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**GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS**

**#9**

**SERVANTS OF CHRIST  
1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-5**

**INTRODUCTION**

Paul had already corrected the Corinthians' understanding of the gospel as well as their understanding of the role of church leaders. But at least one problem remained: the Corinthians misunderstanding of the gospel and the role of church leaders came from their distrust of Paul and his authority as an Apostle of Jesus Christ. Gordon Fee puts this problem in perspective when he writes; *at the heart of much of this is the attitude of many toward Paul himself. These people are not simply for Apollos or Peter; they are decidedly anti-Paul. They are rejecting both his teaching and his authority.* Therefore, Paul must establish his authority once again to both guide them into genuine spirituality and steer them away from the false spirituality that currently enamored them. They cannot forsake the gospel and distort the role of church leaders if they are to ever experience genuine, mature spirituality. Paul must require their complete obedience, but he must do this in a way that does not unnecessarily elevate himself or his role. So now the question becomes, how does one lead those God has entrusted to him in a way that produces mature, genuinely spiritual people without falsely elevating his status to a place that is only reserved for Jesus? The principles that the Holy Spirit reveals through Paul's letter apply to any position of authority in any context.

**1. PAUL ESTABLISHED HIS AUTHORITY BY SERVING JESUS AMONG THE CORINTHIANS (4:1)**

The first truth we learn is that God gives true authority to those who serve. When Paul wants to exert his authority, he reminds the Corinthians that all church leaders are to be regarded *as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God* (v1). Paul's strategy seems backwards; instead of proclaiming himself a great leader who deserves to be followed, he proclaims himself to be Jesus' servant. Why does he do this? Paul does this because he operates according to God's wisdom and not the world's wisdom that had so captivated the Corinthians. And in accord with God's wisdom, God grants authority to those who humbly serve others.

God-given authority comes to those who sacrifice, to those who fight against selfishness and willingly take responsibility for others. The one whose life demonstrates a pattern of self-sacrifice will be granted the power to influence others' lives (See 1 Corinthians 4:11-13). Paul does not demand the Corinthians' respect. Instead, he offers them sincere love and service.

If this truth needs illustrating, let us consider the authority Jesus possesses as a result of His refusal to be selfish and self-serving. Philippians 2:5-11 illustrates the process through which Jesus came to possess the right to control all of creation. His authority is a direct result of His refusal to cling to the benefits of being God and His willingness to take the form of a servant. As a result, God highly exalted Him. This is the way God runs His world; His delegated authority flows to those who humble themselves by taking responsibility for those whom they serve.

Peter concurs with Paul's teaching when he writes, *all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. 6Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time (1 Peter 5:5-6)*. When God grants us a position of authority where we must persuade others because we are responsible for them, He will grant us the necessary influence in correlation with our selflessness. If we embrace selfishness and refuse responsibility, God removes authority from us. Just as Jesus' service to God resulted in our good and our holiness, so it is with us. If pastors serve Christ among His church and fathers serve Christ among their families and mothers serve Christ among their children, the given authority results in the good and increased holiness of all. We cannot violently snatch this authority, nor can we resist the responsibility that attends it. We must patiently serve those whom God entrusts to us and slowly but surely, our influence will expand to result in their increased loveliness, holiness and peace. In other words, if we intentionally reject selfishness and humble ourselves, God will exalt us in His time.

Paul's idea of service does not mean that he lives to please others. In fact, he clearly states that he lives to please Christ alone. As Jesus' servant, Paul has been entrusted with the *mysteries of God*. By this, Paul means that Jesus has entrusted him with the gospel and Paul is not at liberty to change the message in order to please anyone. If he is to serve the Corinthians, he must give them what they need, not necessarily what they want. He must be a faithful steward of the gospel. He and the others leaders are first and foremost servants of Jesus, not the church.

## **2. THE ESSENTIAL QUALITY OF A TRUE SERVANT IS TRUSTWORTHINESS (4:2)**

Again, the essential quality of a servant is not his desire or ability to entertain or satisfy others. Instead, he is a chosen servant appointed for one purpose: to please his master. In other words, he must be trustworthy (v2). Jesus entrusted Paul with the gospel and Paul must guard that trust. Not only did God entrust the gospel to Paul, but he entrusted the Corinthians to Paul's care as well. God required Paul to be a good steward of both.

Think of the message which God has entrusted to us. Have we proven trustworthy with the gospel? Have we spent any time meditating on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as it is revealed in the Scriptures? Have we worked on our ability not only to understand the gospel, but to articulate it and model it through humble, responsible service? Finally, have we in turn entrusted this gospel to those God has placed within our sphere of influence? To be faithful servants of Christ, we must prove trustworthy as we daily handle the glorious gospel of Jesus' life, death and resurrection in the place of sinners.

We should contemplate this truth: the gospel is not discovered by simply living in God's world. The gospel is revealed. And God has placed all of us in some position of authority so that we can reveal the gospel to those we influence.

## **3. A TRUE SERVANT UNDERSTANDS THAT ALTHOUGH HE MUST ENDURE MANY EXAMINATIONS, ONLY JESUS' JUDGMENT IS TRULY ACCURATE (4:3-5)**

As Paul considers his role as a servant of Christ among God's people, he realizes that he must endure many examinations and that the people of God are often too quick to leap to conclusions about their leaders. Therefore, Paul puts this in perspective for the Corinthians who had already

concluded that he was simply unfit to be an authoritative messenger of Jesus. As he lays this out, he reveals 3 truths.

**(3.1) The church's judgment of its leaders is a small thing in light of Jesus' judgment (v3a)**

Paul realizes the Corinthians have judged his ministry as poor and feeble. To Paul, *it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court* (v3). The Corinthians are immature and self-centered; they are in no position to be an accurate judge of Paul or his ministry, much like immature children are not usually in any position to judge their parents' efforts to bring them to maturity. This is not to say that the church is not responsible for judging sin, especially among its leaders [See 1 Timothy 5:19-20]. Paul's point is that immature believers who lean heavily toward selfishness and self-righteousness are going to have a difficult time accurately evaluating their leaders. Therefore, Paul is not going to lose too much sleep when the Corinthians examine him and then judge him as a failure.

**(3.2) A leader's own judgment of himself is insignificant in light of Jesus' judgment (vv3b-4a)**

Secondly, Paul is unwilling to trust his own judgment of himself. *In fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord* (vv3-4). Paul does not deny the proper role of self-examination, but he acknowledges the difficulty in properly examining one's own heart. Our sinfulness skews our understanding of ourselves and others. Therefore, a clear conscience is never our final judge. But with that said, we should not underestimate the power of a clear conscience to let us deal authoritatively with those entrusted to us. This is why Paul clarifies that he is not conscious of any ongoing sin or any type of mishandling of the gospel in his own life. This does not finally acquit him, but it does enable him to deal with the Corinthians honestly and transparently.

**(3.3) Jesus alone will judge and reward those in authority with precision (vv4b-5)**

Paul then points the Corinthians to the final judgment with this statement, *the one who examines me is the Lord* (v4). Jesus alone judges with precision and therefore, He alone can reward His servants perfectly. So the Corinthians are not to leap to conclusions about Paul and his ministry. Instead they are to entrust his judgment to Jesus because He alone can (1) *bring to light the things hidden in the darkness* (2) *disclose the motives of men's hearts* and (3) praise each man according to his loving, selfless stewardship of the gospel among God's people.

**CONCLUSION**

The world's means of seeking authority is completely at odds with the revealed wisdom of God. Yet, that reality did not hinder the Corinthians from judging Paul in the light of the world's wisdom. We are just as prone to this as the Corinthians. We demand authority instead of humbling serving. We often judge leaders from our own sinful perspective and without the wisdom of God. May the Holy Spirit grant us humble leaders to whom God's authority flows in abundance. Has God entrusted some persons to your care? Have you increased your authority through humble, sacrificial service? Most of all, have you entrusted your soul to Jesus who served you by living a perfect life in your place, dying as a substitution as He endured God's wrath and arose as the exalted servant of God to exert His authority over all creation?