

“Unity: Stewards Judged”

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Graphic: stewards, servants, judge, courtroom

Key Verses: 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 commendation from God.

Theme: In the unity of Christ, be like Paul, Apollos, and Peter – servants of God and stewards of God’s mysteries. For us, that means loving the Lord God, introducing people to Jesus Christ, and walking together to make these relationships grow.

1) Introduction

- a) Six weeks ago we began this journey into the book of 1 Corinthians, learning about Unity in Christ. And as the Apostle Paul wrote to the brand new baby church in Corinth, so he writes with wisdom to us today. Sure, we may have vast cultural differences, we may be removed, chronologically, by thousands of years from the church in Corinth, but the wisdom that Paul offers is GOD’S wisdom and is timeless. As a church – as followers of Christ – we are called to be unified under the banner of Jesus Christ.
- b) Bottom line: if we are NOT unified as a church, then the gospel suffers, our outreach and testimonies suffer, and as Pastor Andy so eloquently reminded us last week, “People are watching and waiting to see what difference Jesus makes in our lives.”
- c) And so as we wrap up this series today, where have we been?
- d) You can pick up all the DVDs on the Welcome Table, but here are the Cliff’s Notes...
- e) Paul starts his letter by reminding the church that BECAUSE OF JESUS, God has given them EVERYTHING THEY NEED to BE God’s holy people for eternity! To live faithful, trustworthy, fulfilled lives in Jesus Christ. That’s why God created us and God has given us all the gifts and direction we need to spend eternity with Him, starting today. Sounds great!
- f) SO WHY, asks Paul in chapter 1, is there division in the church? If God has given you EVERYTHING YOU NEED through Christ, then why are some of you claiming to follow Paul, or Apollos, or Peter, or this pastor, or that ministry, MORE THAN JESUS? Follow Christ, Paul commanded them. This is simple...and Paul used simple concepts and words.
- g) And then Paul, in chapter 1 still, acknowledged that this message of the cross of Christ was foolishness to those who are perishing – to those who

don't know Christ. It's too simple! It doesn't make logical sense. But God chose to use these foolish means to bring people to Him because God wants SO MUCH for us to have a relationship with Him that He will do whatever it takes. He chose the weak, the foolish, and the low to get the point across, and still does today.

- h) And because he used the weak and the foolish...you and me...and because Jesus Christ is our everything, we have NOTHING to boast about, except what God has done. It's not about Paul or Apollos or you or me, but about Jesus.
- i) In Chapter 2, Paul tells them that God chose to do things amongst the weak – and Paul chose to come to them weak and fearful – not so they would be convinced of the truth of the gospel with human wisdom or words, but that (listen) the HOLY SPIRIT would show the POWER of GOD in their lives. The key to the Christian life, I am convinced, is allowing the FIRE of the HOLY SPIRIT to BURN in us, so the world can see GOD'S POWER!
- j) By the HOLY SPIRIT, we can experience the awesome things that God has in store for the church – through using our spiritual gifts, serving God with others, and being stewards of the mysteries of God.
- k) But if you're divided, you can't experience that fully in your lives. Paul said, Grow up! Stop acting like the world, who doesn't GET IT. Grow in good spiritual soil. Be built up like a spiritual building – your bodies are the dwelling place of God, for crying our loud. God chose to reside in YOU!
- l) Act like it! Basically, I'll boil it down to this: (pause) Paul wants this church that he planted – wants US – to be a healthy church, unified under the mission and call of Jesus Christ. I, as your pastor, want THIS church, and every OTHER church, to be effective and healthy so that when Jesus Christ comes back, like he promised, we will be judged and found FAITHFUL and TRUSTWORTHY. Are you with me? Is this something we, together, want to do as a church? (YES!)
- m) Today, we have five verses left...the rest of the book is yours to read when you go home today. And so, let's walk through the beginning of chapter 4, verse by verse, because this is where the rubber meets the road for Paul and for US.
- n) Let's pray...

2) Scripture

a) Read 1 Corinthians 4:1

i) The ‘us’ here is Paul, Apollos, Peter, and the other leaders in the church.

ii) Think of “us” as two things:

(1) First, we are servants. Not servants in a house, but servants of Christ – the Savior. The one who DIED on the CROSS so we could be FORGIVEN and set free. Consider us SERVANTS who are serving as a response to the grace and salvation offered through Jesus.

(2) It’s one thing to serve someone – when I was out to lunch this week our waitress SERVED us – but it’s an entirely different thing to CHOOSE to be a SERVANT in response to something that someone ELSE has done, especially if that SOMETHING is DYING on a cross so you can have eternal LIFE.

(3) The typical usage for the Greek word that Paul uses here for *servant* had to do with someone who LABORS with others to row a large BOAT with OARS. So these guys would all sit side-by-side and strain against the water to move the ship forward to get where they wanted to go. Isn’t that a PERFECT metaphor for the church? We are co-laborers, sitting side-by-side in order to all get to the place we want to go and that’s eternity with God in heaven. And we’re taking our direction from Jesus and His Spirit that lives in us when we become born-again Christians.

(4) Paul says, “think of us like THAT” for Christ. With Christ. For the SAKE of Christ.

(5) Second thing – think of us – identify with us – as stewards of God’s mysteries.

(6) I, personally, think that post-modern church in America has almost completely lost its appreciation and awe and wonder of the things about God that are mysterious. All over the Old Testament, whenever God is interacting in the world, there’s SMOKE and LIGHTNING and FIRE and CLOUDS for NO APPARENT REASON, other than the fact that GOD is in the house. Why God would choose to have His Son come to earth as a baby and live and work amongst us is a mystery! Why God chooses to interact with us through Holy Communion and pours His grace on us in our baptisms is a mystery.

- (7) To be a steward of these mysteries of God is not something that we think about much, as a church. When we start talking about spiritual gifts and how to use them for the glory of God in the church, then we start to take a few steps closer to the mystery of God. Why would God choose to use ME?
- (8) Paul wants the church to emulate him as a servant of Christ – a co-laborer for Christ; and a steward of God’s mysteries, someone who cares for the pure message of God’s salvation.
- (9) According to dictionary.com, a steward is a person who *manages another's property or financial affairs; one who administers anything as the agent of another or others* (dictionary.com). It’s a trust that is established between the person who owns something, and the person who cares for it on behalf of that person. It’s the root of STEWARDSHIP, which, in the context of money or property, is our task of caring for assets on BEHALF of God and the church community.
- (10) To be stewards of God’s mysteries is to administer, as an agent, the mysteries of God. God’s message of salvation, of our transformation through Jesus, is in our hands. We choose, every day, what to do with it. Sometimes, we get it right - we teach the younger generations about the mysteries of God – of Jesus’ work on the cross; of the meaning and purpose of baptism and Holy Communion; of the Holy Spirit’s real and present work in our lives. Other times, we’re like the stock broker who loses everything because he foolishly focused on things that didn’t make money – that weren’t WORTH anything.
- (11) In order to be a faithful servant for Christ and steward worthy of God, there has to be trust...we have to earn trust...
- (12) In verse 2, we read...

b) Read verse 2

- i) One of the biggest mistakes in any relationship, whether it’s in school, at work, in our families, or marriage, or wherever, is that we fail to build trust. You know, you’re always wondering if the other person is doing and really acting like it appears. One of my goals for the first 6-12 months here in Panama is to build trust. It’s critical to being able to

effectively minister and work with each other. And we all know what happens when pastor or politicians break our trust!

- ii) And if we think it's important with our earthly relationships, how much MORE IMPORTANT is it to be trustworthy in our relationship to God?
- iii) Paul tells us it is REQUIRED (not a whole lot of wiggle room there) that we be found trustworthy. It's not OPTIONAL. We don't get choice B as stewards of God's mysteries. Being FOUND trustworthy is required, but it takes time...it takes repeatedly and consistently being ready to engage in the mysterious things of God – in worship, in prayer, in identifying and using our spiritual gifts, in reminding ourselves that Jesus died for our sin and rose again, however mysterious that seems...

c) Read verse 3-4

- i) Paul says, “Think of me as a faithful servant and trustworthy steward – but even if you don't, I don't really care! It doesn't matter to me, really, what your judgment is. AND...AND, in fact, it doesn't really even matter to me what my own judgment of MYSELF is.”
- ii) And you're like, *Paul, you're being kind of haughty here, right? Kind of conceited about this.* Why doesn't he care?
- iii) John Wesley commented on this verse. He wrote in his Bible, “Yea, I judge not myself - My final state is not to be determined by my own judgment.” I would add, “...or anyone else's!” See, no matter what we think of the people around us, or what the people around us think of us, about our trustworthiness before the Lord, about how good a Christian we are (or not), the ultimate determination about faithfulness and trustworthiness comes from God alone. “It is the LORD who judges me.”
- iv) Things like faithfulness and trustworthiness are things of the heart. Only God can see in the heart. We don't depend on our own or anyone else's opinion of how we are DOING as servants or stewards for God. The judgment of the person NEXT to you is NOT SUFFICIENT to make even ONE bit of difference ETERNALLY to your life. Only Jesus' judgment is.
- v) Now, there's a common misconception among Christians that we shouldn't judge. “My mother told me never to pass judgment on anything or anyone.” That's false! We judge things all the time. We have to judge where the Spirit is moving in others for leadership. We have to determine if people are ready for ministry. We have to test the

Spirit to see if it's the right time to move in any situation. What we are FORBIDDEN to do is ever condemn other people. There's a huge difference. The only one qualified to condemn is God, and only on Judgment Day, when we stand before the Lord and are LAID BARE before his 100% righteous truth about our lives.

- vi) And it's in THAT moment that I want to rely on the death and resurrection of Jesus as my ROCK and MY FORTRESS, because NONE of us will be found trustworthy enough...faithful enough...for a holy God. But with Jesus, the only one who can judge our hearts, we will be set free for eternity!
- vii) And we can have that freedom now...Paul was pretty sure that he had spent the time to search himself and know that he was free from the things that would be counted against him. He was saying, "I have allowed God to search my heart and know me."
- viii) One of the prayers we should be lifting up every day is, "God, I know that I have sin in my life, because of who I am. Right now, show me where that sin is – identify it – so that I can work out my salvation through it and give it to Jesus." This is honest! This is the stuff that spiritual giants pray all the time. This is Paul's prayer...who called himself the chief of all sinners and the most despised of all.
- ix) In the end, the only judgment that matters is the Lord's and it's with the Lord that we have to be reconciled.
- x) Verse 5...

d) Read verse 5/Application

- i) Don't pretend you are God and pass judgment on others now, because the only judgment that matters is the one that the Lord will pass when he returns.
- ii) And when Jesus returns, three things will happen, according to Paul here:
 - (1) Jesus will bring to light all the things that are now inextricably in darkness...things that are hidden from the world. Things like sin and deceit and those things that we can hide from the world and no one will ever find out about this and... Look, when Jesus comes, it will be like the brightest light that EVER WAS...like the Sun itself two inches from your face, burning through whatever barrier and walls we've put up around the deepest sin in our lives and everything will

be exposed for what it actually is! And there will be some things in our lives where we're like, "Whoa! I didn't He was going to find THAT! I had that thing buried so deep, even I forgot where I buried it." Dig it up now, and deal with it carefully and with help, if you need to, but don't leave it buried any longer because Jesus could come back before I'm done preaching today. How many think THAT would be cool?!?! Yeah, except for those things we haven't yet unburied and given to God and repented of. Don't hold onto it any longer because God already knows it anyway. Get right with God.

- (2) When Jesus comes back, he will disclose the purposes of the heart. God will reveal the INTENT of your heart. Right now, our hearts are fickle...one minute we want more of Jesus and next we want more of the world. Our hearts (Paul calls it flesh) want one thing and do a totally different thing. When Jesus comes back, the TRUE NATURE of our hearts will be disclosed and it will be final. Remember the goal for us, according to Paul, is to be servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. To serve and love God and our neighbors, and be brokers of this mysterious and awesome message of salvation to the world. Make THAT the intent – the purpose – of your heart.
- (3) Finally, when Jesus returns, commendations will be handed out. Prizes will be given out. And this isn't what we see in Cub Scout Pack 255, or 4-H, or in school where EVERYONE gets a blue ribbon no matter what they've done or not done. The commendations that God hands out are not some cheap trinket for participation – "Hey, thanks for being human...here's eternal life 'cause you tried really hard to be nice!" If that's the prize for trying really hard at being a Christian, I don't want any part of it. That's NOT the prize or the nature of the prize-giver that I read about in God's Word. The God of the Bible, the Father of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit is so intent on – so jealous about - having us be holy and fruitful people in relationship with Him ALONE that the prize when we meet the Lord is no less than eternal WORSHIP and LOVE flowing out of us for Him. It's more than we can possibly imagine and it's not cheap. It's COST GOD EVERYTHING! It costs him HIMSELF in the form of His Son. That is NOT CHEAP.

3) Conclusion

- a) Paul paints this picture of the Day of Judgment to remind us that there is MORE to life than what we can see with our eyes or experience with our senses.

- b) We can have incredible, life-transforming hope in the coming day of the Lord as we serve Christ and live as stewards of God's mysteries.
- c) Paul wanted the church that he planted in Corinth – God wants US – to be a healthy church, unified under the mission and call of Jesus Christ. I, as your pastor, want THIS church to be effective and healthy so that when Jesus Christ comes back, like he promised, we will be judged and found FAITHFUL and TRUSTWORTHY and we will hear God say, “Well done!”
- d) The only way we can do that is together. And the only pathway to follow is the one that Christ walked to the cross and beyond.
- e) Our mission statement, printed EVERY WEEK in the bulletin, is that we are **seeking to love the Lord God by introducing people to Jesus Christ and helping these relationships to grow**. This is OUR MISSION. This is what we are called to do here and now.
- f) We have much work to do. I don't want to limp across the finish line into heaven...I want to be sprinting! And just like any good sprinter, I want to be accelerating through the tape, chest out, breaking the tape with passion and energy.
- g) Don't get bogged down in the temporal judgments of this age. Live together in unity of mind and heart under the single banner of Jesus Christ as we forge out our mission...as we grow up together...
- h) Introducing people to Jesus is planting seeds. Helping those relationships to grow is watering and nurturing.
- i) Paul started this letter by reminding the church that they had EVERYTHING THEY NEEDED to transform the world for Christ and advance the Kingdom of God.
- j) WE, church, have everything we need. Our challenge is to remain vigilant as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries for today.
- k) Where is God leading you right now? How is God tugging at your heart to serve and love? What do you truly believe about this mysterious and almighty God that will move you from where you are now, to where God is calling you to be? As we enter into Lent...I pray those questions burn into your mind and prayers and call you into deeper levels of Jesus in your life.
- l) (kneel) Let's pray...