

Servants and Stewards

1Cor 4.1-8

PRAYER

We've been looking at our identity as Christians. Who are we because of Christ? The Corinthians apparently didn't know. They were having an identity crisis. They thought they could be citizens of the Kingdom without giving up their citizenship in the world. That error caused jealousy, strife, division, and a sinful lifestyle.

Paul began this letter by encouraging the Corinthians to grow in their knowledge and understanding of the cross, to be taught of **God** and not **men** – to use Scripture as their source of wisdom and not the ideas and philosophies of their culture. It was common for the Greeks when discussing their ancient mythology to embellish the stories. They'd add twists to the plot, or new characters to the tale. But learning this new Christian way of life was different. They weren't permitted to embellish the truth of Christ, because it was rooted in actual historical events.

The Corinthians didn't see the Gospel as the *same* truth of God variously explained by the teachers of the church. So they selected a teacher and joined his "school of theology," something like selecting a brand of clothes to wear. And then, rather than learning to articulate the truth of God's Word themselves, they quoted their teacher, like ditto-heads. They followed Paul, Apollos, or Peter, *instead of following Christ*. Rather than adopt the *way of Christ*, they held onto their *old ways – the familiar ways*. As a result, they were stuck in their spiritual infancy. They still conformed themselves to the world they knew, instead of allowing themselves to be transformed by the knowledge of Christ, and him crucified.

I have no doubt that each of their teachers cautioned them about these things. In his first letter to the churches, Peter gave the same message Paul is giving here:

¹³ Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest *your hope* fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; ¹⁴ as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, *as in your ignorance*; ¹⁵ but as He who called you *is holy*, you also be holy in all *your* conduct, ¹⁶ because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." (1Pe 1:13-16 NKJ)

Paul repeated the same thing in his letter to the church at Rome:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Rom 12:1-2 NKJ)

But the Corinthians are into status, and climbing the corporate ladder. They created a rift in the church by favoring one teacher over another, as if to enhance their own reputation by following a man of repute. Not only are they in the middle of an **identity crisis** for *themselves*, but they are suffering from a case of **mistaken identity** when it comes to what they think of Paul, Apollos, and Peter. *Paul* wants to give them an accurate portrait of what it means to be a **servant** and **steward** of Jesus Christ, the *only* one they've been called to follow. He wants them to clearly see who *he* is, and who *every* believer is, in the sight of God. *Every* believer should have the same **status**. *Every* believer should have the same **reputation** for righteousness. *Every* believer should live with **eternity** in mind, because *every* believer is accountable for what he does with what he's been given.

That takes us to **First Corinthians, chapter 4**. Paul is going to set them straight about the nature of *servanthood* and *stewardship*: it's not exactly a glamour job. Let's see what he has to say in verses 1-8:

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 trustworthy. 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. 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? 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! (1Co 4:1 ESV)

It's very easy to mishear Paul's voice in this chapter. What I mean is that you might hear him being *sarcastic* rather than *sincere*. You might hear him putting

down the Corinthians instead of helping them see the truth. This type of speech is called “**ironic**,” *not sarcastic*. Irony is when what is being said or described does not match the expected reality – it’s contradictory. *It’s ironic when a brewery runs out of beer*. But it’s *sarcastic* to say, “I like dogs too. Let’s exchange recipes.” Paul isn’t being sarcastic here. He’s not *ridiculing them*. Paul is helping the Corinthians see the discrepancy between how things *should be* for them as Christians, and how they really *are*. ***They’re free in Christ, but acting like slaves***. That’s *ironic*.

These new believers want to favor one believer over another, and one teacher over another. They are trying to gain status by associating themselves with celebrated teachers. Paul knows this can be dangerous. In fact, it is undermining the unity of the church at Corinth. And so he must nip this in the bud. He does that by showing how **self-promotion** is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ about servanthood and stewardship.

³³ Then [Jesus] came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who *would be the greatest*. ³⁵ And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." (Mar 9:33-35 NKJ)

What happened when James and John thought they were better than the others, and wanted to be honored by sitting at Jesus’ right and left hand in the kingdom?

²⁴ When the [other] ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. ²⁵ **But Jesus** called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man **came not to be served but to serve**, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mat 20:24-28; also Mark 10.41-45 ESV)

There was nothing wrong with aspiring to greatness. But the **nature of greatness** confounded the apostles for awhile. It wasn’t until Jesus had gone to the cross for them, and fulfilled his role as a ransom for many, that the apostles finally understood what he meant about greatness. Paul is trying to get this idea across to the Corinthians . It’s as if Paul was saying, “It’s NOT wrong to aspire to DO what we do; but it would be a mistake to aspire to BE who we are.” Their identity **MUST** be found in Christ, and not in other men. Their glory must be found in Christ, as they serve him. Paul wrote about this to the Philippians:

³ Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, **which is yours** in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a **SERVANT**, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phi 2:3-11 ESV)

Paul got it. Peter got it. James got it. So do all mature followers of Jesus Christ. That's why, in various letters in the NT, such men are called bond-servants of Christ. The Greek word is *doulos*: the context shows it means *a willing slave*.

^{NAU} **Romans 1:1** Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, **called** as an apostle, **set apart** for the gospel of God... [a bond-servant of Christ is set apart for the Gospel]

^{NAU} **Gal 1:10** ¹⁰ For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would **not** be a bond-servant of Christ. [Bond-servants have **one** Master; **exclusive** ownership.]

^{NAU} **Col 4:12** ¹² Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, **always laboring earnestly for you** in his prayers... [Bond-servants labor earnestly for others in Christ's name]

^{NAU} **James 1:1** James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ... [Bond-servants do God's will, and they do it in Christ's name, for *his* glory]

^{NAU} **Jude 1:1** Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, To those who are **the called, beloved** in God the Father, and **kept** for Jesus Christ: [Bond-servants understand and acknowledge that they are called, loved, and kept **for Jesus Christ's sake**, that he might receive the glory of their service; they are not kept by their own hand, or by their own wit – *but by the grace of God.*]

^{NAU} **2 Peter 1:1** Simon Peter, a bond-servant and **apostle** of Jesus Christ [an apostle is an envoy or delegate of Christ], To those who have received a **faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:**

Peter reminds the churches that the faith they have received is no greater and no less than what the apostles received. That's the context in which Paul sets up this **irony** of striving for equality when they already have what everyone else has. *When you have it all, there is no more to be had.* But the Corinthians don't yet understand. **Let's examine verses 1-8 again, to see the irony of it.**

These verses can be divided into two parts. The **first part** *through verse 5* deals with **reserving judgment**. Paul tells them to abstain from making any judgment as to the quality or status of another believer, whether for good or bad. The **second part** deals with **exercising contentment** – the *Corinthians must recognize what they already have*, as *believers*, apart from Paul and the others. Paul first clarifies what it means for him to be a steward, or a bond-servant of Jesus Christ. How should the Corinthians *regard* Paul? AND how are they to think of *themselves*?

VERSE 1 This is how one should regard us, as **servants** of Christ and **stewards** of the mysteries of God. [i.e. stewards of the **Gospel** mysteries that are now *revealed*.]

The Greek word for **servants** here in Corinthians 4 is not *doulos*, but the word is still a synonym for servant. It means *ministers* or *assistants*. But in case, like the Corinthians, you think this is some sort of exalted or higher position than *doulos*, it literally means an **under-rower** – someone who rows a boat at the direction of someone else. It describes someone under orders, who has been assigned a chore. **It's a supervisor**. And the word for **stewards** is literally *house-manager*. That's someone entrusted to govern the house and everything in it. Ahah! Surely THAT is a status position. **No**. The house-**manager** must give an accounting to the house-**owner**; he is subject to discipline if he fails to properly care for the household and all those in it. **This too is a... supervisor**. He's still a servant, but a servant with responsibilities over others; even so, he has limited authority.

I was a supervisor for over twenty years. When I described my role to the guys who worked under my authority, I said, “**My** job is to get you *everything you need* to do **your** job. I don't work for you, but I DO serve you.” And so when I worked with those folks, they treated me like a fellow worker. But they also *trusted* me and did what I asked them to do; they had *faith* in my good intentions **for them**; I was not going to Lord it over them. I was looking out for their interests, but within the context of looking out for the interests of our **mutual employer**. That's exactly how Jesus describes his expectations for his *stewards*, for his *supervisors*:

⁴⁵ "Who then is the **faithful and wise servant** [here's that word *doulos* again; but what is being described is a willing slave who has been placed over the other

servants in the household; it's the same job description of a *minister* or *assistant* that we see in 1Corinthians chapter 4]. Who then is the **faithful and wise servant** whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? [he's a **waiter** – it's a *different* job, not a *loftier* job]

⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.

⁴⁷ I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

⁴⁸ But **suppose that servant is wicked** and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' ⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mat 24:45-51 NIV)

AND AGAIN JESUS SAYS TO US,

³⁵ "Be dressed, ready for service, and keep your lamps burning, ³⁶ like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. ³⁷ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them **watching** when he comes. I tell you the truth, **he will dress himself to serve**, will have **them** recline at the table, and will come and wait on **them!** ³⁸ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night. (Luk 12:35-38 NIV)

So Paul establishes two identifying characteristics of men like himself, men that these Corinthians obviously admire. They are first of all **servants** who obey the directions of their master, Jesus Christ. Secondly, they are **stewards** who are entrusted with all the possessions of their Master *during his absence*, however long that turns out to be. They are ready at every moment, having done all that was entrusted to them to do, so that even if their master returns in the middle of the night, they are ready. They are eager to give an accounting of how they handled his goods and affairs while he was gone. **That's what verse two is all about:**

² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found **trustworthy** [or *faithful*].

Who is to say whether we have been faithful, and worthy of respect, honor, and rewards? Paul cautions them not to leap to conclusions before the time. The only one authorized and capable of judging how well we have obeyed, is the one who issued us our directions in the first place – the one to whom we will give account. The steward of the house doesn't ask and he isn't concerned with the opinions of others who have been placed in his care. He is concerned with the only opinion

that counts: his Master's. He *serves* at the pleasure of his Master, and no one else. Thus, he seeks to *please* his Master, and no one else. He wants the *favor* of his Master, and no one else.

VERSE 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.** [In other words, even if I think I'm doing a good job, I'm not the Judge]. 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.

That's a two-edged sword. Paul speaks of himself, but that same warning goes out to the Corinthians. Don't pronounce judgement on others before Christ returns, whether someone is guilty or innocent, whether someone is an unbeliever or a believer, whether your work is acceptable or not. Don't beat yourself up, and don't pat yourself on the back either. Don't throw yourself into hell, and don't demand your name up in lights. Leave all that to Christ. These are things that belong to him alone. There are things we do in darkness that we hope no one will find out about – *but they will.* The day is coming when *everything* will be revealed. The game won't be called on account of darkness, and the clock won't run out before our turn comes up. *We'll have all eternity to get to the bottom of things.*

It's *ironic, inconsistent*, that these Corinthians are acting as though Paul and the others got more from the hand of Christ than they did – so much more that they should be jealous of them, or envy them, or measure their own worth by who they know among these “pillars” of the church (Gal 2.9). Peter writes,

¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to **serve** one another, as good **stewards** of God's varied grace: [*here we see again this dual-role of **servant** and **steward***] ¹¹ whoever speaks, [*he should speak*] as one who speaks oracles **of God**; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that **God supplies** – in order that in everything **God** may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To **HIM** belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1Pe 4:10-11 ESV)

Let's look at Part Two now: verses 6-8. Again, don't read this sarcastically, but with great sincerity. The Corinthians don't understand that they are heirs to the kingdom of God, just like Paul and the others. If he can get them to appreciate what they have their hands on, what has been **given** to them, they may be more

likely to live a life that takes all this into account – they may become in *outward appearance* who they already **are in their hearts**, and in the sight of God.

Verse 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 [written either by Paul in his letters, or by God in His Holy Word, or perhaps written in *the Book of Life*], so that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.

Paul is telling them not to judge by appearances, or reputation, or any other man-made standard of judgment. Rather, learn to leave judging to God. Paul is a fallen creature, a **sinner**, *just like them*. He is a **servant**, *just like them*. He has received the grace of God through Jesus Christ, and is now forgiven of his sins, *just like them*. Don't put him on a pedestal. But don't exalt yourself over him either.

Verse 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?

In the same way, they have nothing to boast in, nothing that wasn't given to them by God; Paul and the others likewise have nothing to boast in. They're all in the same boat, **the same ARK**, preserved and shut in by God's grace against the flood.
– Please leave it up

Verse 8: **Already** you have all you want! Already you have become rich! **Without us** [without our hand being in it] you have become **kings**! [Paul is saying, you owe us **nothing**; you owe Christ **everything**. We were merely his servants and stewards who brought you the knowledge of God's grace *in his name*. HE made you **kings**.] **And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!**

This last verse, verse 8, is a profound statement of the rights and privileges that these Corinthians have been given by God. *Everything* they want, *everything* they could dream of in the way of glory, is already theirs. They are already **rich** beyond measure. *Discounting* Paul, *ignoring* Peter, *setting aside* Apollos, they have been called by God directly to receive their inheritance. God has made them kings, *rulers* over all creation, in the service of Jesus Christ, their Lord... **just like YOU**.

And then Paul applauds them, and encourages them to rule well! **And would that you DID reign, so that we might share the rule with you!** Paul isn't competing with them, and they shouldn't be competing with Paul. They have ALL been called to reign in the name of Jesus Christ. They must rule as if the world had already been overcome, because indeed it HAS. It was overcome by **Christ** in whom they live, and move, and have their being (Acts 17.28). Jesus said,

I have said these things to you, that **in me** you may have peace. **In the world** you will have tribulation. But take heart; **I have overcome the world.**" (Joh 16:33^{ESV})

They aren't *waiting* to rule. They ARE ruling, but they must be *trained* to rule **well**. They must move from being willing slaves, to being ministers and assistants. HOW? Over time, through many trials, they will *prove* themselves **trustworthy**. They are **kings-in-training** who must be taught to *think* like kings, and *act* like kings, and *govern* like kings: to govern their *flesh*, to govern their *relationships*, and to govern their *church*. They must govern by Christ's **Law of Love**, and not by any worldly standard – they must **not** lord it over each other. Paul wants to *share* that rule with them, on an equal footing in the sight of God. To do that, they must commit to the course laid out before them, to run the race, to gather the resources needed, to do the work, and to reap the rewards that await them. **If they do**, then Christ will be glorified by his **servants** and **stewards** who labor in his name.

What about us, today? Just like Paul, Apollos, and Peter, *every* believer is called to be both **servant** AND **steward**. We are *all* servants of Jesus Christ; and we are *all* stewards of what he has entrusted to us. We have been *individually* gifted to *corporately* proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. We do so as the living Body of Christ in this world.

May we be good stewards of our gifts, our Body, our circumstances, and our money. May we take captive every thought, and put reins on our tongues. May we diligently grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we cultivate peaceful relationships – uplifting one another and not tearing one another down, loving and serving one another as Christ loved and served us.

As we serve our Lord in these ways, *we will prove ourselves worthy of his trust, and we will prove our trust in him* –

FOR HE IS WORTHY.

Amen.