

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Chapter 4

The Ministry of Apostles

4 This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. **2** Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. **3** But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. **4** For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. **5** Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. **6** I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. **7** For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? **8** Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! **9** For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. **10** We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. **11** To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, **12** and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; **13** when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. **14** I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. **15** For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. **16** I urge you, then, be imitators of me. **17** That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. **18** Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. **19** But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. **20** For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. **21** What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

4:1 *regard* – The apostles were not esteemed appropriately, and the situation worsened by the time of 2Co. (TLSB)

should regard – λογίζεσθω—The third person imperative has the force of a command: “I command each person to regard us as servants.” (CC p. 128)

We must be regarded, Paul begins, above all as “servants of Christ” (4:1; cf. 3:6). While the Corinthians could say that Paul, Apollos, and Cephas belonged to them (3:22), since the labors of these men had been devoted to their personal benefit, they needed to recognize that the ministers of the Gospel are ultimately accountable only to their Master (κύριος, 4:5); it is before their own Lord that they stand or fall (Rom 14:4). Consequently they are not concerned with “winning popularity contests” in Corinth. (CC p. 130)

stewards. The Greek underlying this phrase means “house manager” or “steward.” (CSB)

They minister on behalf of another: God. See “The Gospel and the Sacraments” (Ap XXIV 80). (TLSB)

Paul proceeds to elucidate more precisely the responsibilities of Christ’s servants: they are “stewards [οικονόμους] of the mysteries of God” (4:1). A steward often was a slave. Following the rabbis, Michel defines a steward as “a kind of chief slave who superintended the household and even the whole property of his master.” Moses was God’s steward, trustworthy in all his house (עֲבָדִי, “my servant,” Num 12:7; θεράπων, Heb 3:5; see Heb 3:1–6). According to Testament of Joseph 12:3, Potiphar’s wife told him to take Joseph as his “steward.” The role of a steward is in accord with the biblical description of Joseph in Gen 41:40–46. Jesus refers to “the faithful and prudent steward [οικονόμος] whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time” (Lk 12:42; cf. Mt 24:45). Jesus continues: “Blessed is that slave [δοῦλος] whom his master will find doing that when he arrives” (Lk 12:43). Paul understood his and his coworkers’ responsibility for faithful stewardship in the light of Christ’s instructions. (CC pp. 130-131)

mysteries. Things that human wisdom cannot discover but that are now revealed by God to his people. (CSB)

Paul and his colleagues were entrusted with management of “the mysteries of God” (4:1). Understanding “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” was Jesus’ gift to his disciples (Mt 13:11). These mysteries are not accessible to human wisdom (1 Cor 2:14; see 1 Cor 2:6–16). The mystery of the Gospel of Christ had been hidden throughout the ages and generations (1 Cor 2:7–9; see also Rom 16:25; Eph 3:4, 9; Col 1:26) and continues to be hidden from the wise and understanding (1 Cor 1:18–25; see also Mt 11:25). But now it had been revealed “to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit” (Eph 3:5; that was Paul’s theme in 1 Cor 2:10–16). As the Gospel mysteries were a gift that had been revealed to them, not knowledge acquired by their own brilliance, Paul, Apollos, and Cephas—and faithful Christian pastors in any age—can only be regarded as stewards of a sacred trust. (CC p. 131)

4:2 found trustworthy – Stewards must faithfully administer only that entrusted to them. (TLSB)

Since a steward was often left unsupervised for long periods, the most important quality looked for in such men was faithfulness (cf. Lk 12:42). A number of Jesus’ parables teach the need for faithfulness during the absence of the master, who upon his return will demand a strict accounting (Mt 25:14–30; Lk 19:11–27; cf. Mk 13:34). Similarly “the Lord of hosts” had spoken through Jeremiah, “Let him who has my word speak my word faithfully” (Jer 23:28). Paul himself had faithfully discharged his responsibility to transmit the Gospel tradition he had received (1 Cor 15:1–11). (CC p. 133)

4:3 not even judge myself. His judgment was merely human, and his conscience may be mistaken (v. 4). Only God is fully qualified to judge. (CSB)

Paul is God’s servant, and only his Master’s assessment matters. (TLSB)

Thus any assessment of his ministry by human beings was “quite insignificant” (4:3). While the Corinthians were making much of their own assessments of their teachers (1:12), in Paul’s scheme of things it all counted for very little. In 4:3, the word ἐμοί (“for me”) is placed first for emphasis. Paul is contrasting his own attitude with that of the Corinthians. Any preliminary evaluation of his ministry by them or anyone else’s day in court is beside the point. There is no place for the censorious spirit condemned by Jesus (Mt 7:1), for the withering condemnations of another’s ministry which preempt the divine judgment. The only day that counts is the great day of the Lord referred to in 3:13 (cf. 3:8). Paul is reminding the Corinthians again of the importance of the eschatological perspective. (CC p. 133)

4:4 *not thereby acquitted* – “Christ remains Mediator, and we should always be confident that for His sake we have a reconciled God, even though we are unworthy” (Ap V 42). (TLSB)

However, his own assessment could not be the final word: “but that does not make me innocent” (1 Cor 4:4). The verb δικαιόω (in 4:4 δεδικαίωμαι, “I have been acquitted,” “I am innocent”) is frequently used for justification, the believer’s standing before God (e.g., Rom 3:20, 24, 26, 28). In this context in 1 Cor 4:4, however, it probably carries the more limited sense of the Lord’s verdict on Paul’s ministry. The Lord Jesus, “the just Judge” (2 Tim 4:8), is his true examiner. Ever since his experience on the Damascus road, his one ambition has been to please his Lord (2 Cor 5:9; cf. 1 Thess 2:4). He knew that as long as he aimed to please people, he would not be a servant of Christ (Gal 1:10). (CC p. 134)

4:5 *appointed time*. When God will judge believers (see 3:13). (CSB)

The time for judgment is not before the Son of Man comes in His glory (Mt 25:31–32), in the light of which, human judgments lose all significance. (TLSB)

On the basis of his argument in this paragraph (ὥστε, “consequently,” 1 Cor 4:5), Paul urges the Corinthians to stop passing judgment on his ministry and that of his coworkers. His injunction against such premature judgments (μὴ πρὸ καιροῦ τι κρίνετε, “stop judging anything before the time,” 4:5) reflects Jesus’ words in Mt 7:1 (μὴ κρίνετε, “judge not!”). (CC p. 134)

The proper time (καιρός, 4:5) for judgment will be the Last Day, when the person to make the assessment will be the returning Lord himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:10). On that day he “will both bring to light the secret things of darkness and manifest the motives of the hearts” (1 Cor 4:5). He alone understands all the hidden counsels of the human heart (1 Sam 16:7; Ps 139:1; Rom 2:16; 8:27); thus he alone will be able to make a true assessment. (CC p. 134)

now hidden – All the evidence, such as inner motives, will be heard (cf Pr 21:2). (TLSB)

disclose the purposes of the heart. Cf. Ps 19:12; 139:23–24; Heb 4:12–13. (CSB)

Until the heart is opened, there is no basis for praise. Cf 3:14–15. (TLSB)

4:6 *these things*. See 3:5–4:5. (CSB)

the saying. Perhaps a proverb common among the rabbis. (CSB)

what is written. In Scripture. Our view of man should be Biblical (cf. v. 7; 1:9, 31; 3:19–20; Ro 12:3). We should recognize man’s weakness and ever-present limitations. (CSB)

The words of OT Scripture or apostolic letters, which became Scripture. (TLSB)

puffed up. One of the root causes of divisions. (CSB)

Conceited and cliquish. (TLSB)

4:7 *who sees anything different* – Rhetorical questions. No people should perceive in themselves any superiority or ground for boasting as though they were self-made and independent. (TLSB)

To deflate their pride, Paul asks three rhetorical questions. The first question, “Who concedes you any superiority?” (4:7), probably means, “Who has made you so distinguished?” Obviously the answer is “no

one.” No one has conferred on any Christian so distinguished a status that he has a vantage point for invidiously comparing one servant of Christ with another. (CC p. 141)

4:8 *have all you* – Paul uses irony and sarcasm here to get the Corinthians to see how poor they really are because of their haughtiness and spiritual immaturity in comparison with apostles. (CSB)

Paul sarcastically mimics their boasts. (TLSB)

Paul continues his ironic indictment: “Already you have begun to be rich!” (1 Cor 4:8). Like the self-satisfied church in Laodicea, they are saying: “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,” while failing to recognize that they really are “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev 3:17). The Corinthians were in danger of becoming “at ease in Zion” (Amos 6:1). (CC p. 145)

4:9 More sarcasm. (TLSB)

like men sentenced – The last people herded through the streets in a Roman military procession were captives, condemned to death. (TLSB)

spectacle. “Theater” is derived from the Greek word used here. Paul refers to the gladiatorial contests in the arena (or perhaps to the triumphal procession of a victorious Roman general). He pictures all the world and even angels looking on while the apostles are brought in last to fight to the death. (CSB)

Like gladiators condemned to fight to the death. (TLSB)

4:10 *we are fools for Christ’s sake* – Perhaps a term used by those who disparaged the apostles. (TLSB)

Just as the world regards the word of the cross as “foolishness” (1:18) and “weakness” (1:25), so it regards the bearers of that word as “weak” and insignificant men, as “fools on account of Christ” (4:10; cf. 3:18). Paul is closing out the argument of chapters 1–4 and anticipating his second epistle’s catalogues of the apostles’ sufferings (2 Cor 4:7–12; 6:4–10; 11:23–29). The word of the cross, which they preach, has been imprinted on their lives, as they follow their Savior in the way of the cross “like those condemned to death” (1 Cor 4:9). The world cannot understand how anyone could willingly let his life and all his thinking be taken captive to the obedience of a crucified Messiah (2 Cor 10:5). The world says: “Your life and your death are a waste.” (CC P. 147)

More irony. (CSB)

Still more sarcasm. (TLSB)

4:11–13 A graphic description of Paul’s condition in Ephesus right up to the writing of this letter. (CSB)

Using hyperbole, Paul reminds them of his suffering on their behalf. (TLSB)

4:12 *working with our own hands*. Paul was a tentmaker by trade (Ac 18:3; cf. 20:34–35; 1Co 9:6, 18). (CSB)

It was Paul’s practice to support his ministry with paid work, so as not to burden his hearers (1Th 2:9). (TLSB)

Hard work with their own hands was another feature of the apostles’ labors (1 Cor 4:12). The Greeks (probably including many members of the Corinthian congregation) traditionally despised manual labor,

thinking it was fit only for slaves. On the other hand, Jews insisted that every boy learn a trade. Jesus became a mason-carpenter (τέκτων, Mk 6:3), like his step-father, Joseph (Mt 13:55). John, James, Simon, and Andrew were fishermen. And Paul was a tentmaker and repairer. Paul, Aquila, Priscilla (Acts 18:1–3), and other like-minded Jewish Christians would have stood out in Corinth for their willingness to get their hands dirty. Thus they modeled Paul’s admonition that Christians should not be lazy but work for their living (Eph 4:28; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8). This was especially important at a time when some thought they could simply relax, having attained a spiritual place that gave them full satisfaction, beyond the need to endure any suffering or sweat in the service of the Gospel. (CC pp. 148-149)

But it was not only his Jewish appreciation for manual labor that led Paul to pursue his tentmaking. He was also concerned to present the Gospel of God’s free grace free of charge to his hearers and, in the process, to set an example as one who willingly gives up his rights for the sake of others (cf. Acts 20:33–35; 1 Cor 9:6–18). (CC p. 149)

we bless. See Mt 5:44. (CSB)

Following Jesus’ example, they do not render evil for evil (Mt 5:44). (TLSB)

endure it. Instead of retaliating. (CSB)

Paul’s words in 1 Cor 4:12b–13a closely echo his Master in the Sermon on the Mount. Again Paul shows his hearers the way of the cross, which to the world seems utter foolishness. Worldly people tend to live by principles of self-assertion and “getting even.” (CC p. 149)

4:13 *refuse of all things* – After sweaty exercise, Greeks and Romans would sprinkle themselves with sand, then scrape themselves off with a stick as a means of removing dead skin and filth. “Spiritual fathers must be ... like the filth of the world and everyone’s refuse and footrag” (LC I 160). (TLSB)

4:15 *countless* – μυρίους—Literally the adjective “myriad” means “ten thousand” (cf. Mt 18:24: “ten thousand talents”), but in this context it simply means “innumerable, countless” (cf. 1 Cor 14:19: “countless words in a tongue”). (CC p. 151)

guides in Christ – Paul acknowledges the legitimate role of the other teachers. (TLSB)

do not have many fathers – Fatherhood is a lifelong commitment, a comparison emphasizing Paul’s authority, patience, and forgiving attitude toward the Corinthians. They come to faith through his ministry. “The only ones called spiritual Fathers are those who govern and guide us by God’s Word” (LC I 158–59). (TLSB)

4:16 *be imitators of me* – Children imitate their fathers. As Paul himself seeks to imitate Christ, those who copy him will copy Christ (11:1). (TLSB)

4:17 *Timothy* – May be the bearer of this Letter (cf. Ac 19:22). (TLSB)

my beloved and faithful child – Both the Corinthians and Timothy were “beloved” (cf. v 14), but the Corinthians were not always faithful. (TLSB)

my ways in Christ – How Paul put into practice his teaching. (TLSB)

in every church – Early Christian catechesis had a uniform theme and content, as every church shared the same needs. Paul takes the Corinthians back to their catechesis repeatedly in 1Co. (TLSB)

4:18 *Some.* Some of the Corinthians who were trying to undercut Paul’s authority (see 9:1–3) were teaching that he was unstable (2Co 1:17) and that his ministry was not important (2Co 10:10). (CSB)

Perhaps the “super-apostles” of 2Co (cf 11:5), who usurp the authority of Paul by disparaging him. (TLSB)

coming to you – Paul is planning a visit, despite the charges of the arrogant. (TLSB)

4:19 *arrogant people.* See 5:2. (CSB)

if the Lord wills – As Jesus prayed (Mt 26:39) and James taught (Jas 4:15), Paul qualifies his plans with the acknowledgment that they may be overridden by God’s plans. (TLSB)

The book of Acts informs us that Paul was able to carry out his plans. Some months later, he spent three months in Greece, most of it presumably in Corinth (Acts 20:2–3). Before this extended stay, he may have paid a brief “painful visit” (2 Cor 2:1; cf. “with a stick” in 1 Cor 4:21) to the city. (CC p. 156)

4:20 *kingdom of God.* God’s present reign in the lives of his people—that dynamic new life in Christ (2Co 5:17), the power of the new birth (Jn 3:3–8), showing itself in a humble life, dedicated to Christ and his church. (CSB)

A phrase rarely used in Paul’s letters. (TLSB)

not consist in talk but of power. Idle, empty talk is contrasted with the genuine power of the Holy Spirit. (CSB)

4:21 Continuing the image of father and children from vv 14–15, Paul clearly favors coming with love, but it depends on the response of the Corinthians. (TLSB)

spirit of gentleness – πνεύματι τε πραΰτητος—πραΰτης is a Gospel term denoting the “meekness,” “gentleness,” and “courtesy” befitting those who belong to the meek and gentle Christ (e.g., 2 Cor 10:1; Gal 6:1; Eph 4:2). (CC p. 153)

Ch 4 People despise God’s messenger because the Spirit’s power is concealed in lowly, suffering leaders like Paul. The crowd always yearns for flashy leadership and despises those who teach the basics and lead by example. God sends us spiritual fathers to nurture us, entrusting to them both the Law and the Gospel for our spiritual good. • “Oh, may Thy people faithful be And in Thy pastors honor Thee And with them work and for them pray And gladly Thee in them obey.” Amen. (TLH 493:3) (TLSB)