths about those topics were not under­ stood in the Old Testament. God's revelation clarified the mysteries. Once Paul and other apostles understood the mysteries, they had a responsibility to share God's truth. They acted as stewards over the dissemination of God's truth.

### Steward's requirement (4:2)

God required Paul and other leaders in his day to be faithful in handling the mysteries of God (4:2). Just as a household steward was accountable to his master for how he managed what was entrusted to him, so Paul and his coworkers were ac­ countable to God for what they did with the great truths He had entrusted to them.

Paul's goal was to faithfully pass on the content and understanding that he had received without making any additions, subtractions, or compromises (cf. 4:6; Acts 20:2 7; 2 Tim. 2:1, 2). He pressed the Corinthians to follow his example of wholehearted devotion and faithfulness to the truth.

**ASK:** What are the characteristics of a minister who is serious about being faithful to the truth? (QS ) *He will give evidence in his preaching, teaching, and*



According to Romans 16:25 and 26, a New Tes­ tament *mystery* is a truth *which was kept secret since the world bega n, but now* is *made mani­ fest.* In other words, it is something that the New Testament explains that the Old Testament did not predict beforehand. Among the mysteries the New Testament reveals are the nature of the

church (Eph. 3:4-6; 5:32), the rapture of the Church (1 Cor. 15:51), and the nature of the believer's relationship with Christ (Col. 1:26, 27).

*conversation that he is determined to understand and proclaim the entirety ofScrip­ ture, and that this is the driving force in his ministry.*

**ASK:** How should being faithful to the truth affect the Sunday School cur­ riculum and other teaching materials a church chooses to use? (06) *Achurch should seek to use materials that present theScriptures as God intended. Materials that purposefully ignore certain passages or doctrinal issues to appeal to* a *broader audience should be identified as m ateriasl that compromise the truth.*

Like Paul, we are accountabl e as God 's ste wards. Faithfulness, then, is the key characterist ic of a godly steward (1 Car. 4:2). This means that the steward's current accounts must receive his primary focus. In due time, God may reward the faithfu l s teward with an even greater accountability (cf. Matt. 25:14 - 30).

**READ:** Matthew 25:24-30. **ASK:** What does the Lo rd 's t rea t me nt of the man in the parable reveal about the character of God? (0 7) *It shows that Hede­ mands our obedience to His plan and expects us to use wisely any resources He has given us to accomplish His purposes.*

#### Steward's reward (4:3-5)

Paul was not intimidated by the Corinthians' opinion of him (4:3a). He knew that any human evaluation of his stewardship , including his own evaluation, could be faulty (4:3b).

**READ:** 1 Corinthians 4:4. **ASK:** Why is being more concerned about the Lo rd 's judgment above any other judgment an important part of being faithful to the Lord? (08) *Being concerned about the Lord's judgment keeps us from compromise and helps us see our service honestly.*

Although Paul had a clear conscience (cf. Acts 24:16), he understood that only the Lord could evaluate accurately (1 Cor. 4:4). He longed for his master 's app roval at the Judgment Seat of Ch rist (4 :5). In the mea ntime, any human judgment was bound to be flawed.

Paul taught that possessing a clear conscience does not make the believer blameless before God in terms of the eva luation that Chr ist will render at His Judgment Seat. This include s the fact that He *will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts* (4:5)- in other words, He will accurately disclose all acts of service that are worthy of reward.

That should encourage us to faithfully serve God with the highest integrity.

Note that a believer's prese nce at the Judgment Seat of Christ will mean that he is saved for all eternity. Furthermore, his sins will not be the focus of the judg­ ment (cf. Heb. 10:17). The Lord will exa m his life to determine only the degree of his rewa rd.

**ASK:** How much tho ug ht have you given to the rewards that you will receive at the Judgment Seat of Christ? (0 9)

Although we are encouraged when we hear a believer's word of appre ciation

for our service, what matters most is the Lord's approval. If He counts us faithful and approves of our service at His Judgment Seat, then we shall be satisfied.

**ASK:** How do we know that God intends the prospect for rewards to mot i­ vate us to be faithful to Him? (Q1O) *His clear revelation about theJudgment of Christ is a strong indicator that He wants us to be motivated by rewards.*

#### Paul Demonstrated Faithful Service (4:9-13)

Having presented the fact that Christ will judge believers for their faithfulness, Paul moved to a discussion about what it means to be truly faithful. His life, espe­ cially when contrasted with the Corinthians' service to God, served as a pattern for faithfulness.

#### Paul's purpose (4:6)

Paul used metaphors to figuratively communicate God's truth about God's

leaders 4( :6). He said that he and Apollos were like farmers, builders, servants, and

stewards. His point is that God's leaders are the conduits through which God's Word is communicated, but God's leaders are never more important than God's Word.

In violation of God's Word, team church in Corinthhad elevated the importance of church leaders. They taught as truth the idea that a believer's level of spiritual- ity was in part determined by the leader he chose to follow. The Corinthians then

violated God's clear Word by becoming proud and combative as they sought to prove their chosen leader was more important than the other leaders. Paul addressed this destructive error that the church *might learn* ... *not to think .* . . *above that which* is *written* in God's Word (4 :6). No one, not even the apostle Paul, had the right to add to God's Word (cf. Rev. 22:18, 19).

**ASK:** Why might a Bib le teacher be tempted to add to the Word of God? (Q11)

*Perhaps to excuse a sin, to gain an advantage over others, or to try tocontrol people.*

#### Corinth's perception (4=7, 8)

Pride and worldly wisdom always lead to self-exaltation or exaltation of oth­ ers, but no believer deserves personal glory. Instead, a Christian owes everything to God's grace (1Cor. 4:7). Instead of uniting in one accord as one team under Christ as Lord, the Corinthians divided into at least four teams, each under a dif­ ferent leader. Instead of being of one accord, they were experiencing discord.

**RESOURCE:** Dis play resource 2 to remind the learners about the different factions within team church.

The Corinthians' pride and worldly wisdom led them to believe they had already attained to high levels of spiritual maturity. Paul, with a bit of sarcasm, asked them a serious of questions in verse 7 to expose their misperception of themselves. They believed they made themselves better than others. They didn't accept that spirituality was not a matter of their own doing. They boasted that they were to credit for a level of spirituality they believed they had attained.

Continuing his sarcasm, Paul described how the Corinthians perceived them-

Jersey Confusion

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selves (4:8). They believed they had nothing lacking. They claimed they had such a high level of authority that they were ready to be kings in Christ's Kingdom.

Paul wished they were indeed reigning that he and the other apostles and leaders might reign with them. But that was not the case.

Paul's experience as an apostle was nothing like enjoyingthe luxuries and privileges of royalty. For this current church age is the season for faithfulness duringopposition and sometimes even persecution. Paul wanted the Corinthians to mature so that they would truly be ready for the time of Christ's reign.

* + 1. **Apostolic position (4:9-13)**

Paul shunned fame and humbly followed Christ. Faithfulness, not fame, was his goal. His faithfulness meant he faced constant harassment. The apostles lived as men condemned to death, as if they were captives being led to their execution. They were a *spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men* (4:9) like prisoners ready to be publicly killed in the Colosseum.Hardly a description of kings living in the lap of luxury!

The apostles were despised, ridiculed, and scorned by the world. They will­ ingly experienced weakness and were considered *fools for Christ's sake,* but the Corinthian believers did not want any part of such suffering. They coveted human wisdom, power, and glory (4:10). They wanted a Christian version of Greek wis­ dom instead of God's wisdom.

The apostles did not live luxuriously (4:12). Paul's apostolic job description certainly would not have attracted any financially comfortable or professionally and socially prosperous Corinthians. But the apostles weren't complaining. They realized that persecution comes with the territory of faithful service for God. They used the persecution as an opportunity to be a testimony of God's grace. They blessed and exhorted their persecutors in hopes of reaching them for Christ (4:12). But even so, many they tried to reach rejected their graciousness and treated them like filth (4:13).

**READ:** 1 Corinthians 4:11- 13. **ASK:** How does Paul's apostolic job descrip­

t ion help you understand the degree to which God expects us to be faithful in servi ng Him? (Ql 2)

* 1. **Paul Demanded Faithful Service (4:14-21)**
		1. **Paul's intentions (4:14, 15)**

**REA D:** 1 Corinthians 4:14, 15. **ASK:** What motivated Paul to speak so plainly to his children in the faith? (Ql 3) *His loving core for them.*

Sometimes a father must speak to his children plainly and sternly to warn them about a danger. He does so because he loves them. As a loving father, Paul warned the Corinthian Christians about the error of their ways (4:14). Even if they had ten thousand caregivers, Paul was their only spiritual father because he had led them to Christ (4:15).

* + 1. **Paul's instructions (4:16, 17)**

Paul braved the opposition in Corinth on his second missionary journey and spent a year-and-a-half proclaiming the gospelin the wicked city (cf. Acts18:1-17). Paul thus urged the Corinthians to imitate him in his actions and motivations.To make sure the Corinthians grasped his manner of life, Paul deployed Timothy to Corinth to convey that Paul lived as God's sufferingservant and faithful steward rather than as rich royalty (1 Cor. 4:16, 17).

* + 1. **Paul's intervention (4:18-21)**

Sometimes a son or daughter does not heed his or her father, so the father must reinforce his teaching with discipline. Some Christians at Corinth thought that Paul was giving vain threats. They interpreted Timothy's arrival to mean that Paul would never persona lly intervene in their affairs. So these arrogant, insolent prodigals rebelled against Paul's teachings(4:18). Paul assured them, however, that he would visit Corinth and discipline his rebellious children if the Lord willed (4:19). They would learn the hard way that Paul was very ser ious;he had apostolic power to back up his words with action (4:20).

The Corinthians believedthey were already in the *kingdom of God* (4:20). But their boast was vain, for the telling mira culous signs that will accompany the com­ ing of Christ's millennial Kingdom were absent (cf. Isa. 35; Heb. 6:5).

Like a faithful father, Paul did not withhold disciplinewhen it was necessary. But he preferred to give his spiritualchildren an opportunity to repent first. So he offereda clear choice: the sinning members of the Corinthian church could continue in their wicked ways or submit to his inspired counsel. If they chose to keep on sin­ ning, Paul would institute discipline among them (4:2ia). If they repented, he would leave the *rod* on the shelf and bea loving, gentle father in their midst (4:21b).

**ASK:** Why is consistently practicing church discipline so important in help­ ing church members to remain faithful ? (Ql 4) *Church discipline at all levels-as we will discuss in Le .son 5-encourages a culture of obedience and accountability among the body of believesr.*

A church ought to be a team of cooperative workers, bound together by their love for the Lord and for one another. Team members should not form little teams within the big team, but must rather work together faithfully as a well-disciplined unit to honorChrist.

# MAKING IT PERSONAL

### Under-Rower Review

Think of what it would have been like to be an under-rower on a first-ce ntury Greek s hip, carrying commercial items to Corinth. Imagine the sights, sounds,smells, and personalities you would encounter. Think of the physical dangers involved.

**ASK:** Why do you think Paul used such a vivid illustration of a minister? (Ql 5) *It reminds us of the dangers and temptations involved in being a faithfu,l humble servant of Christ.*

**ASK:** Have you seen yourself as an *under-rower* in your recent serv ice for God? (Q16) Explain .

**ASK:** What prideful or self- centered attitudes or outlook s might you need to address in your life? (Q l 7)

Encourage your learners to spend time honestly evaluating their livesas God's servants.

#### Reigning as Kings

The Corinthians were mistaken if they thought that they were alrea dy in the millennial Kingdom. But as we will learn in lesson6, the opportunity to rule in Christ's Kingdom will come to pass when Christ returns to set up His Kingdom.

**ASK:** From what you have already learned, how will you prepare to rule with Christ in His Kingdom? (Ql 8) *By learning to be humble and obedient to Him in the church today- servingwith the tenacity and grit of an under-rower.*

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#### Summary and Memory Verse

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Serve God faithfully. Encourage your learners to memorize 1 Corinthians 4:5. Give them an opportu­

nity to quote the verse in class next week.