

1 Corinthians 4 – Chapter Study

INTRO

Outline Recap –

III. Main Body 1:18-16:18

A. God's Way vs. the World's Way 1:18-2:16

B. Disunity Chs. 3-4

Paul wrote this letter in Ephesus, just across the Aegean Sea from the large & famous port city of Corinth.

Actually, *infamous* might be a better description as the city was known across the Roman Empire as a center of immorality.

But Paul had planted a large & vibrant church there on a previous visit.

Some time later as he's there in Ephesus, some of the members of the Corinthian church arrive with a report of how the church is divided into a number of warring camps.

While there are several reasons why they've developed factions, it's based mostly on their lining up under their favorite leaders & teachers.

In Ch. 3 & 4 Paul deals with this problem of disunity. He says that -

1. Factions are a sign of spiritual immaturity 3:1-4

They were bragging about how their faction was better than the others, so *more* mature.

In fact, that they were divided & arguing over such petty things revealed how *immature* they were.

2. Each works / God blesses 3:5-8

The guys the Corinthians had exalted to celebrity status were just doing their job and that if it weren't for God's blessing they'd be able to accomplish nothing.

3. Work wisely 3:9-17

Paul cautioned the Corinthians to check their motivations; if it isn't done for the Lord, it's worthless.

4. True wisdom 3:18-23

What drove the competition in Corinth was the desire to be *thought wise*.

But they were *defining* wisdom by purely worldly means.

Paul reminds them true wisdom accounts for God & His plans first & foremost.

Paul now returns to the subject of *how* the Corinthians ought to see the leaders they'd been exalting to celebrity status.

5. Resisting 'celebrity' 4:1-5

a. servants not stars vs. 1-2

¹ Let a man so consider us,

Here's how you ought to see Apollos, Peter & I -

as servants of Christ

Oh, this is *rich!* He uses a word for servant that was about as **FAR** from celebrity as you can get.

It means *under-rower* & referred to a slave on the lowest deck of a trireme; one of the Greek or Roman battleships.

These guys lived in the most despicable conditions & had a brutal job.

They were chained by shackles around their feet to sit on a plank alongside several other men, & push-pull a massive oar.

It was dark, reeked to high heaven, was hot, & when they entered battle, if their ship was set on fire or went down, they went down with the ship.

The life of an under-rower was short, painful, & without hope.

The only glimmer of hope they did have was to have a captain who was successful at keeping his ship intact, & that one day, he'd be deemed too old to row & would be taken from below decks to be sold to a different owner.

You've probably heard that the lowest position for a household slave was the *foot-washer*.

That was a *dream position* compared to the under-rower.

Paul says, "You Corinthians want to turn Apollos & Peter & I into stars. You ought to think of us as under-rowers." Then . . .

and stewards of the mysteries of God.

First they are miserable under-rowers, then they are stewards, which was the highest servant in a household.

Still a slave, but risen to a place of trust in the esteem of the master and given charge over the other slaves & resources of the estate.

There subtle humor here – don't miss it.

Paul isn't *changing* images from servant to steward, from lowest to highest.

He's *adding* to his role as an under-rower by including his role as steward.

Remember, he's correcting the pride & arrogance that was fueling their divisions.

In bringing himself down in their esteem, he's also bringing *them* down.

He's an under-rower all right, but as a leader in the Body of Christ, he's a steward *among them*.

They are even lower than he is! If he's 2 decks below, they're 3.

Paul's ministry was to work & proclaim the mysteries of God, meaning the Gospel of Grace.

² Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

This looks back to what he'd said in ch. 3 about his & Apollos' role.

They were simply called to faithfully discharge the calling that had been given them by God.

As the servants of God, all of us our stewards, given resources to use for His glory & the advance of the Kingdom of God.

We've been given life, gifts, talents, property, money, even time.

We ought to invest it all in those opportunities that will bring glory to God.

That's what it means to be faithful.

The motto of the US Marine Corps is "Semper Fi" short for Semper Fidelis = Always faithful.

That ought to be the motto of every believer.

Charles Spurgeon tells this story –

A poor woman had a supply of coal laid at her door by a charitable neighbor.

A little girl came out with a small fire shovel and began to take up a shovelful at a time and carry it to a bin in the cellar.

I said to the child, "Do you expect to get all that coal in with that little shovel?"

She was quite confused by my question, but her answer was striking, "Yes sir, if I work long enough."

Spurgeon then drew this application, "Make up for your lack of ability by abundant continuance in well-doing, and your life-work will not be trivial. The repetition of small efforts will accomplish more than the occasional use of great talents."

b. God alone judges vs. 3-5

³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court.

Paul's ministry had come up short in the eyes of many in Corinth.

They criticized him & gave him short shrift while touting *their* favorites, like Peter or Apollos.

Paul says, “Your evaluation of me & my ministry doesn’t concern me → *much*.”

Notice he doesn’t say it meant NOTHING; it was a very small thing.

Paul’s just being honest that it did sting a bit that they didn’t have more respect for the guy who’d given birth to their church and led many of them to Christ.

In fact, I do not even judge myself.

Be careful with this because this seems to go against what he says later in 11:31 – that we *ought* to judge ourselves so that we don’t fall under condemnation.

The word “judge” here is a *different* word that means to investigate.

Paul doesn’t put in trust in either the Corinthians or himself to give an unbiased examination of himself.

He’d come to realize that it was only the *conviction or comfort of the Spirit* that was dependable.

⁴ For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.

Paul made clear in ch..3 that the divine test of our lives & work is at the level of our inner motivation.

Paul had analyzed his motives as best he could & believed they were pure, but he knew his own tendency to self-deception, so He didn’t rest on himself.

He depended on the grace & Spirit of God to do within what needed to be done.

There are 2 kinds of waterwheels; *overshot & undershot*.

In the overshot, the water falls from above, while the undershot is driven from below by the flow of the stream.

The overshot is far more powerful than the undershot.

People are like waterwheels, turned by various sources.

Some move by the undercurrent of mercenary desires and selfish aims.

Those who receive their power from above accomplish far more & their reward endures.

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.

It’s the height of presumption to think we can see into another’s heart & know their motivation.

Only God knows the heart, including our own.

As Jesus says in Matthew 7, we can only see & evaluate the *fruit* of a person’s life & work.

We must avoid either *praising* or *condemning* people based on what we assume about their motives.

The day will come when motives will be laid bare; but this is NOT that day.

As I read these vs I’m driven to serious introspection.

Here’s what the Spirit says to me thru Paul’s words –

Don’t spend so much time fretting over how I’m doing →

Because my analysis of myself is probably skewed by pride & distorted by false humility.

In Isaiah 6 we’re told of an encounter the prophet had with God.

Isaiah was a righteous man, a stand-out saint of his time.

One day he was given a glimpse into heaven, the very throne room of God.

Though he didn’t see God’s face, he was allowed to see the edge of the hem of His majestic robe.

Even that was too much for Isaiah, & he fell on his face in abject, utter terror.

He expressed his dismay in the words, “I am undone” = Literally, I’m falling apart!

Here’s righteous, holy Isaiah, light years ahead of others in terms of spiritual maturity, groveling on the ground when confronted with the tiniest portion of God’s glory.

If he’d felt pretty secure in his standing before God before the vision, now he’s in the grip of despair.

But that is not were God leaves him.

In the midst of his realization of his own utter distance from God – God COMES TO HIM, restores his strength, sets him on his feet and gives him a mission.

Isaiah went away from that encounter realizing the futility of asking himself how he was doing.

It's not about us. All we can do is surrender to the grace & forgiveness of God & busy ourselves with what's He's called us to.

6. Learn from Paul & Apollos 4:6-7

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.

What Paul's said so far he's used himself & Apollos as the subject of.

But the lesson applies to everyone equally.

The Corinthians had begun by making celebrities of the Apostles, but Paul knew if they didn't knock it off it wouldn't be long before some of them would be vying for that title.

⁷ For who makes you differ from another?

Differ means to separate due to prejudice.

We use that word "prejudice" a lot but do we know what it means?

It comes from *pre* – before / Judgment = but here in terms of negative judgment; condemnation.

Prejudice is to condemn before you know the facts.

It's to assume you have all the knowledge you need without actually knowing anything & deciding the other person ought to be punished, *based on your opinion alone*.

Paul asks them, "Who do you think is behind your prejudiced factions?"

Duh! Satan!

And what do you have that you did not receive?

It's all grace, right?

So where is there room for an *ounce* of pride & arrogance in the church?

Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

An honest response would be conviction & repentance.

Now Paul engages in some *sarcasm*. But there's a *purpose* for it. He's not just being mean.

Sarcasm was one of the rhetorical devices they used in Corinth to make their point.

7. False comparisons 4:8-13

⁸ You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us

Read it this way; Paul steps back, extends both arms and says, "You've arrived!"

Though their division proved their spiritual immaturity, they were acting as though they'd maxed out their spiritual potential.

Why it was as if they'd already entered the Millennium & were reigning with Christ.

—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!

Paul wishes they really were in the Millennium because it would mean his deliverance from the many trials he was enduring for the sake of the Gospel.

It would also mean the silliness that was going on at Corinth would be dealt with.

Now Paul gives them a dose of reality.

Far from being the celebrities the Corinthians had turned the Apostles in to, they were suffering greatly in the work they'd been given by God.

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.

This was a reference to the Roman Triumph.

At the very end of the parade came the prisoners who would be herded into the hippodrome or Coliseum, where they would be set upon by wild beasts as that day's entertainment.

Because the Corinthians were so preoccupied with status & fame, the thought of being publicly humiliated was the worst thing that could happen to them.

Paul says the humiliation the Apostles were suffering was on parade before both heaven & earth.

¹⁰ We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ!

While the world considered the Apostles to be blathering idiots, the Corinthians pretended themselves to be the embodiment of wisdom.

We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!

Let me use an analogy here that might help us catch the flavor of this –

Right now the entire world has heard about the woes & sad, shameful story of Brittany Spears.

She's the pitiful source of endless jokes.

But imagine she still has a rabid fan club of die-hard admirers that remains steadfastly loyal to her.

While the world is wholly given over to disgust with Brittany, her fans are arguing with each other over which one is her biggest & best fan.

While the world was dead wrong about Jesus, that's the way they treated the Church & the Apostles.

And the Corinthians believers were split up into warring factions over who was Jesus' biggest & best fan.

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.

It was a mystery to Paul how the Corinthians could turn the Apostles into such celebrities in their own minds when the life of the Apostles was so far from that.

The world treated them like the black scum that forms on the outside of a pot when you cook in a wood fire.

8. Paul's appeal 4:14-21

a. their spiritual father vs. 14-17

¹⁴ I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you.

The sarcasm he used in the previous verses wasn't intended just to make them feel bad but to turn them from the destructive path they were on.

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.

Paul was the one God used to start the church in Corinth. He understood them better than others.

There were many gifted teachers & leaders that could help the Corinthians grow in grace, but Paul had a unique role to play as the one who'd first shared with them and laid the foundation of their faith & fellowship.

Using that unique relationship he then says -

¹⁶ Therefore I urge you, imitate me.

Follow my *example*! Imitate is the word we get our word *mimic* from.

It means to pay close attention to someone so as to catch the smallest nuances for their speech & actions.

The mimic desires to be a living mirror.

Paul isn't calling the Corinthians to merely ape his behavior.

He's just made it clear that motives are the most important thing of all.

They're to imitate even in the things of their hearts.

What's interesting about Paul's call for them to imitate him is that he was hundreds of miles away.

How could they imitate him if he was so distant?

Well, they had their memories of him as well as this, his second letter in which he share his heart with them.

Following the example of others is an important part of discipleship.

And remember, the goal of the disciple is to be just like the rabbi.

Disciples did that by being with their Rabbi 24/7/365¼.

But Jesus extended the scope of training for His followers beyond His death & resurrection.

The Holy Spirit mediates the presence of Christ within so that we can continue to grow into His image even though we're not physically with Him.

Paul knew the Holy Spirit could use him as an excellent example, even at a distance, through his letters.

God has given us some awesome examples to follow through geography & time might keep us at a distance from them.

Their writings or recordings can serve as wonderful tools to further our being conformed to the image of Christ.

Don't let a lack of personal contact with men & women worthy of imitation keep you from being blessed by their example & using it to good effect in becoming more like Jesus.

17 For this reason

"That you may imitate me."

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.

See, it was through Timothy's rehearsing the teaching & example of Paul that they would be able to imitate him.

b. his Challenge to them vs. 18-21

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.

It was easy for the Corinthians to play their pride-games when there was no one there to correct them.

Paul tells them he's planning on a trip.

How will they conduct themselves when he arrives?

They bragged about how mighty they were in argument & rhetoric.

How would they fare when he arrived & moved in the fullness of the Spirit's power?

It would reveal their practices for the tawdry sham they were.

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?

The choice was theirs and would be determined by whether or not they took his rebuke of their sectarianism to heart & repented.

As we end, note with special attention that Paul warned them that if they didn't repent, His work among them would be harsh; he calls it a rod, meaning hard discipline.

Sometimes, when people are caught up in error, have been warned but don't repent, they need to be dealt with more severely.

Paul considered disunity in the church something that had to be dealt with forthrightly.

When people were at unnecessary odds with one another, they needed to be rebuked.

Division due to arrogance & superiority has no place in the Body of Christ.
