SERVANTS OF CHRIST

1 Corinthians 4:1–21

Key Verse: 4:1

“This, then, is how you are to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.”

Have people ever looked at you strangely? Maybe it wasn’t extreme, but you felt like people didn’t really get you, or really respect you for who you are or what you are doing. We all so easily pass judgment on people based on appearances. Apostle Paul faced this same problem with the believers in Corinth. He himself got the church started, but after he left, some people started speaking ill of him. It wasn’t just a personal matter; it threatened the life and health of the church. So in this chapter Paul has to address who he is and why this is important. In this study we want to think about what it really means to be a servant of Christ. We want to reflect on how anyone becomes a servant of Christ, how we can live with this as a mindset, and what it means to live as Christ’s servant in our practical lives. When we live as servants of Christ and see others in our Christian community as servants of Christ, we can build a healthy church. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Read verse 1. The first thing we notice is that, though it’s the beginning of a chapter, Paul is making a conclusion here. In chapter 3 he was addressing the problem of people boasting about which church leader they followed. And he first started talking about it back in chapter 1 (1:11,12). This issue was causing quarrels. Some thought Apollos was wiser than Paul. So Paul explained why he didn’t use human wisdom to share the gospel. He highlighted the difference between human wisdom and God’s wisdom. He explained how God’s wisdom is revealed by the Spirit of God. He rebuked those quarreling over leaders for being worldly. He emphasized how God is actually the one doing the work and causing people to grow. And he stressed how important it is to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ, not on human wisdom or human qualities. Now in chapter 4 Paul gets at the root of the problem.

Read verse 1 again. Paul says we need to see church leaders as servants of Christ. Let’s go back and read 3:5–9. Paul says here “only servants.” And he also says these servants are “co-workers in God’s service.” He means not rivals. Our Lord Jesus taught his disciples the same concept. They wanted to be great like worldly rulers, but Jesus taught them to be the very last, and servant of all (Mk10:42–44). Real leaders in God’s work are the ones who live like humble servants. What does it mean to live like a servant? Again, our Lord Jesus explained. He said, “Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?” (Lk17:7–9) Jesus was speaking to people in a culture very familiar with servants. What was his point? He was saying that servants don’t expect to be served or rewarded or thanked. He concluded: “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Lk17:10). Servants of Jesus aren’t looking for recognition or reward at all; they’re happy just serving, fulfilling their God-given duties.

But Paul says we should regard him and other church leaders not just as servants of people, but “as servants of Christ.” In his letters Paul loved introducing himself as “a servant” of Christ (Ro1:1; Php1:1; Tit1:1). What did it mean to him to be a “servant of Christ”? He wrote in Galatians 1:10, “Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” For Paul, Christ was King. Christ was all his focus. In his past life Paul had lived as his enemy. But by God’s one-sided grace Jesus visited him and changed his life around 180°. Paul wrote, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1Ti1:12–14). Personally, Paul had a tremendous sense of God’s grace that he could be called a servant of Christ. Because of this grace, Paul was promoting Christ, not himself. Paul was so eager to see his King Jesus exalted. So elsewhere he wrote, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Php1:20,21). What a beautiful heart he had to serve Christ above all else, and always to exalt Christ, by any means! It made him so different from most people, who are predictably bent on self-promotion. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:5, “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” It was God’s grace that made Paul such a thankful, loyal, dedicated servant of Christ.

Read verse 1 again. Paul adds that servants of Christ are “those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.” The Greek word is actually the word used for a house manager or steward. The emphasis is not so much on the humility of a nameless servant, but on the responsibilities given. The ancient world was being inundated by mystery religions. People were looking for some secret wisdom—especially in Corinth. But to Paul, the true mystery is God’s wisdom, “the deep things of God” (2:7,10). It’s another way of referring to the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It doesn’t seem like wisdom; it seems foolish. But there’s the deepest, most profound mystery in it that God reveals to us by his Spirit. Paul especially gets into explaining this mystery in his letter to the Ephesians. He says God not only gave him deep insight into this mystery that those before him didn’t understand, but also gave him the task of administering this mysterious grace to all other believers (Eph3:2,3,9).

What is the “mystery”? Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:6, “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” Human beings always prefer their own kind. So in human societies, people in power tend to treat those not in power as “second-class” or not as important. It was happening even in the early church. But the mystery of the gospel is that no one is superior; everyone is a fully equal member of the body of Christ. It’s so mysterious that such a wide variety of people can get together in Christ and have such a beautiful unity, with truly changed hearts. Paul was convinced it could happen even in this divided Corinthian church.

Unlike fallen people, Paul didn’t think he was superior to others because he knew this amazing mystery. Instead, he had a deep sense of obligation before God (Ro1:14,15). Read verse 2. Faithful? Faithful to whom? There are many kinds of faithfulness. Some are faithful to eat three meals a day. Some are faithful to other kinds of rituals, or to a person. But Paul meant faithful to Christ. Paul had a keen sense that he needed to keep proving himself as a faithful servant of Christ. How could he really be faithful to Christ as his servant? By telling people about his gospel. The same is true for us. If God has revealed his mystery in the gospel of Jesus to us, he’s also entrusted us with the task of sharing this gospel with others. If we’re being silent about the gospel of Jesus, we’re not being faithful to Christ. Paul didn’t presume that because he knew the mystery and told others the mystery for a while, he was good, and all done. He didn’t boast about his ministry success. He writes later in 9:16, “For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” This is what he meant by being entrusted with the mystery and proving faithful.

What else does Paul say about being a servant of Christ? Read verses 3,4. Here we see that a servant of Christ doesn’t live before people. We don’t have to worry about being judged by anyone at all. All we have to do is live before the eyes of our Lord Jesus. It gives us a clear conscience, but even that doesn’t make us self-righteous; it makes us even more aware that our Lord Jesus is my ultimate Judge. Whatever we’re doing, we should do it for Jesus’ sake, to please him, to exalt him, to promote his gospel, and aware that he is alive, and watching me. Some people may seem really good; even church leaders can seem so wonderful. But Paul tells us to look at everything and everyone in light of the truth that Jesus is our ultimate Judge. Read verse 5.

Paul was emphasizing all this to help these people get over comparing him with Apollos (6). He also went on to expose why they were doing it. Read verse 7. Their root problem was their own conceit. We have the same problem. The only cure for it is to realize that anything special we may have was actually given to us by God. In the next section of the chapter Paul gets into really rebuking them. In verse 8 he gets in to calling them content, and rich, and reigning. He meant in a worldly sense. Humanly speaking they were wealthy and powerful and not lacking anything. The problem was that this was making them proud and unable to live along with Paul like genuine servants of Christ.

In contrast to them, Paul begins to describe himself and all genuine apostles of Christ. Read verse 9. It tells us that servants of Christ will never be honored by the people of this world, but always despised and ridiculed. Paul says that actually it’s God who makes us like a spectacle of losers. Why does God do that? He wants us to participate in the sufferings of Christ (1Pe4:13). Read verses 10–13. Here we see the lifestyle of genuine servants of Christ. Basically, they suffer! They practice the teachings of our Lord Jesus to love our enemies. They grow in the humble and gracious character of our Lord Jesus who prayed for those who crucified him and who embraced his cross of shame and disgrace. Servants of Christ are not into a power-trip; they live as most humble people.

In verses 14–16 Paul addresses the Corinthians as their spiritual father. He became their spiritual father by helping them to be born again in Christ. With this in mind, he urged them to imitate him, especially in his life of suffering to serve Christ. In verse 17 he says he sent Timothy to also help them know about Apostle Paul’s way of life. Believing the gospel is not just about gaining head knowledge; it’s about learning the way of life of a true servant of Christ. In the last part of this chapter Paul concludes by warning those in the church still holding on to their arrogant minds. They could talk well, but didn’t really have any spiritual power. According to verse 21, a servant of Christ can approach others in one of two ways—with a rod of discipline, or in love and with a gentle spirit.

Read verse 1 again. May God help us see one another as servants of Christ. May God inspire us newly through this study to really live as servants of Christ. May God make us more aware of his grace, more aware that we’re accountable to him, and more willing to suffer for him practically.