

Overview

Chapter 4 brings to an end Paul’s discourse addressing the carnal disunity within the church. Until this point, Paul has been seeking to get the Corinthians to get their eyes off of men and onto God; to repent of worldly wisdom and to embrace God’s wisdom. But in chapter 4, he seeks to correct another problem that was also leading to division. Apparently, there was an element in the church that did not believe they needed any spiritual leadership, for they simply were determined to “follow Christ” their own way. This was the result of an insidious form of individualism. Thus, even though Paul realizes the overall insignificance of the messengers, he refuses to dismiss their importance. The bottom line of the matter is that ministers have a vital role to play in the Great Commission. Paul clearly shows this and does so in a most remarkable way.

For our purposes, we can divide the chapter in the following way (but we will consider only the first of the three below sections).

1. The Minister as a Steward (4:1–6)
2. The Minister as a Spectacle (4:7–13)
3. The Minister as a Father (4:14–21)

TO THINK ABOUT

Before jumping into the text, do you have any experience in the game of “pastor ranking”? What sort of criteria do people often use to gauge the effectiveness of a pastor’s ministry? Can you identify any blatantly unbiblical measuring standards? How do you think an effective ministry should be measured? Should the effectiveness of a ministry be evaluated at all? How do Romans 16:17 and 1 Timothy 5:20 play into this question?

The Minister as a Steward (vv. 1–6)

In vv. 1–6, Paul identifies the characteristic of God’s messengers: They are servants who function as stewards. The Corinthians needed to see them in this light, for only they would they avoid the twin errors of either overestimation or underestimation of God’s messengers.

A Steward’s Responsibility (vv. 1–2)

The first aspect of a steward highlighted in these verses is the steward’s responsibility.

Paul describes ministers of the gospel as “servants” (attendants, helpers; literally, under-rowers) of the gospel. (An under-rower was a galley slave on a ship. These slaves had “a common rank, the lowest ... the hardest labor, the cruelest punishment, the least appreciation, and in general the most hopeless existence of all slaves” [MacArthur].) The word is translated as “officer” in Matthew 5:25 and “attendant” in Luke 4:20. He also describes them as “stewards” (a household manager or overseer) of God’s Word.

“It is required” (v. 2)—lit. “it is sought.” The messenger of God has two major responsibilities: (1) He must faithfully “manage” God’s *Word*; and (2) he must faithfully “manage” God’s *work* (household). See Acts 20:28; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1–5; John 21:15–17; 1 Timothy 3:15).

TO THINK ABOUT

John MacArthur writes, “Ministers are called to serve men in Christ’s name; but they cannot serve men rightly unless they serve their Lord rightly.” Do you agree with this statement? What is the danger when the minister is so concerned with the needs of people around him that he neglects his own service and devotion to the Lord?

TO THINK ABOUT

God values, above all else, the *faithfulness* of his ministers. Can you think of anything that Christians in our day value in ministers above faithfulness? Why is faithfulness more important in a minister than, say, formal education or oratory skill?

A Steward’s Reckoning (vv. 3–4)

The second highlighted aspect of stewardship is the steward’s reckoning.

To be “judged” is to be examined or scrutinised (see Luke 23:14; Acts 4:9; Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 2:14–15). It does not mean to determine guilt or innocence, but to evaluate.

TO THINK ABOUT

Paul considered it “a very small thing” for his ministry to be evaluated by others—or even to evaluate his own ministry. Does this mean that, in our gospel ministry, we should never take seriously the counsel and evaluation of brothers and sisters in Christ? Does it mean that we should never look inward and evaluate our own ministry? Explain.

The word translated “know” in v. 4 literally means “to see all together.” It implies understanding or comprehension. “I know of nothing” can literally be read, “I am conscious of nothing.”

In sum, the minister of God will give an account to God concerning his stewardship. It matters little how man judges; it matters little concerning one’s own assessment. What matters is how God judges.

A Steward’s Right (vv 5-6)

Lastly, Paul highlights the steward’s right.

The word “counsels” speaks of motives.

Paul had “figuratively transferred” to himself and to Apollos. That is, he had applied this truth to Apollos and him. They were stewards of God. Their importance must not be overestimated. At the same time, the Corinthians should not sit in judgement upon their motives or ministry. God alone knew their hearts, and the Corinthians needed to be careful of making judgements based on appearances.

This flows naturally from what has been said in vv. 3–4. The steward will be judged according to God’s righteous standard; not according to the whimsical opinion of man. The steward of God is given this “right”—to be judged by God’s infallible assessment.

TO THINK ABOUT

Paul says that “each one’s praise will come from God” when the Lord “reveal[s] the counsels of the hearts.” How does this play into 3:5–15? What kind of “counsel” or “purpose” (ESV) will receive “praise ... from God”?