

Servants and Stewards – 1 Corinthians 4:1-7

Introduction – When man fails to grasp the wisdom of the cross, his judgment on everything else and everyone else is presumptuous. What is the nature of Christian leadership and by what standards are we to measure faithfulness? It is an honor to be given a place of leadership in the same way it was an honor for Christ to bear the cross. Therefore, embracing your position (even as a leader) as a servant and steward of God and His gospel gives one both freedom (against false judgment) and humble gratitude (against arrogance).

How to Regard Servants and Stewards (vv1-4) – Reflecting on who Paul and Apollos were, Paul had used the metaphors of a field, a building, and a garden-temple (3:5-23) of whom they were “ministers/deacons” and “builders.” Now, he says straightforwardly how they should be regarded: *servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God*. Paul is carefully choosing words. The word “servant” here is unique, referring to a slave who rowed on the lowest deck of a ship – you just do what you are told. And the word “steward” refers to one given responsibility over the possessions of a wealthy household. These stewards oversee the mysteries of God, which refers to the gospel message itself (2:1-2, 6-8). It is required that a steward be found faithful (v2), but to his master, not to his fellow servants. The lead steward must not require anything from the others without the Master’s warrant. They must not feed them with the chaff of their own inventions. They must teach what has been commanded and not the doctrines or fancies of men (M. Henry).

As a steward, the judgment of the Corinthians, and even of himself, does not matter to Paul (vv3-4) for the steward answers to the master. He is not making a claim to radical individualism. Elsewhere Paul will require that to qualify to be an elder, one must be judged, including as having a good reputation among men (1 Tim 3:7). But his chief endeavor is not to please men, but to please God (Gal 1:10). This is why Paul could exhort Timothy to preach “*in season and out of season*” (2 Tim 4:1-5), that is, whether or not they approved of your stewardship of the things of God. And it should be a comfort to preachers when Paul says, “*I do not even judge myself*” (v3), for far too often one cannot judge the fruitfulness of the work that has been done. This protects ministers and Christian workers from the error of morbid introspection over their ministry. We all must remember that it is “*God who gives the increase*” (3:6). “*And happy is it for faithful ministers that they have a more just and candid judge than their fellow-servants; One who knows and pities their imperfections, though he has none of His own. It is better to fall into the hands of God than into the hands of men, 2 Sam 24:14*” – M. Henry. And for all Christians, we are to be single-minded in our devotion to God. All of life is all about Him, He is the perfect Judge and we are in Christ, and this is the most liberating thing in the world.

Judge Nothing Before the Time (v5) – To the Corinthians, then, Paul warns, do not judge before all that has been promised is revealed, until the story (the eschaton) has been brought to light. The immediate context (again): they are not to keep making judgments about Paul and the gospel he preaches before the Lord comes, which will prove the veracity and faithfulness of Paul’s ministry to the crucified and risen Lord. When the risen Lord removes the old covenant/temple, and levels it through his emissaries, the Romans, the church will be left standing. At that point, the darkness of those hearts who remained foolish with the wisdom of that age, and their ungodly motives, will be revealed, for they had refused to come into the light of the glory of the Son of God.

Everything We Have We Received (vv6-7) – These illustrations of Paul and Apollos were given to show the Corinthians how to keep the teachers and the teachings in the right perspective. Arrogant claims to wisdom or rhetorical skill are at the heart of their factionalism which flies against the wisdom of the cross. The doctrine of sola scriptura is defended in v6, although Paul brings it out to apply it to what is written about honoring men. We are not to go beyond “*what is written.*” Paul is a great example of this – already he

has quoted the OT six times (1.19, 31; 2.9, 16; 3.19, 20). The first two and last two explicitly spell out “no boasting in men,” and the middle two references reinforce that theme by contrasting man’s feeble understanding of God’s goodness and grace. The witness of scripture places a strict limit on human pride and calls for trust in God alone. Pride either exalts a man in self-praise or leaves him wallowing in self-pity. Trust in God alone compels us to cultivate humble gratitude (v7).

Humble Gratitude – And here is a good place to conclude. Consider your health and the ability to use your senses. Consider the wisdom and knowledge you have been given, your particular skills and abilities. Consider the family you have been placed in, the doctrines of the faith you have been granted to grow up in. How is it that you hear the music of the gospel with ears that love the tune while it falls on others as though they were deaf? Why are their consciences seared as with a hot iron while yours is supple and responsive to the Spirit? Every good and perfect gift we have has come from our loving, heavenly Father (James 1:17). Too many of us are fools, born on third base, claiming we hit a triple.

As this letter will continue to argue, everything you have been given has been given to you to edify, to build up, to bless the community of saints, the body, and not to boast in. And finally, if these gifts have been given to someone as lowly as you, why may He not make others recipients of His grace as well. “*There can be no case beyond His strength; if he brought you in he can bring all in*” – Spurgeon.

Dave Hatcher – June 10, 2018

Notes for Little Saints

Let’s focus on just one verse – 1 Corinthians 4:7 –

“For who makes you differ from another?” –

What wonderful gifts has God particularly given to you? There are hundreds, but make a list of at least ten –

“...Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” –

What are you supposed to do with those gifts instead of boasting that you have them?

Two other verses that might help you answer that question

1 – 1 Thess 5:18

2 – 1 Corinthians 12:7