

The Audience of One

1 Corinthians 4:1-7

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Before we get into God's Word together, I want to say how great it is to see our church respond to a call to actively share the gospel. Not only because Mark Cahill said it, but because Jesus said it, *Go into all the world and make disciples by sharing the good news about me*. It's a great sign of spiritual health when someone like Mark echoes Jesus' words and we get excited about it.

The timing was providential that Travis was here the same weekend and it's my hope that this energy we have for outreach and this new pastor we have to lead in this area would get some serious momentum going. Great things could come of it. Let's pray they do.

Our teaching journey through 1 Corinthians finished chapter 3 with the glorious truth that we are co-heirs with Christ and because all is His and we are His, all is ours. Since all is ours because we belong to Christ, Paul asks why we stoop so low as to act like we belong to a human leader, even a great man like Peter or Paul. We belong to Christ. We are His. Applying that truth in the Church clears away the rancor of the "groupie" mentality. That mentality destroys unity and that's exactly what it was doing in Corinth.

In chapter 4 Paul senses their confusion. How should we view our spiritual leaders? I think that there is a lot of confusion to this day among many Christians. *Is the pastor or elder the revered leader or the congregational whipping boy? Should I look up to him or look down at him?*

In a small way I sense some uncertainty when people ask what they should call me. Some people grew up with Father so and so or Reverend so and so and I don't fit that mold. It was really bad when I first came to Bethel years ago at age 29. I looked really young for my age. I was probably 35 or so when my doorbell rang and I went to the door and opened it and there was a door-to-door salesman on the front porch who looked at me and said, *Is the man of the house home?* The kicker for me was in my first year here when I was at a social function and a member of our church wanted to introduce me to a local pastor's wife from another church. Now this pastor's wife was dressed like she was a 1950s movies star. He said to her, "This is Steve DeWitt, the new pastor at my church." She looked me up and down and said, "You mean, youth pastor right?" He said, "No, Senior Pastor." She looked back at me with her nose slightly in the air, "Eeohh..."

She was lookin' down on me. How should we look at a pastor or elder or spiritual leader? Up? Down? Sideways? If we shouldn't put them on a pedestal, then where do we put them? He answers this question beginning in verse 1 –

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. 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. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. 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. (1 Corinthians 4:1-5)

How to View Spiritual Leaders

Remember, Paul didn't write chapters when he wrote this letter. The first Bible to have chapter and verse divisions was the Wycliffe English Bible in the 1300s. That's important to realize because Paul didn't think, *Chapter 4, time to start something new*. He is continuing his theme from chapter 3 about the judgment seat of Christ and eternal reward or loss of reward on that day.

The reality of that future judgment is the foundation of what he says here. Since Christ is the one who makes the judgments, how should the Corinthians, and all Christians, view spiritual leaders in their life? *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ.* (1 Corinthians 4:1a)

Servants of Christ

He said the same thing in chapter 3. Who are Apollos and Paul? Really important people? No. They are servants; workers in the field. The Greek word for "servants" here is a word that originally referred to the rowers on the bottom level of the ship. The large ships of that day depended on wind and rowing to move. To be a rower in the bottom of the galley was a most miserable place. Think *Ben Hur*. The Greek word came to mean someone who is under the authority of another; a bottom rower. Apostles, pastors and elders are all men under authority. Servants. Bottom rowers. Notice who they serve. They are servants of Christ.

I recall hearing Pastor Alistair Begg say at a conference that he tells his church often that "I will always be your servant, but you will never be my Master." He will always be their servant but they will never be his Master. His allegiance is to Christ and his service to the church is for Christ.

I believe that strikes the balance found here. Pastors and Elders and spiritual leaders are here to serve the church. We are servants in the church. But at the same time, the church is not our Master, Christ is. He is who we are accountable to and the One to whom we will give an account.

This is a very important balance for a pastor and churches. If pastors forget who they are serving, they steer their ministry and teaching toward whatever keeps the congregation happy. When your ministry avoids challenging passages and awkward topics, you make sure to speak happy messages, you avoid confronting people for their lifestyle, you play politics in the church, and you keep the right people happy. Pastors become ecclesiastical politicians.

The other side is also full of error where pastors don't view themselves as servants *in* the church. Then the church belongs to them and they rule with an iron fist and use people to fulfill their vision. They aren't servants, they are masters.

Biblical leadership strikes the fine balance. There is a difference between being a servant *of* the church and a servant *in* the church. Pastors are servants in the church but not of the church (and churches shouldn't treat them that way). They are servants of Christ who express that servanthood by serving the church. Biblical churches and biblical Christians want that kind of pastor/leader.

Stewards of the mysteries of God

A steward is the administrative head of the household hired by the master to watch over his house. One example of this is Joseph. Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his whole house. He was a slave, but he was a steward in the house as well.

A steward of the mysteries of God. When Paul talks about "mystery," he is talking about truth that the natural man cannot understand but has been revealed through Christ. He speaks to this in 2:14, *The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.* (1 Corinthians 2:14) To the natural man, apart from the Spirit's aid, the gospel remains a mystery. But to the Christian who has the Spirit, the mystery is known and cherished.

The spiritual leader in the church is a steward of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Word. How does he steward these mysteries? He teaches, preaches, disciplines, and protects the church against false teaching. Essentially he does 2 Timothy 2:15, *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.* (2 Timothy 2:15)

Serving Christ in the church and stewarding Christ's truth to the church is a vitally important role as long as it is seen for what it is and is evaluated properly. This is what he says now in verse 2. How should this ministry be done? What is the measure? *Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy* (1 Corinthians 4:2). I like the way the KJV says it, *It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.* (1 Corinthians 4:2, KJV)

The measure with which Christ evaluates church leaders is not the size of their following, the degrees behind their name, their fame or the applause they receive from men. Christ is looking for faithful servants. In the parable of the talents, it was the master who said, *Well done, good and faithful servant.* Church leaders must be faithful and trustworthy in all things.

I don't have time to develop this, but God is looking for faithfulness in all His servants, not just the leaders. Can He count on us? Are we trustworthy in the ministry responsibilities we have? We all should take a moment and self-evaluate on that because the day is coming when Christ will evaluate on that and reward us accordingly. Faithfulness for Christ will be richly rewarded.

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. (1 Corinthians 4:3) Here is the direct point. Christ is the only one who judges His servants and His judgment is the only one that matters. We serve an audience of One. It is Christ. No man can serve two masters.

Pastors and churches have to understand how this works. I hear stories from pastors about church situations they are in where the members of the church act as if they are the pastor's judge and jury. I know some stories that would just make you sick and there are a lot of very discouraged pastors out there. There are discouraged churches out there too because of misguided pastors. It goes both ways and it always has. This is what was going on in Corinth as well.

Find a discouraged pastor and it's not likely the church finances or the persecution outside the church that is causing his discouragement. It is likely criticism he's facing in the church. People who think he's too much this or not enough that and they may even be right to some degree. There are no perfect pastors so all have weaknesses that can accurately be pointed out. But there are no church members who accurately judge either. Only One can do that.

So what do you say to a pastor or elder who has been ripped apart by someone who has self-appointed themselves as Jesus? Tell them what Paul says here. Human judgment is insignificant in light of the judgment of Christ. It's like walking into federal court and worrying about what the gallery thinks. The gallery doesn't matter. The judge does. We serve an audience of One. The judgment seat of Christ will vindicate many a discouraged pastor and

indict many a seemingly successful one. It will also indict many a critical eye and tongue that sowed discord in the church. But there's the point; since Christ's judgment is future and since it is the only one that matters, don't be quick to judge either the good or the bad. We have to take the long view and to wait for the final word.

I think of one of my heroes, George Whitefield, a great preacher who was constantly criticized. He was asked, "What do you want said on your gravestone?" He replied, "Here lies George Whitefield, what sort of man he was the Great Day will discover."

This is not to insinuate that pastors or elders are beyond admonishing or accountability or that it allows any kind of attitude that says, *I don't care what you think*. It's just that spiritual leaders are like everybody else. We serve an audience of One which keeps us from being too discouraged by criticism or too encouraged by applause. We'll have to wait and see what He has to say.

Paul goes on to a second kind of judgment we make. *How do we judge ourselves?*

The Danger of Self-Assurance

In fact, I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. (I Corinthians 4:3-4)

Do you remember the show *Happy Days*? Do you remember the show's open where they are playing the theme song and one of the shots is of Fonzy looking in the mirror with a comb? What does he do? He looks at himself and says, *Ehhh!* He sees himself and he sees perfection.

Paul would never say that he was perfect. However, here he says he isn't aware of anything condemnatory in his conscience. Great. But even the Apostle Paul has to say, *But my opinion about myself doesn't matter either*. There's an audience of One; what He thinks is what matters.

There is such a danger in letting our own self-assessment guide us because we are so self-biased in our self-assessment. We are like Fonzy, "Ehh!" And Christ might be thinking, "Nooo."

It's kind of like after taking a test in school. Your mom might say, "How do you think you did?" She wants you to get good grades so you can get a job and not sponge off of her for the rest of your life. She wants you out of the house! Ever take a test and think you did well only to get the grade and find out otherwise? The wisdom here for us is that none of us should take our personal evaluation as the one that matters. We have to take a long view of spiritual leaders and a long view of ourselves. Like George Whitefield, what sort of servants we have been for Christ, the great Day will discover.

How Christ Will Evaluate Us

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. (I Corinthians 4:5)

So there are two judgments not to make too much of and one judgment we can't make too much of. Don't worry too much about what people say about you or what you say about you. Concern yourself with what Christ will say when you stand before Him to give an account. When will this happen? When the Lord returns. We don't have time to get into that, but this judgment is future after Jesus returns to consummate all the prophecies and to execute

justice and righteousness in His earthly kingdom. The day is most certainly coming. Since all Christians will go through this, we'd better understand how it's going to work. It's kind of like asking the teacher before a test what is going to be on the test.

Full Disclosure

...who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness... (I Corinthians 4:5b)

Darkness doesn't mean evil, it means hidden. There are things about us that are hard to see, both good and bad. God will shine His light of evaluation on what is seen and what only He can see in our hearts and lives. People evaluate us based on what they can see, which in most cases means that we all have much higher opinions of each other than we would if we knew everything about each other. Amen? The more we know people, the lower our opinion tends to go.

But someday there will be a full disclosure and all of us will be seen by Christ for who we really are, both the good and the bad. At the judgment seat, nobody will say to Jesus, "You don't know the whole story!" Or "I don't think you have the right perspective," or "That's not what I meant!" He will evaluate us with perfect justice, impartiality, and love. What isn't He judging?

Why we did what we did and who we did it for

...and will disclose the purposes of the heart. (I Corinthians 4:5)

Other translations go with "motive" of the heart. Jesus' teaching was always concerned much more with why we do what we do. Small things done for the right reason receive a reward (cup of cold water in Jesus' name). Big things done with the wrong motive receive no reward *If I speak with the tongues of men and angels but have not love, it is nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1).*

Wrong Motives

*Men's Approval
Earn salvation
Personal Comfort
Avoiding Suffering
My Kingdom*

Right Motives

*God's Approval
Express salvation
Sacrificial Spirit
Embracing Suffering for Jesus' sake
God's Kingdom*

In saying this, let's realize that while in this flesh, our motives are never without the tinge of self. In Romans 7 Paul confesses the same thing. However, as a new creation in Christ and with a new heart that the gospel has provided, I am now capable of doing the right things for the right reasons. God loves it when we do. Prior to my salvation I could do the wrong things for what seemed like right reasons and I could do what seemed to be right things, but for the wrong reasons, but I could not do the right things for the right reasons.

In Christ, now I can and God calls us to do it and tells us what the right things are in His Word. We now can have the right reasons because He changed us. These words are intended to motivate us to look carefully at what we do and why we do it and who we are doing it for. He will reward us. So we are back where we were in chapter 3. Since this is the case, what should we do? Live today in such a way that when you're dead you'll be glad that you did.

This is the joy of serving Christ. He is a generous king. He's changed our hearts by regeneration. He's changed our direction through repentance. He's given us purposes that are eternal in focus. He empowers what we do by His Spirit. He's given us fellow Christians to

serve alongside. He's promised when we do what we do for Him and for His glory, He will reward us. And He will. It's all good and now the challenge is to go and do it for the right reasons and for the right person - Christ and His glory.

So, as Martin Luther said, "There are two days to live for, this day and that day." Since that is the case, what should be our perspective? Remember George Whitefield's tombstone, "When I die, I desire no epitaph but this: here lies George Whitefield. What sort of man he was the Great Day will discover." Indeed it will.

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