

First Corinthians 4

Introduction:

1. Having demoted ministers for the sake of the foolish Corinthians (3:5-23), Paul begins building rightful respect for God's ministers.
2. It is important to remember Corinth was a proud church with arrogant teachers undermining Paul's authority and violating New Testament doctrine and practice (I Cor 15:12; II Cor 10:10-18; 11:12-15,18-23; 12:11-15).

Outline of Chapter 4:

1. Summary of ministers and their rightful respect (1-7)
2. Comparison of apostles to Corinth's teachers (8-13)
3. Reminder of Paul's authority at Corinth (14-21).

4:1 Paul calls for the right respect of ministers as the privileged ambassadors of heaven.

- A. Paul took pains in the previous chapter to demote ministers; here he teaches proper respect.
- B. Rather than trying to build party loyalty among men, they were dedicated to Christ and God.
- C. Ministers are accountable to Christ their Master, for they are His servants; and God entrusted them to wisely dispense the divine mysteries of heaven, not the church.
- D. As the servants of Christ and stewards of God, they had no ambition to build followings of men; which is another reason against any foolish preacher factions choosing among them.
- E. Saints should soberly consider the office of their ministers (I Thess 5:12-13; Heb 13:7,17).
- F. Pastor-teachers are the special ministers, or servants, of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself!
- G. They are called as soldiers of the kingdom by the Captain Himself (Mark 13:34; II Tim 2:4).
- H. They are the stewards, or household managers, of the mysteries of God in the gospel.
- I. Jesus described them bringing forth things new and old out of the storehouse (Matt 13:52).
- J. Here are two descriptions of ministerial work that indeed make it a good work (I Tim 3:1).
- K. They teach, defend, and perpetuate the truth through their work (II Tim 2:2; Titus 1:9-11).

4:2 Ministers, as stewards, are required to be faithful by serving according to the master's will.

- A. Here is another reason to esteem ministers, after their office (4:1); they are accountable.
- B. A steward is measured and judged by his master as to whether he rightly fulfills his office.
- C. A steward owes his loyalty and service to his master, not to the servants in the household.
- D. Joseph was a great steward (Genesis 39:1-6), but the unjust steward was not (Luke 16:1-3).
- E. God holds His ministers accountable, even as Paul showed clearly in chapter three (3:10-17).
- F. For illustrative purposes (out of context), Paul described servant accountability (Rom 14:4).
- G. Every sincere minister trembles at the responsibility and accountability he has before God.
- H. Paul's subtle message from the first two verses is thus: Esteem us wisely, for we are the servants of Christ and of God, and we have a strong fiduciary responsibility. We are not interested in pleasing men or building loyal parties, for we faithfully serve Christ and God.

4:3 Any judgment of a minister by any party is inferior to the judgment or approval of God.

- A. There were puffed up teachers at Corinth who were not afraid to criticize or judge Paul.
- B. Paul did not care what they thought of him, for their ignorant opinion had very little value.
- C. You might as well ask sheep to grade their shepherd or children to grade their parents.
- D. Paul did not care what any one man or any group of men might think of his ministry.
- E. He did not even judge himself by feeble sense, for even that was inferior to God's judgment.
- F. Ministers have one rule to try thoughts, doctrine, and practice – Scripture (II Tim 3:16-17).
- G. They submit themselves with a good conscience to their Captain (Heb 13:18; I Pet 4:19).
- H. Elihu and the psalmist are good examples of fearless men (Job 32:6-14; Psalm 119:98-100).

- 4:4 **The only legitimate judge of angels and men is the Lord Himself, for all else is suspect.**
- A. Clearly, the first clause cannot be understood in a strictly literal sense, for Paul knew much.
 - B. Paul knew most everything (Eph 3:4), but he did not have perfect knowledge of his ministry.
 - C. Paul knew much about himself (Rom 7:18), but he could not perfectly judge his ministry.
 - D. These clauses are understood of his knowledge of his ministerial labors only, not his life.
 - E. The elliptical sense of the first clause is that Paul did not know any false ministerial ambitions, which we understand clearly by the nature and sense of the second clause and 4:5.
 - F. Paul had a pure conscience before and after his conversion (Acts 23:1; 24:16; Heb 13:18).
 - G. Paul did not know of any false motives or practices, but that did not justify his ministry.
 - H. Because Paul did not know of any ministerial faults did not mean he was ministerially pure before God, for he understood the deceitful heart of man (Ps 19:12; Jer 17:9).
 - I. Paul appealed to God alone as the Judge of his ministry, to Whom he would give an account.
 - J. The Lord Jesus Christ discerns every intent of the heart and all things clearly (Heb 4:12-14).
- 4:5 **Judgment of those things we cannot see well should be reserved until the Lord's coming.**
- A. This cannot be all judgment: Paul taught judgment (1:10; 5:12-13; 6:1-5; 10:15; 11:13,31).
 - B. This cannot be to compromise judgment in the church to wait for the coming of Jesus Christ, for the apostle teaches judgment now by the church (5:12-13; 6:1-5).
 - C. Here is one of those places where we must rightly divide Scripture, as Matt 7:1 cp John 7:24.
 - D. The context limits us to ministerial ambitions and motives, things very difficult to know now.
 - E. The hidden things that cannot be discerned or judged now will be very well known later.
 - F. The hearts of all men, especially his ministers, will be exposed and judged then (3:10-17).
 - G. Then every man, or minister, with a clean conscience and record before God will be praised.
 - H. And then every man, or minister, with a hypocritical heart or false doctrine will be judged.
 - I. There will be a careful judgment at the coming of Jesus Christ (Matt 12:36; II Cor 5:10-11).
 - J. There is in these last two verses a subtle reminder that the Lord would judge the inferior teachers at Corinth, who were sitting in judgment on the apostle Paul.
- 4:6 **Paul had used himself and Apollos as examples to gently crush their ideas of party factions.**
- A. The things he refers to are all the ministerial descriptions and warning he had thus far used.
 - B. Paul used himself and Apollos, Corinth's two great teachers, as examples to condemn ministerial pride and factions among all the many prophets and teachers at Corinth.
 - C. There were many more ministerial problems at Corinth than factions behind Paul and Apollos, but he mentions no other names in order to be very discreet in condemning them!
 - D. Great loyalty to Paul (or Apollos) was not the real problem; it was ministers other than them.
 - E. He gently reasons thus: since it is wrong to be puffed up about Apollos and me, it is much more wrong to be puffed up about the more inferior ministers among you.
 - F. Observe that he transferred these things in order to teach them a lesson about men in general.
 - G. His lesson was not to think too highly of the apostles, but to not think too highly of their other teachers, who were vastly inferior to the apostles.
 - H. There was much pride in Corinth in general and because of spiritual gifts, which caused some men and/or their parties to be puffed up against others in the church, which Paul condemned.
 - I. The next verse reveals that Paul is describing their differences, not those of Apollos and him.
- 4:7 **There is no room for glorying in God's providential distribution of abilities and offices.**
- A. If two men are intrinsically different, it is God that made the difference, not the men at all.
 - B. The context of this verse limits it to ministerial offices and spiritual gifts as the main thought.
 - C. God gives spiritual gifts to men according to His own will (I Cor 12:11; Romans 12:3-8).

- D. Paul condemned Corinth's pride for their spiritual gifts, for God had given them by His will.
- E. Anything you have is by the grace of God, for which every man should thank God only.
- F. The application of God's gifts is another matter, in which our brother Paul excelled (15:10).
- G. To this point Paul defended his integrity and gave further reasons not to think too highly of their ministers at Corinth.

4:8 **Paul sarcastically mocked the luxurious pride of the Corinthians in comparison to himself.**

- A. Having given more reasons not to think too highly of their ministers, he rebuked their pride.
- B. Here is holy irony, for they were no more full, rich, or kingly than Laodicea (Rev 3:17-18).
- C. This church was full of problems of every sort, doctrinal and practical, and infected with foolish pride and self-sufficiency. The rest of the first epistle catalogs their deficiencies and poverty; and the second epistle is Paul's defense against their presumptive audacity!
- D. There must be irony here in some way, for how could Paul wish what he had said they were!
- E. There must be irony here in some way, for how could Paul call his praise a warning (4:14)?
- F. There must be irony here in some way, for what was full, rich, or kingly about this church?
- G. There must be irony here in some way, for Paul tacks on a hint by the words, "without us."
- H. The Corinthians were puffed up in confidence they had arrived as rich kings in the gospel, that they, their teachers, and their church had achieved the pinnacle of success among others.
- I. It was amazing how highly this church and its teachers thought of themselves without Paul.
- J. Paul desired them full, rich, and reigning, so he could partake with them (I Thess 2:19-20).
- K. If they had been the best church in the N.T., Paul would have much enjoyed their success.

4:9 **Paul described the apostles of Christ as having pitiful lives that were despicable to others.**

- A. The subtle message is thus: we apostles are not living so luxuriously at all, why are you?
- B. In comparison to their lofty ideas of themselves, Paul and the apostles appeared despicable.
- C. In comparison to your great successes without us, we are doing horribly by ourselves.
- D. The apostles, the greatest in the church (12:28) and the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20), feared for their lives and were counted as spectacular fools to the world, angels, and men.
- E. There may be an allusion to the last gladiators sent to mortal combat in Roman coliseums.
- F. The apostles had no reception or standing with the world, which some at Corinth still had.

4:10 **Paul further compared the character and circumstances of the apostles to the Corinthians.**

- A. There must be irony in some way here, for how could "fools" and "wise" be used literally in this case; the Corinthians were not wise, strong, and honorable; but the apostles were so.
- B. In what way but sarcastic irony could the Corinthians be called wise, strong, and honorable in comparison to the apostles as fools, weak, and despised?
- C. Paul says with irony, "It is amazing how wise you are in Christ, and how foolish we are."
- D. "It is amazing how strong and able you are at Corinth, and how weak and troubled we are."
- E. "It is amazing how honorable and esteemed you are, and how despised and rejected we are."
- F. You Corinthians have maintained wisdom, strength, and honor before the world, while we are a spectacle of foolishness, weakness, and despising. How can this be?
- G. Paul is using irony to rebuke them for their haughty self-opinions in contrast to the apostles.

4:11 **Paul continued the description of the miserable life of the true apostles of Jesus Christ.**

- A. He described his conditions as hungry, thirsty, naked, fraught with trials, and homeless.
- B. And there was no improvement, for he still endured this kind of treatment to the present.
- C. Who could desire the office of such men? And who could not respect such men?
- D. The purpose of this lengthy description is to check the haughty opinions of the Corinthians; for why was their lot so different from apostles and how could they despise one so dedicated?

- 4:12 **Paul continued the description of the miserable life of the true apostles of Jesus Christ.**
A. Rather than living with ministerial support, Paul labored with his own hands for his support.
B. When he was reviled by men in and out of the churches, he blessed and forgave his enemies.
C. When he was persecuted by men in and out of the churches, he endured it without revenge.
- 4:13 **Paul continued the description of the miserable life of the true apostles of Jesus Christ.**
A. When he was falsely accused, slandered, and defamed, he used humble entreaties in return.
B. Our treatment by most men, in and out of the churches, is as if we were the filth of the earth.
C. In spite of all our labors, authority in Christ, and fruit to our accounts, such is the case today!
D. He shows – there is no glory, prestige, or honor in our office, rather pain, shame, and trouble.
- 4:14 **Paul did not intend merely shaming them in revenge, but he warned them as beloved sons.**
A. The reference to a warning here indicates that the previous verses were a rebuke of Corinth.
B. While he did shame them for their ridiculous pride, he had a much nobler motive than that.
C. The effect of Paul’s last seven verses had to include some shame, but he had more in mind.
D. And his intent was not to shame them into providing anything for his needs in any area.
E. A good father may bring shameful things to bear in admonishing a son, but he seeks more.
F. His intent by verbal reproof was not their destruction, but their salvation (II Cor 10:8; 13:10).
- 4:15 **Regardless of how many teachers they had, Paul had been the one who converted them.**
A. Here is the first specific allusion to the teachers they had in Corinth seeking preeminence.
B. There is absolutely nothing in this verse about regeneration, for Paul had no part in that.
C. Paul already stated clearly that he could do nothing with unregenerate men (1:18,24; 2:14).
D. And to this agrees the rest of Scripture about regeneration (John 1:13; 3:8; 5:25; 8:43,47; Eph 2:1-3; Col 2:13; I Pet 1:3), for anyone believing the gospel is already born again (John 5:24).
E. While regeneration is called a begetting (Jas 1:18; I Pet 1:3), it is not so used in this place.
F. Here again is a place where we are bound to rightly divide the word of truth (II Tim 2:15).
G. Paul no more begat the Corinthians once than he begat the Galatians twice (Gal 4:19)!
H. Paul begat the Corinthians by being the one to convert them to the knowledge of the truth.
- 4:16 **Because of this obvious preeminence, Paul appealed to the Corinthians to follow him.**
A. Due to their pride and the undermining of arrogant teachers, Paul’s reputation was slipping.
B. He will say later that he wanted them to follow him as he followed Jesus Christ (11:1).
C. Consider the apostles’ burden as he prepared to write a church with many major problems!
D. He has carefully laid a foundation of ministerial authority and respect for them to follow.
E. Paul showed great wisdom gently and carefully building his case before attacking problems.
- 4:17 **Since you need to be re-established in my gospel, I have sent faithful Timothy to see to it.**
A. Paul was unable or unwilling to visit at the time, so Timothy was sent to work their recovery.
B. As the apostle of the Gentiles, I exhort you to follow me in the gospel of Jesus Christ (4:16).
C. Timotheus was Paul’s beloved son in the ministry (Phil 2:22; II Timothy 1:1-5; 2:2: 4:1-4).
D. Timotheus was Paul’s faithful helper in the ministry, superior to all others (Phil 2:19-21).
E. Paul was the wise masterbuilder (3:10), having superior knowledge of the New Testament.
F. He was the apostle of the Gentiles, without peer in perfecting their churches (Rom 11:13).
G. He wrote the pastoral epistles of how ministers are to take care of God’s church (I Tim 3:15).
H. His doctrine or practice did not vary from church to church – it was consistently one faith.
I. Ministers perpetuate the public teaching of the apostle Paul, not secret things (II Tim 2:2).

- 4:18 **Paul knew there were arrogant souls at Corinth, who did not think he would visit again.**
- They were puffed up that Paul was afraid to come or that he was too busy to come to Corinth.
 - These haughty cousins of Korah thought so highly of themselves as to defame and defy Paul!
 - Consider that this epistle would have been read to the whole assembly of the Corinthians.
 - Members should not view ministerial mercy or business as fear of their weakness and error!
- 4:19 **Paul affirmed he would seek to come soon and correct the situation with these foolish men.**
- Here is a warning that surely caused some fear in Corinth – Paul would visit in authority!
 - Even the best of intentions should be submitted to God’s will for fulfillment (Jas 4:13-16).
 - Paul intended to visit for examining and judging these puffed up teachers at Corinth.
 - Paul had power – from miracles to revelatory gifts to a holy life to knowledge in Scripture to commanding authority from the Lord Jesus Christ for resolving their childish problems.
 - And there was a profound difference between Jesus and the scribes of Israel (Matt 7:28-29).
 - It is one thing to talk, but another to perform. Consider Ahab to Benhadad (I Kings 20:11).
 - Why is there so much blubbering drivel and twaddle today about mushy love to all saints, when our beloved brother Paul showed how churches in error should be addressed?
- 4:20 **Christ’s true ministers in the kingdom of God have authority, not just pompous speech.**
- Due to the context here, we restrain this verse primarily to ministerial power, or authority.
 - A minister of the gospel armed with God’s word is different from clergymen (II Cor 10:4-6).
 - God’s ministers do not know fear, but rather power, love, and a sound mind (II Timothy 1:7).
 - God told Jeremiah there was a great difference between dreams and His word (Jer 23:28-29).
 - Paul could bring great amounts of power of various sorts to bear in his ministry (I Thess 1:5).
 - The kingdom of God – the reign of Christ in His churches – is a matter of power, not word.
 - A form of godliness denying God’s power – His call to holiness – is perilous (II Tim 3:1-5).
 - Paul told Rome the kingdom was righteous, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost (Rom 14:17).
 - Jesus will condemn many who talked the talk, but He will save the obedient (Matt 7:21-23).
 - John condemned mere professors without obedience as liars without the truth (I John 2:4).
 - James condemned mere hearers without obedience as foolish hearers indeed (James 1:21-27).
 - James further condemned mere faith without the good works to confirm it (James 2:14-26).
 - Jesus condemned those whose religion was drawing nigh with their mouths (Mark 7:6-13).
 - The power of the kingdom of heaven is a changed life by the power of the King (II Cor 5:17).
 - Paul continued to pursue the full change of life shown in Christ’s resurrection (Phil 3:10).
- 4:21 **Paul told the church that it was entirely up to them in what spirit he would visit them.**
- If you continue in pride and stubbornness, I will come with apostolic power for judgment.
 - If you repent of your foolishness and errors, I will come in love and in the spirit of meekness.
 - Here we have just one of a million examples condemning the heresy of unconditional love.

Conclusion:

- The hidden things of darkness and the counsels of the heart will all be manifest soon. Will you be found holy?
- Do you know that anything you have, especially spiritual grace and knowledge, was given to you by grace?
- Is your spirit and life more like the haughty and luxurious Corinthians or the humble and serving apostles?
- Is your life in the kingdom of God one of word only, or is it with power as well? The power of a changed life!

Additional study:

- See sermon, “Judgment Seat of Christ”: http://www.letgodbetruer.com/Sermons/pdf/Judgment_Seat_of_Christ.PDF
- See study, “The Truth about Being Born Again”: http://www.letgodbetruer.com/Sermons/pdf/Born_Again_Truth.pdf
- See sermon, “Belly Worshipers”: <http://www.letgodbetruer.com/Sermons/pdf/BellyWorshippers.pdf>
- See sermon, “Doers of the Word”: http://www.letgodbetruer.com/Sermons/pdf/Doers_of_the_Word.pdf