

I Corinthians 4:1-5 brings together two previous themes: judgment (3:13-15) and the apostles' role as servants (3:5-9). While the opening chapters hinted of the Corinthians' passing judgment on Paul, chapter 4 states this clearly.

4:1 Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

In 4:1 Paul returns to the same point he made in 3:5-9; Paul and Apollos belong to the church (3:21-22) but in the capacity of servants of Christ. The church was to regard them as such.

In 3:5 Paul referred to himself as a *diakonos* (διάκονος), a word which emphasized the nature of a servant. In 3:9 he referred to himself as a fellow-worker *συνεργός* (*sunergos*). Here he calls himself a *huperetes* (ὑπηρέτης), which is also translated as "servant," but was often used of one who managed the household affairs for the master. Then in the latter half of verse 4:1 and in 4:2, Paul calls himself a steward (*οἰκονόμος* *oikonomos*). The change in word choice from *diakonos* in 3:5 to "fellow worker" to "the manager of the household" and "steward" is important. The latter two terms carry the idea of accountability and authority. As servants of Christ, apostles are accountable to Him. As managers of His household, they had the authority of their Master (divine authority) backing their actions.

Their authoritative position is emphasized by the fact that they were entrusted with the mysteries of God (see notes on 2:7).

4:2 In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.

Paul saw himself as God's steward and he knew that God requires faithfulness of His stewards. A steward of the house was to do what his master would do. He should not attempt to substitute his Master's wishes with something else that he thinks would work just as well. For Paul this meant absolute fidelity to the gospel that he had received and preached. This establishes the single criteria by which God would judge and overrule the Corinthians' examination of Paul (Fee, 160).

As a servant, Paul had to be faithful to his Master; as a dispenser of his Master's wishes, he had to be faithful to those who were subject to his oversight.

Paul had been given the mysteries of God and dared not venture beyond what his Master had revealed, or mix truth with speculation, let alone exchange it for human wisdom.

4:3 But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court (lit. by human day); in fact, I do not even examine myself.

Since God was the one who entrusted Paul with the apostolic ministry, only God was able to determine if Paul was faithfully discharging his responsibility. The Corinthians' examination of him, or for that matter, an examination by a human court was of little significance to him. Even his own evaluation of his faithfulness was irrelevant for he was incapable of determining how faithful he really was.

Paul was content to wait for the Judge's evaluation of his stewardship. "This needs emphasis in a day when many are tempted to be introspective. Often they think that they themselves know just what their spiritual state is and just what their service for God has effected. The result may depress unduly or exalt above measure. But it is not our task to pass such judgments. We should get on with the job of serving the Lord" (Morris, 75).

4:4 For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.

Although Paul does not examine himself, he has a clear conscience about his actions. Nevertheless, he repeats that this doesn't mean anything by itself for God alone will determine what good stewardship is, not Paul's conscience.

4:5 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.

Paul concludes this section with the words "do not judge before the proper time." The Corinthians had judged Paul and others, but their judgment is foolishness since God is the judge. When God judges, He will take everything into account. Things that men have done in the darkness will be made visible. Even the

motives behind their actions will be uncovered. And once all has been brought out into the open, men will receive whatever praise God sees as fitting.

Faithfulness to the mysteries God revealed to Paul (the gospel) is the standard God uses to determine how good a steward is, not outward success. Jesus made a similar comment about teaching the principles in the OT (Matt. 5:18-19). By implication, those who teach the Word are also entrusted with a stewardship and they too will be judged by their faithfulness to it and the gospel itself.

4:6 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

Paul now applies the figures he had given in 3:5-4:5 directly to his relationship to the believers in Corinth and does so for their benefit.

The preceding analogies about planting, building and being a steward were all given for the Corinthians' benefit so that

- (1) they may learn not to exceed what is written and
- (2) so that they do not become arrogant toward one another.

"So that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written" has various interpretations. The NIV brings the meaning out more clearly: "so that you may learn . . . the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.'" Elsewhere in Paul's writings, "what is written" introduces quotations from the OT. Although we cannot be certain, we can surmise that Paul is referring either to the principles found in the OT or more specifically, back to the Scripture he had quoted in the earlier chapters (1:19, 29, 31; 3:19-20). The OT had warned about the wisdom of the world, the wisdom of God and about boasting in men. The Corinthians would benefit if they learned to submit to those warnings in the Word and stop placing their confidence in the wisdom of men.

The second benefit from Paul's exhortation was "that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other." This latter purpose is the overriding reason that Paul writes. In other words, in case they had missed it, Paul clarifies that the reason he had given so many analogies about himself and Apollos is to prevent them from placing their pride in certain individuals.

4:7 For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

The "for" in verse 6 gives the reason why this arrogance against Paul is wrong. The Corinthians saw their gifts and "wisdom" as elevating them to a place where they could look down on others. The verb translated as "regards as superior" means to sift out or separate between. In essence, Paul asks, "What are you so puffed up about? Who made you better than anyone else?" Or, Paul may be saying, "Who in the world do you think you are, anyway? What kind of self-delusion is it that allows you to put yourself in a position to judge another person's servant?" (Fee, 171). The Corinthians' pride was presumption on their part. But their arrogance also showed that they were ungrateful. They were acting as if they hadn't really received what they had from God, as if their abilities were earned or deserved. Boasting is an affront to God for it takes personal glory for what rightly comes from Him.

4:8 You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.

With biting irony Paul attacks the Corinthians' own view of themselves. They thought that they had arrived.

It is impossible to fully appreciate the force of this verse without knowing that two issues plagued the church; (1) "overrealized" eschatology and (2) the effects of perceived conversion experiences within many Graeco-Roman and especially Graeco-Oriental cults. "They changed 'the Christian eschatological message . . . believing that eschatology had been "realized'" (Thiselton, 357). Because they were acting as if the kingdom had come, they had transformed the gospel into a mixture of wisdom-gnosis and Spirit-centered enthusiasm (Thiselton, 358).

They thought they were filled (a verb that means to eat until full), implying they couldn't possibly need anything else. They envisioned themselves as rich - both in their wisdom and the abundance of gifts their church possessed. Paul says

that they acted like they thought they were kings (in the Messianic kingdom?) and had left the apostles behind.

Such a notion makes Paul wish that they really were reigning for that would mean that their Savior had returned and established His kingdom and Paul, along with every other believer, would be ruling right beside them. But that was obviously not that case; they were delusional about their own spiritual experiences.

4:9 For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

The Corinthians had thought that Paul should be like them; that he should have sought the same wisdom that they did and should have "matured" to their level of thinking. But Paul boasts about what they disdained and contrasts the way of the cross to their worldly way of thinking. God has made the apostles as a spectacle to the world, as those condemned to die.

4:10 We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.

Paul once more contrasts the Corinthians' arrogant self-assessment to the apostles. There is a double intent to much of what he says. The church viewed Paul as foolish, weak, and without honor. They viewed themselves as wise, strong, and distinguished. In reality, there was some truth to this. Paul was foolish, but his foolishness was the wisdom of God (1:25, 27; 3:18). He was weak, but his weakness was the weakness of the cross. Unlike the Corinthians who sought the honor of men, Paul's honor was in Christ.

4:11 To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless;

4:12 and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure;

4:13 when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

Paul stops his sarcasm and plainly states the road of the cross. The Corinthians were seeking the things of the world, but the cross involves suffering

in this age, and to the present hour Paul had experienced it in abundance. Far from having a rich, honorable life that the church in Corinth was striving for, he was considered the scum of the world, the dregs of all things.

4:14 I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.

In 4:6-13 two themes have surfaced; the church's pride (6-8, 10), and Paul's weakness (9, 11-13). In these verses Paul set forth the theology of the cross that includes rejection and suffering. Paul has also concluded the argument he had begun in 1:10. His goal now is to re-establish his authority which has been an issue within the church and a cause of some of the divisions that have existed (1:1; 4:3; 9:1-3). He does this by way of another metaphor; that of the father and child.

"The imagery of father and child has all the needed ingredients. It continues the important motif of Paul as the founder of the church (cf. 3:6 and 10); and the inherent authority of the father/child relationship allows him alternately to admonish (v. 14), to "urge" behavioral change (vv. 16-17), and if all else fails, to threaten discipline (vv. 18-21)" (Fee, 183).

"Parental love sometimes involves the unpleasant task of correction for the good of the child, but this is a sign not of indifference but of concern, care, and responsible love. Strangers and even grandparents can afford to be more relaxed about "training"; but parents have to suffer the recriminatory outbursts which sometimes accompany the imposition of discipline, which they enjoy no more than the child. Indulgent parents show a less responsible, less long term love than those who are consistent in correction and affirming support" (Thiselton, 369).

The Corinthians should have been ashamed of their behavior and ungodly thinking, but Paul is not simply trying to make them feel bad (contrast 6:5 and 15:34), rather, he is appealing to them as "beloved children". He is trying to achieve realism, not low self-esteem (Thiselton, 368).

Paul had described the road of the cross (4:11-13); now in 4:14-17 the apostle argues that they should become what he is.

4:15 For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

Paul, as the founder of the church in Corinth, pictures his relationship to the church like that of a father to his children.

Paul fathered them so that they might all be one "in Christ Jesus," not as a "loose federation of self-styled 'spiritual people'" but a spiritual family held together by centrality of the death and resurrection of Christ (Thiselton, 372).

We only have one father so it is a unique relationship. The father has a special love and concern for his children as well as authority over them. By way of contrast, a tutor was a servant (distinguished from a teacher) in whose care the master's children (usually his sons) were entrusted. It was the tutor's job to oversee the child's conduct. Contextually, Apollos, Peter, and others who were having an influence in the church fulfilled this role. By using such an analogy, Paul is not trying to exalt himself or erode their authority, but is reminding the church of the unique relationship he has to them and shows why he still holds an authoritative position and has a sense of responsibility toward them.

4:16 Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.

Paul exhorted them to imitate him based on the relationship he had to them. It was assumed that a good son would be like his father (cf. Matt. 5:44-45).

Paul, as a good father, led his "family" by example (see appendix 1). For the sake of the gospel, he suffered from hunger and thirst, was poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless, reviled, persecuted, slandered, and treated as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things (4:11-13). Rather than boasting in wisdom, the Corinthians should embrace the humility found in the gospel - as he did. Paul wanted them to change in their theology *and* in their behavior.

4:17 For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.

Prior to writing I Corinthians, Timothy had gone ahead to visit the church (if he was with Paul as he wrote this letter, one would expect his name to be mentioned in 1:1). It was Timothy's singular mission ("for this reason") to instruct the church in how to imitate Paul's "ways which are in Christ" (i.e. his behavior) and see the primacy the gospel has in all of life. Suffering (4:9-13), the imitation of Paul (vv. 15-17), and costly discipleship (vv. 18-21) are all part of the same package.

Paul had not yet heard if Timothy had arrived or how he had been received (16:10-11). It was probably Paul's concern over Timothy's reception that prompted him to emphasize that Timothy was his "beloved and faithful child in the Lord."

Paul reminds the church that he was not demanding more of them than other congregations, but he consistently taught the same principles to every church.

4:18 Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you.

The church was "arrogant", a word that means "vapor, breath, vanity, empty air, or that which lacks substance" in Hebrew (*hebel*; *Thiselton, 376*). They thought they had authority and wisdom, and some even spoke against Paul, but they had overlooked the possibility of his return. When he returns he will find out how much power backs their hollow claims.

4:19 But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power.

4:20 For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.

Paul intends on revisiting the church - and maybe sooner than they think - but his plans are subservient to the will of God (cf. 16:7; Ja. 4:15; in 16 -by the time the letter had been completed- his timetable had become clearer).

Though the church possessed worldly wisdom they did not possess power. Schrage is correct when he comments that in the context, "power is neither manipulative or miraculous, but derives its meaning from its contrast with *λόγος*, talk." (*Thiselton, 377*). The power Paul is speaking of is the power of the gospel that transforms the human heart. Talk is cheap; power is seen in transformation.

Chapters 1-4 revealed that the church had placed human wisdom over the gospel. Chapters 5 and 6 will show that it tolerated gross immorality within it. Both demonstrate that the power of the Spirit was missing.

The Kingdom of God primarily refers to the reign of Christ upon the earth (the millennium), but that reign has already begun among those who recognize Christ as King (i.e. the church). Its power is present among them now. Jesus made a similar statement in Luke 17:21 when He said, "behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst" (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἐντὸς ὑμῶν ἐστίν). The Kingdom was present because the King was present in the person of Jesus. Power accompanied His presence as well.

4:21 What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

Paul desires peace and reconciliation, but he once more applies the parent/child metaphor to the area of discipline. If they respond well to his letter and to Timothy, then they will experience Paul's gentleness. If they do not, he will be forced to discipline them. They will be the deciding factor in Paul's demeanor when he comes.

Although Paul's argument has been long (begun in 1:11), he now concludes it. The bottom line is that the church needed to change both their theology and their behavior. He will come in love, but his love will either be expressed through gentleness or through the rod (Barrett, 119).