

The Book of 1 Corinthians

Lesson 3: Servants of Christ and Apostolic Authority -- 1 Corinthians 4:1–21

There is a particular kind of pride that can grow up inside a church, and it is more dangerous than the obvious sins because it wears religious clothes. It is the pride of feeling like you have arrived. You have the right teacher, the right knowledge, the right experiences. You feel rich, full, like royalty. And the Corinthians had caught a bad case of it. So Paul holds up a mirror, and the reflection is bracing. “Already you have become rich!” he says, with a touch of holy sarcasm. “Without us you have become kings!” Then he sets beside their imagined royalty a very different picture: the actual apostles, hungry, thirsty, poorly dressed, beaten, homeless, treated like the garbage of the world.

Paul wants the Corinthians to see what genuine Christian leadership actually looks like, because they have badly misjudged it. They have been ranking their teachers like celebrities, puffing up around their favorites, sitting in judgment on Paul as if they were the jury and he the defendant. So Paul resets the whole frame. He and Apollos are not headliners; they are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. A steward’s whole job is not to be impressive but to be faithful, trustworthy with what the Master entrusted to him.

And what has been entrusted to them is not their own clever ideas but God’s revealed truth, the mysteries of God. That is why Paul slips in a phrase that should govern the whole church in every age: do not go “beyond what is written.” The apostles do not invent the message; they deliver it. The Corinthians do not get to improve on it; they receive it. The puffed-up confidence of Corinth, picking and choosing, ranking and revising, runs straight into the authority of what God has actually said.

Underneath the sharp words beats a father’s heart. “I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children,” Paul says. He is not scoring points. He is a father who led these people to Christ and now aches to see them grow up. Read this chapter slowly. Let Paul deflate the religious pride that puffs us up, and let him show you the strange, cross-shaped beauty of a life poured out as a faithful servant of Christ.

Group Discussion: The Corinthians had begun to feel spiritually rich and self-satisfied, even acting like kings, while Paul describes the apostles as “the scum of the world” who are hungry, beaten, and homeless for Christ’s sake (4:8–13). Why is spiritual pride so easy to fall into and so hard to see in ourselves, and how does Paul’s picture of the suffering apostles challenge our ideas about what a strong, successful Christian looks like?

Personal Reflection: Paul asks, “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?” (4:7). Think about the gifts, abilities, and

blessings you are most proud of. Where have you quietly started to take credit for what was actually given to you by God? Name one.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1–21

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Luke 17:7–10, the unworthy servants who simply did their duty; 2 Corinthians 4:7–12, the treasure carried in jars of clay; Matthew 6:1–6, doing righteousness for God's eyes rather than human applause; James 4:6–10, God opposing the proud and giving grace to the humble; 1 Peter 5:5–6, humbling ourselves under God's mighty hand