

"Confronting Judgmentalism"

1 Corinthians 4

Jerry Bridges in his book *Respectable Sins* addresses one of the most poisonous sins for Christians: the sin of judgmentalism. Concerning this spiritual serpent, Bridges writes,

The sin of judgmentalism is one of the most subtle of our "respectable" sins because it is often practiced under the guise of being zealous for what is right. It is obvious that within our conservative evangelical circle there are myriads of opinions on everything from theology to conduct to lifestyle and politics. Not only are there multiple opinions but we usually assume our opinion is correct. That's where our trouble with judgmentalism begins. We equate our opinions with truth. (Respectable Sins, 141)

This is what Paul was confronting in the first four chapters of his letter to the Corinthians. Some favoured the sophisticated, eloquence of the philosophically influenced Apollos and made judgments about Paul's uncouth, Jewish rabbinic style. Yet some preferred Paul's deep biblical connectedness to all of Scripture and his ability to bring God's Word down to earth. So they made judgments about the ones they didn't like to elevate the ones they preferred. Using their preferences as 'truth' they then criticize other people's preferences for life and ministry even though they don't compromise Biblical principles. Remember, our preferences just show how unique and different God has made us - that's all.

To try to put an end to their pettiness, Paul reminds them what being in ministry is all about. And not just if you're a leader. If you are saved you are in ministry. What will help us criticize and judge believers less?

Paul refreshes their minds with a biblical healthy view of what God has called us to do – what God has called us to do -

Serve for the praise of God Not the Approval of People **(4:1-5)**

Instead of elevating one leader over another, Paul reminds them of what leaders are – servants.

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful

But it's not just leaders who are servants with responsibilities, all of us

Are both subordinates and stewards (vv.1-2)

Paul doesn't choose the general word for servant here (doulos), rather he chooses a word that was more demeaning, *huperates*. Assistant, helper, sometimes used for the rower of a ship, the guys who sit at the bottom of the bottom taking orders to row, row, row. Leaders are simply servants doing what God is telling us to do. This is not prestigious. There is no glamor here in case there were some who were envious of Paul, Apollos or Peter. We're God's assistants on the one hand yet we carry with us the responsibility of a steward of the 'secret things of God'.

A steward was the head of the household. He made sure all the other servants did their jobs. He oversaw the resources a household would need to for sleeping, eating, cleaning and safety. It's a big job. Paul said we are stewards of the truths of God. The word 'secret' simply means things previously unknown which Paul must make known. We all are subordinates of God and yet stewards of the truths of God as revealed in His Word. We must make sure we are living responsibly so that those around us have their spiritual needs met, as we share God's truths with them. We're all here to serve each other and God as we share the spiritual resources of the gospel that unbelievers need and the application and teaching of truth that all believers need. God will assess us one day as to whether we were trust-worthy with our time, spiritual gifts and resources.

He already talked about the future day of judgment coming when Jesus tests our work through fire to see what lasts. He comes back to this in vv.3-5 to remind us

Our knowledge of others is limited and biased (vv.3-5)

³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. 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.

I believe the 'human court' Paul was referring to in v.3 was the Areopagus that he was called in front of to defend the gospel in Acts 17 when he first came to Athens, not far from Corinth. The Areopagus was the supreme court of its day. Paul says, their opinion has no bearing because they don't know the gospel. Sadly, some of these Christians had their own assessments of Paul and Apollos and Peter but Paul says you don't know my motives, my heart (v.5) only God does. While Paul says he doesn't judge himself, what he means is he would do so unfairly if he's not honest. He said in v.4 he was unaware of any sin against him, but Jesus might have something to say about that! 'Aware' has the idea of standing out, an obvious sin. While it's a good thing to examine ourselves, we are biased and fail often to see our own sin. But we seem to be pretty good at finding it in others.

So he commands us in v.5 to 'judge nothing before the time' and has the sense to stop doing this because they were (and all of us) do it and wait until the Lord returns. "judge' means form an opinion of someone as if you are their judge and think you have the truth. But we don't. Sometimes we may be right but Paul says we don't have the knowledge and we can't discern motives. Why can't we?

Because Grace Recipients are Unqualified to Judge **(4:6-13)**

⁶ Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. ⁷ For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

Since God is the one who saved us by His mercy and grace, so were Paul and Apollos saved by God's mercy and grace. Paul said of himself in 1 Tim. 1:12-14

¹² I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy

because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Titus 3:4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

The reason we're not to act as judge and jury over each other is we're all saved by God's grace and still in the process of being saved and completely justified.

None of us has 'arrived' yet (vv.6-8)

Paul said he and Apollos were saved by grace, received their giftings by grace and have not taken pride in themselves. They worked together as grace recipients to help people know Christ and grow in Christ. They weren't perfect. They sought to live within the parameters of 'what was written', i.e. the Word of God.

God's Word says we're all sinners saved by grace. God's Word says don't act like your God as if you know everyone's mind and heart. Serve each other and serve God together like Paul and Apollos were doing. It wasn't a popularity contest for them. Nor were they having debates in front of the Areopagus to see what "they" thought was better. They didn't boast in their giftedness as if they were so wise. They sought to live by Scripture which said leave these things to God.

Paul gets a little sarcastic in vv.8-13 because the Corinthian believers were acting as if they had arrived. As if they were kings ordering their subjects around. Acting like they were in charge when God was and is always will be, thank you very much! Listen to his words,

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! ⁹ For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! ¹¹ To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ¹² We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³ when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

Some of these believers had become arrogant over their preferences, equating their preference as truth. Paul reminds them and us, when we think like this to remember none of us have 'arrived' yet.

While our salvation is secure, we are still in the process of being conformed to the image of Jesus. That will be complete when we are in glory. Paul says sarcastically all of us are acting as if we are ruling over others when we make judgments about people. The real king, Jesus, didn't act like this when He was here. In 2 Cor. 8:9 Paul states,

⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

We are rich in Christ. We are to model a Christlike attitude where Paul wrote in Phil 2:3

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Where does it say in the bible that we have the mind of Christ? Oh, right 1 Cor. 2:15

¹⁵ The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment:

¹⁶ "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

They overapplied this verse. Yes, unsaved people cannot assess us properly because they don't have the Spirit. We of all people through the Spirit can know a tiny bit how God thinks because Christ dwells in us. But not to the point where we know everything.

Even Paul, who was an apostle, didn't act like this. Listen to what he says in vv.9-13,

⁹ For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! ¹¹ To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ¹² We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³ when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

If we need another reminder that we are unqualified to judge others. Note that

Our suffering has not ended yet (vv.9-13)

Suffering reminds us we haven't arrived; we're not perfected yet. And as believers we can be terribly treated. Paul says if you think its so great being an apostle, we have targets on our backs. The Romans love to parade their prisoners into the arena at the end of the line to humiliate them and feed them to the lions. This had happened to some Christians already. Paul will eventually be beheaded and Peter crucified. And how are we to respond to persecution? We bless in return.

I think if Paul could use our vernacular today, he would say 'Get your head in the game! You are out of touch with reality. There's too many people outside our church walls that want to hurt us and you guys inside the walls are arguing about who's the better teacher (and many more things as we'll see in the letter)? Work together. Support one another. It's going to get harder. Instead of focusing on your preferences

Focus on God's Goal for You: Christlikeness **(4:14-21)**

Paul wraps up this section to get their minds back on what matters. The whole letter is about spiritual realignment. It's all about Jesus and God's glory, not yours.

Increase in Christlike character and decrease in criticism (vv.14-17)

Paul didn't want to shame them but to remind them of what he taught them. 'Imitate me' was not arrogant but an honest reminder of look at how he lived. And he was sending them Timothy, his

son in the faith who would model Christlikeness. ‘Guardians’ were servants in the household who made sure the children got fed, went to school, did their homework, had some play time – but they weren’t the parents. Very humbly, Paul says I’m your spiritual father, please listen to me. Stop fighting over guardians. Follow Christ and use me as an example.

Replace arrogance with gentleness (vv.18-21)

Paul helps us learn how to stop using our preferences as a way of elevating ourselves and judging those who disagree with us.

¹⁸ Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. ²¹ What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

Paul was coming to revisit them and didn’t want to go over this again. He preferred to come gently and humbly to encourage, not rebuke. We become arrogant when we make un-informed judgments about each other. We don’t have all the info. We jump to the wrong conclusions so often. We place ourselves above others which leads to arrogance.

When we’re tempted to judge someone and become upset and make rash conclusions, let’s remember the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, and gentleness. Gentleness means not being quickly angered. Respond graciously. Remind ourselves, we don’t know the whole story. We don’t know what that person is going through. They make mistakes as we do. We are all grace recipients who haven’t arrived yet so let’s treat each other accordingly.

Paul ended this confrontation with a question: how do you want me to come to you, with love and gentleness or rebuking you harshly because you’re not changing your attitudes? Perhaps that’s a good way to end too, with a question. When are we going to stop being critical of others, making uninformed assessments as if we were Jesus Himself, and instead choose to act with love, forgiveness, and grace to others as we want them to treat us also?

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please
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