

The Scum of the World

1 Corinthians 4:1-13
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¹ This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. ⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? ⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! ⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

1 Corinthians 4:1-13

The Problem of Preference in Corinth

One of the wonderful gifts we have as a church is our ability to warmly welcome people that visit our fellowship. I personally have been overwhelmed by how you have welcomed us, and loved us, and made us a part of this community. I have visited churches in which no one has even said, "Hello" to me. Our church is not like that. If you come as a visitor, you will be warmly greeted by others; you will find many people ready to learn your name and hear about who you are. We are a very warm and welcoming church, and it is truly a beautiful thing. But friends, not everyone, not every Christian, not every dear brother or sister in the Lord, ought to be welcomed here.

If you are a Christian and you have moved to the area – welcome to our church! We are glad you are here. If you are newly interested in Christianity, if God is working on your heart and showing you the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ – welcome to our church! We are especially glad you are here. If you are a member of another local church and you have become increasingly convinced over time that the whole counsel of God's Word is not being taught and preached at your current church – welcome to our

church! We want to pray for any church that is not proclaiming the whole counsel of God's Word, but no one should remain in that kind of church.

If, however, you have come to our church because the worship has changed in your church, and you prefer a different style; or perhaps you have certain preferences for youth ministry that are not being met at your current church; or perhaps you prefer a different style of preaching... whatever it is, you've come here because your preferences are not being met where you are. But if you are coming here merely on the basis of preference, you are ultimately not welcome here. We will be nice to you. We are glad for your visit. But at the end of the day we are going to send you back to your home church.

Here's what happens... here's what we want to guard against. We often think that our personal preferences are far, far more important than they actually are.

We are trained to think this way by our consumeristic culture. We are catechized by marketing agencies to think in this way. Today, for example, we can go to a computer store and sort through hundreds of different laptop models. Once we pick a particular model we then have countless choices about how it will be equipped and what color it will be. Marketers cater specifically to personal preference. And then tragically we bring this same kind of mindset into the church.

We all have a lot of preferences regarding church worship and life. But we need to understand that our preferences about church programs or preachers ought never lead to divisions or Christians breaking fellowship with one another. Recently some people told me that they have been looking for a church, and they have had a hard time finding one. They said to me, "The funny thing is, we're not picky. We just want a church that faithfully teaches God's Word." This was one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard. They were asking for one thing only, faithfulness in preaching and teaching God's Word. Everything else, they understood, was mere preference.

Amazingly, the number one problem in Corinth is not the incest and sexual sin within the church. It is not their idolatry. It is not their confusion over the nature of marriage. It is not their disorderly worship. Instead, their supreme problem is division and strife rooted in mere human preference. This is the issue of greatest concern for Paul. This is the issue he deals with first and most extensively.

In verse 6, Paul basically argues that their preference of one leader over another does not matter at all. **"I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another"** (4:6). Significantly, the Corinthians have gone "beyond what is written." They were not saying, "We just want to be part of a church that faithfully teaches God's Word." Instead they were saying, "We want to be part of a church that has the leader we prefer." So Paul, in effect says, "Don't do that. Don't think like that. You will kill the church as soon as you start to go beyond God's Word by relying on your mere human preferences." Paul's desire is that they not "be puffed up in favor of one against another." He is basically asking the Corinthians to check their preferences at the door and not bring them into the life of the church.

And this, of course, is why not everyone is welcome at our church. If you come here merely because you prefer me over another pastor (although I can't imagine that happening!), or you prefer our worship style and programs over your own church's, we

are going to send you back to your home church because you are violating the very essence of Paul's instructions to the Corinthians. You have gone "beyond what is written" and by leaving your own church over your preferences, introduced division into that fellowship.

Servants of Christ and Stewards of the Mysteries of God

The real concern in Corinth is not just any preference (they are not dividing over the color of the carpet). The specific concern is their preference for one gospel minister over another. Paul now addresses this specific concern by answering the question, "How ought God's people think about their ministers?" Paul says, "**This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy**" (4:1-2). Here, then, is the minister's basic job description. He is first a servant of Christ, and second a steward of the mysteries of God.

As a *servant of Christ*, the minister himself is lowly. He has no authority of his own. His only job is to answer and serve his master, Jesus Christ. In other places, Paul does not hesitate to point out that he considers himself a servant to all, in the sense that he is laboring for their good. He says in 1 Cor. 9:19, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them." However, although Paul considers himself a servant to all, notice his qualifying statement, "though I am free from all...." he is not a servant to all in the same manner that he is a servant to Christ. Ultimately, Paul does not answer to the church. He is not their servant in that way. Instead, Paul serves and answers to only one master, and that is Jesus.

The emphasis here is really on the lowliness of Paul's position as a servant. The original sense of this word for servant was, "under-rower," that is, the ones who rowed in the lowest position on a large ship.¹ Ironically, while the Corinthians were bragging and boasting about different preachers, Paul is suggesting to them that no preacher ought ever to be boasted in. They are merely lowly servants of Christ.

While the minister himself is a lowly servant, his office is nonetheless noble. He is to also be thought of as a *steward of the mysteries of God*. This means that his job is to preach and teach God's Word, namely the gospel. Almost always the word "mystery" in the New Testament refers to the gospel, that which was once hidden (a mystery), but is now revealed.² The minister is not called to preach his own mind, his own opinions, or his own wisdom. He is not called to preach the popular ideas of the day, nor is he called to preach what the people demand from him. He is, plain and simple, called to preach God's Word.

Here we can pause and apply this to our own church situation. This means that neither you, the congregation, nor I, the minister, set the agenda for what is preached and taught at our church. I am merely a steward. God's Word is our ultimate authority. So what you may want to hear, and what I may want to say, does not matter. What God's Word says is what matters. It is both sufficient and authoritative. Paul reflects these truths in 2 Timothy 4:2-4:

² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ For the time is coming when

people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Sometimes God's Word is in season. People want it. They ask for it. These are good times. Sometimes God's Word is out of season. It is not welcome. Regardless, God's Word must be proclaimed by his stewards.

Earlier this month there was an article in the New York Times about pastoral burnout.³ The author cited increased health problems, marriage problems and depression for pastors. One study indicated that the number of pastors who leave the ministry during their first five years has quadrupled since the 1970's. In response to that article another pastor wrote his opinion about why pastoral burnout is increasingly prevalent today. He says,

Churchgoers increasingly want pastors to soothe and entertain them.... As a result, pastors are constantly forced to choose, as they work through congregants' daily wish lists in their e-mail and voice mail, between paths of personal integrity and those that portend greater job security. As religion becomes a consumer experience, the clergy become more unhappy and unhealthy.... Americans now sample, dabble and move on when a religious leader fails to satisfy for any reason. In this transformation, clergy have seen their job descriptions rewritten. They're no longer expected to... deliver sermons that make the comfortable uneasy. Church leaders who continue such ministerial traditions pay dearly. I have faced similar pressures myself. In the early 2000s, the advisory committee of my small congregation in Massachusetts told me to keep my sermons to 10 minutes, tell funny stories and leave people feeling great about themselves. The unspoken message in such instructions is clear: give us the comforting, amusing fare we want or we'll get our spiritual leadership from someone else.⁴

This contemporary pastor's concerns mirror almost perfectly what Paul is facing in Corinth. The question churches and pastors alike must ask is whether the pastor is called to answer to mere human preferences, or if instead he is called to be a true steward of the mysteries of Christ - faithfully, lovingly, boldly, and consistently proclaiming God's Word in its fullness. We ourselves must carefully consider the biblical calling of our pastors today.

Premature Judgment

Paul continues:

² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness

and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (4:2-5).

Paul is not in the least concerned about what the Corinthians think about him. Their judgment of him means very little. This is not because Paul is proud. In fact, Paul says that although his conscience is clear, he's not even going to judge himself. He admits, "I am not aware of anything against myself," but that does not mean he is acquitted. The reason Paul does not ultimately care about how the Corinthians judge him, or about how he judges himself, is because, "It is the Lord who judges me" (v. 4).

Here we see that Paul is eschatological minded. He lives in this world, but for the most part he is running hard toward eternal life. His mind is looking to glory. Every ounce of his being is striving toward that last day. His eyes are on Christ. To Paul, the judgments of this world mean nothing, but the judgments of his Lord mean everything! So in v. 5, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they ought not to judge Paul, or Apollos, or whoever, before the Lord himself has his say on the final day.

For Paul, it is the "commendation" from God that his mind is set on. He offers the same idea in Phil. 3:13-14, "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

If you read Paul's letters carefully, if you read about his life and listen closely to how he talks, if you pay attention to Paul, you will see very quickly that he is a man that is living with one foot in this world, and the other foot in eternity. He holds very loosely, almost not at all, to the things of this world. Whether it be the world's possessions, wisdom, judgments, or power, whatever it is, Paul holds it all very loosely, if at all. Mostly, he is striving to lay hold of the kingdom that is yet to come.

Friends, live like Paul. Hold loosely to the things of this world. Do not be consumed by the cares and worries of this world. Instead, be consumed by Christ. Be consumed with honoring him. Remember the prize. Remember that he is coming. Remember the commendation that awaits God's people, "Well done good and faithful servant" (Lk. 19:17). Consider the recipients of the Hebrews letter, whom although plundered and suffering, the Scriptures say, "you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one" (Heb. 10:34).

We are ultimately not citizens of this world. We belong to another. Paul teaches this clearly in Phil. 3:20, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." So, live like Paul. Care very little about how others judge you. Care very much about how the Lord judges you. Live with one foot in this world, but the other in the next where your heavenly citizenship awaits.

At this point one may object, "But if you are so consumed with your heavenly citizenship, you will not care about this world." It is a common objection, more popularly put, "too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good." But we must understand, Paul never disengages from the world. He never stops caring about the world. It is just that he is not driven by the world's agendas. In fact, his own heavenly-minded agenda generates for him a new, more robust reason for engaging the world and living well. We see this in Col. 3:22-24 as Paul offers instructions for how slaves ought to relate to their masters:

²² Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Paul essentially tells these slaves, “Stop working to please your earthly master, start working to please Christ.” Far from being no earthly good, to be truly heavenly-minded leads directly to diligent engagement with this world. In this instance, the slave who seeks to please Christ will be the most effective servant to his master.

A Cross-Centered Life

Now, if you are going to live like Paul, you really do have to leave your preferences at the door. Wouldn't the Christian life be great if we could live by our preferences? We would never have to sacrifice. We would never have to go to a church with carpet color we don't like, or people and programs we don't like. We would never have to give up anything. We would, in effect, look an awful lot like the Corinthians, and nothing like Paul. Consider vv. 8-13:

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! ⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

Here we see the tangible danger that living merely by our preferences leads us to. If we live by our preferences, we will inevitably be worldly-minded. The truly tempting thing about living according to our preferences is that we don't have to suffer. Would you like to be a king, or suffer? What is your preference? To be honest, my preference is to be a king. That was the Corinthians' preference (v. 8). They are rich, considered as kings, wise, strong, and held in honor. Paul himself would have preferred to be a king. He admits in v. 8 that he would have been glad to share their reign with them. But Paul can't be a king; he can't reign now, because his own preferences mean nothing to him. Instead, he is consumed with only one thing, pleasing his master, Jesus. For Paul this ultimately means that he has become like the scum of the world (v. 13). Paul's message is now clear, “If you live by your own preferences, you will never be able to live a truly cross-centered life.”⁵

So, we want to continue to be a welcoming church, but let's be clear about exactly what it is we are welcoming people into – the cross-centered life of Christianity. When you join Christ's church you enter into the way of the cross where your own personal preferences mean nothing.

The cross was no friend of Jesus. His own preference was made clear in the Gethsemane, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Mt. 26:39). But Jesus submitted his own will to the Father and endured the suffering and indignity of the cross. Ultimately he died so that we who sinfully live by our own preferences, desiring to be our own kings, might become true children of God who live under his (not our own) glorious and righteous reign.

¹ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 74.

² See Mt. 13:11; Mk. 4:11; Lk. 8:10; Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:9; 3:3-4, 9; 6:19; Col. 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; 1 Tim. 3:9, 16.

³ Paul Vitello, "Taking a Break from the Lord's Work." *The New York Times*. 1 Aug. 2010. Web. 10 Aug. 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/02/nyregion/02burnout.html?_r=1>.

⁴ Jeffrey MacDonald, "Congregations Gone Wild." *The New York Times*. 7 Aug. 2010. Web. 10 Aug. 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/opinion/08macdonald.html?_r=1>.

⁵ Speaking in terms of the "cross-centered life" Mark Dever says, "If the One whom we follow was stricken, smitten, and afflicted, if he was pierced and crushed and punished and wounded, then we can't be too surprised that some of that may happen to us in the world... not because by our death we bear sin, but because in our lives we live in a way this world rejects.... Brothers and sisters, the only way to follow Jesus is to die to self-interest daily. Live as Paul lived here. I don't mean that you should try to imitate his circumstances, but follow his course. Commit yourself to following Christ, regardless of whether following him cuts across desires the worlds says are your rights." Mark Dever, *Twelve Challenges Churches Face* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 43-44.