

1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-5

INTRODUCTION

A game that we all probably play sometime is that of evaluating pastors and preachers. All kinds of criteria are used to determine who are the most successful; the most influential the most gifted the most effective.

In the USA I am told there are certain magazines that periodically make surveys and write up extensive reports carefully ranking the Pastors by church membership, attendance at worship services, the size of the church Sunday School the Degree that he holds and so on. But such a practise might be popular in some places in the USA but it is totally offensive to God. The verses that we are looking at today look at the true nature and marks of God's servants.

It sets out basic guidelines for Christian ministry and how it should be viewed and received.

In many ways the people at Corinth were rating Paul and Apollos and Cephas by the way that they favoured one against the other but now Paul urges the church to have a true perspective of all God's preachers.

1. THE IDENTITY OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER (V 1)

The word 'us' refers back to 3:22 and is clearly referring to Paul, Apollos, Cephas and by extension all other fellow workers in the gospel. Paul is telling us how Christians are to view their leaders in the church we ought to regard them as servants. The word translated 'servant' means literally 'under rowers' indicating the lowest galley slaves the ones rowing on the bottom tier of a ship.

They were the most menial unenvied and despised slaves. From that original meaning of the Greek word the word came to refer to subordinates of any sort to those under the authority of another. Therefore Elders in churches are first and foremost above all else servants of Christ they are at all times subject to Christ they are his slaves.

We who hold such a position in churches are called to serve Christ by serving his people but we can never serve His people well unless first and foremost we are serving Christ well. We will only do that if we have a true perspective of ourselves if we see ourselves as servants of Christ.

Now there are some Elders and Pastor's who think that the best way to serve the congregation that God has placed them in is to run about helping them and counselling them and encouraging them and they do so at the expense of preparing for preaching the word of God. But they have got things in the wrong order. The best way any Elder or Pastor can serve the church God has placed them in is to first of all spend much time in the word for their own edification.

Then we are to spend much time in the word for the edification of others and then we will be better Pastors and Elders when called upon to care and counsel the congregation. We will never be able to shepherd God's people unless we are constantly going to the Shepherd for instruction and wisdom. We will never be servants of Christ unless we are daily going to Christ in humility and acknowledge that he is our Master we are only his 'under rowers,' his slaves.

Paul was an Apostle of Jesus Christ if anyone could think highly of himself you would think it would be Paul but Paul considered himself as a galley slave of Christ and he wanted others to consider himself as such. Galley slaves were not exalted one above the other they all had a common rank the lowest possible task, no galley slave thought of himself better than all the other

galley slaves everyone was equal. Paul has already indicated this in this letter (3:5) Elders and Pastors are just instruments used by God for his glory and for the benefit of his church (3:7).

Now notice Paul does not say here that he is a servant of the church but of Christ this means that he is not to seek to please the church he is not placed in a position of responsibility just to grant to each member of God's church their wishes he is to do what pleases Christ and that will mean that at times he will not always please every person in the church but will have to rebuke as well as exhort and encourage God's people.

No Elder or Pastor is to be manipulated by certain members so that some people can get their own way in the church. No we are to serve Christ first and foremost and obey him only. This is one reason why historically and legally Ministers are not viewed as employees as other people are. Much of the employment law does not apply to us because we are seen as servants of God rather than employees of the church.

This is why traditionally Ministers are given a stipend rather than a salary. A salary is for work done and stipend is to allow work to be done and there is a difference, a difference I would hasten to add that this Government are keen to remove. But it's been like that for centuries because of this biblical principle that is being declared here Elders and Pastors are servants of Christ above everything else they only serve the church because they are servants of Christ.

Of course what is true of Elders in churches is true of every Christian, we are all servants of Christ first and foremost and we are all to serve one another but that is not Paul's context here. But Paul goes on to say that not only are leaders servants but they are also stewards of God's truth or they are 'entrusted with the secret things of God.'

Now we need to unpack this phrase a little if we are going to understand what Paul is saying here. The word translated 'entrusted' means house manager a house manager is a person placed in complete control of a household. He would supervise the property, the fields, the vineyards, the finances, food and the other servants on behalf of his master.

So every leader is a house manager responsible for caring for our Masters property. But Paul tells us exactly what we are to manage 'the secret things of God.' Elders are entrusted with proclaiming the secret things of God or the mysteries of God. The word translated here 'the secret things' is the word that means that which is hidden and can be known only by divine revelation. So an Elder and Pastor is to take God's word God's gospel and dispense it to God's household he is to take care of God's truth and oversee its proclamation. He is to speak all God's word proclaiming the whole counsel of God holding nothing back.

Therefore you can see where the priority of every Minister and Elder lies. It lies with making sure that God's truth is revealed in the power of the Spirit to the congregation. That's why I spend a considerable part of my week in the study preparing to preach God's word whether from this pulpit or in one to one Bible studies or on the doors or in the School Assembly or wherever.

The best way any Elder or Pastor can serve you is by preaching God's word to you and to do that takes time and hard work. You too are responsible not in the same way as Elders and Pastors are but you are responsible for sharing God's word to others and that will take time and effort and determination to study and learn from God's word

2. THE REQUIREMENT OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER (v 2)

What is God looking for in Elders and Pastors? How can you tell if your Elders are fulfilling their calling? They will be faithful men. A house manger that is entrusted with his master's possessions will ruin his master's household unless he is faithful in managing the household. God wants his

leaders to be men who are faithful to their calling of proclaiming the word of God fearlessly to those that God places in front of them week by week.

This means that Elders and Pastors must be faithful in obeying the word of God in their lives and faithful in applying the word of God in the lives of others. This means that Elders will be faithful in their commitment to the Lord and His people.

God is not looking for Elders who are academic with letters after their name He is not looking for Elders with attractive personalities He can of course use Elders like that but what He is looking for from every leader is faithfulness to God, to his word and to his people.

He wants those of us who are Elders and Pastors or might be in the future to be men who will not compromise on the word of God who will preach God's truth without fear of men and will set examples of godliness within a congregation. What is true of Elders in particular is surely just as true for each one of us in general. What God is looking for in your life is faithfulness. When we are looking for future Elders or Deacons what we ought to look for first of all is faithfulness. Is this man faithful, faithful to the word of God in his living, faithful in his praying and faithful in his commitment?

Does he seek to handle the word of God with great faithfulness and care or is he only after popularity or even power. God entrusts each one of us with his word he wants us to proclaim and live by it. Are we faithfully doing that?

Yes Elders have a greater responsibility when it comes to proclaiming and preaching the word of God but we all are responsible for applying it in our hearts and lives and then seeking under God to proclaim it in our own way to others in our church and in our world. It is sad to say that it is getting more difficult to find men and woman who are faithful to God and who are faithful to his word.

3. THE EVALUATION OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER (vs. 3-5)

In these two verses Paul is simply telling us about his own attitude to ministry and what Paul says about himself here should be true of every Elder and Pastor and every Christian. Paul says that he cares very little about the opinion and views of other people. It does not matter to Paul if his ministry is criticised or even praised by his fellow Christians or even by any human court. Now we need to be clear what Paul is saying here.

He is not saying that he does not listen to criticism or the views of other believers about his ministry for we all know that we can often benefit from the wise counsel of a Christian friend and indeed can learn from the advice from others. But what Paul is saying is that no human being is ultimately qualified to determine the validity, quality or faithfulness of our work for God.

We are not even qualified ourselves to determine our own faithfulness. Of course that does not mean we are never to pass a judgement about another believer for we are told that matters of outward sin are to be dealt with by the church (1 Timothy 5:19-10). But apart from matters of church discipline we can make no absolute accurate assessment as to the faithfulness of one's heart and mind to the living God.

Even if others judge us even if it is by other Christians or even if a human court decides to examine our lives and ministry ultimately no human being is qualified to give a definitive evaluation of any of God's servants or of any other Christian for that matter. Only God sees the heart only he knows our intentions and our motives therefore only God can ultimately judge us and our ministries with accuracy.

Therefore we should be very careful when passing judgement on another Elder or Pastor in God's church for we do not know the whole truth about that person. Of course we are not to turn a blind eye to his sins and we are to encourage him to deal with his faults and failings and look carefully at his weaknesses.

Now providing we are doing those things and providing that an Elder is seeking (as far as he is enabled to) to live faithfully before the Lord we cannot pass judgement upon him or his ministry with any great accuracy. Yet we do pass judgement don't we? We think that because someone is ministering in a small church that their ministry is not very successful and because someone is in a larger church then they must be better Elders and Pastors.

But the truth is they might both be faithful servants of Christ or the one in the smaller church might even be more faithful we simply do not know, only God knows the whole truth.

Those of us who are in Eldership and leadership roles or will be in the future must not be put off when unfair criticism comes our way, we simply should keep on being faithful to the Lord examining our hearts daily in the full knowledge that God is ultimately the judge of our ministry and not those that we minister too.

I am not saying that an Elder should not care about what others say. A caring Elder of Christ cannot be insensitive to the feelings needs and opinions of God's people. A sincere word of appreciation after a sermon is encouraging and a word of helpful criticism can be a blessing. But no Elder or Pastor can remain faithful to God and to his calling, if he lets others decide how true his motives are or whether he is being faithful.

The knowledge and understanding of others is always imperfect even when it is done out of genuine love and care for us. We who are in positions of responsibility must not allow others to shape our ministry, we ought not to care ultimately what people think of us or our preaching or our leadership or of our pastoral care. We ought simply to seek to please Christ and follow Him in everything.

Paul even cautions us here about the danger of making our own evaluation of our ministry. All of us are naturally inclined to either build ourselves up in our own minds or to simply pull ourselves down so that we are failures in our own eyes.

But we ought not to trust our own judgements in the same way that we can't ultimately trust the judgements of others for we can all make wrong judgements for we know that our feelings are unreliable and our own hearts so easily deceive us. Of course Paul is not saying that we should never examine ourselves with the help of God.

Of course we are to examine our hearts as God enables us, we are to confess sin that is discovered and we are to pray about our shortcomings and work on them by the grace of God. But ultimately none of us are able to evaluate our own Spiritual lives and our own ministry for we either are too lenient on ourselves or too strict only God can truly measure our spiritual lives and our ministry.

As Paul examined his own life and ministry he had a clear conscience (v 3) yet he was aware that his assessment of himself does not mean that he is innocent for he knew that he could be wrong in his assessment of himself. However ultimately he acknowledged that only the Lord could truly know and judge his heart. The only view that really matters is the Lord's, what others thought about him and his ministry or what he thought about himself ultimately made no difference it is the Lord's verdict that counts.

Every Elder and Pastor is to be a servant of the Lord, he is to faithfully make known God's truth and he is to do so in the knowledge that the Lord alone judges the true value of our work.

Therefore Paul now gives us the application of this principle in verse 5. God has a day planned when he will bring to light the things that are hidden and reveal the motives of our hearts. These phrases are referring to the attitudes and motives within us that only God can see.

This is why other people's views do not ultimately matter because one day everything will be revealed. This is why it is none of our business to pass judgement of God's servants. Sure we should encourage them and even make some constructive criticisms of them but none of us can truly give an accurate evaluation of their ministries. None of us can say we have a poor Pastor and none of us can say we have a great pastor all we can say is that as far as we can judge these things our Pastor is On that day of judgement things unknown to us in this world will be revealed, things that have been hidden deep within our hearts will be uncovered and these things do not necessary have to be bad things they are simply motives and attitudes that might actually be good and pure.

So you see there might be a situation where we have been critical of an Elder or Pastor or fellow Christian and one day that situation might be revealed to be one that was done out of love and concern.

On this final accounting day each one of us will receive praise from God for although there might be much that we have done that will not have been done with worthy motives nevertheless because we are saved by grace there will be something that we have done that will be revealed to be worthy works and actions, actions done with the right attitudes and with pure motives.

All that is important is not so much what we do or don't do for the Lord but whether our motives are right and pure. Everything we do should be for the Lord if are motives are anything other than this then our works as Christian people will not receive praise from God. So let's remember this week that it's not what we do or don't do for the Lord that matters it's our motives that count. I can't see them and you can't see them but the Lord does and one day he will bring everything to light and then we will understand why something's were done the way that they were done.

Amen