

Paul Exhorts the Corinthians Not to Judge or Boast

1 Corinthians 4

1 Corinthians 4: *“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. 3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. 5 Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one’s praise will come from God. 6 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. 7 For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? 8 You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! 9 For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both 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 distinguished, but we are dishonored! 11 To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. 12 And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; 13 being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now. 14 I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. 15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you, imitate me. 17 For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. 18 Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. 20 For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. 21 What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?”*

Background Notes

The church at Corinth was not a perfect church. That’s why a study of this letter is very appropriate for today - and for any time - because no church is perfect! It’s often been said that if you ever find the perfect church, don’t join it - why make it imperfect?

In chapter 3 Paul referred to the Corinthian believers as fleshly or carnal. They were not spiritual Christians because their thoughts and actions were too much in line with the world’s way of thinking and acting.

In chapter 4, Paul exhorted the believers in Corinth about three different areas where they were carnal and worldly in their thinking and their actions – areas in which they needed to get their lives more in line with the truth and a biblical worldview. Each of these three areas is covered in one of our doctrinal or teaching points.

Doctrinal Points

1. Everything we do will be reviewed - so don't judge now!

The first five verses of the chapter tell us that if we are thinking in line with the Bible, we will recognize that we are all servants of Christ, and ultimately we *all* will answer to *Christ*. We are stewards of the mysteries of God - we are responsible to care for the truth that God has revealed. The world does not have this truth and the world does not care for this truth. But because we have this truth, we also have the responsibility to be faithful in caring for this truth, in whatever role the Lord has given us. So let's not spend our time judging one another! Rather let us spend our time being faithful in doing whatever the Lord has given us to do.

We will answer to the Lord - and He will review our lives at His Judgment Seat. This "Judgment Seat" does not determine our destiny – it determines our reward. Our destiny is Heaven, and that was determined when we became believers. Our reward, however, is determined by our faithfulness as believers now. And every believer can be faithful. So - since Jesus Christ will be our ultimate judge, let's not judge one another! Let's be faithful to the Lord. Let's keep as clear a conscience as possible in everything that we do, just as Paul did: *"For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord" (v4).*

At the judgment seat of Christ, everything will be brought to light, both our actions and our motives, and the Lord will judge whether these actions and motives were for self-glory or for God's glory. Then everyone will receive the proper reward from the Lord - not from fellow believers! Everything we do will be reviewed, so don't judge now.

2. Everything we have has been received - so don't boast now!

Verses 6-7: *"Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?"*

Here Paul used himself and Apollos as examples. The Corinthian Christians were wrongly picking favorite speakers and leaders, and as a result they were creating divisions in the church. Some of these unnamed speakers and leaders were to be blamed for drawing undue attention to themselves. This situation could be corrected by understanding the proper view of the natural talents and spiritual gifts that fellow believers possess: *they've all been **received**.*

No one has ever earned a natural talent or spiritual gift. They've all been **given to us by God**. So why do we boast about ourselves or anyone else? Just recognize and thank the Lord for the talents and gifts He has given to you - and given to others. These gifts were given by His sovereign will.

This doctrinal point has great application in all areas of life. If you've got a high I.Q. and you're smarter than other folks, don't boast - because your brains were given to you by God. You didn't earn your brains, did you? They were **given** to you. They're a gift! If you're a natural athlete, for example, don't boast about your accomplishments because God **gave** you that ability. You didn't earn it - it was a gift!

The same is true of spiritual gifts. If you're a gifted teacher of the Word or a gifted musician, these spiritual gifts were **given** to you by God. Yes, you developed these gifts with His help, but the ability was a gift. What do you have that you did not receive? Answer? Nothing! So stop boasting as if you attained it yourself. Everything we have has been received, so don't boast now.

3. Everything we “are” is being reviled, so don't reign now!

Verses 8-13: *“You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both 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 distinguished, but we are dishonored! To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the off scouring of all things until now.”*

In these verses, Paul used irony to get across his point that the carnal and worldly Corinthian believers did not have the right viewpoint and lifestyle - but the apostle Paul and his fellow workers did have the right viewpoint and lifestyle.

The Corinthians were taking the same incorrect position that a significant number of Christians take today. For example, they say that if Christians are children of the King, then they should live and reign like children of the King by acquiring wealth and living in luxury. This is essentially the position that the “health-and-wealth-gospel” preachers take today.

Is this a biblical position for believers? Not according to 1 Corinthians 4! Christians will reign with Christ in a **future** kingdom here on this earth, but now is not the time of reigning. Right now is the time of suffering for the sake of Christ. It may involve hunger and thirst, and even homelessness in some cases (v11). The cross must come before the crown.

2 Timothy 3:12 says, *“All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”* This is because the world is against Jesus Christ. And as He indicated in John 15:18-19, the world hates us because it hated Him. The more committed we are to Jesus Christ, the more the world will treat us like the apostle Paul and his fellow workers. The world will want to get rid of us (v9). The world will want to call us fools (v10). The world will treat us roughly (v11). The world

will persecute us (v12). The world will slander us (v13). Even when we bless those who hate us, we will still be reviled. 1 John 3:13 says, *“Don’t be surprised if the world hates you.”*

The time for reigning with the Lord on this earth has not yet come, so let’s not jump the gun, as the Corinthians were doing. The world rejects Christ as Lord and King, so right now we are in the time of suffering because we are identified with Christ. Therefore, if we are committed Christians, we will “bear the reproach of Christ” as a way of life now. Everything we “are” is being reviled - so don’t reign now!

Practical Application

Can we say, as Paul said: “Imitate me”?

Verses 14-21: *“I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.*

Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?”

In this last section of the chapter, Paul informed the Corinthians that he had sent Timothy to them, and that he would follow later. He wanted the Corinthians to understand that he loved them in the Lord, as a spiritual father: *“I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel”* (v14-15).

As their spiritual father, Paul wanted to come to them with love and gentleness. However, because of their arrogance and carnality, he was concerned that he might have to come with a rod of discipline if they continued on in their worldly ways! And if he did have to come to them with discipline, it would be with apostolic authority and power, not just words. Verses 19 through 21, *“But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?”*

In the meantime, if they wanted to get their lives in order and get their fellowship right with the Lord, Paul advised them to “Imitate me.” Verse 16: *“Therefore I urge you, imitate me.”*

Could we say that to assist a fellow-believer who is not living by the teaching of the Word of God? Or would we have to say, “Do as I say, but not as I do”? What a challenge to get our own lives in order! Can we say as Paul said, “Imitate me?”