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A1203 – January 15, 2012 – 1 Corinthians 4:1-5
Stewards Are Examined By The Lord

Last week we sort of summarized things in the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians, giving some points on personal evangelism and spiritual growth. I didn't intend to be exhaustive but the points made were certainly pertinent to the situation at Corinth and they have parallels of pertinence today. In evangelism it is common to try and skirt the offense of the cross in order to get more people saved but doing so makes the cross of Christ void of saving power. Christ is often preached as an example of someone who was so sincere about His beliefs that He died for them and we should follow His example and thereby be saved. That is not the gospel. Or sometimes the cross of Christ is preached as primarily an example of the love of God and this should spur us on to love others and reform our lives and fix our behavior. While the cross is the love of God, by itself this is not the gospel. The gospel is first and foremost the death of our sinless substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, who paid the restitutionary price for our sin to satisfy the justice of God, and having no sin He rose from the dead for our justification. That is the gospel and if that is not preached then the offense of the cross has been avoided and the gospel has not been preached. Further, we showed by the points that you can't grow spiritually to reward status if you denigrate the authority of Scripture and elevate autonomous human reason. The infatuation with worldly wisdom and university learning will not help you grow spiritually because the organization of this learning is not in terms of the truth, and therefore, if you pursue worldly wisdom without re-interpreting the data in the biblical way of thinking then it will actually result in fleshly activity, a lot of sin and despair will come out of that.

The problem at Corinth was the ranking of teachers. This, Paul says, was fleshly behavior and he has condemned it thoroughly. Today we come to the question of how the Corinthians should think of Paul and Apollos? If we

should not exalt one over the other then how ought we to think of them? The answer to these questions is found in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

The difficulty in these verses is how to translate the Greek text so you'll have to bear with me here and there as I highlight some changes to the NASB. The NASB is a good word-for-word translation but no translation is without some difficulties when you get in the nitty-gritty and all commentators admit that there are some difficult areas to translate in these verses. So let's just get a translation of the first three verses before us because the imagery relates to the culture at the time, so we'll just set out before you my translation and then we'll take care to explain it.

Verse 1 is straightforward. **Let a man look upon us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2Moreover, in this connection, it is required of stewards, that each be found faithful. 3And for me it is a trivial thing that I may be assessed by you or by a human court; and consider this, I don't even assess myself.** Now obviously the point of the text is that the Corinthians were not looking upon Paul and Apollos correctly, and in this text it is clear that Paul is defending himself against those who assessed Apollos higher than himself. This assessment was false. And therefore Paul is telling them how to properly assess both Apollos and himself, they are servants and stewards.

The NASB says **Let a man regard us in this manner.** I have changed that slightly to "look upon." Let a man look upon is in this manner. A slight change but I think it clarifies. The main point to make is that this is a command to follow and so I would translate it **Let a man look upon us in this manner,** and then he describes he and Apollos **as servants** and **as stewards.** Two depictions and these are very important words because they set up the imagery in the Corinthian mind; an imagery that comes from Roman culture and is foreign to us. So here we must bridge the cultural gap in order to understand the imagery the Corinthians readily understood.

In Roman culture they had **servants** and they had **stewards.** Servants and stewards shared one thing in common – subordination. They were both subordinate to an authority. But they differed in other respects and so we want to investigate these terms.

The word **servant** is the Greek word *uperetes*. And you say, well Paul is picking up a prior theme he introduced in 3:5, I remember Paul saying something about service earlier on. Indeed he did. What did he say in 3:5? “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed...” So the theme of servanthood is a theme that has already been introduced but the Greek word translated “servants” in 3:5 is not the same Greek word translated **servant** in 4:1 and they are used in different imagery. The word in 3:5 is *diakonos* and refers to one who gets something done on behalf of a superior and is used in an agricultural context. Paul and Apollos worked in the fields of Corinth and they got the planting and watering done on God’s behalf.

But the word in 4:1 is *uperetes* and is used in maritime activities. A *uperetes* was an “under rower,” a slave who rowed a ship from the lower deck of the huge Roman galleys. If you remember Ben Hur you might remember Charlton Heston rowing in one of these galleys. Now as an under rower you can’t tell where you are or which way the ship is going. However, as long as you follow the captain’s orders the ship will sail a straight course. So Paul’s first depiction of himself and Apollos is that we are under rowers, we are not captains of the ship, the captain tells us how to row and we obey him. So then don’t exalt Apollos as if he is the captain and I am the under rower, we are both in the same station in life, under rowers. So then by the first word, **servant**, Paul has made both himself and Apollos slaves who are subordinate to and follow the orders of the captain, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now for the **steward**. A **steward** is the Greek word *oikonomos* and it refers to “a manager of a household or estate,” the steward was responsible to manage the master’s possessions. For example, in the OT, Joseph was the steward of Potiphar’s house. So he was in a subordinate position, just as the word servant conveys. However, as steward he was also responsible to manage the possessions of Potiphar. So this word also has the idea of subordination but it has the added idea of responsibility. The steward must answer to the master for how he managed his master’s affairs. And it didn’t matter what anyone else thought, what mattered was what the master thought. So a steward in the ancient world was not to worry about the assessments of those around him or even his own assessment, he needed only to please his master!

Now this opens up all kinds of things in verses 2 and 3 so far as how we should translate this and what Paul means and what the problem was at Corinth. Here you have Paul and Apollos and he says we are servants and stewards and as servants and stewards we are in a subordinate role that involves responsibility to our master, Jesus Christ. He is the one who chose us to row in His galley and He is the one who entrusted us with the mysteries of God. And therefore He is the only One who has the right to assess us. Therefore, you Corinthians, by assessing us and placing Apollos above me, reveal the fact they you are arrogantly usurping a right that belongs only to Jesus Christ. You have no right to assess us in this way because you are not our Master.

So then Paul says, verse 1, we are **servants of Christ** which doesn't give much explanation other than Christ is the one they serve; He is the captain of the ship. Secondly we are **stewards of the mysteries of God**. So here we have more to work with, stewards of the mysteries of God. There are twelve mysteries in the NT. And by that we don't mean mysterious in the spooky way. The meaning of the word "mystery," *musterion*, in the NT is something previously unknown because unrevealed but now made known because revealed. So then Paul is claiming that he and Apollos received new revelation from God. We say there is not much new in the NT, that most of it is already contained in the OT. Well, here is something that is new in the NT, the mysteries of God revealed to Paul, Apollos and other apostles and prophets - things like the interadvent age, the rapture, the unity of Jew and Gentile in one new body, the church, all the mystery truths relate in some way to the Church. And it was Paul and Apollos' stewardship to dispense these mystery truths to others. That would be how they could show themselves to be faithful stewards, to dispense the truth, to get rid of it in the sense of giving it to others.

Now turn to Eph 3 to see what a responsibility this was. Every where you read of Paul in the NT, particularly in the Book of Acts He is on the move, he is taking the gospel and evangelizing and then he is following up quickly with training, making disciples. Why is Paul so tireless, why everywhere he goes, even along the Roman roads he travels he is training believers? Paul taught the word night and day, six days a week. Why this urgency? One reason among several is that he was an apostle and as an apostle he had received fresh revelation of God and this gave him a revelation debt, that is he had all

this new information about God revealed to him and therefore it was incumbent upon him to get rid of this debt by telling this information to others. Of course people don't even care today. Oh, a Bible, yeah, I read some of that once. And here is the apostle Paul dedicating his every waking minute to get the word out because that was the only way to get rid of the revelation debt and Paul was eager to get rid of it. Here Paul describes this in Eph 3:1, "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus," prisoner of who? Jesus Christ. See, he was under authority and he was in chains for Jesus Christ. For what purpose? "for the sake of you Gentiles—" he owes them something. He was apostle to the Gentiles. Let's see what it was that he owed them. Verse 2, "if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you" - it was information, Paul got information vital to Gentiles and it was his job to impart that information. Verse 3, "that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief." earlier in chapter 2, "By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;" there's your definition of a mystery, something heretofore unknown, now known because revealed by the Spirit. Then in verse 6 he gives one of the twelve mysteries, the unity of Jew and Gentile in one new body. But the point is these men who received new revelation from God were indebted to God and the debt relief came through telling others this new revelation.

That Paul says, is what Apollos and I are; we are stewards of God's mysteries and it is our responsibility to share them with you so as to please our master. So then, if we return to 1 Cor 4:2, you see that Paul elaborates on the imagery of the steward in Roman culture. **In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.** That I have changed to read, **Moreover, in this connection,** that is, in connection with stewardship of the mysteries **it is required of stewards, that each be found faithful.** That is, a steward is going to be in deep trouble if he doesn't manage his master's possessions faithfully. And in this case Paul and Apollos must be **faithful** in managing the mysteries of God. And the way they would be found faithful would be to dispense them to others by getting the word out.

And then verse 3 logically follows, **But to me it is a very small thing** should say **And for me,** it's a continuative conjunction, **And for me it is a**

trivial thing that I may be assessed by you or by a human court; and consider this, I don't even assess myself. And so you Corinthians are usurping an assessment that does not belong to you at all. Remember, the steward was responsible to manage his master's possessions. And as such it didn't matter how anyone else assessed you, your own self-assessment didn't even matter, what mattered was the master's assessment. So Paul says, you're not my master and therefore it is a very trivial thing for you to assess me. Or a human court, big deal, they are not my master; they are beside the point when it comes to my management of my master's things and they don't tell me how to manage it. **and consider this,** he says, **I don't even assess myself.** Paul says I have no right to assess myself because the steward's own self-assessment didn't count. All that counted was the master's assessment. And therefore this assessment the Corinthians had done, of assessing Apollos as higher than Paul and breaking up into factions and quarrelling with one another, was completely out of line. They had no right to judge them at all. All judgment of Paul and Apollos was rightfully held by Christ alone, which is Paul's next subject no less, but before we turn to it let us consider how the apostles responded to human judgment and may I say that they did so with a tenacity and fierceness, which by all counts is inexplicable apart from their confidence that they were liable to a Caesar not of this world.

Notice Acts 4:18. This is not Paul and Apollos but Peter and John, but nonetheless apostles. A different situation but a human judgment, the Sanhedrin nonetheless, the most powerful Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, and notice how they respond to it. Verse 18, "And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19But Peter and John," uh oh, here we have civil disobedience, they're going to go against the standing leadership. "But Peter and John answer and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge;" and boy, that really put the onus on them because they were good Jewish lawyers and they knew God was the ultimate authority. So they're putting them in a logical bind. Verse 20, "for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." We're not going to stop spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and doing good in His name. Ha, we laugh at human threats. Verse 21, When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people," so the leadership were afraid their little political reputations might be damaged. But you can see that the apostles were under

a higher authority and therefore it was a trivial thing for a human court to judge them. And so this is one case where civil disobedience is warranted. Whenever the government tells you you can't preach the gospel, you can't mention the name of Jesus Christ, then you tell them, well sir, I'm sorry, I can't do that, I respect your office but I have to obey God, He is the authority. And just know if you do that, it's not going to go over too well. So be prepared to take the consequences; there may be jail time for this but the reason is because they are threatened. Most people in authority don't want to think that they're not the real authority so when you do this they are going to react very strongly against you. So I just warn you to be prepared to take the consequences.

Now turn to Acts 5:29 because here we see the actual civil disobedience. Verse 25, "But someone came and reported to them, "The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people. Verse 27, "When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council." So it's the same human court as before, "The high priest questioned them 28 saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." Verse 29, "But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men" and he goes on to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ right in the court. Now that's boldness. These guys went right for the jugular and the only way you can do that is if you know you've received a dispensation from God and you are responsible only to Him. He is your master and you are His steward to carry out His will in His time for His purposes. And that is where this amazing courage of the early apostles is coming from. They knew they had been commissioned for a task by Jesus Christ, the Lord of the universe and they would have to answer to Him

So let's go back to 1 Cor 4, verse 4, **For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.** See how he's continuing along the line of I am a steward. And as steward my own self assessment doesn't even matter. The only thing that matters is that my Master, **the Lord**, He assess me as faithful in my dispensation. And I'm not off the hook just because I can't think of any place I've failed, that doesn't vindicate me, the only one who can vindicate me is **the Lord**. Now this word **examines** in the phrase **the one who examines me is the Lord**, refers to a judgment, and probably the judgment seat of

Christ, but this word has a unique connotation to it. Bengel explains it this way, “to decide in judgments on one in relation to others.” That is Paul, compared to Apollos, compared to Peter, compared to John, compared to all the other apostles and prophets, how did they fare in relation to one another? Only one can decide, the Lord Jesus Christ. And He will because if you remember that dialogue in the Gospels where the disciples were arguing among themselves which one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom. And how did the Lord respond? He who is the least shall be the greatest. So they will all be ranked as to how well they carried out their stewardship and Paul affirms so much at the end of verse 4 by saying, “the one who decides my place among the others is the Lord.”

Now we might briefly comment on this human weakness alluded to at the beginning of the verse, **For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted.** This shows something interesting; did you know that you can have a perfectly good conscience and yet be caught in sin? Of course you can, we are not capable of our own to know all of our motives. We may have sinful motives and yet be perfectly unaware of it. So Paul’s point here is that not only do I not even assess myself because a steward has no right to assess himself, but even if I were to assess myself that would not acquit me. I don’t know of anything I’ve done wrong in my stewardship, but there could be things I’ve done wrong and that evaluation belongs to the Lord alone. So it just shows that you can’t know all your motives, the human psyche is very complex and a lot goes on inside of us and even though it is finite it is not fully accessible and we fail to give a perfect analysis of ourselves.

Alright, verse 5, **Therefore, do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.** That is, stop assessing Apollos higher than me; you are usurping a right that does not belong to you. That judgment belongs to the Lord and it will come when He comes.

Now here is a thing about the judgment seat of Christ that we all need to be aware of and then I will give you some protective advice. Underlying all of our thoughts, words and deeds there are motives. They may be pure, they

may be impure, they may be of the Spirit, they may be of the flesh; it is these motives that will be judged. It is hard to tell whether the Corinthians were judging Paul as having bad motives, but in any case, those motives will be brought to light at the judgment seat of Christ. However, and here's the protective advice. You can't know all your motives, so don't drive yourself crazy worrying about them. You just live your life to the best of your knowledge of the word of God, learn the word, confess your known sin, walk by the Spirit daily, pray, live by faith.

Now so far as application goes, we don't have living apostles and prophets and the direct problem they were facing of ranking them one above the other. However, we could have the problem of ranking spiritually gifted men among us, exalting one above another. Granted there are always people who stick out. You're going to have teachers who stick out, you're going to have people in your local church who stick out administratively or in the area of helps or giving. But this does not vindicate assessing one as more important or better than another and here's why. Let's say we have two ladies, Mary and Suzy. Mary and Suzy both have the spiritual gift of helps. Mary helps a lot of people and her service really sticks out, everyone in the church knows that Mary helps because even though Mary doesn't try and show off her gift of helps it is unconcealable. On the other hand you have Suzy. Suzy and a few people in the church know that Suzy helps because Suzy has helped them, but it's not well known because Suzy just doesn't help as many people as Mary. So most people in the church conclude that Mary is really a superior help to Suzy. While that is natural that is not spiritual and here's why. Christ determines the measure of a gift that someone receives. Now maybe Mary, whose help was obvious to all, was only, on her end of the responsibility, using 50% of her capacity whereas Suzy, who a few knew helped was using 85% of her capacity. Now you've misjudged. My point is there are other unseen factors that you can't know about and therefore to judge is to presume knowledge.

The point then is that we should never pass judgment on these matters and create some kind of ranking system. We have no right to compare and rank fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We can evaluate a teacher's accuracy to the text, yes, but we have no right to judge their motives, we have no right to rank their quality alongside of others, that judgment belongs to Christ.

Alright, so what are some of the stewardships we have been given. We are not Paul and Apollos, stewards of the mysteries of God, we are not recipients of divine revelation. But we're not apostles and prophets and we're not going to give an answer for how well we dispensed the mysteries of God in the NT.

However, we still have several stewardships. One that is for pastor-teachers is to rightly divide the word of truth. The pastor will be evaluated as to how accurately he taught the text. Another one is spiritual gifts. All believers have spiritual gifts and I don't know what your gift is but you will be given an assessment by the Lord Jesus as to how well you dispensed your gift. Another one is husbands. Husbands have a stewardship responsibility to love their wives, cherish them, nourish them in the world, live with them in an understanding way and this will be analyzed at the judgment seat of Christ. Wives, wives have the stewardship responsibility to submit to their husbands, to honor them and respect them and they'll be judged for how well they carried that out. Fathers have the responsibility to discipline and train their children in the fear of the Lord. That involves both Scriptural instruction and physical discipline, the rod. Then you have children and their responsibility is to obey their parents, and as children we'll be evaluated for how well we dispensed of that stewardship.

But all of these evaluations will hinge on one thing, whether we dispensed of our stewardship by the filling of the Spirit or by the flesh. That's the dichotomy and so you can only live one of two ways at any given time and therefore the issue is learning to live the spiritual life, and to do that you have to get your nose in this book, faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God. And as you go about day by day you want to set your mind on the things of the Spirit, set your mind on the word of God and as you do, you fulfill the desires of the Spirit, but if you set your mind on the flesh then you'll fulfill the lusts of the flesh. So these are the two ways a believer can live in our stewardships and we want to take care to watch our walk and be like Paul and Apollos and fulfill our stewardships in the manner God has declared they are to be fulfilled and then we can go to the judgment with confidence expecting to hear the words, "Well done good and faithful servant, you were given little, but you did much." He who sows by the flesh reaps the flesh, but he who sows by the Spirit reaps the Spirit.

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