

THE LETTER OF PAUL
1 CORINTHIANS
January 13, 2021

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Chapters 1-4 are all about keeping the proper perspective about one's self. Specifically it emphasizes how we are not to stress our importance or standing. Even the apostles must keep things in balance. It was also illustrated when Paul described the apostles as servants of Christ. Servants of Christ were to be trustworthy and held accountable to the Lord. For Paul the only judgment that counted was the final *Day of Judgment*. Ultimately it is the Lord who judges because only God can penetrate the secrets of the heart.

Paul set himself and Apollos as examples to follow. They did not boast or seek approval or status from their brothers and sisters in the faith. The only approval that counted came from God. All would get their recognition (if they deserved it) when the Lord returned. In the meantime, our energy and attention should be centered on being trustworthy servants. Paul was confident that no charge could be leveled against him. He has scrutinized his own actions and found no reason to judge himself. Trustworthiness or faithfulness is the bottom-line test of a servant of the Lord.

*It is difficult to imagine being able to make such a claim about ourselves as Paul did.
How do we see ourselves and evaluate our own actions?
Who is our example of faith?*

1 Corinthians 4:6-13

Paul moved on to reveal what he had been pursuing in the opening section of his letter. Until now Paul used indirect speech by making observations about himself and Apollos. Paul made himself an object lesson with the hope the Corinthians would apply it to themselves. He wanted them to learn the most basic lesson – No matter how different people may be, they are one in Christ. As a result there is absolutely no place for divisions, boasting, or judgment. This defines the basics of the gospel.

From the *Message Bible* by Eugene Peterson (4:7-8)
Who do you know that really knows you (knows your heart)?
And even if they did, is there anything they would discover in you that you could take credit for?
Is not everything you have (and everything you are) sheer gifts from God?
So what is the point of all this comparing competing?
You already have more than you need!
You already have more access to God than you can handle.

What places all believers on common ground is our equal dependence on God.
We are the unmerited recipients of the grace of God.
But some in Corinth got ahead of themselves.

Over against the Corinthian fiction of ruling and being filled, Paul paints another picture. He pictured apostles as condemned to death. Even in those dire circumstances apostles modeled the gospel by not returning evil for evil. They blessed, endured, and reconciled when people treated them in an opposite fashion.

In these verses Paul allows us to see what is going on in Corinth – Their divisiveness was really about power. Concerns for status and power showed they had not understood what it meant to live in Christ. Some believers were claiming that they were more advanced than other believers. In vs. 8-13 Paul tried to shock them into the realization that God's work in them had just begun. They had not achieved levels for which apostles had not even dared to reach.

*What do we still want to work on in terms of our faith development?
Name a time when your actions reflected the grace and love of God to an unexpected recipient.*



1 Corinthians 4:14-21

Paul looks back over his purposes so far and positions himself as pre-eminent over all others. He is the *father* of the Corinthians and they are his *beloved children*. His purpose was to admonish (not shame them) so he appealed to them. At that time children were expected to learn not only trade but appropriate behavior from fathers. Through the family metaphor Paul provided a moral pattern as well as a social grouping. All who belong to God are part of the family of God and are brothers and sisters to one another. On the basis of faith Gentiles are adopted with full rights of inheritance.

Paul and Apollos were different from each other yet they worked together in harmony. In the gospel they are one and there is no boasting, no judgment, no striving for status. Both behaved in such a way that God could provide the growth in his own field. Paul even represented the gospel when he was not treated as he should have been. So also the Corinthians should learn from him that they needed to be moved by love.

Paul closes this section with a note of warning. Some have become arrogant questioning whether Paul is coming (or not). He promised that he would not only come but when he came – He could come as a father ready to discipline them. Or he could come as an apostle with love in a spirit of gentleness. Either way Paul will come in the full power of the gospel.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Now we encounter the first specific example of how boasting has condoned a particular action. Corinthians should not be elated over the man who was living in an immoral way.

They should have gone into mourning.

Actions of that man was an indictment on the entire community.

It was their failure to exercise proper care for one another.

At stake was the well-being of the community and the future of the one who did wrong.

Paul would expect to encounter such behavior out in the world but not in the church.

In the final judgment God would eradicate all evil and all sin.

In the meanwhile our job is to maintain proper temple holiness.

Immorality and injustice were not to taint the fellowship of believers.

Paul then gave instructions to dismiss this man as his only hope.

If he were allowed to continue in the fellowship he might never be called to account.

He might not be challenged to bring his behavior in line with the gospel.

By excluding him from the fellowship the community would send a wake-up call to the man.

No longer would he be able to take their acceptance as an indicator of being on the right path.

His recommendation was not an ungracious opposition to the man.

But from his previous letter they should have known not to mingle with immoral people.

Casting this man out of the church paralleled the Jewish practice of removing yeast at Passover.

They were to be like fresh, unleavened dough.

One who eats leavened bread is threatened with being cut off from Israel.

Simply ridding the community of the sin was not sufficient.

Something positive needed to be put in its place.

His suggestion was to replace it with sincerity and truthfulness as from the Holy Spirit.

One either lives by worldly wisdom or one lives in godly sincerity.

With sincerity one would check one's motives to see if they were pure and open to examine.

Yeast became synonymous with contamination which was to be cast out to keep it holy.

For some time the Corinthians had immoral people in their fellowship.

This particular man was not the first but was seen by Paul as an extreme example.

First letter of Paul did not solve the matter.

Some of the Corinthians came up with some radically different understandings of his counsel.

How can holiness not only be lived but also honored and preserved in the world?

Paul thought it was not possible while one lives completely in the world.

People were to live within the ordinary transactions of human life.

But fellowship within the community was to be measured by another scale.

Inside the fellowship there was to be absolutely no immorality.

Immoral people were not to be granted fellowship in the body of Christ.

Such behavior was a corrosive, corrupting, and contaminating power.

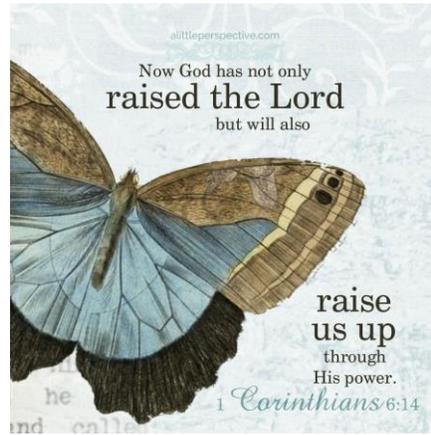
Believers had the responsibility to monitor such behaviors and to call it into question.

It was such behavior that threatened the health and wholeness of the community.

Paul pronounced judgment regarding the man and he must be expelled.

Such individual corruption brought the entire community under the judgment of God.

*Have we known of immoral behaviors within the church?
What are we to do in the church when we see it in our faith community?
When are we permitted to judge behaviors?*



1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Some Corinthian believers were taking other believers to civil courts to settle disputes. His series of questions placed the believers on the witness stand. Paul exposed the shameful conduct of the Corinthian believers. In the final judgment of God believers would form part of the heavenly court. Judgments rendered by the unbelieving could wrong others.

Questions arise of what is appropriate to do within our community in contrast to the world. His complaint about the Corinthians going to civil court was twofold – Those who valued wisdom did not have a wise person to adjudicate disputes. Those whom Paul presumed to be experts on justice turned to persons outside the community. What was up with that?

They turned to judges who knew nothing about justice and judging. Paul was convinced that believers should be able to work out their differences. They are the ones who know the difference between injustice and righteousness. Once more the boundaries marking the community from the world had been breached.

*How do we determine the health of our church?
What kinds of things cannot be settled within our church walls?*

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Paul has a fondness for maxims and so do the Corinthians. Maxims are characteristic of Greco-Roman education and culture. They are used in moral deliberation and in the education of children. They were epitomes of truth.

Maxim 1 – Everything is permissible for me.
Paul quoted their own saying to establish common ground with the Corinthians.
Paul attached qualifiers to broaden the understanding.
But all things are helpful and he would not be mastered by anything but God.
Mastery by the Lord was central to the life of faith.

Maxim 2 – Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food.
Paul added that God would wipe out both the one and the other.
God has power over all things (stomachs and food the people crave).

Maxim 3 – The body is not for immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.
Paul added that God raised the Lord and will raise us through his power.
Word *body* is used 30 times after this passage.
It is a technical term that refers to one's whole self.
We are for the Lord and the Lord is for us.
As a result believers must live in a way appropriate to Christ.

Maxim 4 – Every sin a person does is outside his body.
Corinthians believed no other sin was so directly related to the body as sexual immorality.
It implied that the sin of an individual was the problem of that person and not for the community.

Maxim 5 – The immoral person sins against his own body.
Corinthians believed the sin of this one man did not bear upon them in any way.
Sin of an individual did not contaminate or stain other believers.
Concern of Paul in both maxims was that Corinthians needed to become subject to Jesus Christ.
Believers are set apart for the one who owns them (and whose Spirit dwells in them).
Proper clinging to the Lord ruled out any and all rivalries.
Proper obedience of the servants to the Lord obviated all other potential allegiance to other lords.
Temple maintenance (proper to the Spirit who resides in the temple) was obligatory.

At the end of the chapter Paul laid down the defining claim for the believers:
They are those who are set apart for God.
They do not belong to themselves but to their Lord.
Their bodies (their very selves) are members of Christ.
They are the temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells.

Message is summed up with *Glorify God in your body*.
Rest of the letter is an elaboration on that one notion and a demonstration of it.

*What does it mean when Paul says we are not our own?
How do we live that out?*

Assignment for January 20
1 Corinthians 7-9