

Sermon Reading: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. ³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

Sermon Theme: The Lord Judges You

Someone looking for a job, after seeing the title of the position will look to the job description. There you might find the duties that you would be responsible for and how you are expected to carry them out. Such things as punctual, hard-working, driven, self-motivated, timely, courteous are all different descriptions one might see. As you are well aware, different jobs and positions have different requirements that require different types of people to do them. But that doesn't always stop us from seeing someone carrying out their position and thinking how maybe it should be done differently. A waiter takes a little too long to bring your food and shows little remorse. You see the construction worker just standing there next to the road. There's the mom at the store with the screaming toddler. What thoughts go through your mind? You have an idea of someone's financial situation and you find out they bought a brand new TV, maybe you think, "How could they be so foolish?" Someone volunteers to work on a project, maybe it crosses your mind, "Why did they do it that way?" But if someone questions how we do something or why we did it, all too often...watch out. It's almost impressive how quickly we judge someone else's actions but then turn around and are upset and defensive when the same happens to us. What's happening here? Is it fear that other people might think I'm not doing good work? Is it shame that you could have done better work? Is it frustration because you could be doing a better job than they are? There's a chance it's a little bit of all of those. But even more so, it's pride. Pride where I am the star of the show who thinks I know how other people should be living and acting. But on the flip side no one knows what I'm dealing with; therefore, they shouldn't say anything. We are talking about judging and with 1 Corinthians chapter 4 we prepare our hearts and learn what it means that the Lord judges you.

Paul is writing these words to the group of Christians in the city of Corinth. This congregation had many issues that needed to be worked out and one of them had to do with divisions in the church. There's jealousy, quarreling, fighting and not getting along because different people were claiming to be followers of different leaders. They are all Christian leaders but some individuals were boasting about who they were following

and it seems they were making others feel bad or not as important or vital to the church because they didn't follow a certain leader. So in verse 1 Paul states: **This is the way a person should think of us: as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.** For Paul—and as it should be for the Corinthians—there isn't different levels of importance or one leader being better than the other. No, a person should think of them as servants and stewards. They all served under the master Christ; one was not greater than the other. They were stewards, caretakers of what God, their master, had given to them. And what's the gift? Their responsibility? The mysteries of God. Mysteries here is referring to something that needs to be revealed. Paul is talking about what God reveals about himself and we find this in God's Word, the Bible. So, they were to be regarded as caretakers of God's Word who served under Christ.

And as caretakers and servants notice the job description in v.2: **In this connection, moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.** Faithful is dependable, consistent, having integrity. They are to manage God's gift as they have been entrusted using it as God intended. No more, no less: they are to be found faithful.

As in Paul's day, these words apply directly to the leaders of the church today and especially to those workers who are called public servants of the Word; that is, pastors and teachers. As with so many other positions in this world, various people have different ideas of how those positions should be carried out. It can be confusing, difficult, frustrating, even burdensome because there are so many different thoughts of what a pastor should be doing and how they are to do it. Now, elsewhere in the Bible Paul lists the different qualifications of a pastor and the qualities one should display. But it's striking that here, in order to mend the divisions in the church, one rises above the rest: faithfulness. The first question that should be asked of a pastor/leader is, "Are they faithful caretakers of the mysteries of God, of God's Word?"

Yes, these words apply directly to called workers but it doesn't stop with them. For you too are **a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession who have the responsibility to declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light** (1 Peter 2:9). Or, as Paul states it here, you too are servants of Christ and stewards, caretakers of God's Word.

But too often, unlike Paul, we do not see it a small thing, a trivial matter to be evaluated by other people. Instead, we try to keep up with the Joneses chasing after the toys they have, the types of homes they live, or the lifestyles they enjoy. There's the competition of trying to be "Super-mom" or "Super-dad" doing all these different things and still have their lives together. There are these standards of society that to be viewed as successful and winning at life you need to reach certain goals by a certain age. Whether you are single, married, have kids or not, old or young, you feel these tensions,

expectations, demands all around you. And it's a burden because the question becomes, "Am I doing enough?"

But when we are trying to figure out whether or not we are doing enough it tends to pull our attention away from being faithful caretakers of God's Word. Personal Bible study is put off, attending worship becomes a chore or little more than habit, being spiritual leader of your home may be ignored or not held to a high standard. And what then happens is one can deprive themselves of what they need to put their minds at ease and give them peace. Instead we try to measure up to, find our fulfillment in, and determine our success according to the world around us.

Paul doesn't leave it up to the Corinthians to evaluate him and his work. He doesn't really care about their opinion. He says in v.3: **It is a trivial matter to me if I am evaluated by you or by a day in a human court.** In fact, he states: **Why, I do not even evaluate myself.** Paul knows how our consciences one moment can be easily weighed down and burdened and the next they can be dulled and numb to those things that should prick it. So Paul recognizes that neither he nor the Corinthians can be impartial judges of his actions or faithfulness to his calling as servant of Christ. What a relief for us too! You're status or faithfulness isn't based on what other people think or how they evaluate you. It's not even dependent on how you view yourself! In fact, Paul says in v.4: **I do not in fact know of anything against myself.** Understand that Paul isn't saying he is sinless. This is the same man who called himself the worst of sinners and a wretched man frustrated with not doing the good that he ought to do. But what Paul is saying is that his conscience is clear because as he continues in v.4 **the one who evaluates me is the Lord.** He leaves it in the Lord's hands to judge him on whether or not he is being faithful. That's the same for you and me and for all people. It's the Lord who judges you.

How does that make you feel? For some that's a scary thought. It might make you uncomfortable because, if you are like me, you know how you have not always been faithful in the various callings that God has given to you. Instead of serving the best interests of my family, at times I'm more concerned about myself. Instead of putting my best effort in my work, at times I have done just enough to get by. I have not always been patient, loving, or caring but allowed my emotions to get out-of-hand. It can be so frustrating because, how do you find a faithful balance between the many different callings God gives us? Think of the callings that God has given to you whether it is your calling as wife, husband, dad, mom. Think of your calling as a child, a student, a teacher, employer, employee, or a position in the church. Think of your calling as child of God and caretaker of his Word. How are you supposed to be faithful to all of that?!

What can make it even scarier is what we are told in v. 5: **he brings to light what is hidden in darkness and reveals the intentions of the heart.** Those things of the past that you tried to hide deep in the dark closet of your mind can't be hidden enough. The motivation and attitude that too often is self-seeking instead of loving is no secret from God. Nothing is hidden from him; he knows it all—every time you have not been faithful in action or intention—and will reveal it.

The Law pulls away the blanket of excuses we use to try to cover ourselves. It strips us of those protective walls we build to protect that too-easily-injured pride. And when it does the Law leaves us to confess with Paul, “What a wretched person I am.”

And what does God do? He sends faithful messengers to prepare his people. We saw it how God sent John the Baptizer to go out and preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to prepare the people for Jesus. He continues to do the same for you sending caretakers of his Word, pastors, and other faithful messengers to prepare your heart for Jesus' return. When Paul says in verse 5 to judge nothing ahead of time he is not saying to ignore blatant sin and sinful attitudes, but do not jump to conclusions. It's not our job as his servants to read hearts and pass judgment on others. Leave that to the Lord who will come and **bring to light whatever is hidden in darkness and also reveal the intentions of hearts.**

But you do know your own heart; you know the secrets and your intentions. And so, in light of God's Word we want to repent. Recognize the crooked ways of our hearts. See how littered they can be with obstacles of our pride and distractions of the world. Make straight the way of the Lord. Confess your sin with me and rest in the assurance that it is the Lord who judges.

The Lord judging you is not something to fear. As Paul said in verse 4 we aren't justified—declared not guilty, have a peace-filled conscience—by how we view ourselves. We are declared not guilty because our King came lowly in a manger. You have a clear conscience before God because the King set aside his crown of glory for a time to be replaced with a crown of thorns. Your King Jesus stepped down from his heavenly throne to be your brother, be counted amongst sinners, and to take your place. He claimed your sin—including unfaithfulness—his own, nailing it to the cross where it died, was buried with Jesus in the grave, and that's where it remains. As far as the east is from the west, your sins have been removed from you never to be traced back to you. The light of the Gospel casts out the darkness of sin and exposes a heart that has been made new in the waters of baptism. The Lord, for the sake of Jesus' sacrifice, does not count your sin against you but declares you not guilty of sin—justified. The Lord does not base his judgment on the accusations of the devil, the world, or even your conscience. With sins forgiven no accusations can be brought against you. God's

judgment isn't based on a certain standard that this world sets or how you view yourself. Instead it's based on Jesus who perfectly lived up to God's standard, has refined you and makes you pure with his blood, and declares you, judges you to be faithful.

It's that same Jesus who works in you to will and to act according to his purpose (Philippians 2:13) to be faithful. And then God credits the work Jesus does through you as your own and commends you for it—there will be praise for each of you from God himself. This means in light of what Jesus has done that is now yours by faith, when Jesus returns or calls you home, the Lord judges you and will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Amen.