

HOW CHRISTIANS SHOULD REGARD PASTORS AND THEMSELVES

1 Corinthians 4:1–7

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1 Corinthians 4:1–7 (NIV)

“So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time, each will receive his praise from God. Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, ‘Do not go beyond what is written.’ Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”

The title of this message today is “How Christians Ought to Regard Their Pastors and Themselves.” In these seven verses, Paul is speaking to the Corinthians about their attitude toward their pastors, namely, himself and Apollos and Cephas.

As I worked through this passage this week, it really struck me how this not only applies to the view that we have toward our pastors but how it can also be applied to how we view our own lives. There are so many false views of the Christian life today, as there are so many false views of pastors or ministers of the Word. Sometimes those who minister the Word are seen in the category or see themselves in the category of stars. Everything is focused on them. Others have

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said that those who minister the Word, like preachers, are bags of hot air. Others have said that people like myself are nothing other than persons who are a holy groan in a black suit. Someone else has said that pastors are mild-mannered men speaking to mild mannered people, exhorting them to be more mild-mannered.

The Corinthians thought pastors were big shots. They got this from the traveling evangelist kind of syndrome, that was evident at Corinth. Others see pastors or ministers as playboys—lazy persons who lay around all week and get up and perform an hour on Sunday.

But in these seven verses, Paul’s putting before us the proper responsibilities of pastors and of Christians. And also, the proper evaluation of the ministry that we have as believers and the freedom that we as believers can exercise when we see one another in the proper light.

Verses 1 and 2 speak to us specifically about the responsibilities of pastors and Christians. There are three responsibilities.

I. One is to be servant of Christ.

“So men ought to regard us as servants of Christ.” If you look up in the biblical text chapter 3:5, you’ll find Paul describing himself there as a servant. “What, after all, is Apollos and what is Paul? Only servants.” In the Greek language, that word is *diakonos*, from which we get the word “deacon.” It originally means “a person who serves,” “one who waits on tables.” Here, though, in 1 Corinthians 4:1, a different word is used for servant. A richer term, by parallel comparison: *hupereteo*, which comes from two words “under” and “rower.” Literally, “an under-rower” is the meaning of the word.

Paul uses a term that would be familiar to the Corinthians. The Corinthian would see the war galleys of the Roman Empire sailing across the Corinthian isthmus. On these war galleys, the lowest deck was made up of single rows of benches on both sides of the ship, where the rowers

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sat. They were on the lowest level of the ship. On a little deck, raised above them so that all could see, was the captain. The rowers' responsibility was to do what the captain said. Their whole business was to obey orders. When he said, "rest the oars." Their job was to rest them. When he said, "put the oars in," their job was to put them in. When he said "draw the oars" in a certain measure, or bat, they were to do that. The term *hupereteo* is used elsewhere in the New Testament to simply describe people who were functionaries. People carrying out orders. Like, for example, Acts 13:5. John Mark was taken by Paul and by Barnabas on the first missionary journey to be an under-rower, simply one who did chores assigned him.

If you were to ask me to identify the greatest danger in the Christian life in Southern California, I would probably identify it as refusal to submit to the orders of Jesus Christ and refusal to be an under-rower. There is such temptation in the Christian life to call our own shots and to do things the way we want to do them rather than the way He is telling us to live and to relate. We so much live on the feeling level. If we feel good about something, we will do it. If we don't feel good, we won't. If we feel good in a marriage relationship, everything is ok. If we don't feel good, we feel we have the freedom to walk away from the commitment. We live on the excuse, "My past has made me what I am. Therefore, how do you expect me to be different?" We often live on the "Everybody else is doing it" kind of level, which justifies our actions on the basis of watching how someone else is living, or maybe not living, the Christian life.

An under-rower, though, is one who looks to only one for their orders and instructions in life, and marches by the cadence of His command. Jesus said very explicitly, "You have only one master," and the job of every Christian is to occupy that lowly place of service and humility before God and take orders from the Lord.

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We're not only, therefore, under-rowers, Paul's saying to these Christians at Corinth, who were putting their pastors up on some big high pedestal. Paul's saying, "Get us down off that pedestal.

We're in the bottom rung of the ship, if you want to know what position we really occupy."

II. He then says, as well, that we who are ministers of the Word and individual Christians are stewards of the mysteries of God.

Those who have been entrusted with the secret things of God. The literal is "stewards of the mysteries of God." The word "steward" is kind of a King James word, but it's a good translation of the word, which means "house distributor or dispenser." Someone who administers the affairs of the household that have been delegated to him by the owner. He pays the servants. He marshals the equipment and supply and directs the affairs of a large household for an owner. The modern word "stewardess" best connotes what a steward is. The stewardess on an airplane has access to all the goodies on the plane. And at the appropriate time, dispenses those goodies to those that are on board.

So a steward or a stewardess of the mysteries of God is one who knows the riches that are in God and shares those riches, distributes those and dispenses them to His people in the body and in the world.

This phrase, "the mysteries of God," is a well-worked term in the New Testament. There are many ways the New Testament speaks of mysteries.

We have, for example, Jesus talking about the mystery of the kingdom in Matthew 13. Those who are Christians are those who know the mystery of the kingdom.

Seeds are a mystery. We don't know what potential a seed has—if it will become a cucumber or a radish or a beautiful flower, or what? It's a mystery. You haven't seen the package. You haven't planted the seed to see what will grow.

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In the same way, the kingdom of God is a mystery in the world. The mystery is that people don't see that God's reign or rule or activities has invaded the world. It looks like so much evil is in control. How can we be sure that God has really come to us in the person of Christ Jesus? What do we mean when we say God is ruling and reigning in our life? It's a mystery, because it's not something political or outward. It's small. It's like a in seed form. The kingdom is as a sower that went forth to sow seed. I'm able to know what this seed is because I've looked, now, at the outside package. Beautiful carnations will come from these seeds if they are planted. I don't have to wait for the actual experience to know what's going to happen. This tells me what's going to happen. This settles the mystery. It's no longer a mystery.

In the same way, when we have seen Christ and who He is, I don't have to personally experience the Resurrection to know what's ahead for me, because I've seen Jesus Christ through the Scripture, through the power of the Spirit—the kingdom of God, which is a mystery. People are wondering, what's reality? Is there a God? Is He real? Can I know Him? It's no longer mystery to us who are in Christ. So we don't keep the mystery. We tell how the mystery has been solved, where we came from and what we're doing here and where we're going. We speak of the mystery of the kingdom of God.

There are plenty of other mysteries in Scripture. There's the mystery of Christ in the gospel, in Ephesians 3, that we as Gentiles are heirs with the Jews. There's the mystery of faith and godliness in 1 Timothy. There's the mystery of Israel in Romans 11. Here is this nation that is still in existence. The Philistines are gone. The Jewish people are still here. What is God up to? What's going on? The world doesn't know what the purposes of God's dealings with Israel are. But to us, it's not a mystery anymore. We dispense the mystery. We tell what it is about.

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There's the mystery of lawlessness in the world, the terrible crime and evil that is in the world.

We have a grasp, we know where that's coming from. That is of satanic origin and it is going to eventually work itself out in tremendous havoc at the end of the age. Then God will move in to judge.

We too know the mystery of the resurrection. Paul says, "Behold I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall be changed in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye. For the trumpet shall sound. Christ shall descend" (1 Corinthians 15:51–52). We know that, when these bodies are laid into the ground, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. It's no longer a mystery. Why? Because we have dispensed telling how Christ took the riddle out of life and the future.

So we are stewards of this as Christians. We have these precious truths without which we have no life and no hope.

III. A third qualification for the Christian or for the pastor is to be faithful.

"It is required that those who have been given a stewardship or trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2). The Lord is simply asking us, do you carry out orders? God does not require you to be successful, but He does require you to be faithful

There are two great temptations that pull us away from faithfulness there in Jesus' story of the sower and the seed, in Matthew 13. The temptation of adversity—the seed springs up, but the sun comes out and bakes it. So the hardships of life are wanting to choke out that kingdom of God within us. If that doesn't work, then there's the seduction of cares of this life and riches. The seduction of ease. And the Lord says to us, "Be faithful. Don't volunteer for something and then not perform. Don't start and then not finish. Don't ride on enthusiasm and then fail on commitment." So many things are begun on enthusiasm. God wants commitment.

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This summer, in Washington DC, on vacation, at Arlington cemetery, we saw the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. What an impressive sight! Every half-hour or hour, the guard changes.

There's inspection of the guard, a rigorous inspection, before he can assume his position, striding back and forth before the tombs of the unknown soldiers. I asked one of the tour guides, "Do they do this in the middle of a winter's night, a blizzard, when there's snow on the ground. Do they come out here at three o'clock on Christmas Eve? Are they doing the same thing then? Or do they kind of stay inside, because it's a cold night?" I couldn't believe they would do that. It's a manner of honor. They're always there. Even when there's no one to see them, they're always there.

That's exactly what Paul is saying here in the Scripture. Even when there's no one to see your labor for Christ, that's where faithfulness comes through. Do it with no one watching.

There's an evaluation that we make of our ministry. Verses 3–5 speak of the evaluation of pastors and Christians. There's an evaluation that others make. Paul says, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court." He says, "I'm not so concerned about the judgment in the church or the judgment in the world. I care little." This statement, "I care little about what others think," is not meant by Paul to breed a superior "I answer to no one" kind of mentality. For, in 1 Corinthians 5, the Corinthians will be specifically sited for their failure to examine one another. Also, leaders must care about having a good reputation, because hands cannot be laid upon them, ordaining them for ministry, except that they have passed the inspection of believers. So Paul is not in a very cavalier way saying here, "It doesn't matter to me what anybody else thinks." What he is saying is that, in light of being an under-rower of Christ, in light of being a steward, in light of being a faithful person, these responsibilities are being kept; he is not now looking to others for their approval or disapproval. He has looked to Christ first for his approval.

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The teacher of the Word of God does not get truth from a majority vote of a congregation. He will not stay away from sensitive issues because he might lose key members. That's one aspect of "I care little if I am judged."

But all of us as Christians face this kind of thing, of other people judging us and having expectations of us. Often in terms of our evaluation, the opinion of someone else becomes more dominant than the opinion of the Lord. I think especially of our teenagers and the tremendous peer pressure they undergo. The pressure from their friends. Often non-Christian friends seek for them to conform, to go to certain places, to dress in certain kinds of ways, to say certain kinds of things, and develop certain kinds of behavior that are not really what a child of God would do. Tremendous peer pressure comes, and you find yourself saying, "I care very much if I'm judged by you."

One of the marks, though, of growing maturity in the Lord Jesus Christ is beginning to be willing to stand out and be obedient to Christ, even if some of your friends think you're just a little bit too out of it. It's developing this kind of Christ character that says, "Lord, You are the captain and I'm the under-rower. I get my agenda for life, I get my orders, I get my direction from You." There is self-evaluation. Paul says, "I do not even judge myself." This does not mean that there is an absence in his life of self-evaluation. We all must examine ourselves from time to time. In fact, we're told in the Scripture, "Examine yourself to see if you are in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5). What Paul is saying in this passage is that self-examination is incomplete. Our conscience is not always a reliable guide. This incredible statement is made by Paul, "My conscience is clear" (1 Corinthians 4:4). How many of us could say that? My conscience is clear.

But even though he could say before God and the Corinthian church, "My conscience is clear," he says, "That still isn't what makes it, because there are blind spots in my own life." I don't

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look to my own conscience for evaluation. In fact, there are moments when we dare not judge ourselves or we treat ourselves too harshly.

I have found there are moments when I've felt I have totally failed. And I've been harder on myself or other people than God would be. In fact, I have an interesting theory in regard to preaching. That is, when I feel I have preached the worst sermon, I have a theory that when I greet people coming out of the church that morning, there are going to be more people that say how that ministered to them than when I preach and I really feel like the Lord has anointed me. When I feel I zinged the message home. It seems to be an unfailing law that when I really feel like I've delivered my heart and really preached well, nobody says a word. Obviously that's God's work.

We cannot, in that instance, judge ourselves. We simply are to be an under-rower, a steward, a faithful person. And leave it then, as Paul says, for God to judge us. That's the evaluation that counts. It's clearly the only evaluation that counts. On the human level, we can judge one another's actions. In 1 Corinthians 5, the Corinthians are exhorted to deal with the immoral actions of one of its members, but the church and no human being can judge a person's motives or intentions. I can't judge yours and you can't judge mine. Only the Lord Himself knows our motives and our intentions and our circumstances. And only He can give approval or disapproval.

So when we live our lives in the constant evaluation of the Lord, we need not fear the evaluation of self or the evaluation of others. This then brings us freedom when we think rightly of one another. Verses 6 and 7 talk about the freedom that comes when we're no longer competing with one another, trying to be somebody that we're not. If we're simply under-rowers and we know

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our place in the body of Christ, then it eliminates rivalry. There's no struggle for position.

Nobody's trying to get on top of somebody else to be the chief honcho.

Philippians 4 describes a conflict between Euodia and Syntyche, two women in the Philippian church who were having a falling out with one another. Their names meant "Prosperous Journey" and "Happy Chance." Beautiful people with beautiful names. But they were a mess, because they were in a power struggle with one another. When we come to understand that we're under-rowers and the Lord is our leader, and we're to follow His example of service, the rivalry disappears.

There are so many tremendous stresses today on family life. One of the stresses within marriage relationships often is the problem of insecure husbands who are wanting to exert headship in their homes. There is a proper place for biblical headship in a home. But headship, really, from Christ's modeling of headship, begins by being a servant, not a director of orders. It begins by taking a towel and washing the disciples' feet. Husbands who are relying upon a headship doctrine to, in some way, pummel their wives into submissiveness are not looking to the model of Christ, who served not from a standpoint of "I'm better than you," or "I'm more important than you," or "I know more than you." But who served with a heart of love and deep compassion and care. A husband can no more command his wife to submit than a wife can command her husband to love. These things must be freely given.

When there is a proper relationship, as we understand our responsibilities and evaluation, it also begins to eliminate conceit. After all, every gift we have is given. The ministry which I have, of preaching the Word, is a given ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is not natively endowed. It is given of God. Why, therefore, should I boast? Why, therefore, should anyone boast because they have

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some specific ministry that has been given of God? If it is given, there are no grounds for boasting.

A young minister was going home after what he believed was a great sermon that he had preached. On the way home, he said to his wife, “I wonder how many great preachers there are in the world?” His wife wisely replied, “One less than you think.”

We have freedom when there’s no striving any longer.

God has called us to a ministry toward one another. I close with this. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells two beautiful stories of being a servant of His. One is found in Luke 17 and the other in Luke 12. You cannot take one story without the other, because you will not get the whole picture unless you lay both stories side-by-side, for they represent two dimensions of truth of service.

One story, Luke 17, is the story the Lord tells of the servants who’ve worked all day plowing the field and tending the sheep. It’s hard work to plow a field all day, to get up at the crack of dawn and work until the setting of the sun. With no modern mechanistic ability, but simply with the labor of one’s hands and the sweat of one’s brow, to plow the field. The servants then come home. Jesus says, “When they come home, do they wait for their master to prepare supper for them? Does the servant go and make it easy? No. The servant comes straight in from the field and he then fixes the dinner for his master. Only when his master is taken care of, can he sit and rest.” So Jesus tells them the moral of the story. “So you also, when you’ve done everything you were told to do, you should say, ‘We are unworthy servants. We have only done our duty’” (Luke 17:10). Tremendous words on the length of service to which we go without expecting something in return.

But that’s only one dimension. The one attitude that speaks of “we serve the Lord regardless.”

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In Luke 12, Jesus tells the other side of service. He says that there were servants who were watching for their master to return from the wedding banquet. Obviously, He's speaking about us as we wait for His return. When the master comes back, he finds the servants vigilant and he says to them, "I tell you the truth. The master will dress himself to serve. Will have the servants recline at the table and will come and wait on them" (Luke 12:37). On the one hand, Jesus says that when you've done everything, keep on serving. On the other hand, He says, "But remember, when you have served and when I come back, I myself will serve you."

Our Lord, even in His glory, has not left off being a servant. We think, for example, that when we see the Lord, we will fall at His feet. I believe I will, and I believe you will. But what we have, perhaps, not seen is that this Scripture in Luke 12 is saying to us that the Lord will fall at our feet. He took a towel and washed His disciples' feet. He will embrace us in a loving and a humble way.

It pays to serve Jesus. It pays, everyday. That's the bottom line. Where are you at in your relationship with Jesus? Are you His servant? Are you walking in His orders? Is His evaluation of your life more important than anyone else's evaluation? Has it set you free from the tyranny of evil and selfishness and conceit? Has the Lord set you free to serve Him and to serve your fellow man?

Closing Prayer

Our Lord Jesus Christ, we come to You in this very special moment. It's a special moment in my life. I thank You that, since I was a child, my mother taught me the Scriptures. There are many persons in this church who did not have that blessing in life. But all of us, whether we come from Christian homes or non-Christian homes, can give You thanks for who You are and for where we are in this particular moment of our life. It's a moment of our life in which You want to enter in

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new ways, with deeper insight and strength. A moment, Lord, when You remind us that we are, indeed, strangers and pilgrims passing through. That, if we are to go first class in Your kingdom, then the way is to be a servant. That's the only first class passage to be a servant of You and of one another. We confess, Lord Jesus, that there is joy in serving You. That there is fulfillment in serving You. That there is no disappointment in You. And that all things are ours—life and earth, things present and things to come. All are ours because of You. There may be children of Yours here today, Lord, who You love so very much, who are not so conscious of all these possessions we have in You. They may be living outside of the circle of Your love, or just allowing themselves barely, barely within the border of Your concern and care and love. All of us, Lord, would ask of You, this morning, that we would come close to You. And that we would really count as dear the things that matter; laying aside those things which pass away. Holding on to You and Your call and Your will for our life, which endures. We commit ourselves to You anew. To love You with our whole heart. We give You thanks. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.