

Building Church Unity and Judging Your Brother (1 Corinthians 4)

Expository Lessons from the Book of 1 Corinthians

I. Introduction

- a. To understand **1 Corinthians 4** we must read the chapter in context of the beginning of the letter. Paul is building on what he said in the first three chapters. If we take **1 Corinthians 4** out of context, we will come up with some bizarre interpretations and applications.
- b. Understanding Paul's writings requires going through a four-step process (and asking four questions):
 - i. What is the problem Paul is addressing? (or, what is bothering *him*?)
 - ii. How does Paul make his point? (logic, Scriptures, example from his life, etc.)
 - iii. What is Paul's conclusion? (What does he direct the church to do?)
 - iv. Only *after* we ask the first three questions above, can we ask: what are the implications of Paul's teaching for us today?
- c. It is easy for someone to misunderstand or misapply the lessons from **1 Corinthians 4** if they don't go through the above process! Consider:
 - i. What is the most famous verse in the Bible? Probably **John 3:16**.
 - ii. The second most famous (or second most often quoted) is probably **Matthew 7:1** "Judge not, that you be not judged."
 - iii. Is Paul telling us in **1 Corinthians 4** that we should not judge each other?
- d. "For with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God." (**1 Corinthians 4:3-5**)
 - i. Reading this passage in isolation, one might conclude that Paul is saying: "You don't judge me, I won't judge you, and God will sort it all out in the end."
 - ii. There is one problem with this interpretation. It would completely contradict what Paul said right after **1 Corinthians 4**! In **1 Corinthians 5** he is addressing sexual immorality and in **1 Corinthians 6** he addresses lawsuits.

iii. Read **1 Corinthians 5:9-12**.

1. “For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person.” **1 Corinthians 5:12-13**
2. Paul is saying: the church *should not judge* those *outside* the church (the non-Christians), but *should judge* those *inside* the church (the Christians). If a Christian is in serious sin, the church should judge that person and put him or her out of fellowship.

iv. Read **1 Corinthians 6:1-6**.

1. The context of this passage is that Christians were taking other Christians to courts in the world, to obtain justice in disputes.
 2. Paul is saying: if there is a problem in the church, there has to be someone who is wise enough to judge the matter and address the dispute. Christians in the church *should be* judging these matters.
- v. So, what does it mean when Paul says in **1 Corinthians 4** that he does not judge? If he says later that there are situations where the Christians should judge one another, he must, in **1 Corinthians 4** be talking about judgment in a different sense.
- vi. You can’t understand what Paul is saying unless you understand what Paul had just talked about in **1 Corinthians 1-3**.
1. This is why we must understand the Bible passage in its context and not cherry pick any passage in isolation. We must always ask: how does this (or any Scripture, especially difficult ones) fit with other Scriptures on a similar topic?
- vii. So, let’s walk through the four step process we discussed earlier so we can properly understand what Paul is saying.

II. Step 1: What is the Problem Paul is Addressing in 1 Corinthians 4?a. Read **1 Corinthians 3:1-4**.

- i. The Christians are worldly, carnal, and fleshly, which is resulting in envy, strife, and divisions. This is the problem Paul is addressing.

b. Read **1 Corinthians 4:6b-7**.

- i. Christians are puffed up, boasting, prideful about their gifts and abilities. (Perhaps they are better speakers, wiser, etc. than others.)

This too is leading to divisions in the church, the problem Paul is addressing.

III. Step 2: How Does Paul Make His Point?

- a. “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against another.” **(1 Corinthians 4:6-7)**
- b. **Question:** What is Paul talking about?
 - i. **Answer:** He is using himself and Apollos as examples, which he then flips back on (or applies to) the church.
- c. So, what is the example he is using about himself and Apollos?
 - i. Who is Apollos?
 1. Read **Acts 18:24-19:1**. Apollos was an eloquent and powerful speaker, knew the Hebrew Scriptures and could use them effectively to show that Jesus is the Christ. Apollos ends up in Corinth and is having a tremendous impact.
 - ii. Unfortunately, the Christians were identifying with Apollos rather than Christ and this was becoming divisive.
 1. “For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” **(1 Corinthians 1:11-13)**
- d. So what is Paul saying in **1 Corinthians 4:6** when he says, “Now these things... I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes....”?
 - i. Read **1 Corinthians 3:1-9, 21-22**.
 1. Paul’s says: Paul and Apollos are *nothing*; just fellow workers of God. They are servants and ministers.
 2. Paul says, ‘I just worked with the grace and blessings God gave me, it all came from God’.
 - ii. Paul goes on. Read **1 Corinthians 3:10-15**. Paul says:
 1. What I built (as a master builder on the foundation of Christ) will be tested on the Day of Judgment by fire.

2. If it lasts, I'll be rewarded. If it doesn't last, I will suffer loss.
 3. No one can boast in me, nor can they boast in Apollos.
- iii. "Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." (**1 Corinthians 4:1**)
1. **Question:** Who is Paul referring to as "us"?
 - a. **Answer:** Himself and Apollos.
 2. When reading the Scriptures, it is really important to understand who the writer is talking about when he says "us", "we", "you", etc. A few examples:
 - a. "All of our righteous deeds are like filthy rags." (**Isaiah 64:6**)
 - i. Who is the "our"/ "us" in this passage? All people for all time? (No)
 - ii. Or is it just the corrupt Jews of his day? (Yes)
 - b. "I have plans to prosper you, not to harm you." **Jeremiah 29:11**
 - i. Is this particular message for the Jews going into captivity, or is it a promise for Christians today that our lives will be a 'bed of roses' if we just seek God?
 - ii. The "you" in this passage, taken in context, refers to the people being taken into captivity.
 - c. If we don't understand who the words "us", "we" or "you" are referring to, we can readily distort what a Bible passage is saying, and misapply it.
 3. In **1 Corinthians 4:1**, the "us" Paul is talking about is Paul and Apollos.
- iv. Read **1 Corinthians 4:2-4**.
1. Paul goes on to say he does not judge himself.
 2. He had just discussed a type of judgment, that every person's work (how they build the church) would be judged on the Day of Judgment. (**1 Corinthians 3:13-15**)

3. Paul is saying he does not judge his own work of building the church, and others should not as well, because God will judge each man's work on the last day. He and Apollos will either suffer blessing or loss, depending on how they build.
- v. Paul then flips this back on everyone else. Read **1 Corinthians 4:6-7**.
 1. If you are special, it's because God blessed you. If you have some gift, it is because God gave it to you.
 2. Paul's attitude is the same as what Jesus said in **Luke 17**. Read **Luke 17:7-10**.
 - a. We are nothing special. We are just humble servants, doing what our Master asks us to do.
 - b. (Therefore, we are not to be puffed up and divisive like the Corinthians!)
- e. Read **1 Corinthians 4:8-21**.
 - i. **Question:** What verse in this passage have you heard misused in the past?
 1. **Answer, for me:** "imitate me" (v. 16)
 - ii. Some have taught that this passage means that as Christians we are to imitate our leaders broadly, in all types of ways.
 - iii. Yet what qualities does Paul want the Corinthian Christians to imitate in him? What aspects of his character is Paul holding up? (Remember the problem he is addressing: envy, factions, divisiveness, etc.)
 - iv. Paul explains what qualities the Christians in Corinth are to imitate:
 1. We labor with our own hands;
 2. when we are reviled, we bless;
 3. when persecuted, we endure; and
 4. when defamed, we entreat.

(And these qualities caused Paul and will cause the Christians in Corinth to be considered "the filth of the world!")

IV. Step 3: What is Paul's Conclusion? (What does he direct the church to do?)

- i. Putting **Chapter 4** all together, Paul is saying, I do not compare myself to others. I don't even judge my own work, which God will judge on the Last Day. I am just a servant; my talents are from God. I am

striving to follow in the footsteps of Jesus: laboring hard, blessing, ensuring and entreating; even when I am mistreated by others.

- ii. And you, Corinthians, should imitate my example. Don't be so proud, worldly, puffed up, divisive. Be humble and imitate me *as I follow Christ*.

V. Step 4: What Does This Mean for us Today?

- a. Each of us is called to imitate Paul's Christ-like qualities described here:
 - i. Be nothing but a fellow worker with God.
 - ii. Use our talents to serve God.
 - iii. When we are persecuted: we don't get angry, don't lash out at others, don't retaliate and create a sinful faction in the church. Instead, we rejoice and bless others. Also, we don't get discouraged and give up.
 - iv. Each of us is to be a champion, like Paul, for unity: to be a peacemaker.
- b. While we are called to imitate Paul individually, we as a church group are called to imitate Paul's spirit as well.
 - i. As we are not to elevate ourselves individually over others, we are also not to elevate our group over other groups.
 - ii. We should not look down at other Christians or think we are better than others.
 - iii. We as a church are not to lay a foundation other than Jesus Christ.
 - iv. If God gives us blessings as a church, we remember that these are from God, and we are to use these gifts to serve God and others.
- c. Let us always read Scripture in context so we don't miss the wonderful things that God wants us to understand and put into practice in our lives.

VI. Conclusion

- a. Read **Ephesians 4:1-6**.
 - i. The unity we share: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God over all. To live with all lowliness, gentleness, with long-suffering, bearing with one another in love as we strive for unity in Christ.
- b. Read **John 10:11-16**.
 - i. Jesus is the good Shepherd. He has one flock and desires that we hear his voice and come into his fold.

- ii. With the humble spirit of Paul (and Jesus), let us strive for unity with other Christians, without compromising any of the teachings of Christ.
- c. Having laid a solid foundation in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul now turns to specific matters where the church has compromised Christ's teaching. We will pick up at **1 Corinthians 5** next week.