

Be reminded of the ways of Christ

1 Cor. 4:1-21

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1 Corinthians 3:21-23 says this:

“So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.”

Let no one boast in men. Let no one talk as if men are great. Many in the church of Corinth sought to put Paul, Apollos and Peter on a pedestal as if they were someone great. They then sought to bolster their own significance by connecting themselves to these spiritual leaders. This only brought more division and dissension.

In reality, none of this jousting for position was even necessary. They were already precious and loved unconditionally, because they were connected to Christ and Christ was connected to God. There was no need to build themselves up to look good in the eyes of others. They had everything they needed in Christ.

Do we not struggle with the same temptation? We brag. We gossip. We stretch the truth. We hide our faults. We strive for worldly success. We covet. We photoshop our pictures on Instagram to look better than we do. We exaggerate our credentials on LinkedIn to make ourselves seem more qualified than we are. We spend so much time pursuing the approval of man, when in Christ we already have the approval of God.

1 Corinthians 4:1-3 Paul continues with these words:

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.

Paul continues by urging the believers in Corinth to not think of Paul, Apollos and Peter as leaders who deserve praise, but instead as servants of Christ who have been sent by God to humbly serve the church.

This word that is translated in this verse as “servant” was the word for the slave rowers who worked on Roman warships called triremes. The ships would have sailors, soldiers and rowers. The rowers were slaves who were worked brutally to propel the ships in all types of weather and even in battle. They had no freedom and no dignity in their work. Paul was trying to communicate to those in Corinth that he and the others were merely their servants.

Paul then describes himself, Apollos and Peter as stewards of the mysteries of God. This word steward was the head administrator of one’s entire estate. Maybe like Joseph in the Old Testament. He oversaw the staff, purchased and sold supplies and properties, and handled all issues related to the owner’s instruction. Even with all of his responsibility and freedom, he was still a slave and under the complete control and authority of his master.

Regardless of one’s role in the church or the community of faith, he or she will always be under the authority of Christ, who is the head of the church. None can be raised to the glory and importance of Christ in the life of the church.

For Paul, man’s approval or the approval of any human entity was not important. In fact, Paul did not even give his own evaluation of himself much credence. Our perspective of ourselves is often blinded, biased or self-serving. At the moment Paul knew of no wrongdoing that he was guilty of, but at the same time that did not make him innocent. It was possible that there were unknown sins or “blind spots”, of which only God was aware.

We find a similar truth in Psalm 139:23-2:

“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!”

With this in mind we should not pass judgment on anyone, whether that be too highly or too lowly, before Christ comes. When He comes He will reveal all that has been hidden and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Because of our sin, this will show that none of us have the right to be judge. Only Christ. Then each one will receive their reward from Christ.

Paul is basically saying, “I will not worry about what you think and I do, not even trust what I think. The only perspective and approval that matters is God’s, and in Christ I know I have God’s approval.”

Do you know the freedom this brings? It brings a person to a place of self-forgetfulness. It is not that you think of yourself more highly or more lowly than should. You just don’t think about yourself much at all.

You no longer get in the elevator and spend the whole time thinking about your clothes, your weight, your complexion or your image. You no longer compete at work. You rejoice anytime someone does well. You no longer need the best Instagram photos or the most likes. You have been freed from making a name for yourself. You go out to lunch sincerely interested in how the other person is doing. You speak the truth because you have no reason to hide.

It is like enjoying a sunset. You enjoy it without expecting any credit or any personal gain. Can you imagine doing the same in your life every day? Because you are approved by God and because your needs are met in Christ, you no longer have to have the approval of others. You rest in Christ and are free to sincerely serve others without needing anything in return.

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?

The truth of our lives are wrapped in the gospel. We must remember both the bad news and the good news of the gospel. We must walk in the truths of scripture. For us to go beyond these truths will usher into our lives lies and falsehoods that will compromise who we are in Christ and thus the unity of the church. We will think more highly or more lowly of ourselves and miss the riches that are afforded us in the gospel.

In Christ we have all that we need. Grace, forgiveness, love, provision, security, peace, hope and salvation. All that we have has been a gift from God. How can we take glory in anything except Christ? There is no room for even the smallest boasting, because all that we have is a gift. This Spirit-led realization should lead all believers into humility and unity in Christ.

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.

When a Roman general would win a battle, he would return to Rome and parade his victorious army through the streets of Rome to the applause and cheers of the Roman citizens. It was a great procession of Triumph. At the end of these processions there would always be a group of captives chained together. They would eventually be led into the coliseum where they would fight and be killed by wild

beasts. This was Paul's comparison to the apostles. A small band of men who had left all, and were willingly laying down their lives for the sake of Christ.

The Corinthians had fallen prey to the ways of the world and now resembled more the surrounding culture than their indwelling Christ. They lived a complacent Christianity of selfishness and pride while Paul and other apostles lived a humble life of sacrifice and service.

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.

Paul's words would have sound like foolishness to the Greek mind. Aristotle had declared that the greatest virtue of a man was not to endure an insult. To the ancient Greek mind they could not grasp the idea of humility, much less all the other types of "foolishness" that Paul was espousing in these verses. But these were the fruits of a life in Christ.

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?

Paul then brings to an end this section of the letter where he has been focusing on the problems of divisions and dissensions. He speaks directly and boldly, not as a slave master but as a loving father who longs for the best from his children.

In the midst of various spiritual leaders and some false teachers, Paul urges them to be imitators of him. That is a difficult invitation for most, but in Paul's case by the grace of God he was a life worth following. We then see Paul's commitment to their holiness as he sent Timothy to lead them. Timothy's role is to remind them of the ways in Christ. We are in need of this same reminder.

It is only as we turn back to the gospel on a regular basis that we will be reminded of our sin and God's grace. This is the foundation for the humility that is found in Christ.

Discussion questions:

1. Who is one of the most humble people that you have ever known? How did you know that they were humble?
2. What in this lesson did you find most interesting or meaningful?
3. In your opinion, why do you think most people want the approval of others?
4. How can the gospel protect us from wanting man's approval?
5. Paul instructs us to not go beyond what is written. How would you say that in your own words?
6. What do you think God wants you to remember from these verses, of 1 Corinthians 4:1-21?