

Reality Check



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

Scripture Focus

1 Corinthians 4

Summary

The Lord has entrusted Christians with ministry responsibilities, 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 judge pride and divisiveness.

Outline

I. God Will Disclose Faithful Service (4:1–5)

- A. Steward's responsibility (4:1)
- B. Steward's requirement (4:2)
- C. Steward's reward (4:3–5)

II. Paul Demonstrated Faithful Service (4:9–13)

- A. Paul's purpose (4:6)
- B. Corinth's perception (4:7, 8)
- C. Apostolic position (4:9–13)

III. Paul Demanded Faithful Service (4:14–21)

- A. Paul's intentions (4:14)
- B. Paul's instructions (4:15–17)
- C. Paul's intervention (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).

GETTING STARTED

Driveway Heroes

Children often imagine themselves as sports heroes. They play out scenarios in their driveways, as if they were suddenly in the last seconds of the NBA finals. While counting down from 5, they 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 fantasies, they get as many countdowns and chances to make the shot as they need. And when they finally 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 shot.

ASK: What championship scenarios did you play out as a child? (Q1)

ASK: What does it take to win an actual 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 servant of God looks like. He sarcastically exposed the Corinthians' fantasy that they were already spiritual champions. As a wise and caring coach, he pointed them to the work and sacrifice that goes into becoming an actual champion for the cause of Christ.

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

Set up a small trashcan or other container at the front of the room. Give each learner a wad of paper. Station 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 countdown. Make a buzzer sound as the wads are in the air. Make note of any celebrating by successful shooters.

ASK: For those who made their shots, did you feel even just a twinge of satisfaction and pride for beating the buzzer?

ASK: Did draining your shot make you a basketball star?

Becoming a star basketball player takes years of discipline and hard work. It also takes a humble willingness to learn from experienced coaches. Even Michael Jordan had to learn 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 truth, and called them to a life of spiritual training.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. God Will Disclose Faithful Service (4:1–5)

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

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

A. 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 difficulties, 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 meaning of the word *ministers* help you see the importance of being faithful in service to the Lord? (Q3) (Reveal or record answers.) *Everyone in the ship counted on the under-rowers to do their job well and faithfully, especially if they were running from an enemy. The task of rowing demanded humility, which is intrinsic to faithfulness.*

ASK: How does the under-rower metaphor help you understand the level of commitment demanded of a faithful servant? (Q4) (Reveal or record answers.) *It shows that being faithful to serve God 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 custody. 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 believer's standing in Christ. Some of the truths about those topics were not understood 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.

B. 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 accountable 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 20:27; 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? (Q5) *He will give evidence in his preaching, teaching, and*



According to Romans 16:25 and 26, a New Testament *mystery* is a truth which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest. 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 of Scripture, and that this is the driving force in his ministry.

ASK: How should being faithful to the truth affect the Sunday School curriculum and other teaching materials a church chooses to use? (Q6) *A church should seek to use materials that present the Scriptures as God intended. Materials that purposefully ignore certain passages or doctrinal issues to appeal to a broader audience should be identified as materials that compromise the truth.*

Like Paul, we are accountable as God's stewards. Faithfulness, then, is the key characteristic of a godly steward (1 Cor. 4:2). This means that the steward's current accounts must receive his primary focus. In due time, God may reward the faithful steward with an even greater accountability (cf. Matt. 25:14–30).

READ: Matthew 25:24–30. **ASK:** What does the Lord's treatment of the man in the parable reveal about the character of God? (Q7) *It shows that He demands our obedience to His plan and expects us to use wisely any resources He has given us to accomplish His purposes.*

C. 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 Lord's judgment above any other judgment an important part of being faithful to the Lord? (Q8) *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 approval at the Judgment Seat of Christ (4:5). In the meantime, 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 evaluation that Christ will render at His Judgment Seat. This includes 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 presence 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 judgment (cf. Heb. 10:17). The Lord will exam his life to determine only the degree of his reward.

ASK: How much thought have you given to the rewards that you will receive at the Judgment Seat of Christ? (Q9)

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

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 motivate us to be faithful to Him? (Q10) *His clear revelation about the Judgment of Christ is a strong indicator that He wants us to be motivated by rewards.*

II. 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, especially when contrasted with the Corinthians' service to God, served as a pattern for faithfulness.

A. 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 Corinth had elevated the importance of church leaders. They taught as truth the idea that a believer's level of spirituality 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 Bible 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 to control people.*

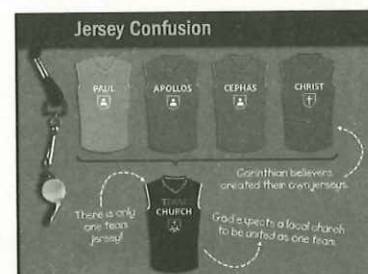
B. Corinth's perception (4:7, 8)

Pride and worldly wisdom always lead to self-exaltation or exaltation of others, but no believer deserves personal glory. Instead, a Christian owes everything to God's grace (1 Cor. 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 different leader. Instead of being of one accord, they were experiencing discord.

RESOURCE: Display 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 series 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-



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 enjoying the luxuries and privileges of royalty. For this current church age is the season for faithfulness during opposition and sometimes even persecution. Paul wanted the Corinthians to mature so that they would truly be ready for the time of Christ's reign.

C. 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 willingly 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 wisdom 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 description help you understand the degree to which God expects us to be faithful in serving Him? (Q12)

III. Paul Demanded Faithful Service (4:14–21)

A. Paul's intentions (4:14, 15)

READ: 1 Corinthians 4:14, 15. **ASK:** What motivated Paul to speak so plainly to his children in the faith? (Q13) *His loving care 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).

B. 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 gospel in the wicked city (cf. Acts 18:1–17). 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 suffering servant and faithful steward rather than as rich royalty (1 Cor. 4:16, 17).

C. 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 personally 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 serious; he had apostolic power to back up his words with action (4:20).

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

Like a faithful father, Paul did not withhold discipline when it was necessary. But he preferred to give his spiritual children an opportunity to repent first. So he offered a 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 sinning, Paul would institute discipline among them (4:21a). If they repented, he would leave the *rod* on the shelf and be a loving, gentle father in their midst (4:21b).

ASK: Why is consistently practicing church discipline so important in helping church members to remain faithful? (Q14) *Church discipline at all levels—as we will discuss in Lesson 5—encourages a culture of obedience and accountability among the body of believers.*

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 honor Christ.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Under-Rower Review

Think of what it would have been like to be an under-rower on a first-century Greek ship, 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? (Q15) *It reminds us of the dangers and temptations involved in being a faithful, humble servant of Christ.*

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

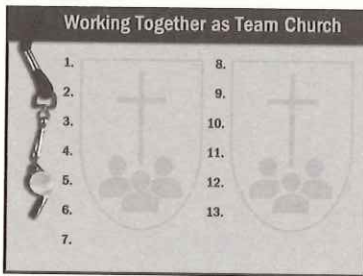
ASK: What prideful or self-centered attitudes or outlooks might you need to address in your life? (Q17)

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

Reigning as Kings

The Corinthians were mistaken if they thought that they were already in the millennial Kingdom. But as we will learn in lesson 6, 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? (Q18) *By learning to be humble and obedient to Him in the church today—serving with the tenacity and grit of an under-rower.*



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 opportunity to quote the verse in class next week.