

“Servants”

- 1 Corinthians 4 -

**by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Chapter 4 *Let a man so consider us, as servants Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. 3 But 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. 4 For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. 5 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. 6 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 the other. 7 For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? 8 You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! 9 For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. 10 We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! 11 To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. 12 And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; 13 being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now. 14 I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. 15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you, imitate me. 17 For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. 18 Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. 20 For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. 21 What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?*

(4:1) Paul has thus far been speaking concerning the individual's place and participation within the greater church. He has spoken concerning *what* we are building with the life of grace that we have been given, as well as *how* we are building. He has talked of humility and maturity as well as the child-like way many of us approach the faith instead of the serious “going to war” attitude that is required for successful living.

Here now in chapter 4 of this letter, Paul instructs us...through the example of his own life and ministry, how we are to manifest our true salvation as a “servant” and as a “steward” of the masters house. Essentially, the scriptural handling of the words “servant” and “steward” tend to cross each other, because a steward was generally just a servant or slave that has been given the trust and responsibility to manage his master's house and affairs.

The steward was the trustee of the master's slaves, though he was still a slave himself. He controlled the master's staff and supplies. He oversaw the day-to-day operations of the master's house. A pastor is God's steward of His “mysteries.” The word “servant” is rendered from the original “under-oarsman.” An under-oarsman was a slave on the lowest deck of the ship who was to simply follow the cadence of the drummer. The servant (*under-oarsman*) was simply to do what the captain of the ship instructed.

(4:2) A called minister of God will serve Christ first and answer to Him. I am merely a steward of God, and that is how you are to see me. As His steward, I will be held accountable for how I deal with the Master's house.

God is not looking for high education, wealth, status or success, but He **is** looking for faithfulness! It is truly the prize attribute, and further, it is the mandate of God. What exactly does the term “faithful” mean? It simply means He can count on you. **Can** He count on you? Because this issue...this attribute, is far more rare than one would like to admit! Everybody likes the idea, wants it from those around them, and believes themselves to be such, at least right up until the time that they are not.

Matt 24:45-51 *“A faithful, sensible servant is one to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his other household servants and feeding them. If the master returns and finds that the servant has done a good job, there will be a reward. I tell you the truth, the master will put that servant in charge of all he owns. But what if the servant is evil and thinks, ‘My master won’t be back for a while,’ and he begins beating the other servants, partying, and getting drunk? The master will return unannounced and unexpected, and he will cut the servant to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

(4:3-4) Please note that Paul is not trying to dance out of accountability here. He is however stating for the record that ultimately, he, as well as those other guys, did not answer to the Corinthian church, but **to** God and **of** God’s calling upon his life. But again, he is not removing himself from human accountability and responsibility, nor is he giving you permission to do so. I emphasize that fact, because I find this passage is often used as a defense against accountability and community...with the attitude of “*I don’t have to answer to anybody but God!*” and of course God apparently is always telling you just what you want to hear, to do just what you want to do, and to go just where you want to go, with the claim on your lips “*God told me...*” and who can dispute that? But this was not Paul the apostle.

Gal 2:1-2 *“Then fourteen years later I went back to Jerusalem again, this time with Barnabas; and Titus came along, too. I went there because God revealed to me that I should go. While I was there I met privately with those considered to be leaders of the church and shared with them the message I had been preaching to the Gentiles. I wanted to make sure that we were in agreement, for fear that all my efforts had been wasted and I was running the race for nothing...”*

(4:5-6) Let us remember how Paul began this chapter. He stated he was God’s servant...or *slave*, and furthermore the “slave steward” of God’s house. So he wasn’t copping out of the responsibility and accountability. No, Paul made it clear throughout his writings that it wasn’t a matter of choosing *not* to run away, and *not* to quit, but rather he believed he *could not* run and he *could not* quit! For he had died to himself and no longer made those decisions for himself. He was a slave now. He had already received his missional orders and God doesn’t change his mind. As God’s servant and His steward, Paul felt that he wasn’t fit or righteous to even judge himself any more than he was to rule himself. That was God’s gig now.

You see, Paul knew something ever so important: He knew that who he *really* was, was the guy at the end of the race, that guy at the finish line. Who he presented himself to be before that really didn’t matter much on the eternal realm. Paul knew and taught that we must finish well, and such was a big issue to Paul. He knew he would have to ultimately and finally answer to God for the way he lived, and for his faithfulness, *or lack thereof*. What Paul was trying to say in these last few verses is that it was not the **people** that kept him walking forward, rather it was ultimately God. But taking that position did not give him the out to cease walking forward!

We live in a Christian world much like that of Corinth. We tend to exalt the work of pastors, preachers, and evangelists, while overlooking the quiet service. But the value of our service will be weighed in a different manner before God. It will not be based solely on volume, but shall also be measured according to a person’s faithfulness and passion; **gold** or **straw**. Remember, that judgment awaits us at the *end* of our journey. So many

of us “peter out” as we approach the end, or we “retire” from the mission, or excuse ourselves from active service on the pretext of age, family responsibilities, vocational pressures, etc. It doesn’t really matter why if at the end of your life *you failed to finish your mission*. You didn’t finish the race, *so no one will ever remember that you even ran in it*. It matters little what we *appear* to be or *think* we are today. It matters little what men think we are, or what we might have done in the public arena. God will be at the finish line and *His praise* will be our crown. What will *you* be wearing that day?

(4:7-8) After reasoning with the Corinthian believers for three chapters, Paul now moves into the correction phase of his letter. Which is ironic in a church world that wants to deny a pastor the power and call to correct. There were divisions and strife in the midst of this church, even while there were blessings and gifts abundant in their community as well. There were problems and issues that had to be addressed, despite the good stuff that was emanating from that community.

Again, little has changed in the greater church environment today. Some people and church communities have problems which are overtly obvious, yet others can appear healthy on the outside even while a cancer is quietly consuming them from within. Often by the time the problem is out in the light of day, it’s too late to save the patient and another soul fails to finish the race or a whole church crumbles in shame.

Paul begs the listener to set down his or her pride and consider the facts. What makes you special over your brothers and sisters that are in your midst? If in fact all that you have is from God, then what do you have to brag about? Furthermore, what makes you the exception to the rule? If everyone served as you do, would we even still be here as a church? How about your financial support? How about your participation and evangelism? Paul, notoriously cynical, paints a picture of a group of spoiled children who have forgotten who they are. Yes indeed, the Corinthians were a lot like Christians today. They thought they were supposed to be full, rich, and reign in the present world. What is worse, they thought they already were!

It’s been said that “life time is training time for reigning time.” The “reigning” we are to participate in is not in this world, but for the one to come. But let’s face it, we want our desert right now. We want the finish line medal right now in this life before we finish the race. We want things easy, without discomfort and certainly without pain. We want to be well thought of and have as many toys as the person in the world.

H.P. Barker said, *“It is positive disloyalty to seek our crown before the King gets His. Yet this is what some of the Christians at Corinth were doing. The apostles themselves were bearing the reproach of Christ. But the Corinthian Christians were rich and honorable. They were seeking a good time where their Lord and Master had such a hard time.”*

(4:9-10) In Paul’s world, if what the Corinthians insinuated was fact, God must have forgotten about His front-line troops! Because Paul wasn’t feeling much like royalty! In fact, he knew very well and first-hand what it meant to be out there truly living for Christ, and it certainly wasn’t living like a king.

Paul addresses the reality of the true walk of faith and it isn’t to reign over this world, despite what the modern “religious right” would have you believe. Once again, we are not the rulers but the “under-rowers.” Jesus said as much when He spoke to Pilate saying *“If my kingdom was of this world, then would my servants (“under-rowers”) fight.”* Paul claims God has in fact “displayed” the ministers of Christ as ones condemned to death. He presented them as “spectacles” in a world that looks in at us as animals in a zoo. Yet truthfully such is fitting and quite normal for those who share in the death of Christ, have picked up our own cross and have died to self. They have been made a “spectacle to the world,” just as Jesus was throughout His life and especially upon the cross. We are “fools for Christ’s sake.” The language Paul uses is descriptive of the Roman executions of

condemned men who were brought into the Coliseum, where they were tormented and killed by wild animals as cheering crowds looked on. Indeed, this all was *and is* anything but glamorous!

“After all, think of Paul’s resume: bounced from church to church, run out of many towns, accused of starting riots, rarely supported by the ministry, arrested and imprisoned several times--who wants to hire him?” (GUZIK)

(4:11-13) While the Corinthian church was seeking influence and community reputation through philosophy and people-pleasing, the apostles were enduring the hardships of true faithful living. This is ironic in a day when the wider church overtly seeks comfort, prestige, wealth, and clout. Often, whatever they can’t get their hands on themselves, they feign to “claim” in the name of the Spirit of God. Yet not too many believers are “claiming” the privilege to be hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, beaten or maligned for the kingdom of God. We all love the idea of salvation from sin, but few are willing to follow Christ all the way as Paul had.

“We want a middle road, a little bit of praise and popularity, a little bit of recognition and thanks, a little bit of the applause of men. At the same time we want the anointing of the Spirit and the authority of God; we want the power without the cost.” (Alan Redpath)

Paul’s experience was a costly one. All the apostles worked, and worked *hard* for the kingdom. They would bless others and would often only be reviled in return. They endured persecution, defamation of character, and often were just trampled under foot for their efforts. Ah, the glory of the ministry. It’s a reality few anticipate when they seek the pastorate and to serve God. Perhaps that’s why Paul said for him, there was no choice.

Bruce Thielemann, wrote in the Wittenburg Door in April of 1977 the following:

“There is no special honor in being so gifted—there is only special pain. The pulpit calls them to it as the sea calls its sailors, and, like the sea, it batters and bruises and does not rest, but always there is the lure of its ‘better and incomparable’ society. To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time, and to know each time you do it that you must do it again. Only one certainty sustains the preacher: That God never denies a man peace except to give him glory.”

Paul wrote later in this letter, in 1Corinthians 9:16 *“For preaching the Good News is not something I can boast about. I am compelled by God to do it. How terrible for me if I didn’t do it!”*

(4:14) Paul insists he wasn’t scolding the believers in Corinth, but he was warning them out of love. He is exposing their sin, but he is not trying to shame them. That’s a difficult tightrope walk for a pastor. How do you correct people without risking the possibility of insult and injury? He is not trying to sweep their sin under the rug, but he is unwilling to just look the other way either. He loves them enough to lay out the truth and call them on it. That **is** love, not ignoring sin or turning a blind eye! To do that is not love but condemnation and self-interest.

(4:15-16) Paul reminds them that teachers will come and go, but he had given his *life* to them. Knowing Paul from the entirety of his writings, it was, no doubt, hard for him to take such a position. To have to remind his brethren of their history together should not have been necessary, but it’s amazing how people can forget.

Paul goes on to say something that is one of the most courageous things anyone ever said in scripture. He says, *“...imitate me.”* Wow! This is either incredibly bold, or incredibly arrogant. Again though, we can hardly see Paul in his writings as arrogant. In fact, he was consistently the opposite. While he knew and stated elsewhere

that he was anything but perfect, he also was confident of his heart, his commitment, and the faithful life he led. So he could say what few of us can: “be like me.”

(4:17) Paul was sending his “assistant pastor” to take care of the details of the matters he wrote about. In doing so, he gives Timothy all of the clout he himself had earned.

(4:18-19) No doubt Paul anticipated their next move: “*Oh, ...won't come yourself, huh Paul?*” Obviously Paul anticipated that not all of the believers in Corinth would be swayed by his letter. Any pastor to believe such would be the case is a fool. He must have known that some would only get indignant and self-righteous. So he let them know Timothy was just the “advance man,” and he was indeed coming himself. Paul was never one to avoid conflict if it arose. He was not a “peace-at-all-costs” kind of guy. If he needed to fight, he would fight, and it appears he was formable in such.

(4:20-21) Paul knew the word of God was not all talk, but the power of God manifested. Not just words, but **action**. Today we have lots of talk, but God is seeking fruit, and fruit that remains. Plenty of guys will berate you with words and accuse you in speech. But time is the proof of what you are and what you have. Just how Paul, *and thus God Himself*, would deal with them was their choice. Would it be love, gentleness, *or a rod?*