

CGYG & LIFE Bible Study: 1 Corinthians 4:1-7

For Discussion: Jim and Joe graduated from seminary in the same class. After a few years serving as an associate pastor, Jim became the senior pastor of a church with 600 members. Under his leadership, the church grew to over 5,000 members and developed a prominent international ministry. Joe, on the other hand, had a rocky time for most of his life. He didn't seem to stay at a church for more than 3 or 4 years at a time, and the largest congregation he ever pastored had only 60 members in it. Of the two, who would you say was more successful? Why?

For review: Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-23.

-What two analogies does Paul use to describe the Church? Through these analogies, what does Paul say about himself and other church leaders?

- 2 pictures – the Church as God's field and God's building (Temple) (3:9)
 - Paul portrays his role (and that of Apollos & other leaders) as servants laboring in the field and working on the building, under the direction of the Lord – "Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each" (3:5)
 - they are 'just doing their jobs' → each doing different jobs
 - neither he nor Apollos are anything; the glory (and allegiance) belongs to God alone, who gives the growth (3:7)
 - they are one - united in their objective/purpose; and each one will 'receive his wages according to his labor' (3:8)
 - this applies more generally to all who lead & serve in the Church – servants of God and His fellow workers (3:9)
 - it's not ultimately about us, but about God and the work He calls us to do together
- no place for rivalry, but rather unity and helping/encouraging one another
- makes no sense to divide into factions surrounding different servants (Paul, Apollos, Cephas), since they are all working for the same Lord & toward the same purpose

-In the context of 1 Corinthians 1 & 2, what does it mean, to build with "gold, silver, and precious stones", or with "wood, hay, and straw"? What are the consequences of building with one set of materials as opposed to the other?

- Building with gold, silver, precious stones – i.e. building with things that will survive the judgment/testing of God vs. wood, hay, straw – i.e. things that will not stand the test, but will be 'burned up'
 - things of lasting value vs. things that will pass away
- In context of 1 Cor. 1-2, 'building with gold, silver, precious stones' refers to serving in ways that are aligned with the wisdom of God, as demonstrated in the word of Cross – 'Cross-centered ministry'
 - building with wood, hay, and straw = serving in accordance with the wisdom and the ways of the world, which God will destroy (1:19), and which is doomed to pass away (2:6) and is ultimately futile (3:20)
- each person's work will be shown for what it is on 'the Day' (3:13-15)– i.e. Judgment Day
 - everything 'tested by fire'
 - those who built with things of lasting value will be rewarded
 - those who built with 'wood, hay or straw' will lose what they have built → no lasting value, no reward for their labor
 - not a judgment for salvation, but of rewards
- both an encouragement (reward) and a warning (potential loss) to build on the right foundation, in the right way

How should 1 Corinthians 3 shape the way we serve in the Church today?

- leaders as servants, working in the same field, building on the same foundation of Christ alone
 - humility, mutual encouragement & co-operation rather than competition, strife, envy, etc.
- taking care to build in the right way – in accordance with the wisdom of God as demonstrated in the Cross, rather than in accordance with the wisdom of the world
- learning from & sharing in the work of many different workers – all are ours in Christ
 - remembering all we have in Christ, and remembering all God has given us in Him → makes many of the things that divide us seem rather petty & insignificant

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

-What attitude within the Corinthian church is Paul addressing in this chapter?

- pride, which led to them judging Paul & the other leaders, and presumably one another as well
 - they were 'puffed up' (4:6) and arrogant (4:18)
 - some (many?) thought very highly of themselves (4:8-10) and looked down on Paul & others – 'puffed up in favor of one against another' (4:6)

Re-read 1 Corinthians 4:1-7

-In chapter 4, Paul uses 3 more images to characterize himself (v.1; v.9; v.15). The first image is of a household steward (v.1)

What is a steward, and what does it mean that Paul (and the others listed in 3:21-22) was a steward “of the mysteries of God”? (v.2 cf. 1 Cor. 2:6-7; Col. 1:24-27& 2:2-3)? What does this tell us about Paul and how he viewed his ministry?

- A servant/steward – i.e. a household steward entrusted with managing/directing the affairs of the house on behalf of his master
 - a servant, yet one with delegated authority to take care of his master's business, in accordance with the master's will
 - accountable to his master for how he discharges his duties as the steward – must prove trustworthy
- Paul deeply aware of the need to be faithful in the way he fulfilled the trust given to him by God (more on this later)
 - accountable to God for how he discharged his duties, not to the Corinthians or others who might judge him
- Paul was entrusted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ
 - the 'mystery' of the Gospel of Christ – previously hidden in some respects, but now fully revealed (2:6-7; Col. 1:24-27)
 - also to the depths of the wisdom, glory and power of that are God in Christ
 - as noted in the previous question, he was accountable to God for how he discharged his duties as a steward
 - an 'authorized agent' of the Gospel
 - had to remain faithful to the proclamation of the truth of the Gospel, as given him by God
 - therefore stayed faithful to the word of the Cross rather than pandering to worldly wisdom (chp 1-2)

-Why didn't Paul care if he was judged by others for the way he discharged his responsibilities as a steward? Why didn't he even judge himself?

- he was accountable to God alone for how he discharged his trust
 - What mattered was God's approval, not how he thought he was doing, or what others thought of him
 - even a clear conscience is no indication that one is doing right
- ultimately, God Himself would judge Paul's ministry when He comes
 - similar thought to 3:13-15, when the Day would test each person's work by fire
 - Paul's goal was to be faithful, not necessarily 'successful' in the eyes of the Corinthians or anyone else

-On what basis were the Corinthians judging Paul (and the other leaders)? (cf. 1 Cor 3:1-4; 2 Cor 10:1-13) Why does Paul tell them not to “pronounce judgement before the time” (v.5), and not to “go beyond what is written” (v.6)?

- the Corinthians were judging Paul & the other leaders by the standards & wisdom of the world (3:1-4)
 - based on externals, style, rhetoric, etc.; rather than according to the standards / wisdom of God
 - felt Paul's personal presence wasn't too impressive, and that “his speech is of no account” (2 Cor. 10:10)
- Paul reminds the Corinthians that God ultimately will judge –not just his work, but everyone's – when He comes
 - they themselves would also be judged (similar to 3:13-15)
 - God will judge truly, based on all the evidence – even those things no one else sees (4:5)
 - things hidden in darkness → brought into the light; purposes/motives of the heart will be disclosed
 - at that time, each one (who has been a faithful steward) will receive his commendation from God (v.5)
- in judging Paul and the other leaders, the Corinthians had strayed from what Scripture taught (regarding the wisdom of God vs. the wisdom of the world, as cited by Paul in chp. 1-2)
 - Paul applied these truths to himself and Apollos to instruct the Corinthians and bring them back to right thinking
 - their judgment revealed a heart of pride – they were puffed up & thought too highly of themselves
 - failed to realize that they were no different from any other believer – sinner saved by grace, and that whatever gifts they had, had been given to them freely (thus, nothing to boast about) (4:7)

-Do Paul's instructions here mean that we should never “judge”? More specifically, should we ever “judge” / evaluate our service and the service of others? If so, how? (you might also consider Romans 12:3; 1 Timothy 3:10)

- Paul is not telling the Corinthians not to 'judge' at all
 - 1 Corinthians is full of instructions to 'judge' – e.g. 5:2-6, 12-13; 6:1-6; 11:27-30
 - there are situations in which we are called upon to judge, based on what God has revealed in His Word (“what is written”)
 - e.g. matters of sin, whether in leaders or in other believers in the church (e.g. 1 Cor. 5)
 - however, not for a judgmentalism that looks down on others, based on a sense of superiority (as in the case of the Corinthians)
- there is a place for proper evaluation of ourselves and our service, to be sure we are in line with what God has desired & has commanded
 - e.g. it is appropriate to 'test' elders & deacons to be sure they meet the standard that God has set (1 Tim. 3:10)
- but beware judging “success” of one vs. another based on worldly wisdom

Reflection and application

Paul's example is a powerful reminder of how we ought to live and serve as servants of Christ. In contrast to the Corinthians, who were puffed up with pride, Paul saw himself as a humble servant, a mere steward of His Master's household. His life and his ministry were lived out in light of the fact that he would one day give an account to God for how he had discharged the trust committed to him. And so he faithfully preached the Gospel, regardless of whether others judged him to be foolish or ineffective, trusting that his commendation would come from Christ on the day of His return. Consider your own walk and service in the church - whose approval are you seeking?