

Text: I Corinthians 4:1-5

Title: “The Applause of Heaven”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION - Not long ago the rock group U2 became eligible for induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. It had been 25 years since their first record. They were aware of the significance of this honor, but the band members decided not to become too caught up in the accolades and accomplishments of the past. Their bass player Adam Clayton said, "I suppose if people want to shower you with honors, the only reasonable thing to do is accept them." The drummer, Larry Mullen, added: "But it does feel premature. We're trying to stay focused on the big prize."

That’s what I want to help us do today as we open our Bibles to I Corinthians 4:1-5. Paul is still dealing with their immature ways. And one mark of spiritual maturity is to stay focused on “the big prize,” and to not settle for just pleasing people.

To accomplish that we need to be able to answer these questions?

KEY QUESTION #1 - WHAT IS MY PLACE? (v.1)

1 Corinthians 4:1 - So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.

Now remember that in Corinth, the church members had taken on the spirit of the city where traveling orators/philosophers would come to town like entertainers do today in our city. Corinthians prided themselves in having a taste for the various entertainers, and they debated their virtues quite vigorously based upon their eloquence and their superior knowledge. Well this had trickled into the church so that the church members didn’t see their pastors or the apostles as spiritual leaders, but as “entertainers” there for their enjoyment. And they divided themselves in parties: “I’m of Paul. I’m of Apollos. I’m of Cephas.” So the church was fragmented.

It was all a very man-centered approach to the life of the Body of Christ. And Paul chastises them repeatedly for this. Don’t look at other people through those lenses.

So just how should we view ourselves and others in the Body of Christ?

OUTLINE - Every believer is a servant and a manager.

Now Paul is an apostle. And he’s speaking as an apostle. “I’m a servant and a manager (steward) entrusted with the truth of God.” That was a unique calling, or place, for the apostles. Their teachings form the foundation of the New Testament we are studying.

But if someone as important as an apostle is a servant and a manager, how much more are all of us in whatever place God has put in His Kingdom ... vocational ministry or volunteer ministry. We’re all servants and stewards.

SERVANTS

Paul has already used the word “servant” to describe the work of church leaders. In 3:5 he uses the word “diakonos” which is the word from which we get our word deacon. But here in 4:1 he uses a different word.

He uses a word that comes from the world of ships and sailing. It literally means “an under-rower”

Let me paint the picture for you. The people who lived in Corinth would understand this image. The city sat on a tiny isthmus that separated two seas. It was a port city, and the Corinthians regularly saw the great war ships pull into port. These war ships had a number of decks, and the lowest deck was made of single rows of benches on both sides of the ship where the rowers sat. Then on a little deck raised up above them all, so that each rower could see him, was the captain of the ship. It was the rowers' task to row according to what he said. If he wanted the ship to move then they were to row; if he wanted them to stop they had to stop instantly. Their whole business was to obey his orders.

And so the word came to mean a “servant who obeys the orders of his master.” And certainly Paul and the other apostles had received their orders directly from Christ, and were following those orders ... “under-rowers” for Christ.

Characteristics of an “under-rower”:

- Obeying the orders
- Working hard
- Not seeking glory for ourselves
- Letting our captain get the credit
- Rowing with the team
- Willing to do the dirty work

Paul said, “That’s the way we want you to think about us. We’re not big shots. We’re servants of Christ.”

That’s the example of Jesus when he removed his coat, wrapped a towel around his waste and washed the feet of the disciples?

MANAGERS

The word essentially meant a household servant who was responsible to the owner for the affairs of the household.

Your translation may use the word “steward.” Remember we used to call flight attendants “stewardesses.” Serving food and drinks on the plane ... making sure the passengers are safe and comfortable.

And managers are entrusted with certain things that really belong to another. And they are supposed to manage the possessions of another.

Now in the case of the apostles like Paul, they were responsible for what they did with the Word of God that was entrusted to them. They were “**entrusted with the secret things of God.**” This is the wisdom of God that Paul has been talking about ... the Gospel.

But if you zoom out, the picture encompasses all of us as believers. Every person here has been entrusted with certain things ... money ... spiritual gifts ... opportunities ... possessions ... relationships, etc.

And God places us in the middle of all this. None this really belongs to us. It belongs to the Master, and He wants us to use those things for His glory. And that leads me to ...

KEY QUESTION #2 - AM I BEING FAITHFUL WHERE GOD HAS PLACED ME? (v.2)

1 Corinthians 4:2 - Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Notice the gauge here is not talent, not good looks, not skill, not success as men measure success ... the gauge is faithfulness.

Remember, Paul is speaking of his responsibility to teach and preach the truth. I have that same responsibility in the church. Sunday School teachers and other teachers do the same thing. Are you being faithful to deliver the goods?

You see, in a sense, everything comes with an assignment. If I have the gift of teaching, that gift is an assignment to use that gift for God's glory, and to help others get closer to Him.

Your money is a gift from God. You say, “Oh no, I worked hard for that money. It's all mine to do with as I want.” No, not if you're a Christ-follower. Because you see that that money isn't just a pay check for the work you've done. It comes with an assignment to use it for God's glory.

So if you get money and don't tithe and use it for God's Kingdom, you aren't being faithful to the assignment that came with that gift.

And it is required that those who have been given a trust, a responsibility, that they must prove faithful. Don't abandon the mission.

ILLUSTRATION – There's a great example of this in the new Superman movie, *Superman Returns*. Superman has been given an assignment to make the world a better place. His father, Jor-el, sent his son, Superman (Kal-el) to Earth to do good and to help people. But when astronomers discover remnants of Superman's home planet, Krypton, his curiosity is piqued and, without a word, Superman leaves the Earth he was sent to save.

And that's the way the Church is, and the way individual Christians are, so often. We forget our mission ... to be faithful to the assignment that has been given to us to take the Good News of Jesus Christ to a lost world.

ILLUSTRATION CONTINUED - Once Superman gets a grip on what he has done, he apologizes and re-engages. Good re-enters the fray against titanic evil.

Are you being faithful with what God has placed in your hands?

But then there's one more big question.

KEY QUESTION #3 - WHOSE APPLAUSE REALLY COUNTS? (vv.3-5)

Now in the next three verses there are repeated references to judging and being judged. And this is what is meant ... the scrutiny and discerning of a matter, and giving an opinion about it. And this happens all the time. We make judgments about things and matters ... some are right and some are wrong.

But when it comes to being judged by others, it really boils down to whose applause really counts. For whose pleasure am I living my life?

WHOSE APPLAUSE REALLY COUNTS?

- **The applause of others?**

1 Corinthians 4:3 - I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court;

When we serve the Lord in any visible capacity, others will judge us. Some will praise and some will criticize. And if we're playing for that applause what happens is that we become like the Pharisees whose main motivation is pleasing others rather than serving the Lord.

- **The applause of myself?**

1 Corinthians 4:3b-4 - I do not even judge myself. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.

Paul says, "I do not even judge myself." Now that does not mean that he doesn't examine himself and evaluate what he is doing, because he does. He tells us that he does in other places in Scripture. And he tells us to do the same.

He says, "I'm not aware of anything where I'm not right with God. My conscience is clear. But that's not the final analysis."

Friends, we can deceive ourselves. We can get to a point in life where we justify our actions and our attitudes to where we no longer feel guilty.

- **The applause of God?**

1 Corinthians 4:4b-5 - It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

You see, living for the applause of others or the applause of self has three problems.

First, the wrong person is doing the evaluating ... others or self. No, the Lord is to be the ultimate judge

v.4b - "It is the Lord who judges me." This is in the present tense; it is something that is going on all the time. In the privacy of his own heart and conscience he says that as he exposed himself to the Word of God and the Spirit of God spoke in his life, he became aware of the Lord's evaluation, what the Lord said was right and what he said was wrong, and what he praised him for.

Second, it is the wrong time to be judging.

v.5 – "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes."

He's speaking of the second coming. All the facts are not in yet.

Third, the wrong data is being used.

v.5 – "He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts."

Only the light of God can truly reveal the motives of men's hearts. We think we know so much, don't we. We don't have a clear enough view to really make judgments about other people. God alone has the vantage point to see into a person's heart. And He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness. He will expose the motives that we cannot see.

ILLUSTRATION – Alistair Begg tells the story of visiting a historic sight in Wales, called "The Grave of Gelert." There is a grave there that is very unusual ... hundreds of years old. It's surrounded by a wrought-iron fence. In the 13th century, LLeuwellyn The Great, who was the Prince of Wales, had a palace in that part of Wales. One day he went out hunting, without Gelert, who was his faithful dog. He didn't know where the dog was, so he went without him. As the prince returned, his dog Gelert joyfully ran up to meet his master. But the dog was smeared with blood. The prince was immediately alarmed and he ran off to his palace, there to find that his infant son was not in his crib. The child's pajamas were in the floor covered in blood. The prince suspected the worst. He immediately drew his sword and drove it into the heart of his dog, Gelert. The dog's dying yelp was answered by a child's cry. LLeuwellyn searched and discovered the boy unharmed. And nearby the boy, the body of a mighty wolf, which Galert, his faithful dog, had slain. The prince, filled with remorse, is said to have never smiled again. He buried Galert there at this now-famous grave.

"Judge nothing before the appointed time..."

CONCLUSION

1 Corinthians 4:5 - At that time each will receive his praise from God.

How do I please God? The Bible says that apart from faith it is impossible to please God. That means that as I live my life in simple faith and trust in Christ, the result will be that we receive praise from God.

ILLUSTRATION – A friend of mine sent an email recently talking about the death of dear friend of his who had passed away recently. As he spoke of the span of her life he said this: “The official record will show: September 3, 1940 – May 27, 2006. The dash between the dates made all the difference.” Then he adds these lines of poetry:

For it matters not how much we own
The cars, the house, the cash
What matters is how we live and love
And how we spend our dash

What better way to live one's life ... to spend our dash ... than for the applause of heaven! Are you tired of trying to measure up to people's expectations all the time? Are you weary of the demands that people put on you? Try living for the applause of heaven. That's what we are created to do, and so it will be most rewarding.