

VI. Stewards of the Mysteries

November 13/15, 2012 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5

Aim: To recognize the folly of worldly wisdom within the church and to realize that church ministers must adhere to the godly wisdom of preaching Christ and Him crucified.

A. The Final Word on Wisdom (1 Cor. 3:18-23)

1. Let No One Deceive Himself (3:18-20)

a) Paul's Warning (3:18)

¹⁸*Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.*

The usual word 'deceive' (*apatō*) is intensified by the prefix *ex* (*exapatō*). There is self-deception, but this person is in danger of self-inflicted blindness, metaphorically speaking. Paul thus warns the one tempted to follow the wisdom of this age to pull his thinking inside out, identifying now with God's scale of 'wisdom' seem in God's 'foolish' message of Christ crucified.

Paul's appeal is for the Corinthians to be 'Christian fools' rather than worldly fools, by coming back to the true wisdom that is only found in the gospel of the cross. The appealing wisdom of this world is utter foolishness as far as God is concerned.

b) Paul's 'Proverb' (3:19a)

¹⁹*For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.*

A person who thinks that he is wise in this age—that is, wise in contemporary human wisdom—does nothing but 'deceive himself.' Anyone who is so self-deceived ought to 'become foolish' (*mōros*), that is, identify with those who recognize that human wisdom, including our own, is mere foolishness (*mōria*) without God. Human wisdom is 'moronic' in the Lord's sight, before God.

Paul substantiates his advice to the 'wise' by his own personal proverb or 'wise' saying: 'for the wisdom of this world is folly with God.' The values and standards of this age (v. 18) or this world (v. 19) are topsy-turvy. As viewed by the Almighty, traditional *sophia* is an evil follow because it disregards Him.

What that would mean, in practical terms, would be to refuse to put their confidence in the securities of the contemporary pagan society all around them. It would mean recognizing that its value systems were totally wrong and futile. Wealth and prestige, impressive leaders and rhetoricians, secret knowledge and supernatural powers, elite in-groups and envious outsiders: confidence in any of these is considered folly by God.

Even Christians, therefore, do not have a right to their own opinions about the things God has revealed. When Christians start expressing and following their own ideas about the gospel, the church, and Christian living, the saints cannot help becoming divided. Christians are no wiser in their flesh than are unbelievers. The church must create an atmosphere in which the Word of

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God is honored and submitted to, and in which human opinion is never used to judge or qualify revelation.

c) Paul's Quotations (3:19b-20)

For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness,"²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

If we trust human wisdom and place it above the Word of God, we are writing our own ticket to misery and woe. Paul further substantiates his 'wisdom' by an appeal to two texts from the Old Testament Scriptures.

The first quotation is from Job 5:13. Paul perhaps means us to complete the verse for ourselves. It continues: '...and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end.' There is a constant reminder in Scripture that man can never outmaneuver God.

The second Old Testament quotation, from Psalm 94:11, reveals Him as the God who avenges, who vindicates His people, who sees and hears and knows, and who disciplines and punishes foolish rebels. In the light of such knowledge no one would want to be a self-deluded fool; Paul therefore makes this strong appeal to the Corinthians to think things through clearly and to act accordingly.

As sculpted by the apostle, Psalm 94:11 declares the 'thoughts' (*logismos*) of the apparently wise enemies of God's people are 'futile' (*mataios*, 'vain,' 'empty'). The term 'thoughts' as used elsewhere in the New Testament denotes the sinful opinions or plans of godless men. Paul draws out the application: if the Corinthians continue to devalue his ministry, they will in practice identify themselves with earlier, worldly-wise enemies of both God and the saints. They will be in peril.

Both texts are significant in their Old Testament contexts, speaking of God's judgment of the self-styled 'wise.' In the first, the 'wise' are high-minded and 'crafty,' but God overturns their plans. In the second the 'wise' are arrogant, but the Lord will bring their thoughts to nothing.

2. Let No One Boast in Men (3:21-23)

a) The Problem (3:21a)

²¹ *So let no one boast in men.*

The Corinthians looked upon their preachers in much the same way as people today look upon athletes and film stars.

b) The Antidote (3:21b-23)

(1) All Things Are Yours (3:21b-22)

For all things are yours,²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours...

The thing the Corinthians had failed to see was that by glorying in preachers they were cheating themselves. Paul says it was foolish for them to exalt one preacher when God had given them all! In fact, he goes so far as to say that not only preachers, but the world, life, death, things present, and things to come all exist for the benefit and welfare of the church (cp. Rom 8:28)! There is nothing to which the Corinthians are in servitude, either voluntarily or otherwise. This being so, party strife must stop – they need fear nothing.

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‘All things are yours.’ Here is the antidote to boasting and the reason why gospel spirituality is never man-centered. The irony is that we know some of the Corinthians were in fact boasting in men – ‘I am of Paul, I follow Apollos.’ What they should have boasted of was the great certainty with which the chapter ends, ‘You are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.’ Rather than belonging to any human leader, they should have rejoiced that they belonged to God and that the human leaders whom God had given them, along with all His other blessings in this world, belonged to them.

The world and this age, fallen and corrupt as it is, remains under the grasp of God’s providential, all-powerful hand. Thus Paul is life-affirming, world affirming, and this age affirming.

(2) All Things Are God’s (3:23)

²³ *...and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

Just as ‘all’ this belongs to you, so too, ‘you belong to Christ.’ You are safe in His kingdom, kept for the coming age of God. Christ, too, is safe, kept for the coming age of God because He in turn ‘belongs to’ God. All things are yours, and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s.

Far from being subjugated to others, the Corinthians own ‘all things,’ because they are the possession of Christ. In turn, Christ belongs to God. Theology and doxology merge, the security of the believer resting in the crucified and now triumphant Jesus who has been acknowledged by the Father.

This world belongs to God, as does the gift of life, and the great enemy death is under the sovereign rule of the Lord Jesus. The present and the future are in His omnipotent hands, and in that His people are also held in those hands, all things belong to them. This is the challenge with which Paul wants to leave his readers at the end of this section. If all the greatest realities are ours, through Christ, why become the slave of a party leader or a gifted guru? Why allow one’s natural preferences to be hardened and narrowed into exclusive prejudice? Why limit the freedom we have in Christ by signing up to a small, elite group who think they have got everything just right?

The Christian is one who has submitted to Jesus Christ. He belongs to Christ! And Christ is the one who voluntarily submitted Himself to God’s plan of salvation. Submit to this Christ who submitted Himself to God, and you will ultimately discover the truth of Paul’s statement: ‘All things are yours.’

B. The Next Word on Service (1 Cor. 4:1-5)

As the new chapter opens, Paul is still concerned with the question of leadership. It has been occupying his mind since first he identified the divisions in the Corinthian church back in 1:12. Corinthian Christianity was keen to put the spotlight on its leaders, and because they regarded themselves as a spiritually superior congregation, they obviously needed superior leaders. Paul just did not seem to measure up to this standard. Paul’s concern has been to trim these pretensions down to size. The Corinthian church is only what it is because of the grace of God in the gospel. It is clearly not part of God’s intention that the human institution should be elevated in this world. What God is looking for, both in the church and in its leaders on earth, is faithfulness.

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The main point of the passage here still concerns the divisions over different ministers. The message is that servants of God should not be ranked at all, by others or by themselves. All who are true to Scripture in their preaching and living should be treated equally. Where there is sound doctrine and personal holiness there is no justification for ranking God's servants (Romans 16:17 and 1 Timothy 5:20, however, point out that where those two essentials are missing, there must be evaluation and confrontation).

How should Christians regard preachers of the gospel? That is the question to which Paul turns in this passage. It is easy to see why it was necessary for him to take up this matter. He has devoted considerable space to urging the Corinthians not to exalt one preacher over the others and to warning about defective and destructive ministers. He knew some would misconstrue his words and conclude that preachers are indeed a sorry lot and are not worthy of even a smidgen of respect. He knew some would, in light of his words, swing all the way from preacher worship to preacher disdain.

A concern for leadership is still uppermost in Paul's mind as he now begins to consider the criticism that he has been receiving from the Corinthian church. Taking some key principles and applying them to himself and to Apollos, he provides for them and for us an analysis of how relationships in the church can so easily sour, particularly in the areas of leadership and ministry. To do this he makes use of a different metaphor, namely, the picture of a household, and of the responsibility of a steward within the household.

1. Paul's Responsibility (4:1-2)

a) Roles (4:1)

Having described himself as an 'apostle,' a 'servant,' and a 'master builder,' (1:1; 3:5, 10), Paul introduces two more terms to clarify his status and that of some others: 'agents' or 'servants' (*hypēretas*), meaning subordinates, and 'stewards,' (*oikonomos*), persons accountable to their superiors. Because Paul and others are answerable to Christ, they are not to be reckoned as lackeys at the beck and call of the church.

(1) Servants (4:1a)

¹*This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ...*

Who are the 'us' that Paul is speaking about in verses 1-5? Is it a general reference to 'ministers through whom you believed' (3:5), people like Paul and Apollos, but not limited to them, or is it to himself as an *apostle*, referring to himself in an 'apostolic plural'? References to Apollos before and after this section (3:4, 5, 6, 22; 4:6) suggest the former, that is, Paul, Apollos, Cephas (cp. 3:22), and all other 'fellow-workers' (cp. 4:9). However, there is a sting in Paul's words, for they apply pointedly to the teacher or teachers who are building unhelpfully on his foundations.

Paul reveals his obvious concern that the Corinthians have a correct grasp of his role as an *apostle*, the inference being that they do not have a right view of him. Verse 1 introduces two new terms that the apostle uses to describe not only himself but all his fellow ministers of the gospel: servants and stewards.

The word 'servant' is not *diakonos*, 'minister' (as in 3:5), but *hypēretēs*, which originally meant 'under rower,' the slave rower in a trireme who occupied the miserable, lowest bank of oars. From their position in the lowest galley, they were the most menial, unenvied, and despised of slaves. From that meaning the term came to refer to subordinates of any sort, to those under the

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authority of another. By New Testament times *hypēretēs* had come to mean an ‘assistant’ or ‘servant,’ one who is on hand to carry out the instructions of the master, as for example the ‘attendant’ in the synagogue of Nazareth who handed Jesus the scroll for Him to read (Luke 4:20; cp. Acts 13:5). If Paul was trying to create respect for preachers, he certainly went about it in a strange way! This picture seems only to encourage people to despise and disdain ministers!

The picture changes when we take into account the other half of the phrase, ‘of Christ.’ Paul’s reference to himself as ‘a servant of Christ’ carried the ideal of humility and obedient service to one whom he regarded as his Master. The point is that the preacher has no worth or value in and of himself, but his office still has great value because he is serving none other than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The minister is not great but he represents and serves a great Savior.

(2) Stewards (4:1b)

...and stewards of the mysteries of God.

A ‘mystery’ refers to a truth which can never be discovered by man himself, but can only be known by God revealing it. In short, Paul means us to understand the gospel which he preaches as the ‘mystery’ of God. This had been the long hidden plan of God, but which was now open to every ear in the preaching of the gospel of Christ crucified and risen.

The second role describes a senior position in the household. Paul is a ‘steward’ or ‘trustee’ of these mysteries. In that culture a ‘steward’ (*oikonomos*, literally ‘house manager’), often an educated slave, was employed to distribute money and goods within an extended household or farming establishment. In those days, the steward would hold the keys to his master’s resources, and was the most senior and trusted of the servants. The steward supervised the property, the fields and vineyards, the finances, the food, and the other servants on behalf of his master. His responsibility involved the correct use of those resources to equip the master’s people to do the master’s work.

The emphasis in each phrase is on the other part of each description – ‘of Christ’ and ‘of God.’ The implication seems to be that gospel ministers are not firstly servants of the church, nor stewards of the church’s reputation, which is what the Corinthians seem to have forgotten.

Because Paul and certain others are authorized transmitters of what the Lord had made known to them, they will not be deflected from their task, whether by fear or flattery. Although, unlike Apollos, Paul is an apostle, the two men are equally assistants and stewards. The implication is that every elder finds himself in the situation of these servants; administrative status demands hard work.

b) Requirement (4:2)

²*Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.*

When we put the words ‘servant’ and ‘steward’ together, this is what we have: the preacher is one who dispenses to the family of God the truths revealed by God, and he supervises the family according to the wishes of the master. The indispensable ingredient for being a steward was faithfulness to the master of the house. The steward had absolutely no authority of his own but simply administered the household in accordance with the wishes of the master.

Fundamental to his work, aside from competence, was a steward’s faithfulness. Paul is saying that as a ‘steward,’ he was called, above all, to be faithful in distributing to others what he had received from God. In modern terms, the metaphor might be that of a senior executive who is

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always under the critical scrutiny of his chairman and who has the best interests of his business at heart.

Paul stresses that faithfulness to the gospel is the one qualification the steward must fulfill. God desires that His spiritual ministers be consistently obedient to His Word, unwavering in their commitment to be faithful. He does not require brilliance or cleverness or creativeness or popularity. He can use servants with those qualities, but only trustworthiness is absolutely essential. ‘It is required.’ God supplies His Word, His Spirit, His gifts, and His power. All that the minister can supply is his faithfulness in using those resources.

Faithfulness to the master’s message is faithfulness to his goals, and, ultimately, faithfulness to the master himself, which is the standard by which all his servants will be judged. So, to be concerned about how one particular leader compares to others, to seek the approval of a denominational hierarchy, or to seek the popularity of the congregation, must all ultimately lead to *unfaithfulness*.

2. Paul’s Accountability (4:3-5)

Why does the good minister concern himself with faithfulness to God? Because he knows he must someday give account of himself to God.

Stewards were held to account by their masters for their distributions by some kind of audit process. But to whom is the ‘steward’ of God accountable? Paul raises three possible judges of his stewardship: the Corinthians, a human tribunal, or himself.

a) *Human Judgment (4:3a)*

³ *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.*

‘Judged’ and ‘judge’ (v.4) are from *anakrinō*, which means ‘to examine, investigate, question, evaluate.’ It does not mean to determine guilt or innocence, as the translation ‘judge’ suggests.

When the preacher keeps his eye on the final reckoning with the Master, certain things automatically occur. First, he learns to discount *congregational pressure*. It is totally inappropriate for the Corinthians to be setting the examination paper for Paul. The one who has commissioned him to his service is the only one who is properly qualified to assess the degree of his faithfulness.

The final reckoning with the Master will also cause the minister to discount *cultural pressures*. Paul also calls ‘a very small thing’ the judgment of ‘any human court.’ The Greek for ‘human court’ is *anthrōpinēs hemera*, which literally means ‘human day.’ This has led some to conclude that Paul was referring to the thinking of his day, that is, the thinking of his culture, but most likely refers to a day in human court.

Paul reveals that he senses the hostility of opponents who enjoy their ‘day’ when they criticize him and seem to prevail. However, when the Lord has His own day in His own court, the servant’s labors will be given proper credit. And because human assessments are invidious, Paul dares not estimate his own worth; his policy is just to keep going. This is not irresponsibility. In that the apostle operates in the light of the advent of Christ, he will entrust the last word to Him.

Paul’s statement here should not be considered as bravado, much less stubborn refusal to listen to any criticism. What he wants to impress on his readers is that the church at Corinth had no right

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to judge him, as they were doing, and so he is not going to pay attention to their assessments, whatever they say. The logic is that he is *Christ's* servant, not theirs.

Paul wasn't trying to be arrogant, and he certainly wasn't saying he had no sensitivity to others. He was simply registering his deep conviction that he could not serve God effectively if he constantly concerned himself with what people thought of him. This doesn't mean the preacher is above criticism, but it does mean he must not let criticism from others be the determining factor in what he preaches and in how he conducts his ministry.

b) Self-Judgment (4:3b-4a)

In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.

Finally, the day of reckoning with the Master will cause the preacher even to discontinue *personal pressure*. Paul is not saying he never thought about his ministry, or he never tried to evaluate it. His point is simply that it is extremely difficult for the preacher to make an accurate assessment of his own faithfulness. He stresses that he remains unaware that he has sullied his commission. Paul knew nothing against himself; that is, his conscience was clear. But he also knew a clear conscience was no guarantee he was pleasing to the Lord. One can be pleased with oneself and still not be pleasing to the Lord!

When he says that he does not judge himself, this is not evidence of spiritual arrogance, but of spiritual realism. We should not understand Paul to be saying that he was never self-critical. That would be a particularly desperate state to be in, though some Christian leaders have been known to think they are right about everything! No, Paul is constantly examining himself to keep his conscience clear, but he knows that God may well see sins that are hidden, even from his own eyes, or be aware of ingrained evil in his life, or which he is personally unaware. So neither any other human being, nor even the servant himself, is qualified to judge his work.

c) Godly Judgment (4:4b-5)

(1) The Judge (4:4b)

It is the Lord who judges me.

Congregational pressure, cultural pressure, personal pressure—all are tainted with human fallibility and frailty and cannot be trusted to be completely accurate. In the last analysis, only one thing matters: how the Lord looks at us. It is the Lord who judges. He who commissioned and equipped is the only one capable of assessing and rewarding. Just as it is wrong, then, to boast about human leaders, so it is equally wrong to judge them. None of us is qualified to do that.

This is an extremely important consideration. Ministers are delivered from being 'people-pleasers' by this great reality. If the Lord, not the church in particular nor people in general, is the judge then I can be courageous and independent in my ministry. On the other hand, we must be cautious about passing judgment on the ministry of others.

(2) The Time of Judgment (4:5a)

⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes...

The Corinthian's context was already the present. They wanted to have everything *now*, in a glorified super-church full of wisdom, power, and impressive spirituality. Paul, however, has

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been relentlessly underlining that the real test is not now but on the last day; what he calls here ‘the time.’ Closely connected here are the Lord’s ‘coming,’ the resurrection of all, and the Lord’s judgment of all. That will be a day of revelation. That is the examination day, when the Lord Jesus returns and judges His servants.

In Paul’s application, the Corinthians are to cease weighing up the validity of Paul’s ministry, although this does not mean that they must refrain from judgments in other directions (cp. 5:12; 6:5). His meaning is that the Lord will exercise a perfect judgment and that Corinthians will have no choice but to acquiesce in the divine verdict.

(3) The Quality of Judgment (4:5b)

...who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

The central part of this verse reflects the Bible’s awareness of God’s omniscience. Christ is far more interested in the hidden ‘motives’ (*boulē*) than in the external signs. His criterion of judgment will not be outward success but godly faithfulness. The Lord will cast light on hidden things of darkness and expose the motives of human hearts. To judge His servants presently by our standards is a massive presumption and an usurpation of God’s authority. Moreover, we are extremely likely to get it all completely wrong, because our judgment is sinful, tinged with jealousy and self-seeking, characterized by pride and prejudice.

(4) The Outcome of Judgment (4:5c)

Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

What an encouragement then it is to be told in the last sentence of verse 5, that God loves to praise and reward His faithful servants.

Paul’s words in their original setting were not written in the abstract. Rather, they are quite pointed and intentional. Paul is directing them squarely to the unnamed teacher or teachers of ‘wisdom’ who have built inappropriately on his ‘foundation’ in Corinth, the preaching of Jesus Christ crucified (cp. 3:10). Implicit in his words is a double warning, first, that they are answerable to the Lord for their ‘stewardship,’ but also, secondly, that they should not pass judgment on him: Christ is their judge and his.

Criticisms of those in the ministry, or of other congregations, abounds in churches. Much of this is not only fruitless but dishonoring to the Lord, so we need to examine our own attitudes. Whether we are under criticism, or meting it out to others, the one thing needful is to examine our own faithfulness to Christ and our desire to please Him above everything. It is because we are called to be pleasing only to Him, that He alone has the right to judge His servants. Of course, this is no excuse for us to be undiscerning in matters of biblical doctrine, or practical behavior. The rest of the letter will exhort the Corinthian church to right judgments, both in ethical issues and in practical lifestyle. But is the writing off of Paul because Apollos is your guru, or the rubbishing of any servant of the Lord because his face does not quite fit, which is condemned. The sobering reality is that such attitudes have destroyed so many churches and still do; far better to heed Paul’s warnings and to look to receive praise from God at the last day, rather than condemnation.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-21.