

“Through the Gospel”

The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 4:1-21; Deuteronomy 4:1-8

One of the vivid memories that many of us share from our collective childhoods is that of our exasperated mother telling us “wait till your father gets home.” In our text we have the apostolic equivalent. “Wait until your apostle returns.” Paul is in Ephesus when he writes his first letter to the Corinthians. Although in the providence of God, Paul never did return to Corinth, nevertheless he considers himself to be the father in the faith of the Corinthian church because of the gospel he has preached to them. So Paul admonishes the Corinthians to imitate him because Paul does not seek favor with men, but from Christ, who is Lord of his church. As the spiritual father of this church, Paul hopes to return to Corinth to see his spiritual children. When he returns, the apostle hopes that the immature who are acting arrogantly will have humbled themselves and that he will be able to come in a spirit of gentleness.

Having wrapped up Paul’s discussion of true versus false wisdom in the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians, we now turn to Paul’s discussion of the nature and authority of his apostolic office in chapter four. Up until now, Paul has been speaking in rather general terms. Now he gets very specific. The pastoral gloves come off. In the first five verses of chapter four, Paul confronts those who have been judging him using the standards of worldly wisdom discussed in previous chapters. In verses 6-13, Paul addresses those in the church boasting about their own false perception of their own wisdom and stature. Paul then speaks fondly as a father speaking to his children in verses 14-17, before closing out the chapter with a very stern warning to those who reject the authority of his apostolic office.

In this chapter we see a rare picture of Paul—the apostle is a bit sarcastic as he scolds the church in Corinth which he helped to found. Paul has suffered greatly. He has sacrificed much. No question that he hates to see this congregation facing division and schism, fighting among themselves, solely because they have not been able to leave pagan wisdom and categories behind. And so in this chapter, Paul sounds very much like an disappointed father getting word that his children are misbehaving, and then warning them that he is coming home after work, to either punish or commend them, depending upon how they behave. Paul is clearly vexed and more than a little frustrated.

So, having wrapped up his discussion of true and false wisdom, and having told the Corinthians that the time has come for them to move on to maturity, Paul turns his focus to the way in which God vindicates Paul’s ministry. He is a servant of Christ, not just another faction leader.

As Paul states in verse 1, “*This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*” What follows in the next five verses is the application to be drawn from the preceding discussion regarding the foundation laid down in the gospel, and that when believers assemble together, they make up the temple of the Holy Spirit. Given the fact that ministers are servants of God, certain things must follow. That worldly wisdom still adored by the Corinthians, must play no role in evaluating that which God reveals. God alone can give a true and valid judgment of those who serve in Christ’s church. Paul now returns to the theme of servanthood, first introduced in 1 Corinthians 3:5, only this time with a new slant—God’s servants are accountable only to God. Ministers and their ministries are not to be evaluated from a worldly point of view, but a biblical one.

Paul's first point is that ministers are not to be regarded as anything but servants of Christ. The Greek word Paul uses is not *diakonoi* (i.e. table-waiters—from which we get our word “deacon”), but *hyperetes*, which refers to an “under-rower,” that is, an oarsman on the lower deck of a large ship.¹ Ministers are servants of God, called to a position of service which the world regards as lowly.

But ministers of God also have been entrusted with the secret things of God. Although the world regards what they do as lowly—bottom deckers—God has called them to a very unique and important task. The word here translated as “stewards” is *oikonomou* which refers to someone who supervises a large estate, i.e., a manager or an administrator. This term should make us think of one who functions as a chief of staff.² The *oikonomou* ran the master's estate, cared for the property and animals, supervised the laborers, procured supplies, etc. But the *oikonomou* was always subservient to the owner of the estate. Usually this individual was himself indentured or a slave, but was a master over others of the same status. And this is how we must view a minister (and office-bearers). They care for the church, which is not theirs, but Christ's, even though they take a special pride in it.

The reference to secret things is an important one. Paul has already defined these secret things in 1 Corinthians 2:1, 7, as those things connected to revelation of the gospel—which was a mystery throughout the Old Testament until the coming of Jesus Christ. Here, Paul reminds us that these secrets have been entrusted to the ministers who are now to proclaim them. Ministers are administrators or stewards of these mysteries as they are revealed in God's word. That which was hidden is to be made plain. This is why only ordained ministers can preside over the sacraments, and matters related to keys of the kingdom (binding and loosing).

Because they are entrusted with the mysteries of God's revelation, ministers are held to a higher standard than the laity. Paul spells this out in verse 2. “*Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.*” Those who have been given the job of supervising the master's estate, must do their duties faithfully. Those who do not demonstrate themselves to be trustworthy, disqualify themselves from such service. This is why in Reformed and Presbyterian church polity, the duty of supervising the supervisor is given to the consistory (the elders). The elders are to watch the doctrine and the life of the one entrusted with the mysteries of God (the ministers), so that the word is rightly divided, that pastoral care is exercised, and that Christ's church is kept free of scandal.

But in verse 3, Paul now gets to the point of this brief exhortation. “*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.*” Paul has a completely different understanding of this than do the immature in the Corinthian church. The various ministers in the Corinthian church were servants to the Corinthians, but the Corinthians are not the masters of Paul, nor any of others who had taught them. God is Paul's master.³ Since God is Paul's master, the apostle makes it very clear that he doesn't necessarily care what the Corinthians think of him. Paul does not stop and continually judge himself in light of the complaints against him from the Corinthians. Rather, Paul knows that God is the final and ultimate judge of his teaching, so even if he is personally hurt by the criticism of the Corinthians, he will not change his methods or approach because

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 71.

² Hays, First Corinthians, 65.

³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 72.

of it—unless and until God instructs him to do otherwise.

The practical application of this is obvious. Ministers must be very careful not to preach so as to be popular or well-liked, or to preach to the so-called felt needs of the congregation. Ministers are to concentrate upon communicating the meaning of the biblical text—i.e., explaining the mysteries to which they have been entrusted. Likewise, the way in which the people in the pew should evaluate a sermon is not by whether the sermon was entertaining, motivational and so on, but along the lines of “did the minister clearly and simply explain the biblical text.” Does he draw appropriate application from the text? This is what Paul has done because Christ has revealed to him the gospel, which Paul in turn, has been entrusted to proclaim in those churches he has helped to found.

As Paul states in verse 4, *“I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.”* Because Paul knows that God is his judge, his conscience is clear—he has done his best to be faithful, and as he recounts in Philippians 3:4b-11, Paul knows that God has covered all his sins with Christ’s perfect righteousness. But since God is Paul’s judge, Paul’s own efforts do not acquit him. Paul wisely leaves this matter in God’s hands where it ought to be left. He is not going to allow those judging him by worldly standards to thwart his divinely-appointed mission.

Paul knows that a final judgment is coming, that he is covered with the righteousness of Christ and so as he puts it in verse 5, he will wait for the judgment. *“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.”* Paul exhorts his readers to concentrate on being faithful, but to leave the outcome of these things in God’s hand. The appointed time, for which we are to wait, is the Second Advent of Jesus Christ. On that day, all things will be brought out into the open, including those things we hide in darkness—a metaphor for sin—such as the motives of our hearts. On the day of judgment, God will deal with all of this. As one writer reminds us, “the business of praise and blame belongs to God.”⁴ This, of course, fits with Paul’s repeated rebuke of busybodies in the church.

There are really two issues raised in the following verses. One is the work of Paul and Apollos among the Corinthians. The second has to do with the trials endured by the apostles in which Paul contrasts his lowly state with that the self-important status found among by the Corinthians. Paul’s remarks in this regard have been called “an impassioned and incisive piece of prose, with irony so biting that some have felt that Paul can scarcely be addressing the church as a whole.”⁵ But in the absence of any limitations attached to these words, we must assume that these remarks are addressed to the church as a whole. They constitute what we might call a stern fatherly rebuke!

We begin by addressing the issues relate to Paul and Apollos in verses 6-7. *“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. 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?”* This is a very difficult sentence in the Greek and is very tough to translate. Paul uses a figure of speech—“applied” which means something like “to transform.” He does this to make

⁴ Hays, First Corinthians, 67.

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 76.

the point that he and Apollos are illustrations of what true servanthood should entail. Paul and Apollos have done all this for the benefit of the brothers (note the continued use of affectionate language). Because of their example, the Corinthians are not to elevate men over God's purposes, by continuing to take pride in the factions which they had created.⁶

Paul asks the Corinthians to consider the obvious—they are no different from anyone else. Everything they have comes from God—including the gospel which has been taught to them by both Paul and Apollos. They are not to go beyond what is written—which I take to be a reference to the sufficiency of Scripture. God has revealed to us everything in his word which we need to know. Paul's words echo certain Old Testament passages such as Deuteronomy 4 (our Old Testament lesson this morning) which speak of the written word as authoritative and something which cannot be added to. And since these things come from God, on what basis, then, can the Corinthians boast? When using worldly categories, the Corinthians may have been able to boast. But when viewed from God's perspective, Christians have nothing to boast about. We have nothing to boast about, because all we have God has given us.

The effect of Paul's rhetorical questions, then, should put those who boast in worldly wisdom in their place. It were as though Paul were saying to those who boast, "who do you think you are?"⁷ To take credit for a gift from God is the height of worldliness and a most foolish act when viewed from the perspective of the cross. The ironic nature of what follows should not be missed. Perhaps these words actually reflect what some were saying in Corinth,⁸ although we cannot be sure. In any case, what follows in verses 8-13, amount to what one commentator calls "withering sarcasm."

Paul begins by reminding his readers in verse 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!*" The Corinthians have all they want—they are fully satisfied, they think of themselves as rich and as kings. This, of course, is the problem with the church Laodicea as reported in Revelation 3:17. Jesus says to them, "*For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*" The Corinthians face the same rebuke from Paul. They think they have all they need. They are secure and self-sufficient, which in actuality, is a dangerous state to be in, but probably quite typical of the influences of Stoic philosophy.⁹ Because of the influence of pagan philosophy, the Corinthians cannot see that they are not rich at all.

The actual conditions faced by the apostles are quite different than the erroneous estimation of things being made by the immature among Corinthians. Paul spells these out in verses 9-13. "*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. 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. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have*

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 75.

⁷ Hayes, First Corinthians, 69.

⁸ Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 108.

⁹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 76.

become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”

Paul is not complaining in these verses, but he is pointing out that preaching the gospel has not brought fame, success or fortune as the world regards fame, fortune and success. In fact, he endured a number of horrible things while in Ephesus, from where he is presently writing to the Corinthians (recounted in Acts 19:23 ff). But this position of weakness and depravation enables Paul to preach the gospel for what it is—the power of God for salvation of all who believe. Paul can’t trust in his own abilities (which he knows, humanly speaking are lacking). Therefore, he must trust in the power of God .

The number of the things Paul mentions which he has had to endure is utterly remarkable. He has felt like an exhibit brought into the arena to be mocked and thrown to the animals. He has but put on display for the whole world to watch (both men and angels). His gospel is considered foolishness, he is weak and dishonored, while the Corinthians see themselves as wise, strong and honored for behaving like pagans while still using the wisdom of “this age” to make sense of heavenly things. Paul has suffered great economic depravation. He is hungry, homeless, has no material possessions and is often brutalized. He works as hard as humanly possible, and blesses those who curse him, while at the same time enduring the persecution to which the Lord has called him. He is slandered and does not respond in kind. Paul is regarded as something to be swept up and thrown out like so much trash, so that the world will be rid of him and his foolish message. Paul is regarded by both Jews and Greek as contemptible, and there are some who think that getting rid of him and his message would cleanse the earth.

Therefore, the gap between the Corinthian’s self-estimation (rich and kingly) and the reality faced by Paul (persecution) could not be greater. To avoid Paul’s plight, the Corinthians are choosing to make peace with the world. Paul will now appeal to them not to see things from their distorted perspective, but from the reality that Paul sees—not only in a theological sense, but in a practical one. And so Paul warns his readers in what follows, all the while exhorting them to learn about the kingdom of God, which comes in the power of the Holy Spirit (through the message of Christ crucified) and not through the flattering speech of sinful men and women.

In verse 14, there is a marked change in Paul’s tone as he speaks of the members of this church as his children. Having sternly rebuked the congregation (speaking sarcastically), Paul’s language becomes quite affectionate and tender. These are people Paul knows, and he obviously cares for them no matter how exasperating their behavior might be. Paul is angry with them, but his anger will not have the last word. *“I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.”* Paul does not want to shame these people, but admonish them of the consequences of their immaturity.

At this point in the chapter, Paul assumes the role of a father, speaking firmly, but tenderly to a disobedient child. *“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. I urge you, then, be imitators of me.”* The Corinthians may have a thousand guardians (*paidagogous*) literally “pedagogues,” slaves who took their charges to school, making sure that they fulfilled their assignments),¹⁰ but they only have one father in the faith. Paul is not merely someone who comes and scolds the Corinthians using corporal punishment so that they comply. Rather, Paul is like a father who exercises firm but loving discipline. He is the first to preach the gospel to them, he is the one who led them to Christ. And it is through the gospel—that glorious message that Christ’s death is sufficient to save sinners—that Paul is their father.

¹⁰ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 80

Because this is the case, Paul can urge the Corinthians to imitate him. By this, Paul does not mean that they should drop all their factional allegiances and simply follow him as the true faction leader. Rather they should imitate him by making sure that everything they do is done in the light of the gospel (and the age to come). They must move on to maturity and leave behind the categories of this present age.

Because he cannot come to Corinth in person, Paul will send someone to help them do exactly this. Paul writes in verse 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.”* We don’t know much about Timothy’s visit to Corinth, but Paul is obviously quite comfortable with the young Timothy’s capabilities. Timothy will bear witness not only to the fact that Paul’s life is consistent with his theology, and that what he is teaching the Corinthians is the same as he has been teaching all the churches—focusing upon the preaching of Christ crucified. Timothy can inform the Corinthians that Paul is dealing with them the same way he would deal with any church. Paul is not demanding anything of the Corinthians that he wouldn’t demand of anyone else. He’s not treating the Corinthians unfairly.

Timothy will confirm that Paul is indeed willing to come when he can, something the following verse indicates is a problem. *“Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you.”* Some in the congregation are “puffed up,” either telling others that Paul would not come to Corinth, or behaving as though he would not come to address the issues in the congregation. “Paul doesn’t care about us enough to come, why should we not follow someone else?”

But verse 19 demonstrates that this is absolutely not the case! *“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.”* It is clearly Paul’s desire to return to Corinth, but the Lord had other plans. But one thing is certain, the immature among the Corinthians are all talk. They have no power. For the power of God is not revealed in mere human opinion, but in the gospel! This becomes plain in verse 20, when Paul writes, *“For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.”* The kingdom of God is the rule of God, manifest in the person and work of Jesus Christ. When the kingdom comes, there the power of God is manifest in that the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, the unclean (lepers) are healed, and even the worst of sinners are forgiven. This kingdom is not in any sense connected to this present evil age. Rather, the kingdom of God comes with power because it is the manifestation of the age to come!

And so, Paul ends his rebuke by giving the Corinthians a very clear choice. *“What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?”* If the Corinthians move on to maturity Paul can come to them like a father visiting his children who have moved away from home. If the Corinthians continue on in their present course, Paul will come as a father who must exercise discipline over disobedient children. The choice is up to the Corinthians. A whip? Or a gentle spirit? Wait till your apostle comes home!

What, then, should we take with us from this section of Corinthians?

What, then, should we take with us from this section of Corinthians? This is a tough section of Corinthians because Paul is so peeved about the Corinthian’s love of worldly wisdom that he speaks in sarcastic terms. For Paul this not a personal offense—that they are attacking him personally—but stems from the fact that their behavior amounts to a dismissal of the wisdom of God revealed to them through the gospel which Paul had preached to them. Through that gospel the power of God is revealed as sinners are made right with God because his wrath and anger has already been poured out upon his own son. Why would the Corinthians—indeed why would we—continue to evaluate the gospel ministry through the lens of pagan wisdom when the wisdom God gives through

the preaching of Christ crucified is the very thing we need to move on to maturity. The more we focus upon the cross—the demonstration of both the wisdom and power of God—the greater our progress will be.

Let us see in Paul's concern for the Corinthians the great danger of evaluating the preaching of Christ crucified through the categories of modern America. "I'm a good person, I don't need a Savior" "God just wants me to do my best, therefore Jesus is just an example for me to follow." "All religions basically say the same thing, so can't we tone down all the focus on sin and blood?" "Can't we talk about me and the things I am interested in?" "Christianity is so divisive."

In this letter, Paul reminds us that despite the fact that a crucified Savior offends us, it is through the gospel that God saves us from our sins—a message our contemporaries hate just as much as the did the pagans in Corinth. Through the gospel, the kingdom of God comes with power. Everything else—especially the complaining of the immature who still think like pagans—is only so much talk.