

Pride and Prejudice

Intro:

Let's turn together to 1 Cor. 4. 1 Corinthians is the 7th book in the NT, so if you get to the NT, keep going right through the gospels, Acts, Romans, and then you come to 1 Cor.

Before we read, let me just set this chapter in its context a little. The Corinthian church was planted by the Apostle Paul but after he left, the church became a real mess. First of all, they caved in to the cultural pressure to look wise, as the Greek culture defined wisdom. And so there was an effort in the Corinthian church to rebrand themselves as the smartest church in the room. There were also schisms in the church as one group said they followed Paul, another group identified with the far more charismatic Apollos and the church was literally breaking apart as they argued and fought over who followed who. Those who for Apollos were not only for Apollos, they were against Paul! And vice versa. Now these leaders (Paul, Apollos, Peter) weren't asking for this kind of allegiance, they did nothing to contribute to it, but it had become a divisive matter in the Corinthian church.

As we come to chapter 4 we come to the conclusion of Paul's corrective teaching against all this boasting and fighting and judging.

1 Cor. 4:1-5 (pray)

I. Pride and pre-judging

Sport teams talk about having a "home field advantage". It's a huge thing to have a friendly crowd supporting you – and playing in front of a hostile crowd makes it a lot harder. You'd think that Paul enjoyed home field advantage since he led most of the Corinthian believers to the Lord and he planted the church. But while there are some in the church who identify with him, there is a larger number in the church who are identifying with Apollos and actively opposing Paul, and seeking to undermine his ministry to the church. They had become so wise and so spiritual in their own eyes that they felt they were now qualified to evaluate Paul's ministry, character, and gifting and in all these things they found him to be falling short. Paul isn't impressive enough, charismatic enough, spiritual enough, or wise enough for them. Apollos is trending, but they've outgrown Paul.

This is the environment that Paul is trying to bring instruction and fatherly correction in. Far from having home field advantage, the Corinthian church is more and more becoming a hostile crowd towards Paul. Pride has elevated them off the field and placed them in the judge's box, no longer working alongside Paul for the prize, no longer being coached by Paul about how to run the race and fight the good fight of the Christian life, now they are analyzing, evaluating, and critiquing Paul's and Apollos' ministry performance from the lofty perch of a judges box.

Once again Paul adjusts their focus off of man and onto God. Ironically he does this first by reminding the Corinthian church and he and Apollos and all ministers of the gospel are servants.

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (vs. 1)

Look at us as servants and stewards. At first glance this might seem to support their belief that Paul and Apollos and others were their servants and therefore it was right for them to sit in judgment of their service. Paul says regard us as servants and stewards. But whose servants and whose stewards? Interestingly, Paul uses a different word for servant here than he does in chapter 3. The word for servant

he uses here originally referred to the slaves who rowed in the lower tier of ancient war ships. The word came to mean subservient, under a superior. But Paul isn't saying he's subservient to the believers at Corinth, or that he serves them. He is a servant of Christ and a steward of God's mysteries and his one objective is to be found faithful. The only one who was in a position to judge whether a steward was faithful or not was the one who had entrusted the stewardship to the steward. For Paul, the only One who could measure his faithfulness was the Lord Jesus Christ, whose servant he was.

I mentioned home field advantage earlier. If you watch football, you know that the home team fans try to get in the heads of the visiting teams by making a lot of noise when the opposing team has the ball – in the hopes of disrupting and unnerving them. And when 40 or 50K fans make a lot of noise, it can be pretty disruptive. It can make it very hard for a team to communicate and concentrate. There are times when it works and teams literally fall apart because it gets into their heads and then they have a hard time executing even the simplest of plays. But when a team isn't unnerved and keeps its composure and executes well, especially if despite all the noise they score a touchdown or start to build a lead, what happens is a reverse unnerving. You can feel the wind sucked out of the crowd. They get quiet as concern and discouragement settle in. In essence the visiting team is saying, "we don't care about your noise, we're the better team and we're just going to put our heads down and beat your team. That's our answer to your opposition!"

Paul says, "I don't care about your judgment of me. It doesn't unnerve me or intimidate me. There isn't a court on earth that I care much about or an earthly verdict about me that means much to me. I don't even trust my own judgment of my performance – because it doesn't matter what you think, or they think, or I think. The only thing that matters is what the Lord thinks. So I'm going to put my head down, be faithful, serve Christ, and leave the judgment to him."

Paul lived with a very real sense of the coming Day of Judgment. In chapter 3 he tells us that that Day will test the quality of what we build and *therefore* we should all be careful how we build in the church. In the same way, these 5 verses stand on the assurance that that Day is coming and make a claim on how we live in light of that coming Day. Three words of application on how we live this day in light of that Day:

1. Leave the judging to God

Pride makes us think we're better judges than we are. I have a friend who has a very high up position in the NY state courts and he's gotten to know a lot of powerful judges over the years. More than once he has said to me that very few judges wear the robes well. The problem is, if you to ask them, every judge would think they are good judges. Pride makes us think we are better judges than we really are. Pride and prejudice go together – I'm using the word not exclusively in reference to racism, but in prejudging people and motives and how God sees them before we know everything.

We are meant to judge...some things. Chapter six will tell us we are to judge people within the church – when it comes to sinful behavior. We are to be careful to assess whether a teaching or ministry is biblical and gospel centered. Paul even urges us to examine ourselves to confirm that we are in the faith. We can't throw out all judgment or we'll be lost in the woods. If something is clearly biblically wrong we have the grounds to assess it as wrong. If we can see in the Bible that a teaching is clearly in error, we have a responsibility to identify it as error.

So there is a way to humbly assess open and measurable things based on clear, biblical grounds. But we are not to sit in smug, critical judgment of others, based on our own questionable inner compass of what is right and wrong, good and bad, effective or ineffective, pleasing or not pleasing to God. Pride has a

way of elevating us to the judge's box and making us think we are qualified to pre-judge other people's motives or kingdom fruitfulness or standing with God. We need to be careful about rendering judgment in things that are questionable or about people or about motives and comfortable leaving those things for the day when the true Judge renders the final and ultimate verdict. *Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time. (vs. 5)*

2. *God wants us to be free from living in fear of what others think*

On the other side of this subject of judging, we can be free from the fear of what people

think of us. We don't have to live under the weight of trying to win people's good judgment. Paul really didn't care that much about what they thought of him. He cared about them – but he didn't care that much what they thought of him.

The Bible says that the fear of man brings a snare – it's a trap to always be trying to get people to approve us and think well of us. If you have ever been in a situation where you know people are thinking badly of you, you know that it can mess with your mind. But God wants us to be free from that. We are called to be servants, but ultimately not of other people but of Christ. Serving Christ will have us serve people, and loving people will make us want to serve them well. But there is a freedom in knowing that we are Christ's servant and ultimately we only answer to him.

Sometimes we need to shut out the noise of the stadium, the sound of the critics, and the craving for the approval of the crowds, put our heads down, and remember that we live for the approval of One – the Lord Jesus Christ.

So if the bad opinion of some people is resting heavy on your heart, if you know that you're measured as a failure on someone's ledger, remember, their judgment is a small thing. If everyone in the world judged you badly, but God gives His approval, the weight of the world's judgment would weigh less than a feather compared to the weight of God's judgment. We'll talk about God's judgment in a moment, but this brings us to the third application point from these verses:

3. *Don't be introspective*

Here's what we see about Paul – he wasn't an introspective guy! He wasn't constantly soul-searching and second guessing himself about himself. *I do not even judge myself.* He wasn't aware of anything against him, his conscience was clean, but that didn't acquit him. You can have a clean conscience and a dirty soul. We don't try to violate our conscience, we try to do what's right, but ultimately it's God, not our conscience that judges us. Paul's response to that is: don't be introspective!

There's a kind of seductive attraction to introspection. It feels good to wallow in self-examination. Trying to figure ourselves out can feel good cause we like to think about ourselves. It feels good to believe that if we can turn ourselves inside out, we'll be able to fix ourselves. And there is a dark pleasure in feeling sorry for ourselves. Self-pity is like a warm bath – it just feels good. One of the few memories I have as a little baby is my mom giving me a bath, and the smell of the baby shampoo in my hair and the warm (never hot) water being poured over my head washing that shampoo away. Self-pity wants to keep us perpetually in that warm bath feeling but it's a false substitute for the real strength and comfort that the Lord Jesus wants to give us in hard times. Self-pity is comfortable, but it isn't true comfort for the soul. When we are tempted to wallow in self-pity (which is a form of introspection) we should run instead to Christ and find our shelter and refuge in him. Introspection sucks us deeper and deeper into ourselves

with the promise that we will discover who we are and why we are who we are and why we do what we do and good things will happen when we do, but it leads to an endless downward spiral of self-focus that takes us nowhere except deeper into ourselves.

Our hearts are like onions – every time you peel back a layer, there's another layer. Trying to get to the bottom of a particular sin is like trying to scuba dive in a bottomless cesspool. The Bible doesn't tell us to figure out our sin, it tells us to repent of it! Turn away from it by turning towards the Lord, ask Jesus to forgive you of it, and MOVE ON!

Trying to get to the bottom of our motives is also an impossible task. Once we begin to second guess why we do what we do, there's no end to it. Why did I try to help that person in need? Was it because I care, or was it just because I want people to think I care? We can peel back layer after layer trying to get to the bottom motive, but that isn't the way God's word leads us to change. We change, not by focusing on ourselves and our hearts, but by focusing on Christ and his heart, and as we behold him we are transformed into his image, from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18). So ask God to help you to really love and care about others, do good to people as you have the opportunity, commit it to God and move on!

Don't get me wrong, we do need to examine ourselves – Paul's not advocating that we never allow the Spirit to shine the light on our hearts and reveal things that we need to bring to the Lord in repentance. Psalm 139 says *Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.* But even in that, we're asking God to search us, and lead us. A little introspection goes a long way.

There is, Paul reminds us, a day coming when the Lord will bring everything into the light. Everything that is now hidden will be revealed, and the very motives of our hearts will be disclosed. Judgment day will shine a light such as we have never experienced, when the very motives, the very undercurrents of our hearts will be seen for what they are. Not only *what* we did will be seen and evaluated, but *why* we did it will be brought into light so it will be clear to the Lord and to all what motivated us.

That sounds pretty scary to me. I don't relish the idea of having every single thing I've ever done and every motive, every heart impulse I've done it with being played on an IMAX screen for all to see. But Paul doesn't frame that day as a "gotcha" moment for the believer. He frames it as a positive: *Then each one will receive his commendation from God.* That's not to say some won't be rebuked – there is a warning to be ready for that day implied in these verses. But mostly the believer lives in expectancy that, as we live in the goodness of the gospel, as we live in God's forgiveness and grace, as we live in the confidence that we are justified and righteous in God's sight, as we live in the power of the Spirit enabling us to grow and obey, as we live in the desire to honor and please God with our lives, we can look forward to that day as a day of commendation. Not because we deserve it, but because God gives us what we don't deserve. That's what grace does: we deserve condemnation from God, we receive commendation from God.

Next week we'll finish out this chapter with a cousin message called *Pride and Perspective*, but pride and prejudice can sideline us from God's great work by seating us in the judge's box instead of being out on the field where we belong. Like the Corinthians pride would have us become judges evaluating how things should be done, rather than fellow laborers doing what God wants done. God hasn't called us to be judges; He's called us to be faithful. He's called us to be servants of Christ. Not in order to be saved, but because we are saved. Not in order to be accepted but because we are accepted. Not in order to

Letter to a Really Messed Up Church
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avoid condemnation but because of His loving grace we can eagerly work for, and look forward to, His commendation.