



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 6: How to View Christ's Ministers... 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5

At the end of chapter 3, the Apostle Paul begins to sum up his argument regarding the fact that Christ's ministers are not divided. You will remember I hope that in this first section of First Corinthians Paul has set about the task of answering three rhetorical questions...questions found in 1:13.¹ We've gone over those three questions enough times now that there is really no need for me to repeat the point again. I would like to say, however, that this issue of Christ's ministers not being divided seems to be Paul's main concern...that is, the main question that Paul wanted to answer. It seems to be the questions that Paul wanted to make sure the Corinthians got right.

You see, the church at Corinth had busted up into factions...or perhaps better...preacher cults and the individual members of the church were arguing over which group they belonged to...which group was right...which group was the most spiritual.

Paul didn't want any part of that.

In fact, he spends the first four chapters of First Corinthians trying to get the Corinthians to see that they are looking at everything completely backwards.

Paul wanted them to see that the idea of belonging to one particular party or group was all wrong.² He wanted them to see that they were being satisfied with much too little. Paul was trying to get them to see that they were focusing on one solitary book or volume...while in reality the whole library was theirs. They were focusing on one particular gum drop when the whole candy store was theirs. You see Paul wanted them to understand that all of the ministers of Christ's church belonged to them. The Corinthians, needed to see that as God's people they were free to enjoy all of the collected wisdom of all of God's faithful servants.

Still to get them to look at things his way, Paul has to first convince them that they are under the spell of the world's wisdom. So what he tells them to do is to **"snap out of it."** Look at what he says in verse 18.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:18**...Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

I love what Calvin says about verse 18. He writes, **"Here he puts his finger upon the true sore, as the whole mischief originated in this — that they were wise in their own conceit."**³

Gordon Fee repeats the same point.

The opening salvo *here in 3:18* is *ironic* once again; **"If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age."** Of course they *think they are wise*; that is quite the point. This same formula will appear three more times in this letter, two

of which (8:2; 14:37), along with this one, speak to the heart of the...problems that plague the church. They think of themselves as wise, as having arrived at knowledge (8:2) and as being spiritual (14:37). That is precisely their problem. And in each case Paul must *set them straight*; otherwise the church *at Corinth will be up for grabs*.⁴

Apparently, the Corinthians felt justified in complaining that Paul had treated them too much like novices in the faith...too much like under achievers. It seems that they were complaining about that and of course when that happened they even began to denigrate his ministry. It may have been, and it seems likely, that there were new ministers at Corinth who had begun to point out Paul's failures with regard to teaching the "**deeper**" truths of the faith. These new ministers probably tried to expose Paul as simplistic or oratorical rube. It may have been that they were interested in "**tearing down**" Paul in order to elevate their own importance among the Corinthians.

If that was indeed the case, it would have been the same old story of jealousy and self-absorption. It is the nature of men to assume that they are the only repositories of truth. It is a sign of vanity and arrogance for such men to denigrate each other in a vain attempt to exalt themselves. It was true then; it is true now.

Ray Stedman writes this:

One of the most popular hymns of all time about the church is the well known *Onward, Christian Soldiers, Marching As To War*. The second verse is a great description, biblically, of the church:

Like a might army moves the church of God.
Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.
We are not divided; all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.

I think that captures in a wonderful way the teaching of the Scriptures about the church. But when you come to the actual experience of the church, it is sometimes not quite as exciting. It certainly was not at Corinth -- there was a church that had problems; they were very much divided. Somebody has given us a parody of that second verse of *Onward, Christian Soldiers*:

Like a mighty turtle moves the church of God.
Brothers, we are treading where we've always trod.
We are much divided, many bodies we,
Strong in faith and doctrine, weak in charity.⁵

Now up to this point, Paul has tried to answer their criticisms by pointing out that he did, in fact, teach a consistently simple message...and that message was Christ and Him crucified. Paul pointed out in the early chapters of his letter that this message thought by the Corinthians to be overly simplistic was in fact the **"true wisdom of God"** for those mature enough to recognize it. Here at the end of chapter 3...starting in verse 18, Paul picks up the idea again.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:18**...Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

The word that he uses here is the word *evxapata, tw*...and it is a wonderful word. It usually means **"beguile"** or **"deceive"** and is the principal word to describe what the serpent did to Eve in the Garden of Eden.⁶

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:19**...For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

The two quotes are from Job 5 and Psalm 94.

The quote from Job is interesting because it is the quote not of Job but of one of his so-called friends. The interesting thing is that in its original context Eliphaz is

pointing out that the problem is with Job. He is addressing Job as one bearing the brunt of God's displeasure because of some failure. Eliphaz is arguing that Job's pleas for understanding and mercy are seemingly wise, but he is saying that God's actions are an indication that Job's are and wisdom are being shown for what they are, futile and sinful.

^{ESV} **Job 5:11**... he sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety. ¹² He frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. ¹³ He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end. ¹⁴ They meet with darkness in the daytime and grope at noonday as in the night.

Paul seems not to be just using the quote from Job to refute the alleged wisdom of the Corinthians. He seems to be using the whole context of the dispute between Job and Eliphaz. It seems like Paul is saying:

Remember how Eliphaz corrected Job by pointing out that Job only thought he was wise. Remember how Eliphaz rebuked Job saying, **He is the One who catches the wise in their craftiness**, only in the end to find out that neither he or Job could comprehend the depths of God. Eliphaz thought he had everything figured out...that he had Job nailed as a secret sinner...only to find out that when God Himself stepped into judge the dispute between them that he was not nearly so crafty after all. It is as if Paul wants us to remember that he vanquished the wisdom of both of Job and Eliphaz.

You see, Paul is arguing that the wisdom of the world is going to be shown for what it is...foolishness.

He is arguing that if anyone thinks he is wise in this age, he should understand that his wisdom will be ultimately be revealed for what it truly is. He is arguing that any person who really wants to be wise should focus on the wisdom of God as it is revealed in the crucified Christ. Because all human wisdom will be revealed for what it actually is, the Corinthians should not be so infatuated with the new wisdom of their new teachers. This wonderfully new, deep wisdom of the Corinthian teachers was transitory at best. That is why he turns next to quote Psalm 94:

^{ESV} **Psalm 94:11**...the LORD--knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath.

The NIV uses the word “futile” but I particularly like the way nth the ESV and the NASB translates the original passage in Psalm 94:11. Both use the idea of breath. The NAS puts it like this.

^{NAS} **Psalm 94:11**...The LORD knows the thoughts of man, That they are a *mere* breath.

There we get a sense of the transitory nature of men’s wisdom. Man’s wisdom is temporal. It is short-lived, a mere blip in the cosmos when viewed against the eternal wisdom of God. It maybe new and fresh and exciting, but it is temporal. That is my concern ultimately with the preoccupation we see in our day with the whole notion of seeker-sensitive worship. It is viewed as a vehicle to accomplish a particular end result. The problem is that it employs the wisdom of this world to accomplish its design. I like the way James Montgomery Boice has put it:

I sometimes say what you've got in the evangelical church today is what a generation ago the liberal church was guilty of. They were guilty of pursuing the

world's theology, the world's wisdom, the world's agenda, and the world's methods.

What will be the end result of conforming the church to man's wisdom? The answer I think is two-fold. First, we will have to change our way of doing things as soon a better more efficient wisdom comes along. Whatever whim man is currently motivated by will change. The church winds up changing over and over again to accommodate those whims. The church will cease to be the repository of eternal truth and start to be church of what's happening now.

Secondly, we will grow further and further from our God, Who has commanded the proclamation of the gospel as the **"foolish means"** of growing His church. I'm not talking here about evangelism only. I'm talking about the message of a crucified Christ as fully adequate to grow His children in their sanctification. I am talking about a gospel that is capable of saving, in the fullest sense, even believers.

But to return to the text, Paul is saying that the Corinthians should not be so enamored with the new wisdom they are getting. It is a wisdom that is foolishness to God and at its very best is just a passing fancy. Instead, the Corinthians should recognize that all the teachers God has given belong to them. They should realize that they are rich with resources. Look how Paul says it:

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:21**...So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future--all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. Christians, with all of their immense privileges, are not the ultimate owners of anything.⁷

I like the way John Piper puts it:

“Suppose you are standing in the hall bragging about your Sunday School teacher and putting another teacher down, and I walk up to you and say (trying to paraphrase Paul's argument here), ‘Why do you feel the need to talk like that? Don't you know that everything in this universe is yours? Don't you know that every teacher in this church belongs to you—and the world and life and death and present and future?’”

“What's the root of boasting that I am trying to sever in saying that? What am I assuming—what's Paul assuming—about the cause of boasting when I say, ‘Don't you know that all things are yours? You don't need to boast in man’?”⁸

That line of thinking, of course, raises another set of questions. If the Corinthians have been wrong in their assessment of Paul, how should they then view Paul or any minister of God? Paul proceeds in chapter 4 to answer just that question.

ESV 1 Corinthians 4:1...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.

It is true that Paul has pointed out that ministers are servants. They are God's laborers both in the tilling of His field and in the building of His house and temple. But because Paul has used the phrase **“servant”** he has left himself open to being treated as the personal lackey of the Corinthians. It is a common occurrence that God's people view their ministers as their own personal servants to cater to their particular tastes and whims. But Paul is taking care to point out here that he is really the servant of Christ. He is a servant of his master and as a result he has an obligation to Christ infinitely more important than his obligation to the Corinthians.

I like the comparison that one commentator used. He referred to stewards and stewardesses on an airplane. We often think of them as our own personal galley slaves. That is, we think their job, their only job, is to cater to our needs. We expect them get our food or drinks and to pamper us with a lowly demeanor. Now, of course, all analogies break down somewhere but the truth is that stewards and stewardesses are really the servants of the captain. Their job is to meet the expectations and wishes of the captain. Usually the two duties parallel each other, but sometimes they do not. We have seen just in the last year the dilemma of their situation in trying to cater to hostile passengers when the requests being made are contrary to the express desires of the captain. You have seen, as I have, scenes where they have been spat upon, threatened, pushed and abused both by those we would expect and those we would not expect. The parallels, I think, are striking.

But Paul is not going to let the Corinthians forget that he and other ministers are **“servants”** of Christ and that they are **“stewards of the mysteries of God”**. Now it is a fascinating word for Paul to use, especially in light of the many secret religions at Corinth and in light of the Corinthian passion for deeper things. But Paul has already explained what those mysteries are.⁹ The mysteries that Paul is referring to are the whole set of doctrines associated with preaching **“Christ and Him crucified”**. There is no need, I think, at this point to repeat the ground that we have already covered. But I think one illustration might be helpful.

C. H. Spurgeon tells the story about his friend, Dr. Priestly who was invited to speak t his famous brother’s Unitarian Church under the condition that he would not speak on anything controversial.¹⁰ Dr. Priestly responded, **“I’d be glad to accept that invitation.”** After he was introduced he stepped to the pulpit and

said, "I've been asked to speak on something that is not controversial, so my subject this morning comes from a text in the Bible which begins, 'Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh.'" And he preached on the deity of Christ which is very controversial in the Unitarian Church. For him to have done anything else would have been to be unfaithful to his Master.

But, here Paul is trying to answer the question of how the Corinthians should view such men. He answers them in verse 2.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 4:2**...Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

Do you see how Paul is applying what he has said? He is saying that he and others are servants of Christ. He is saying that they are charged with being stewards of God's mysteries, that is the gospel. He is saying that the office of steward requires by definition that such men be faithful or trustworthy. That is why Paul can conclude that the criticism of the Corinthians doesn't really matter, That is why Paul can assert what he does in verse 3.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 4:3**...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.

You will notice that there are three particular areas that Paul covers. First, Paul says it not really that important to him whether he be judged by the Corinthians. Secondly, he says it is so not important to him if he is judged by human courts. Lastly, he says it is not so important to him whether he even judge himself. Please do not mistake what Paul is saying. He is not saying that it has no

importance at all, he is saying rather that compared to another avenue of judgment it is of little importance.

One commentator puts it like this:

“Paul does not therefore 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. Everything must be left with God in the last analysis, and one should not give privilege to one’s own introspective assessments.”¹¹

Paul is saying straight out to the Corinthians that he is not overly concerned with their criticisms. He does not quake when they murmur or complain. He remembered what he preached among the Corinthians and that the content of what he preached was **“Christ and Him crucified”**. He attempted to be faithful to His master and their snide remarks, their carping criticism was not going to deter him. He was not overly concerned with their evaluation of his motives.

I think there is a practical side of this for us even today. Doubtless, all of us have had barbecued preacher for Sunday lunch on one occasion or another. It is even possible, though I admit far less likely, that we have even had barbecued Sunday school teacher from time to time.

I think there is a point in which such men are fair game, pardon the pun.

If the content strays from that which we have been commanded to proclaim or if there is haziness of thought or an obscuring of the gospel, it is the duty of the elders even the laity to speak with kindness and civility to such men. But I think

it goes beyond the pale to question the motivations. Such men are not your servants; they have another Master.

That is one of the reasons why I like the division used by Stuart Briscoe in a sermon I heard him preach on this very passage when I was in seminary. Briscoe said ministers face three kinds of pressure in the world. They face ecclesiastical pressure. That is, they face pressure from their own churches. That is what Paul is addressing here.

Secondly, ministers face political pressure. That is they face pressure from the world. We all have seen how the world and all its minions can bring pressure upon ministers to soft-soap the gospel and the claims of the exclusivity of Christ. That is what Paul is referring to when he says:

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 4:3**...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.

The phrase “**court**” here is actually a translation of the Greek word “**day**”. You can see how the translators of the ESV would use “**court**” to get the idea across. Literally, Paul is saying “**I am little concerned about being judged in any human day, as in day in court, because there is another day out there, another day coming**”.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:8**...who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 3:13**...each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

But the pressure is real and many men have fallen victim to the pressures of the world. I am reminded of the biblical character described in 1 Kings 22:13ff.

^{ESV} **1 Kings 22:13**...And the messenger who went to summon Micaiah said to him, "Behold, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king. Let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably." ¹⁴ But Micaiah said, "As the LORD lives, what the LORD says to me, that I will speak." ¹⁵ And when he had come to the king, the king said to him, "Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?" And he answered him, "Go up and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king." ¹⁶ But the king said to him, "How many times shall I make you swear that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?" ¹⁷ And he said, "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, 'These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.'" ¹⁸ And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?"

Now, Micaiah failed to make the King of Israel happy. But you notice that he was not deterred. He was bound to the truth. He cared only very little whether the King was happy. He was another's servant.

I have seen the same thing happen even in our day. Most of you can still remember the infamous words of Bailey Smith in 1980.¹² He outraged first a group of 16,000 politically active evangelicals when he said that God did not hear the prayers of non-Christian. He simultaneously infuriated Jews, Catholics, Mormons and even the secular media. Some argue that he was a fanatic, an anti-semite. Some argued that he was exclusionistic. I think that part of the charge was true. The theology behind what he said had merit. I mean think about it.

Can man come before God in an unmediated state? No.

How many mediators are there? One.

What happens if a man tries to come before God without this mediator? Nothing. But you see it wasn't his theology, or even his logic that was questioned, it was his motives. That is what Paul is saying here. He is not going to be detracted by world. When it comes to choosing between the approval of the world and his ultimate judge, Paul is decidedly *Contra Mundam*.¹³

Yet, it is so easy for us to misjudge the motives and deeds of another person.

The story is told of Mr. Jones who picked up the wrong umbrella in a hotel lobby and was about to walk out when the rightful owner called attention to his mistake. Embarrassed, Mr. Jones offered his apologies, found his own umbrella and went on his way. The incident, however, reminded him that he had promised to buy both his wife and daughter an umbrella. To his delight he found that a local store nearby had them on sale, so he bought two. As he was getting into his car with his purchases, he saw the man he had encountered earlier eyeing him suspiciously. Seeing the three umbrellas hooked over his arm, the stranger exclaimed sarcastically, "**I see you had a good day after all!**" Although Mr. Jones blushed, he was not guilty of any wrongdoing.¹⁴

But not only is Paul going to care little for the ecclesiastical pressure he faces, or even the political pressure he faces. He is going to care little for the pressure he puts on himself.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 4:3**...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.

Paul is not going to suffer from any **“paralysis through analysis”**. He is going to proclaim **“Christ and Him crucified”** and that’s it. His reasoning is simple. And it is not that he is harboring some vile secret motivation. Look how he says it:

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 4:4**...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.

For Paul, the concern was to be faithful to the stewardship he had been given. He was not going to be deterred from doing what he had been commanded to do. Elsewhere, Paul had stated that he was a man under compulsion. It was his way of saying that he had another Master and that the Master’s judgment was all that mattered.

But in summing up, it might be a good idea to look at Paul’s overall point of how we are to view ministers.

First, we are to look at ministers as **“gifts from God to His people.”** That means that we ought to spend a portion of our time praying for them that God will keep them faithful. We need to pray that God will keep them on track, the track of **“Christ and Him crucified.”** We ought to pray and make every effort not to encumber them with pressure to conform to our desires over and above the commands of Christ. The ministers of Christ are not divided. This is true whether they are laboring today, or in the past. We ought, I think, to spend some time before God thanking Him for the gift of all the faithful ministers of the past, who’s manifold wisdom still blesses the church today either through the writing of books or sermons.

Secondly, we ought to realize that though they serve us, they are ultimately Christ's servants. As a result, we may not always like what they do or say but they are not our servants. They have another Master. When we see flaws in their character or actions, we ought to point them out with gentleness and wisdom knowing that we too have such flaws and that we too covet gentleness when others are dealing with us. We ought to pray that God will keep them faithful to the theology of the cross for the day in which they will be evaluated is not our day, the world's day, or even their own day, it is Christ's day.

They have another Master and so do we.

¹ NIV **1 Corinthians 1:13**...Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

² Thomas Constable, *Notes on First Corinthians (2005 Edition)*, p. 36 found at the Sonic Light Webpage. <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/1corinthians.pdf>.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary to First Corinthians* in Calvin's Commentaries Volume XX (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1981), 143.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1987), 151. Slightly edited and modernized by me.

⁵ Ray Stedman, "How to Destroy a Church" a sermon base on 1 Corinthians 3:18ff. The sermon can be found at <http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/1corinthians/3580.html>.

⁶ NIV **1 Timothy 2:14**...And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

NIV **2 Corinthians 11:3**...But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

NIV **Romans 16:18**...For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

The Romans passage above is particularly interesting because just two verses later in...

NIV **Romans 16:20**...The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you...Paul seems to be returning to the image of the Garden of Eden and Eve's deception.

The point would be that the Corinthians ought not delude themselves...

⁷ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the first Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1953), 73.

⁸ John Piper, "How Much Do You Own?" A sermon preached March 13, 1988 from 1 Corinthians 3:18-23. Found at <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/88/031388.html>.

⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1987), 160.

¹⁰ Charles Spurgeon, "The Bible Tried and Proved" No. 2084 Delivered May 5th, 1889.

¹¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* in the NIGTC series. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2000), 341.

¹² "It is interesting at great political rallies how you have a Protestant to pray and a Catholic to pray, and then you have a Jew to pray. With all due respect to those dear people, my friend, God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew. For how in the world can God hear the prayer of a man who says that Jesus Christ is not the true Messiah? It is blasphemy."--Bailey Smith, president, Southern Baptist Convention, Aug. 22, 1980.

¹³ Referring back to the phrase on Athanasius' tombstone...Athanasius Contra Mundum...Athanasius Against the World.

¹⁴ Duane V. Maxey, *2700 – Plus Sermon Illustrations* (Holiness Data Ministry, 2001), Illustration 0298. Found at wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyctr/books/1001-1100/HDM1040.PDF.