

# High Peaks Bible Fellowship

## Ministers Are Stewards of God's Truth 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

### Introduction

- In 1 Cor 3:5 Paul said that ministers are simply servants of God. He illustrated their role in the church as being like field hands in God's field, or as builders in God's construction project.
- Here Paul begins with a third illustration of the role of ministers, and then he ends with a personal appeal to the Corinthians to end their divisive spirit.

### An Illustration from Household Life (1 Cor 4:1-5)

#### Two ways to properly regard any minister:

1. "As servants of Christ" (*huperetes*) = literally, "under rowers;" originally, those rowing on a galley ship of the period. It became a general term for any subordinate or worker who was standing ready to carry out the master's wishes. The use of this term emphasizes the personal responsibility that each worker had to Christ alone.
  2. "As stewards of the mysteries of God" (*oikonomos*) = literally, "house manager;" a servant in charge of the affairs of the household. This emphasizes the personal responsibility of the steward to the owner of the house.
    - A steward was typically responsible for the property of the master, and in this case Paul says ministers are stewards of the "mysteries" of God. A mystery is something that can only be known through revelation. Christ's servants have been entrusted with the treasures of God's truth revealed to the apostles and prophets. It was their responsibility to be stewards or managers of these truths according to the instructions and desires of the Master.
    - The primary job requirement for a steward is trustworthiness. Since ministers are stewards of God's treasured revelation, the primary qualification they must meet is faithfulness to their Master.
- Since human leaders are God's workmen doing whatever work He assigns them, they are responsible to God alone – they are free from human judgment. The factions in Corinth were evidently evaluating their leaders on the basis of their own preferences and choosing between them based on their own standards. This itself demonstrates that they had a wrong concept of the role of ministers.
  - "Examined" (*anakrino*) = to investigate or conduct a preliminary examination, not to pass final judgment upon something.
  - "Any human court" (*hemera*, day, see 1 Cor 3:13) = Paul's statement might appear arrogant, so to avoid this interpretation he says that he had the same regard of the opinions of all people.
  - "The one who examines me is the Lord" = As God's steward, Paul (and every minister) should be aware that he must please God alone. In effect he says here, "It is unimportant what you Corinthians think of me; it is not important what men in general think of me; it isn't even important what I think of myself!" He concludes: "The only one whose judgment counts is the Lord!"
  - "Do not go on passing judgment" = Stop judging! They are not to pass judgment on any minister, since there are so many things that make up his character which cannot be known.
  - "Before the time" = Do not get ahead of the Lord's day of judgment (*krisis*) by your preliminary investigation (*anakrasis*) which will certainly be useless and incomplete.
  - "The motives of men's hearts" = the purposes, plans, and intentions hidden within men. All of our hidden motives will be made known on that Day, so no one can conceal his purposes under the scrutiny of the Lord.
  - "Each man's praise" (*epainos*) = that which is due to a man as a result of his actions, after having been evaluated in light of his actual motives. Every person will receive a complete and impartial evaluation on that day.

## Paul's Personal Appeal (1 Cor 4:6-21)

- He closes his argument with a personal appeal to them to have the right attitude toward him and all of their other leaders.
- “Figuratively applied to myself and Apollos” = here Paul states he made use of himself and Apollos to stand for all the ministers or leaders which the Corinthians were holding in high regard. Paul’s argument was that the divisive spirit in Corinth was in part caused by a wrong concept of ministers, and he was one of those ministers.
- “Learn not to exceed what is written” = Paul wants the Corinthians to learn something from his previous discussion! When faced with dilemmas like this, Paul’s standard approach is to ask, “What does the Bible say? Do not go beyond what is written in the Scriptures.”
- “Become arrogant in behalf of one against the other” = this refers to their divisive spirit. When one says, “I am of Paul” they are also saying, “I am against Apollos!” They are saying, “UP (*huper*, above, over) with Paul, and DOWN (*kata*, down) with Apollos!” They were taking pride in being for one and against another.
- Paul punctures their pride by asking three pointed questions:
  1. “Who regards you as superior?” (*diakrino*) = literally, “Who distinguishes you (above another)?” – to distinguish, sift through, or separate things. Who has separated you from others, making you superior to others? Arrogance is based on the notion of superiority in terms of human effort or ability. So, in the next question, Paul addresses their supposed superior abilities.
  2. “What do you have that you did not receive?” = What abilities or gifts do you have that do not come from God? However you obtained it, it was ultimately the gift of God. No one can say that his so-called *superior* abilities are really his own! No one should take credit for producing something that was really a gift given to him.
  3. “Why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” = Why do you boast as if it were the result of your own effort or skill?
- The Corinthians are acting like the masters of the house, rather than like members of the house to whom the stewards or household managers are ministering.
- Here Paul uses sarcasm to set up a dramatic contrast between their so-called “exalted” position and his own lowly position as an apostle.
  - “You are already filled” (*korenumi*) = occurs only here and in Acts 27:38, “And when they had eaten enough.” It is usually applied to a feast, and pictures those who have stuffed themselves.
  - “Have already become rich” (*plouteo*) = to be richly supplied; affluent in resources.
  - “Have become kings without us” (*basileuo*) = assumed the throne, taken the highest-ranking position.
  - The emphasis in these three word pictures is on the terms already and without us. The implication is that the Corinthians think they have somehow attained all they can spiritually.
  - The first metaphor pictures people completely filled with food; the second is of those who are so rich that they lack nothing; the third is of those who are raised to the highest position where there is no place left to which to ascend.
  - “I wish you had become kings” = the implication is that they were not! It is as if Paul is saying, “You are so puffed up and satisfied with your own favorite teachers and your own spiritual attainments, that you feel like those filled full at a feast, or as a rich man priding himself in his riches, or as the top-ranking people in the land.”
- Paul introduces the contrast: “You have become kings, but the case is very different with us.”
- “Last of all” = They were acting as if God had put the apostles at the end of their victory procession, like those under a sentence of death, to show them off as spectacles of shame to the world and to angels and to men.
- “Condemned to death” = This is probably an allusion to the practice of bringing condemned criminals into the amphitheatre to fight with beasts or with one another as gladiators.
- “Become a spectacle” (*theatron*) = literally, “a theatrical spectacle.” The illustration is of the Roman amphitheaters in which various exhibitions were put on show for the pleasure of the spectators.
- Paul provides three contrasts in the areas of knowledge, manner, and worldly position:
  1. Knowledge:
    - “We are fools” (*moros*) = stupid; appearing absurd
    - “You are prudent” (*phronimos*) = sagacious, clever, enlightened
  2. Manner or Bearing:
    - “We are weak” (*asthenes*) = without strength; impotent

“You are strong” (*ischuros*) = forceful or mighty

3. Worldly Position:

“You are distinguished” (*endoxos*) = ‘in glory,’ held in esteem

“We are without honor” (*atimos*) = having no value, worth, or dignity; despised; looked down upon

- Here Paul begins a serious summary of his actual sufferings and trials. These hardships were still continuing and were to be regarded as a part of the condition of an apostle.
- “Scum of the world” (*perikatharmata*) = to cleanse all round; that which is thrown off in cleansing; refuse or trash. That which is collected by sweeping a house, or that which is cast away after purifying something. This is a strong expression to denote the contempt and scorn with which the apostles were being regarded.
- “Dregs of all things” (*peripsema*) = scraping around; garbage or dirt rubbed off something.

**Paul follows harsh words with tenderness and encouragement to imitate his fatherly example.**

- “I do not write to shame you” = Paul is not ridiculing them or mocking them. His purpose was much higher and nobler than that. No minister ought to reprove someone merely to overwhelm him with shame, but his object should always be to make his brother better.
- “To admonish you” (*noutheteo*) = to put something into the mind with the purpose of gently reproofing the person.
- “Countless tutors, but one father” = all the subsequent teachers in Corinth could be regarded as their tutors or instructors, but only Paul could be considered their spiritual father. He was the one who was used by God initially to bring them to Christ – he was the instrument of their conversion.
- “Be imitators of me” (*mimetes*) = keep on becoming (present middle imperative) imitators of me. Paul had no desire to form parties or sects when he was with them, and so he exhorts them to imitate his example in this.
- “For this reason” = that they might be better imitators of Paul and more obedient to his instructions.
- Two Things About Timothy:
  1. Much beloved by Paul – very dear to him as a companion and co-worker.
  2. A Christian minister proven to be trustworthy over his years of service with Paul.
- “Remind you of my ways” = to call to mind. Way (*hodos*) = a well-traveled road; also, a course of conduct; a way of thinking, feeling, and acting.
- “As I teach everywhere in every church” = Timothy will remind the Corinthians of Paul’s teachings, the doctrines or truths of the Faith which Paul shared everywhere he went. A major part of ministry work is teaching the Word of God, because people cannot come to believe and practice truths that they do not know.
- Paul warns of his coming with discipline and rebuke. Some of the Corinthians may think that he is sending Timothy because he does not want to face them himself. Arrogance is a key result of having a divisive spirit within the church. Where there is arrogance, there is a real problem.
- “But I will come” = Paul promises that he will visit them as soon as the Lord allows.
- “I will know” (*ginosko*) = I will fully understand and (by implication) I will put to the test.
  1. “Not the words” = Paul is not concerned about their high-sounding speech or philosophical rhetoric. Talk is cheap, but can they stand up to the exercise of God’s apostolic authority wielded by the apostle Paul?
  2. “But their power” (*dunamis*) = the inherent power residing in something by virtue of its basic nature. Paul will know and test the character of their lives and the extent of their influence within the church.
- “Kingdom of God” (*basilea*) = Paul seems to present this as a contrast with 1 Cor 4:8 where he said the Corinthians had become kings (*basileuo*) – they had assumed the throne, supposing they had reached the pinnacle of spirituality. Here he contrasts that with what it truly means to be spiritual!
- What is it that confirms the presence of God’s kingdom? It is not empty speeches, but the demonstrated power of the Holy Spirit; it is the obvious rule or reign of God in the life of the church.
- “What do you desire?” = Whether he responds in tenderness or strictness is totally up to them. He will come – either as a stern disciplinarian or as their loving “father” in the Lord.
- When a Christian slips into wrong behavior or wrong doctrine, he needs to be corrected. He needs to be told in love, but with firmness, that his Christian life is not what it should be, or that he is not acting on the principles he has already learned. Such confrontations are never easy, but they are sometimes necessary.

## Points of Application

- Ministers should be faithful. We should regard ministers as the servants of Jesus Christ, and honor them for their Master's sake. We should respect ministers in proportion to their faithfulness in their work.
- It is of little consequence what the world thinks of us. It is a good thing to have a good reputation (Prov 22:1), but it should not be our focus. Even the admiration of our friends should not be the focus of our efforts. It is valuable, but not nearly as valuable as the approval of God.
- Sarcasm is sometimes a proper tool for expression (1Cor 4:8-10), but it is not as safe for us to use as for the apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Very few people can use sarcasm properly, and so very few people should allow themselves to indulge in it. Sarcasm is rarely used in the Bible; and it is hardly ever used in real life without causing some kind of harm.
- This passage provides a wonderful illustration of the way reproach, contempt, and scorn should be endured (1Cor 4:12-13). The apostles imitated the example of their Master, following His precepts, and there is nothing but true spirituality that can produce this kind of response.
- All that we have in this life (beauty, health, wealth, honor, grace) has been given to us by God. We should constantly remember this fact and express our gratefulness to Him. We should certainly not be proud of what we have, as if we received it by our own efforts. We have nothing to boast about, but if we boast we should boast in the Lord for what He has accomplished in and through us.

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**High Peaks Bible Fellowship**

**Our primary purpose is to uphold the truths of the Word of God.**

I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)

**Our primary responsibility is to equip the saints for the work of ministry.**

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-12)