

STEWARDS OF GOD'S PEOPLE**1 Corinthians 4**

INTRO: I'm continuing our study of 1 Corinthians with chapter 4. As with the last chapter, which I referenced two weeks ago, I'm not going to cover every thought Paul is addressing, since we've done that over the past two months. The most obvious of those thoughts is that Paul once again addresses the issue of who was the best preacher – since there apparently were several camps – one for himself, one for Apollos and, from what we remember from previous chapters, one for Peter, and for that matter, for the especially holy people, one for Jesus himself. Let me just say, as you will hear as I read the text, Paul makes what is the final reference to that favorite preacher subject. Now listen to the word, and we will look at how this letter is helpful to us in being the church in challenging times.

(Read 1 Corinthians 4)

Paul begins by defending his credentials then deals a good deal of sarcasm and then, at the end he issues a warning. Paul was talking to the Corinthians, but we can apply this to our own ministry as stewards of God's people. Here's how, first...

All of us are servants of Christ

- I don't want to minimize what Paul is saying here about the responsibility leaders of the church have. My obligation to be the obedient shepherd I have been called to be is just as forceful as ever. James warns, *Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.* James 3:1. It is a sobering thing (at least it should be) to be a pastor who leads and teaches the people of God. It is an awesome and awful responsibility to think how easy it is to get sidetracked from the direction of the Holy Spirit onto a pastor's own agenda. So I want you to know I'm not missing what Paul is saying here about the sacred trust apostles like he and Apollos are. With Paul I take that seriously and I commit myself again to you as my church family and flock. I must lead and teach with integrity and it's more important than ever.
- That being said, I want to add that every one of us, by virtue of our profession of faith in Christ have been entrusted with the mysteries of God Paul refers to here and we all have a trust to fulfil. We have responsibility for others – they are looking to us for Jesus and we need to show him.
- You see, we live in a selfish world. A world that says "YOU are on your own, and I am not responsible for you. In fact, YOU look out for me!"
 - Let me illustrate. The other day as I was writing this sermon, Emily called me as she was driving home from Howard. She was driving through the madness of Loudonville with its State Park camp ground and the canoe livery, which was made even crazier by the fact that it was the Friday of the Labor Day holiday weekend and the end of summer vacation. She said there were camper trailers and motorhomes EVERYWHERE! As she talked to me, she was also talking to the guy who pulled out in front of her with "Hey driver! There was not enough space to pull out in front of me!" That driver put the onus of responsibility on Emily to avoid hitting him.
 - It made me think of what it was like on the roads of Benaulim, the village in Goa State in Western India where I visited in 2012. I was visiting my friend Dan and he and I tooted around on his Honda scooter. I was amazed by the seemingly total disregard for anyone else as people navigated the streets. As far as I could tell there were no street signs or speed limits. I KNOW there were no stop signs, that's for sure. So, with me on the back, and Dan driving, we would dodge this car here, that motorized rickshaw there, and the random ox or donkey cart that meandered out in front of us with, by all appearances, complete blindness to all oncoming traffic. I was amazed! And I was especially awed by the fact that Dan artfully dodged all of them. We didn't wreck once. We actually, never really came close. Nevertheless, I determined that the Indian road navigating philosophy was "You, and only you, are responsible to not collide with me, regardless of how reckless I may be."
- That church, is the essence of what society says – "No matter what I do, you have a responsibility to look out for me." That's been one of the tenants of the great mask controversy of 2020, the one that proclaims, "You must wear a mask in order to protect me from this virus called COVID-19" and this has caused great resentment for those who resist the mandate and those who think the resisters should get with program. Practically, the resisters are right. We all need to take care of ourselves. Biblically the resisters are wrong

though – Christ Followers have a responsibility to others as stewards of the people of God. Just like Jesus we are other centered.

- This is what we can take from Paul’s words. He and Apollos were servants of God entrusted with the mysteries of the faith to be shared with the lost. We also have a similar responsibility to share the faith with the lost. We have been given a trust and we too must be faithful. F. B. Meyer says we should be *“faithful to our trust and make much of our Master and little of ourselves.”*
- Another thing to learn here is...

Don’t be too quick to judge

- Paul is obviously feeling the press of judgment from the Corinthians. He’s not lying when he says in verse 3, *I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court.* But he does care. Or, let me put it this way he cares that they are missing the point and thereby judging him and holding him up to unfair comparison.
- Paul has the contentment of knowing his conscience is clear. Yes, he knows he’s not a flowery preacher like the eloquent Apollos, and he doesn’t have the three years of day in and day out contact Peter had with Jesus, but Paul has the direction of God through the Holy Spirit. The words leveled at him by puffed up critics in the Church bounce off the armor of the reality that it is God Paul must please in the end. It is God’s judgement that matters.
- Here is the take away from this, let people say what they will about your faith, or your Bible, or your message of the Good News. The message that says that Jesus is the only way to salvation, real joy, real peace, and eternal life. The message that there is only one God, and he is revealed in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. People don’t like to hear that, and they might resist it and say we’re close minded, or narrow, or even, plain, down wrong. But let ‘em judge. What we have is still the truth, and the Great Commission to spread that Good News. Because, we are servants of God’s people and commissioned to make more and more of God’s people.
- And finally, skipping all the way down to the last 7 verses...

Let’s stop thinking and get to doing

- I know that might sound awkward, but don’t hear what I’m not saying. What I’m saying is, we do a lot of thinking and never get to doing. Paul gets tough with the Corinthians and comes close to saying, threateningly, “Don’t make me come over there!” He’s clearly had it with what he his hearing from them and he points out that it’s time to get down to business. It’s what he had to do. He loved the Church and his Lord too much not to. F. B. Meyer writes, *“It is not pure but selfish love that forbears to speak and act strongly when eternal interests are at stake.”* I think it’s what Butch was pointing out last week when he shared about those chances he missed to almost missed to share the Good News.
- Now only that, there is no time like the present to stop thinking about how you need to change, and actually make the change. How many times have you, like me, said, *“I know it’s wrong, but . . .”* “I know it’s wrong to feel this way, I know it’s wrong to watch this on my computer screen, I know it’s wrong to tell this story about . . . , I know it’s wrong . . . BUT. . .” Stop thinking and just stop it. (Bob Newhart sketch – JUST STOP IT!).
- In order to be stewards of God’s people we need to be doers as much as we are thinkers. No buts about it. Because the world is watching. Make sure you are worth it. Make sure you are worth imitating. It’s not arrogant that Paul, even after he dresses them down with sarcasm and a strident tone, tells the Corinthians to imitate him. It’s not arrogant because they don’t have any other pattern. Any previous example they have for faith and religion is a disgusting collage of sin, selfishness and dissipation. They couldn’t look to their parents, their parents had been steeped in false Greek and Roman gods. The religious leaders of their city were the purveyors of fertility worship. Holiness was decidedly not the motivation of Corinthian worship. So Paul said, imitate me. Jesus turned my life around, now learn from that and allow him to turn your life around too.
- We have inherited that ministry from Paul. The world is watching. They are just aching to see hypocrisy in you. They are very quick to use the Bible on you even though they never open it except to point out your

inconsistency. They are also dying without hope unless you live Jesus in front of them. Stop thinking and start doing. Give them something to imitate.

Conclusion: The world needs good news. The other day the headline across the Times Gazette proclaimed how depression and fear are making more and more impact as a result of COVID-19 and more and more people will be in need of therapy similar kinds of help. It's not just COVID that is causing it though. It's despair. It's anger. It's conflict. Its emptiness and hopelessness. I'm not being a doomsayer to remind us that a vaccine or a new administration or retaining an administration or justice in the streets are the answer to society's woes. The only answer is Jesus Christ – and then those concerns will look a lot different in the light of God's glory and grace.

We are all messengers of that Good News, Church. If Jesus is your Lord, you are commissioned. You are stewards of God's people. Amen.