

1 Corinthians 4:1-5 "What Is A Servant Of God?"

1CO 4:1-5 "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. 2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. 3 I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."

As Paul continues his case against division in the body of Christ he brings up a compelling argument as to how to appraise any servant in the church. Keep in mind that he has rebuked these people for placing one servant above another to the degree that we follow that person instead of the One who called that person to service, and that is Christ Himself.

1CO 3:21 "So then, no more boasting about men!"

This doesn't mean we can't encourage each other, or acknowledge the way in which servants in the body of Christ are helpful or faithful to the work of our Lord. It simply means that we never place someone on a pedestal to where they become our spiritual guru. That can be a dangerous thing.

Jesus Christ alone is our King, our Lord and our Savior. He alone should take prominence in every aspect of our lives. And He alone knows what we need to grow in Him and with Him, which is why He alone provides servants for our good. Paul simply acknowledges this and now begins to define what type of servant Christ wants any of us to be.

1CO 4:1 "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God."

The NASB puts it this way. "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."
(1Co.4:1)

Paul is saying that, "if you have to look at us as leaders in the church then look at us through the eyes of God. We are first and

foremost servants of Christ and we are also stewards of the mysteries of God."

What does all of this mean? Well, the first thing we notice is what Paul doesn't suggest. He doesn't suggest that he is "the head honcho" of the church.

This doesn't mean he is downplaying his role as an apostle who is charged by God to bring them the word of God and to build the church on the foundation of Christ. It simply means that Paul doesn't want the church to place its confidence in him, or Apollos or Peter, as their foundation. He's just a worker, though a privileged worker of Christ in the kingdom of God. We saw this earlier in this chapter 3.

1CO 3:5-7 "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe - as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow."

The word servant in 1Co.3:5 is the Greek word *diakonos* which is where we get our English word deacon. This word is different from the usual word Paul uses of himself which is *doulos*, which we find in some of his letters.

ROM 1:1 "Paul, a servant (*doulos*) of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God -..."

The designation *doulos* means slave and it infers that Paul has been purchased, and out of reverence and obedience to his benevolent Master he follows wherever his Lord leads.

However, in our text Paul uses a third word which our English versions translates servant. This is the Greek word *huperetes* and it means an under-rower. In ancient days it referred to those slaves who rowed the sailing ships below deck. It was hot, it was menial, it was humbling. But it was vital to the success of that ship.

Later *huperetes* came to mean any type of subordinate under the authority of another. The pattern Paul paints for us in this letter, whether he uses the word *doulos*, (slave), *diakonos*, (deacon), or *huperetes*, (under-rower) is that Paul sees himself as one who is under the authority of his Lord and Master, not a privileged prima donna who directs evangelistic campaigns from his headquarters in some palace.

There are leaders in the church today who have confused their position in the body of Christ by living as though they were prima donna's in their ivory towers. You would think, as you watch some of these tele-evangelists, that we are their servants, doing their bidding as we are given the privilege to support them and their work to their glory.

Paul makes it clear that his position is that of a slave, an under-rower whose only glory is to serve Jesus Christ as he serves the body of Christ. That is a far departure from much of what we see today in the church. Every minister of the gospel would do himself a favor to reevaluate what it means to be a minister, which means servant.

The designation "leader" in the church should always have, as it's prefix, the word servant. Servant-leaders are what we need. If a leader in the body of Christ thinks for a moment that he is anything but a servant then he is no leader at all, as far as the Kingdom of Christ is concerned.

People will follow a leader only as far as that leader can take them. But people will be much more willing to follow that leader to the degree that that leader will get in the trenches with them and not presume an aura of superiority despite the fact that they have a position which carries more responsibility.

A true leader in the church will see himself as a servant who derives his power and authority from the One who is Creator and God and Savior, but will not flaunt that power and authority to his own advantage. And that's what Paul is conveying here in the pages of this letter.

But not only is Paul a servant of Christ he is also a steward of the mysteries of God. The NIV uses the phrase "those entrusted with the secret things of God." That's what a steward is, one who is entrusted with responsibility. In fact, the Greek word here for steward was a word which designated a person as the manager of a household or of household affairs.

We see this same imagery when Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to "a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them." (MAT 25:14) We know this as the parable of the talents where the master entrusted to three servants a portion of his riches and then commanded each to invest those riches as a wise steward.

And that's how Paul views himself. He knows that Jesus Christ has called him to be a wise steward with the things of God. And he's an example to all of us as we too are called by Christ to be wise stewards of the duties given to us by our Lord.

It begins there. If we only see ourselves as passive riders on the bus waiting to get off at the end of the line then we'll not only miss many blessings, but we'll also have deceived ourselves like that one servant who buried the talents given to him by the master. Instead of a "well done good and faithful servant", that servant was rebuked and had his responsibility given to others.

Paul knew what his responsibilities were and it included the mysteries of God, or as the NIV puts it, the secret things of God.

Now, when we talk about the mysteries of God we're not talking about things which every believer can't know. The mysteries that Paul refers to here mean those things that have been hidden; those things which were not known in their fullest sense until revealed by God.

And now that they have been revealed Paul is proclaiming them. What is he proclaiming which has been a mystery?

ROM 16:25 "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, 26 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him -..."

In fact, Paul brought up this mystery or secret earlier in this letter.

1CO 2:6-8 "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

The secret or mystery is that mystery which has been foretold in ages past. The mystery is that sinful man is going to be given a redeemer. The mystery was clouded in such a way that sinful man saw through a mirror dimly, but he was given enough of the mystery to know the intent of God.

If this were not the case, then no one would have been saved by grace through faith as they trusted God for this Redeemer. This is the only reason Abraham could believe God and have it reckoned to him as righteousness.

But, because it was a mystery which was a shadow of the good things that are coming, many people were not willing to investigate this mystery. They were not willing to trust God with the information they did know. You see, it's not as though sinful man was left completely in the dark. God did speak in the past.

HEB 1:1-2 "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."

The Son of God is that mystery revealed and Paul sees himself as one who has been given the responsibility by Christ to share it with mankind and in essence tell mankind that there is no more mystery, either about man's sin or his future, if he is willing to come to the One who can secure that future through the redemptive work of Christ.

This is how Paul and his fellow workers want to be regarded. They want to be regarded as servants bringing this mystery, this gospel, to the world no matter what the cost to them personally.

The reason Paul and the others who served with him could do this is because they had met and come into a personal relationship with the living God. Paul was not looking to be an apostle and servant of Jesus Christ when the Lord came to him on the road to Damascus, much less a Christian.

That was the last thing on his mind. But when Paul met Christ he learned what it meant to meet God truly by faith. And now, out of gratitude he humbly and willingly will follow Christ wherever He leads.

This is what Christ asks of every one of us. To be a Christian should be synonymous with being Christ's servant. Unfortunately, many Christians don't even consider what that word Christian means. You'll remember that the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

They were called Christians for one simple reason. The word Christian is taken from the Greek word *Christianos* which means a follower of Christ, which infers one who is a servant of Christ.

If the early believers were more interested in simply being church attendee's they would never have been called *Christianos*, they would probably have been called "Church goer's". They were called Christians because they did in fact follow Christ which meant they were people of action as they proclaimed Christ in both word and deed.

And Paul is stating quite clearly that being a servant of Christ must include being faithful to whatever Christ has commanded of us.

1CO 4:2 "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."

As far as Paul is concerned we don't have an option. If God was faithful to give us life in Christ, then it stands to reason that we must be faithful to walk in that life and follow the One who gave us that life, and to follow it with a zeal knowing that we have the greatest news this world has ever heard.

Zeal is something that the church-at-large seems to have lost when it comes to service to Christ. Paul talks about it in his letter to the Romans.

ROM 12:10-12 "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 *Never be lacking in zeal*, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

Paul's zeal came from his faithfulness to his Lord, knowing that outside of Christ he had nothing. But now with everything in Christ he knew what life was all about and how one might come to know eternal life in Christ. He also knew that it didn't make any difference what anybody thought about him because he knew where he stood with Christ.

1CO 4:3-4 "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."

This seems like an odd thing to say and yet Paul is simply making the point that his confidence doesn't come from men but from the One who appointed him. And so, our confidence should not be put in men, but in the One who called us out of darkness. Remember, this is a letter dealing with division in the body of Christ because of Christians placing their confidence in certain men.

Paul's ministry did not depend on the acceptance of men. Now, I know that we all like to be accepted by people. No one cares to think that someone doesn't like us or accept us. And believe me, there were plenty of people who didn't like Paul, even certain Christians.

But, what if Paul had based his ministry on people liking him? What would he have accomplished? Very little. How many times have we all tried to minister to someone and for whatever reason that person or group of people didn't like what we said? Maybe they even showed their contempt by saying or intimating with their body language, "who do you think you are telling me those things?"

If we are truly interested in serving Christ as we try to help another person with the truth in love, then such encounters should not hinder our service to Christ simply because someone didn't appreciate it.

Rather, we will realize that it is our love for Christ that compels us to love others. I once told this church a number of years ago that my love for them alone, and theirs for me, is not what compelled me to serve them. And some of them had this bewildered look on their face.

But, I explained that if my service to them was dependent on mutual love for each other, then there was a good chance that I would be serving for all the wrong reasons. What if their love for me died, for whatever reason? What if some of them didn't like me? How would that effect my service if that's what my service depended on?

What would be my motivation if I didn't get the response I was expecting? And would I be tempted to tell them just what they wanted to hear in that case so as to regain their love for me? Should I tickle their ears so as not to offend anyone?

Do you see the problem when you put people, even Christian people, in a position of determining how you will serve Christ, because of their response to you? What Paul is saying and what I have said for years is that the main reason I serve is because of my love for Christ. People will always disappoint us, but Christ never will.

And so, because Paul loved our Lord Jesus, he could love the sheep no matter how the sheep responded to him. He wasn't

looking to people for acceptance, he was looking to Christ for acceptance as he was faithful to serve God.

Now, again this doesn't mean that Paul or any servant of Christ is cold-hearted when it comes to people rejecting them. But, it doesn't cripple them from continuing to love the body because they realize that they didn't get their commission from people but from Christ who loved the body even while they were yet sinners.

And so, despite how anyone judges Paul's ministry he knows ultimately that it's only Christ's assessment of his ministry that will count.

He's not being cocky when he says, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself." (1CO 4:3)

He's simply stating that no man can truly judge the heart of any minister of the Lord Jesus Christ and conclude on that basis the effectiveness of that ministry as he serves the Lord.

In fact, Paul even says, I don't even judge myself. In other words, he cannot effectively judge his own heart at times. He knows the deceitfulness of the human heart, even among those who have been made new creatures in Christ.

He can't make a tally sheet of all of the things he's done for the Lord and present that sheet before the Lord and say, with any certainty, that it is all gold, silver and costly stones. He knows the chances are pretty good that somewhere in the mix there may be some wood, hay and straw that will be burned up as it relates to his good works for Christ.

But, his conscience is clear because he is not out to hood wink the church. His motivation is truly to serve Christ. He is not consciously trying to fool anyone or abuse his power and authority.

1CO 4:4 "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."

Though his conscience is clear he knows that he too, like all of us, will stand before Christ. He knows that the only reason he will be able to stand before God is because Jesus Christ is the One who judges Him and the verdict is "not guilty."

ROM 8:1-2 "Therefore, there is now *no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."

This is what excited Paul. In fact, he looked forward to the day that he would stand before Christ. He had nothing to fear because his guilt was laid upon his Savior, Jesus Christ, who took our guilt to the cross and suffered the wrath of God on our behalf despite the fact that He was sinless.

"It is the Lord who judges me", Paul says. And in that sense, Paul will take his case before the Lord when it comes to the way in which he served Christ. He knows what motivates him. He knows that many people will not accept him and that others in body of Christ may question the validity of his ministry. But he also knows that he will not stand before men in the final day.

This does not excuse any minister of the gospel if he is derelict in his duties to Christ and the body as he does not teach and preach the whole counsel of God's word and does not teach and preach the true gospel. In such cases a judgment must be made and the church must recognize that he has mishandled his duties and responsibilities.

But that's not what Paul is talking about here. He essentially says that he has run the race and is finishing the course as Christ has laid it out for him. And on that basis, no judgment other than Christ's will count. Therefore, he says, don't make judgments of the heart when that is reserved for God alone.

1CO 4:5 "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."

All of us are tempted to judge others. Again, this does not mean that there aren't legitimate times in which judgments must be made. Jesus tells us that if a brother sins against us we have the responsibility to go that brother or sister to point their sin out and to restore them with the truth in love.

The only way you can do that is to make a judgment on their behavior. The same is true when leaders in the church have to enact church discipline on a member of the body. A judgment has to be made in those cases because of outward sin, but the judgment is based on the word of God, not on some unseen speculation based on your judgment of the heart of that person.

And that's what Paul warns against in his own case. He is saying that neither he, or any servant of Christ, must be judged on any

basis other than what the word of God clearly teaches. If that servant is doing the work of God as it is revealed in the Scriptures then we cannot judge the heart of that servant.

If that servant is following the lead of the Holy Spirit, as Paul was doing, then to judge the effectiveness of his ministry was to make a judgment that is reserved for God alone. That's why Paul says, "therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."

In other words, nothing will escape God's notice. In that day He will judge not just the outward works of each servant, but will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts.

This, by the way, is not limited to Paul, but to every single Christian. What Paul is implying here is to be careful how you judge another's heart because you will come under the same judgment of God and your heart will be exposed for what it is as well.

But he doesn't say this to bring fear to men. He shares this to encourage the body of Christ to serve our Lord and each other and to expect that God will be a rewarder of those who diligently seek and serve Him.

He's saying to serve in a way where, when your motives are examined by God, they will reveal that your service was unto the Lord. "At that time each will receive his praise from God." That praise will find its ultimate fulfillment in being welcomed into His Kingdom.

Imagine receiving praise from your God and Savior. This is why Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians:

2CO 10:17-18 "But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." 18 For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."

Paul was not going to commend himself. But he wasn't going to be condemned by men either, as it relates to his faithfulness to Christ. He will leave that in the hands of God and be content with the outcome knowing that his service was to Christ first and foremost and that his justification was from Christ as well.

Because God will reward according to the motives of men's hearts, our single purpose in life should be that, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1CO 10:31) That motive should determine everything we think and do.....

.... It is good when fellow Christians can speak well of us sincerely. It is good when our own conscience does not accuse us. But it will be wonderful beyond description if, on that day, our Lord can say of us, "Well done, good and faithful servant." (John MacArthur)

And what Paul wants us to realize is that only God can evaluate the heart of His servants. To cause division in the body of Christ over such matters is unproductive and destructive as people argue "over who is the most honored servant." (MacArthur)

God will honor each one as He judges righteously. May we all desire to find such honor as we are faithful to love and serve Christ as we too have been entrusted with the mysteries of God found in the gospel of Jesus Christ and His revealed word.

Our Lord Jesus is coming back. May we be found faithful, doing His work to His glory.

REV 22:12-14 "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. 14 "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city."