

Four Truths A Minister of God Must Never Forget

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Introduction: In his classic, *Respectable Sins*, Jerry Bridges address one of the most poisonous and deadly of sins that Christians struggle with: the sin of judgmentalism. Concerning this spiritual serpent Bridges writes,

“The sin of judgmentalism is one of the most subtle of our “respectable” sins because it is often practiced under the guise of being zealous for what is right. It is obvious that within our conservative evangelical circle there are myriads of opinions on everything from theology to conduct to lifestyle and politics. Not only are there multiple opinions but we usually assume our opinion is correct. That’s where our trouble with judgmentalism begins. We equate our opinions with truth” (Col. Springs: Nav Press, 2007, p. 141).

In the church, a critical spirit and a condemning attitude is like cancer to the human body. If it is allowed to spread it can be fatal. Paul knew this to be true, especially as it relates to the ministry and how we view our ministries. The church at Corinth

was still under the seduction of the world's value systems. As Don Carson puts it "one-upmanship was tearing the church apart" (*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 93). "My preacher or Christian leader is better than yours" was being bantered about. Paul, Peter, Apollos and even Jesus were being used as pawns in a "ministers beauty contest" that resulted in division, quarreling, jealousy and strife (chs 1-3). The church had lost the proper perspective on just what a minister is, and Paul seeks to correct their faulty way of thinking. In the midst of helping us rightly see just what ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ are, he also provides valuable instruction on the ever-present danger of judgmentalism. Four truths are presented for our edification.

I. A minister is a servant of God 4:1

The Corinthians had elevated Paul, Apollos and Cephas (Peter) to celebrity status. Paul finds this scandalous and sets out to quickly correct their error. Paul writes, "A person should think of (*ESV*, "regard") us this way" (v.1). *The Message* paraphrases it, "Don't imagine us leaders to be something we aren't." Paul Gardner writes, "Paul is not making a suggestion that may help the Corinthians see things in a better light. Rather, this is the way it is in God's church" (*1Cor. ZECNT*, 191). And what are ministers of God? First, they are servants of Christ (Gr. *hypēretai*). Gordon Fee points out, "This word originated to describe the slaves who rowed in the lower tier of a trireme [a ship with 3

levels of oarsmen). Eventually it came to be used of any who were in a subservient position, with emphasis on the relationship of one who served a superior” (*1 Cor.*, NICNT, 173). Ministers are servants not captains. They are humble servants of their sovereign master and King, the Lord Jesus Christ. Their assignment is clear and singular, their status is plain and certain. They serve Christ and his churches. They live and serve by one simple dictum, “all that matters in life and ministry is that I please Christ!” What liberty! What responsibility! What a calling! We are “servants of Christ.”

II. A minister is a manager of the mysteries of God 4:1-2

Paul adds a second descriptor to the ministers of God in verse one: “managers (*ESV*, “stewards”) of the mysteries of God.” Mark Taylor says the word managers “denotes one who has authority and responsibility for something such as an administrator or manager of a household. The term denotes a person in a position of trust and who is accountable to others” (*1 Cor.*, NAC, 112). Of course it is clear who ministers are accountable to. It is Christ and Christ alone. Further, our trust is the gospel and all that it entails, what Paul calls “the mysteries of God.” Ministers have a special calling to proclaim the gospel (2:2) and protect the gospel. When the gospel is misrepresented or compromised, added to or subtracted from, the minister of God must sound an immediate warning. That is why Paul adds in verse two, “In this regard, it is required that managers (*ESV*,

“stewards”) be found faithful.” To be faithful in ministry is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as a servant of God and a servant to others (Mark 10:42-45). It is to have a passion for faithfulness and obedience to our heavenly Father that envelopes everything that we do. The end result can be powerful. Spurgeon put it beautifully, “It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God” (*Lectures to My Students*, 8).

III. A minister will ultimately be judged only by God 4:3-5

One of the most egregious aspects of the sin of judgmentalism is that we actually take the place of God who is the rightful Judge of us all. James 4:12 makes this crystal clear, “There is one law giver and judge who is able to save and destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” Paul develops this principle in the light of the Corinthians’ carnal behavior in evaluating the value and worth of different leaders in the church. Bottomline: Paul could care less about any human assessment because ultimately it is God who will render both an accurate and final judgement of our service. Now, as we carefully weigh what Paul writes, we must be accurate as to what he is saying and what he is not saying. There are times in the Bible where we are told to make judgments, to evaluate people, their teaching and action. Chapter 5 and the man living in an immoral relationship “with his father’s wife” (5:1) makes this crystal clear. Further,

Jesus condemns being judgmental in Matthew 7:1-5 only to follow immediately in verse 6 with the command, “Don’t give what is holy to dogs or toss your pearls before pigs.” Those words sure sound like a judgement call to me. Clearly the Bible teaches there is a balance we must strike between being judgmental and making no judgements at all. We must find a way to judge graciously and righteously.

Paul is specifically concerned with how others see him and his ministry for Christ and to the Church. What he says is blunt and to the point. First, “It is of little importance (*ESV*, a very small thing”) to me that I should be judged by you.” I know what you say about me. I know your opinion of me. I consider it, but it definitely does not consume me. Second, it does not matter to me if I am judged by “any human court.” Their opinion doesn’t matter all that much either. Anticipating what Paul will say in verse 4-5, Mark Taylor writes, “A human “day” in court is quite insignificant in comparison with the judgement day of God” (*1 Cor.*, *NAC*, 114). Third, Paul boldly states, “I don’t even judge myself.” What he means by this is explained in the very next verse, “For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges” (v.4). Tom Schreiner is very helpful in his comments on this verse,”

“Paul is not ‘conscious of anything against myself’ (CSB), but his own subjective assessment of his ministry is not decisive, For it is the Lord who gives the definitive word, who assesses (*anakrinō* again) how faithful Paul has been in his ministry. Since the Lord assesses, it follows that he is also the one who ‘justifies’ (*dedikaiōmai*) and acquits. Paul reflects, then, on the final day, the day when the Lord will judge ministers in terms of their faithfulness to their stewardship. The Corinthians, then, should not presume to render final judgement on the effectiveness of ministers or anyone else before the time of the final judgement—the day the Lord returns. The Corinthians are engaging in an assessment of ministers, but they must desist since their knowledge of others is limited and partial.” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 99).

Paul seals his argument in verse 5 with a command and a theological observation. The command: “Don’t judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes.” The theological principle: It is the Lord “who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the heart.” Christians are not to make judgements now because you are the wrong judge

and you do it at the wrong time. The Lord is the only rightful judge and His second coming is the right time. This implies, by the way, that our work for Jesus does not end at death! It continues on, for good or evil, by how our lives impact others. This is an especially somber realization for ministers, the servants and managers of Christ.

The theological principle gets to the core of Paul's concern. Divine judgement, and only divine judgement, will accomplish two things: 1) it "will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness" and 2) "reveal (*ESV*, "disclose") the intentions of the heart." I like the way the *Message* paraphrases verse 5, "So don't get ahead of the Master and jump to conclusions with your judgments before all the evidence is in. When he comes, he will bring out in the open and place in evidence all kinds of things we never even dreamed of—inner motives and purposes and prayers." Paul's points are powerful. Mere humans can never see all the evidence, only God can. Mere humans cannot see into the dark recesses of the soul, only God can. Mere humans cannot know why people do what they do, "the intentions of the heart," only God can. When we trespass into these territories that rightly belong only to God, we cross the line from righteous judgment to sinful judgmentalism. Ken Sande says, "the most insidious type of critical judgment is to assume the worst about others' **motives**." He notes, "Some people are habitually cynical (distrustful or suspicious of others' nature

or motives); others assume the worst only in certain people. In either case, the effect is the same: they are quick to attribute others' actions to an unworthy motive, such as pride, greed, selfishness, control, rebellion, stubbornness, or favoritism." He then raises an excellent question followed by an excellent answer. He writes, "So, is there ever a time what we can properly form a firm opinion about someone's motives? Yes, we may do so whenever the other person expressly admits to such motives, or when there is a pattern of incontrovertible facts that can lead to no other reasonable conclusion. But when such clear proof is not present, it is wrong to presume we can look into others' hearts and judge the motives for their actions. Scripture teaches that God alone can see into the heart and discern a person's motive (see 1 Sam. 16:7; Ps. 44:21; Prov. 16:2). When we believe that we also are able to do this, we are guilty of sinful presumption." (Judging others: The danger of playing God (Part 2, CCEF, 8-21-09).

Now, once again let's be clear. Scripture calls us to make important and even necessary judgements. However, it calls us to be charitable, gracious and wise. Ken Sande notes there are at least four limits on making what he calls charitable judgments. He writes, "First, God's command to be charitable does not require us to believe that an action is good when there is significant evidence to the contrary. Although we should always give people the benefit of the doubt, we

should not ignore clear indications that things are not as they should be. In fact, excessive charity can lead to denial and blind us to issues that need to be faced. Second, charity does not require that we accept without question everything people tell us. Nor does it require that we naively entrust ourselves to people who do not have legitimate authority or have not proven themselves to be worthy of our trust. Since we live in a fallen world, charity must always walk hand-in-hand with discernment and wisdom (Phil. 1:9-10; James 3:14-17).

Third, the call for charitable judgements should not be used to stifle appropriate discussion, questioning, and debate. If people have sincere concerns about a matter, they should not be brushed aside with, “Just trust us.”

Finally, charity does not prevent the exercise of redemptive church discipline. When the leaders of a church believe a member is caught in a sin, they have a responsibility to seek after him, like shepherds looking for a straying sheep (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1)”. (Judging others: The danger of playing God (Part 2), CCEF, 8-21-09).

IV. A minister will receive his reward from God 4:5

Paul concludes this short paragraph with a word of encouragement about future rewards for his servants (cf 3:10-15). He writes, “And then praise (ESV, “commendation”) will come to each one from God.” Schreiner notes, “God’s reward will be just, since he understands the motives of the hearts and knows

everything about every person” (*1 Cor.* TNTC, 99). Carson adds a nice pastoral touch and writes,

“Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this paragraph of 1 Corinthians is how it ends. With the final day of judgement in view, Paul might have been expected to say, “At that time each will receive his rebuke from God.” But instead, he says, “At that time each will receive his praise from God” (4:5c). How wonderful! The King of the universe, the Sovereign who has endured our endless rebellion and sought us out at the cost of his Son’s death, climaxes our redemption by praising us! He is a wise Father who knows how to encourage even the feeblest efforts of his children.”

(*The Cross and the Christian Ministry*, 101).

God is omniscient and God is just. He will do right by his servants. We can rest in that. We can rejoice in it too.

Conclusion: I want to be helpful, practical and biblical as we conclude our study. How can those of us who have been redeemed from all of our sins by the precious blood of Christ rightly make judgements without wrongly being judgmental? Let me share some thoughts for our consideration.

- 1) Check your motives. Why am I doing this? Have I checked my heart

knowing that ultimately only God knows the motives and intentions of the heart (Prov. 16:2; 1 Cor. 4:3-5)?

- 2) Examine your own walk with the Lord first. Am I walking in the Spirit, characterized by a gentle spirit, careful to monitor my own sin even as I seek to restore another (Gal. 6:1-2)?
- 3) Seek out, before acting, the wisdom of God's word and godly counsel (Prov. 10:13, 10:14, 11:14; 15:22). Don't play the Lone Ranger in this area.
- 4) Practice the "Golden Rule." Think about how you would want to be treated if was you on the receiving end of correction (Matt. 7:12).
- 5) Be careful to not make a snap decision or quick judgement. Take the time to get the facts and listen before taking action, recognizing you will never know everything (Prov. 18:13).
- 6) Pray for the one who appears to be caught in sin before correcting them (James 5:15-16).
- 7) Don't forget the example of Jesus and how He helped and ministered to sinners.

Jesus was condemned and ridiculed for the way He cared for and loved sinners, tax collectors, pagans and the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11).

- 8) Speak the truth, but do it in love (Eph. 4:15).
- 9) Keep in mind that some things are right and wrong, but some things are just different! (Rom. 14:1-6, 13-23).
- 10) Never forget that ultimately everyone must give an account to the Lord, not to you or me! (Rom, 14:7-12; 1Cor. 4:4-5; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Ken Sande provide a wonderful word to bring this message to a close; good words for our careful consideration.

Help Me to Judge Rightly

Lord, help me to judge others

as I want them to judge me;

Charitably, not critically,

Privately, not publicly,

Gently, not harshly,

In humility, not pride.

Help me to believe the best about others,

until facts prove otherwise—

To assume nothing,

to seek all sides of the story,

And to judge no one until I've remove

the log from my own eye.

May I never bring only the Law,
to find fault and condemn.

Help me always to bring the Gospel,
to give hope and deliverance,
As you, my Judge and Friend,
have so graciously done for me.

(Ken Sande, “Judging others: The danger of playing
God (Part 3); 8-3-09, ccef).