

# Servants of Christ

1 Corinthians 4

## Stewards

☐ Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5. As Paul said earlier, he and his fellow apostles are “only servants” (3:5). They are “servants of Christ” and “stewards of the mysteries of God” (4:1, *ESV*).<sup>1</sup> In general, a “steward” is a servant entrusted with managing his master’s household or estate. In this case, the apostles are “stewards” entrusted with the truths of God’s revelation.

1. Who has the authority to judge the “steward’s” service? What is the most important requirement for the steward? (4:2, 4)



- ☐ Since the Lord is the Owner, he is the one with the authority to judge. Judgment of Paul’s service by others (including Paul himself) is fallible and premature at best.<sup>2</sup> But nothing is hidden from the Lord. At the final judgment, he will expose the motives of people’s hearts.
  - ☐ Apparently, some of the Corinthians have improperly judged Paul. But Paul understands that the judgment that really matters is the Lord’s judgment, and the praise that really matters is the praise that comes from God (4:5). Paul wants the Corinthians to understand this also.
2. How does this apply to us today? How should it affect our evaluation of Christian leaders and ministers? How should it affect our concerns about people evaluating *us*?

## Weak, Dishonored Fools?

☐ Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-13. Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to learn from the images applied to himself and Apollos in 3:5-4:5 (4:6a).<sup>3</sup> He desires that none of them be arrogant (puffed up)<sup>4</sup> in favor of one against the other (4:6b).

3. Why it is wrong for the Corinthians (or any Christians) to be boastful or arrogant? (4:7)<sup>5</sup>

☐ In verses 8-13, Paul contrasts the Corinthians with himself and his fellow apostles. Paul describes the Corinthians *as they view themselves* (with some exaggeration from Paul). Paul describes the apostles *as the world, and worldly Corinthians, view them* (4:9-10, 13b), *but also as they actually are* (4:11-13a).



<sup>1</sup> The *ESV* translation of *oikonomos mysterion theou* is more literal than the *NIV* translation.


<sup>2</sup> This does not necessarily prohibit Christians from evaluating the character and performance of Christian leaders and ministers. Proper discernment and evaluation is appropriate and needed. However, such evaluation must be done with humility and sensitivity to the Spirit, and the recognition that no human judgment is final. As Thiselton notes, “Paul does not ... advocate a thick-skinned indifference to public opinion; his point is a different one, namely, its fallibility, relativity, and limits which make it an unreliable guide on which to depend.” (A.C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 341).

<sup>3</sup> Verse 6 is difficult to translate and interpret. Assuming the *NIV* has captured its meaning, what does “what is written (*gegraptai*)” mean? Paul typically uses *gegraptai* to refer to Scripture. Thus far in the letter, he has used it to refer to five Old Testament passages: 1:19 (Isa. 29:14); 1:31 (Jer. 9:24); 2:9 (Isa 64:4); 3:19 (Job 5:13); 3:20 (Ps. 94:11).

<sup>4</sup> “take pride” (*NIV*); “become arrogant” (*NASB*) – from *φυσίω*, *physiōō* – “to puff up” (also used in 4:18, 19).

<sup>5</sup> Everything special about the Corinthians is a gift of God’s grace. “Grace leads to gratitude; [worldly wisdom] and self-sufficiency lead to boasting and judging” (Gordon Fee, *First Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 171).

4. Complete the following table by listing the descriptions given in verses 8-13.

“you” (Corinthians) – 4:8, 10	“we” (Paul and the other apostles) – 4:9-13
	

5. Which of the two lists is more consistent with the earthly life and teachings of Christ?<sup>6</sup>

- Genuine fullness, riches, and reigning are promised to believers,<sup>7</sup> but some of the Corinthians were too “puffed up” to see the true path to these blessings. The path is Christ crucified, and *his* path is a path of humility, submission to God’s will, self-giving love, suffering and glory.<sup>8</sup>

## Father

- Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-21. Paul now addresses the Corinthian Christians as their “father.” He became their father “through the gospel;” that is, he brought them to new life in Christ (4:15).<sup>9</sup> Paul does not aim to shame them, but he needs to admonish<sup>10</sup> them as his dear children (4:14).
- Paul urges them to imitate him, but only because of his “way of life in Christ Jesus” (4:17). Later he says, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (11:1).
- Paul again states that some of them are arrogant (puffed up). But when he visits them, he will find out if they have power or just hot air.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Paul ends this section with a warning.<sup>12</sup>

## Reflection/Application

- Where do place your confidence? Is your confidence in worldly wisdom and/or your own abilities, status or achievements? Are you sure you are on the right path? Seek the true path.
- Believers: Reflect on Jeremiah 9:23-24, and ask yourself: In what do I take pride? In my life, what do I boast about? Think about Jesus, and “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (1:31).

<sup>6</sup> Consider Isaiah 53:3, 7-8; Luke 9:58; John 15:18-21; Matthew 5:2-12; 2 Corinthians 8:9; 13:4; Philippians 2:5-11.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see John 6:35; Ephesians 1:18; 3:8; Colossians 1:27; 2:2-3, 9; 2 Timothy 2:11-12; Romans 8:17.

<sup>8</sup> Understanding this truth results in a reversal in verse 10. The “foolish,” weak and dishonored are the ones who become truly wise, strong, and honored *in* Christ Jesus. See 1 Corinthians 1:25-31.

<sup>9</sup> “ten thousand (countless) guardians” (*myrias paidagōgoi*) – refers to other leaders, though exaggerated in number.

<sup>10</sup> “warn” (νουθετω, *nouthetō*) – to admonish (to correct, which may include warning)

<sup>11</sup> Paul is looking for is the Spirit’s power, which is not necessarily accompanied by “wise and persuasive words” (2:4). “Hot air” (my choice of words) refers to empty speech made to impress people.

<sup>12</sup> “whip” (ῥάβδος, *rhabdos*) – better translated “rod” – an image of discipline and punishment, used in both Greek and Jewish education (Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 29:15). However, Paul would rather correct them with a gentle spirit.