

The Book of 1 Corinthians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: Servants of Christ and Apostolic Authority

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This chapter is the climax of Paul's four-chapter rebuke of the party spirit in Corinth, and what is doctrinally at stake is twofold: the nature of Christian leadership and the authority of God's revealed word. Paul presents apostles and teachers as servants and stewards, accountable to the Lord and bound to be faithful with what God entrusted to them, not free agents inventing their own message. The phrase "do not go beyond what is written" (4:6) is a charter for the whole church: our standard is what God has actually said. The teacher should use this to reinforce the absolute authority and sufficiency of Scripture, and the apostles' unique role as the appointed deliverers of Christ's revelation, against any impulse to revise, supplement, or improve upon the word.

At the same time, the chapter is a sustained assault on spiritual pride, which is the soil in which the Corinthian divisions grew. Paul's irony, his catalog of apostolic suffering, and his piercing question in 4:7 are all aimed at the heart. So the lesson is deeply formational: it means to humble us, to reorient us toward faithfulness rather than applause, and to teach us to live for the Lord's verdict alone.

Aim, then, at humility and faithfulness. Send students home with a higher view of God's word and the servant-shape of true greatness, and send them home with their religious pride gently punctured, freshly aware that everything they have was received, and freshly content to be faithful servants who wait for the Master's commendation.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful" (4:1-2). What does it mean to be a steward of the mysteries of God, and why is faithfulness, rather than impressiveness or success, the chief thing required of such a servant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open up the two images Paul uses: servant and steward. A servant exists to do the master's will, not to build his own following. A steward is a household manager entrusted with the master's goods, answerable for how he handles what is not his own.

Stress what is entrusted: “the mysteries of God,” the revealed truth of the gospel. The steward did not author the message; he was given it to deliver faithfully. This frames every preacher and teacher as a deliverer, not an originator, of God’s word.

Highlight 4:2: the one thing required of stewards is faithfulness. Not eloquence, not crowds, not innovation, but trustworthiness with what the Master gave. This quietly rebukes the Corinthians’ celebrity ranking of their teachers.

Apply it broadly. Every Christian is in some sense a steward of what God has entrusted, the gospel, gifts, opportunities. The measure God applies is faithfulness, and that is a measure available to the most ordinary servant.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christian leaders as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s revealed truth (4:1)
- The steward as a deliverer, not an originator, of the message
- Faithfulness, not impressiveness, as the chief requirement (4:2)
- Accountability to the Master rather than to human admirers
- Stewardship as a calling on every Christian, not only leaders

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to be a steward of the mysteries of God?
- Why does Paul make faithfulness, not success, the main thing required?
- How does seeing ourselves as stewards change how we handle what God has given us?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul measures himself not by results or reputation but by faithfulness to what God entrusted to him. In your own areas of responsibility, your work, your family, your service in the church, are you driven more by a desire to look successful or by a commitment to be faithful? Where do you need to recover faithfulness as your true aim?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the steward image into the student’s own responsibilities. Most of us are quietly more driven by appearing successful than by being faithful.

Help students distinguish the two. Success is often outside our control and tied to results and reputation; faithfulness is within our reach and tied to obedience and integrity. God calls us to the second.

Probe specific arenas: work, parenting, service in the church. Where have results-anxiety or image-management crowded out simple faithfulness?

Aim for one recovered commitment. Ask each student to name one area where they will measure themselves this week by faithfulness rather than by how successful they look.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithfulness versus the appearance of success as our true aim
- Results and reputation as things largely outside our control
- Integrity and obedience as what God actually requires
- Recovering faithfulness in everyday stewardship

Discussion Prompts

- Are you more driven by looking successful or by being faithful?
- What is the difference between the two in your daily work?
- Where will you choose faithfulness over image this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says it is a very small thing that he should be judged by the Corinthians or by any human court, and that the Lord is the one who judges him; therefore we should “not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness” (4:3–5). What does this teach about whose verdict ultimately matters and about the danger of setting ourselves up as judges of one another?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring out Paul’s striking freedom from the verdicts of others. The Corinthians have been judging him, and Paul says their court, and even his own self-assessment, is a small thing; the Lord is his judge.

Explain the warning of 4:5: do not pronounce judgment before the time. There is a coming day when the Lord will bring hidden things to light and give each one his commendation from God. Final judgment belongs to him, not to us.

Clarify what Paul is and is not saying. He is not forbidding all discernment; elsewhere he commands the church to judge sin within it (chapter 5). He is forbidding the presumptuous, premature judging of motives and persons that belongs to God alone.

Apply it pastorally. So much division and bitterness grows from our setting ourselves up as judges of one another’s hearts. Leaving final judgment to the Lord frees us to be humble, patient, and gracious.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Lord, not human opinion, as the judge whose verdict matters (4:4)
- The coming day when hidden things are brought to light (4:5)
- The difference between godly discernment and presumptuous judging of hearts
- Freedom and humility that come from leaving final judgment to God

Discussion Prompts

- Whose verdict does Paul live by, and why does it free him?
- What kind of judging does Paul forbid, and what kind does Scripture still require?
- How does leaving final judgment to the Lord change how we treat one another?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul lives for an audience of One, content to wait for the Lord's commendation rather than craving the approval of people. Whose approval do you find yourself living for most of the time? How would your daily choices change if the Lord's "well done" mattered to you more than the verdict of the people around you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the audience-of-One theme into the student's daily life. We all answer to some jury in our heads; the question is whose.

Help students name their real audience: a parent, a peer group, social media, a rival, the culture. Living for these juries quietly shapes a thousand choices.

Set the Lord's commendation against them. To live for his "well done" is both sobering, because he sees everything, and freeing, because his verdict is the only one that finally counts and it is full of grace toward the faithful.

Aim for one reoriented choice. Ask students to name a decision this week they would make differently if the Lord's approval truly outweighed human opinion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living for the Lord's approval rather than human applause
- Identifying the hidden juries we answer to
- The freedom and seriousness of an audience of One
- Reordering daily choices around the Lord's commendation

Discussion Prompts

- Whose approval do you most often live for?
- How would your week look different if the Lord's verdict mattered most?

- Name one choice you would make differently for an audience of One.

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul confronts the Corinthians' boasting with a piercing question: "What do you have that you did not receive?" (4:7). How does this single question undercut all spiritual pride, and what does it teach about the nature of grace and the source of everything good in our lives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the force of 4:7 land. Three quick questions dismantle pride: Who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why boast as if you did not?

Draw out the doctrine of grace beneath it. Everything we are and have, life, breath, ability, faith, salvation, is gift. The logic of grace is that there is no room left for boasting, because nothing originated with us.

Connect this to the Corinthian problem. Their boasting and party spirit assumed they had something to be proud of. Paul cuts the root: it was all received, so the only fitting posture is gratitude, not superiority.

Be careful to hold grace and response together. Recognizing that all is received does not make us passive; we still believe, repent, and obey. But it means we can never take credit, and so we can never look down on another.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Everything good as a gift received from God (4:7)
- Grace as the death of boasting and comparison
- Gratitude rather than pride as the fitting response
- Receiving all from God without becoming passive in our response
- The leveling effect of grace within the body

Discussion Prompts

- How does the question of 4:7 dismantle spiritual pride?
- What does it teach about the nature of grace?
- If everything is received, what posture is left to us?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul exposes a boasting that takes credit for gifts that were received, not earned. Where are you most tempted to compare yourself with others and feel superior, in knowledge, in morality, in spiritual experience? How does remembering that it was all received rather than achieved put that comparison to death?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns 4:7 onto our habit of comparison. Comparison is the engine of much spiritual pride: we feel tall by standing next to someone we judge shorter.

Help students notice their favorite measuring contests: knowledge, morality, spiritual experience, service. Pride hides in all of them.

Apply the cure. If every advantage was received, then comparison collapses; we cannot boast in a gift over someone who simply received different gifts or fewer opportunities.

Aim for one concrete humbling. Ask each student to name a comparison they regularly make and to bring it under the truth that it was all received.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Comparison as a chief engine of spiritual pride
- The arenas where we measure ourselves against others
- Grace as the end of boasting over others
- Humility flowing from remembering all is received

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to compare and feel superior?
- How does grace put that comparison to death?
- What comparison do you most need to surrender this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul contrasts the Corinthians' sense of being rich, full, and reigning with the apostles' lot of being "last of all," a spectacle to the world, weak, dishonored, persecuted, and reviled, yet responding with blessing and endurance (4:8-13). What does this striking contrast teach about the shape of faithful Christian living and about following a crucified Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the two pictures side by side as Paul does. The Corinthians imagine themselves rich, full, and reigning; the apostles are hungry, homeless, beaten, and treated as the world's refuse. The contrast is deliberate and jarring.

Explain the point. The Corinthians have embraced a triumphalist faith that expects status and comfort now. Paul shows that the path of those closest to Christ is cross-shaped, marked by suffering and lowliness, not by worldly glory.

Highlight the apostles' response in 4:12–13: reviled, they bless; persecuted, they endure; slandered, they speak kindly. This is the character of Christ reproduced in his servants.

Apply it carefully. This does not glorify suffering for its own sake, but it does warn against a Christianity that promises ease and status. To follow a crucified Lord is to expect the world's misunderstanding and to answer it with grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cross-shaped pattern of faithful Christian living (4:8–13)
- The danger of a triumphalist faith that expects status and comfort now
- Christlike response to mistreatment: blessing, endurance, kindness (4:12–13)
- Following a crucified Lord rather than a worldly idea of glory
- Lowliness and suffering as no sign of God's disfavor

Discussion Prompts

- What is wrong with the triumphalism Paul mocks in the Corinthians?
- How does the apostles' response to mistreatment reflect Christ?
- What does it mean that the Christian path is cross-shaped?

Question 8

Student Question:

The apostles answered reviling with blessing and persecution with endurance (4:12–13). Think of a situation where you are being treated unfairly or wearing some hardship for the sake of doing right. How might the example of the apostles reshape your response this week, from self-pity or retaliation toward blessing and steadfastness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes the apostles' example into the student's own hardships. Most of us face some unfair treatment or some cost for doing right.

Help students locate a real situation, a strained relationship, a cost at work, a hostility because of their faith, without rushing to fix it.

Hold up the apostolic pattern: bless, endure, answer kindly. This is not passivity but a deliberate, Christlike refusal to repay evil with evil.

Aim for one concrete change in response. Ask each student to name how blessing and steadfastness might replace self-pity or retaliation in their situation this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Responding to mistreatment with blessing rather than retaliation
- Endurance as a Christlike alternative to self-pity
- Bearing the cost of doing right for Christ's sake
- Reflecting the character of Christ under pressure

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you bearing some unfair treatment right now?
- How might the apostles' example reshape your response?
- What would blessing instead of retaliating look like this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul tells the Corinthians not to be "puffed up in favor of one against another," teaching them by his own example "not to go beyond what is written" (4:6), and he reminds them that the kingdom of God "does not consist in talk but in power" (4:20). What does it mean to refuse to go beyond what is written, and how does submitting to the authority of God's revealed word, rather than human opinion and clever talk, guard the church from pride and division?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson. The key phrase is in 4:6: Paul applies all this to himself and Apollos so that the Corinthians may learn "not to go beyond what is written." This is a foundational principle for the authority of Scripture.

Explain its meaning. The apostles' job, and the church's standard, is bound to what God has revealed. We are not free to add to it, subtract from it, or improve on it according to human opinion. The puffed-up confidence of Corinth, which picked teachers and revised the message to taste, runs straight into this boundary.

Tie this to the broader teaching of Scripture about its own authority and sufficiency. The completed New Testament is the inspired and sufficient word, able to equip us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). To respect what is written is to refuse both the adding of human traditions and the editing away of what God has said.

Bring in 4:20: the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. Corinthian Christianity had become big talk and empty boasting. True kingdom life is marked by the transforming power of God, lived in obedience to his word, not by clever speech. Note in passing that the

kingdom is a present reality here, something the Corinthians are in now, not merely a future hope; Christ reigns and his rule is at work in his people.

End with the protective gift of this principle. Submitting to what is written guards the church from both pride and division. When the word, not personality or preference, is our authority, there is no ground left for parties, and there is solid ground for unity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Not going beyond what is written as a charter for the authority of Scripture (4:6)
- The apostles as deliverers, not editors, of God's revealed word
- The completed New Testament as inspired and sufficient (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- Refusing both human additions and the editing away of God's word
- The kingdom as a present power, not mere talk, with Christ reigning now (4:20)
- Submission to the word as the guard against pride and division

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean in practice not to go beyond what is written?
- How does the authority of Scripture protect the church from division?
- What is the difference between a kingdom of talk and a kingdom of power?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter. Paul deflates religious pride, redefines greatness as faithful service, and writes to his beloved children as a father longing for them to mature. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from 1 Corinthians 4 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks students to look across the chapter and name one way Christ is forming them. Let them respond before offering help.

If they are slow, recall the movements: faithful stewardship, living for the Lord's verdict, the humbling question of 4:7, the cross-shaped life of the apostles, and the father's heart that admonishes in love.

Note the tender turn in 4:14–16. Paul's sharp words come from a father who longs for his children to mature and even invites them to imitate him as he imitates Christ. Severity and love are not opposites here.

Push toward the specific and close in prayer that students would walk this week as humble, faithful servants who live for the Master's commendation.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation through the call to humble, faithful service
- Living under the authority of God's word
- The blend of loving correction and a father's heart (4:14-16)
- Moving from general agreement to a specific, named response

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this chapter pressed on you most, and why?
- What is the one truth from 1 Corinthians 4 you most need this week?
- What named step is God asking you to take in response?