

“Pride and Prejudice”

1 Corinthians 4

Hymns: #30 The God of Abraham Praise

#466 Faith of Our Fathers

Reading: 1 Corinthians 4

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”

If you are novel reader, you may recognize this as the opening line to Jane Austin’s classic novel, “Pride and Prejudice”. First published in 1813, the story charts the emotional development of the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, who learns the error of making hasty judgments and comes to appreciate the difference between the superficial and the essential. The novel revolves around the importance of marrying for love, not simply for money, despite the social pressures to make a good (i.e. wealthy) match.”¹

In many ways, the fourth chapter of 1 Corinthians could be titled “Pride and Prejudice” for in it we see the apostle Paul seeking to shepherd the Corinthian believers’ emotional development away from hasty, unqualified and premature judgements; we see him modelling for them the essential element of humility in contrast to the superficiality of their pride. And he is doing all this because Jesus Christ is indeed in possession of a good fortune and has chosen the Corinthians to be His Bride. For this reason Paul says in 2 Cor. 11:2, “I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.”

As we work through this chapter we will see the 1) Proving of Paul, the 2) Pride of the Corinthians and finally the 3) Power of a Patron. I’ve titled this morning’s message “Pride and Prejudice”.

1.) Proving of Paul (V. 1-5) *“1So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. 2Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. 3I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. 4My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. 5Therefore 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.”*

This chapter completes the first major section of Paul’s letter in which he is first dealing with the divisions amongst the boasting baby believers at Corinth. Verse one commences with “So then, thus, therefore”...in other words everything that follows is going to summarize the problem and the solution Paul is urging. He says, “So then, therefore, thus”, no more dividing and boasting about men, rather, in this manner...“men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and those entrusted with the secret things of God.” The word servant is the Greek word which means an “under-rower”; an under-rower was a slave, chained to an oar, rowing hard under the deck of a Roman galley ship. Paul is saying, “Hey folks, stop boasting. Apollos, Peter and I...we’re not the Captains of the Ship. We’re just working below decks, pulling with all our might to keep this ship moving in the right direction. Jesus Christ is the Captain. We’re nothing to boast in and certainly nothing to divide over, we’re under rowers.” The imagery of Paul rowing hard for the Church is further seen when we remember that in Latin the word for ship is “navis”, from which we get the English word Navy, and the ship was one of the earliest Christian symbols. We also describe the main body of a church or cathedral as the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pride_and_Prejudice

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“nave”, which is recognized by the “keel shape” of the vaulting of the ceiling of many old church buildings.

Paul’s second self-description is that of one “entrusted with the secret things of God”, literally a “steward”. The Greek word means “house rule” and is the word from which we get the English word “economy”. We might think of it as an administrator or one who dispenses the food and utensils to the other servants in a large house. In other words, Paul is saying “Hey folks, not only are we apostles not the Captains of the Ship, neither are we the Heads of the House. We’re simply Butlers, responsible to the Head of the House, to ensure that you all have what you need to make this large house function.” Paul was “Carson” on “Downton Abbey”, not “Lord Grantham”.

And notice what Paul was a steward of, “the secret things of God”, literally the “mysteries of God”. In the NT, a mystery is that which is completely unknown prior to and apart from divine revelation, but which has now been made known. We find numerous “mysteries” in the NT which apart from the God given apostolic stewardship of Paul, we would know nothing of it. For example:

- The mystery of Israel’s blindness during this age (Rom. 11:25)
- The mystery of the rapture (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thes. 4:13-17)
- The mystery of the NT Church being one composite body of both Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 3:1-12; 6:19; Rom. 16:25; Col. 4:3)
- The mystery of the NT Church as the Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:32)
- The mystery of the indwelling of Christ (Col. 1:26-27)
- And there are many others which I encourage you to explore sometime with your concordance.

Without the ministry of the Apostle Paul, as recorded by the Holy Spirit in the Word of God, we wouldn’t have the foggiest idea about any of the mysteries of God. Thank God, for Paul and that he was faithful, which is exactly what he goes on to explain. Paul says that it is required of stewards that they must be “proved faithful”, that is faithful to the Head of the House. A steward must faithfully dispense within the house and administrate God’s economy so that everyone is equipped for their own works of service. And because Paul knew who he was responsible to, namely Jesus Christ and not men, he says he cared very little if he is judged by the Corinthians or any other human court (literally “man’s day”).

We sometimes use the saying “Every dog has his day in court”, and in fact it is this idea that keeps Paul from being distracted by people’s opinion of Him as an under-rower and steward. He recognized that there are three days in court and only one of them really matters. The first court is the court of public opinion; it’s “man’s day” and this is the lowest level court. What people thought of him made little difference to Paul. He could care less what they thought of him. He knew He was a steward. What about you? Is the lower court of public opinion about you the highest court in the land in your mind? Frankly, I think all of us would worry a whole lot less about what people think of us if we realized how seldom they actually do. But unfortunately I think it is true that, as someone has said, “The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism”.

The second court is a higher court and it is the court of our own conscience. But Paul knows this court still isn’t the highest court in the land so he confidently says “I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent”. You see our conscience is good, but it’s not totally reliable. One trusted expositor says “When it rebukes us and tells us we are wrong, we

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should obey it. However, our conscience can also approve our easy going ways and can appeal to our vanity and flatter us. Then we need to beware of it.”²

The third court is the Bema Seat Court of Jesus Christ; here is the highest court in the land, here is the Supreme Court. Thus Paul says “It is the Lord who judges me”. He is saying, “It’s not you Corinthians, nor any other men, nor even myself, but the Lord will judge me and to Him I will remain faithful.

When Pompeii was destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, there were many people buried in the ruins. Some were found in cellars, as if they had gone there for security. Some were found in the upper rooms of buildings. But where was the Roman sentinel found? Standing at the city gate where he had been placed by his captain, with his hand still grasping his weapon. There, while the earth shook beneath him- there, while the flood of ashes and cinders covered him- he had stood at his post. And there, after a thousand years, was this faithful man still to be found.”³ That’s the faithful steward Paul; unmoved; totally dedicated to Christ who posted him.

Let us stop here for a moment and take stock. Do you know that you too are a steward? God has entrusted you, not with the mysteries of God, but with His revelation of those mysteries in the Bible. Do you dispense that Word faithfully when you can or are you silenced by the fear of public opinion? You are a steward entrusted with Time; are you being faithful to number your days aright and wisely using what time you have remaining? You are a steward entrusted with Talents; “Now to each one a manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” (1 Cor. 12:7) Are you being faithful to Body of believers and others with your gift? And you are a steward entrusted with Treasure. How convinced are you that “your money and possessions” are actually His, and that you’re only a steward of them. I have been so excited to re-examine my own life in this regard and to make some changes. Randy Alcorn, in his book *Money, Possessions and Eternity* asks “How could the Bible’s Author and Editor justify devoting twice as many verses to money than to faith and prayer combined? And how could Jesus say more about money than both heaven and hell? Didn’t He know what was really important? ...With so much to be said, so much he could tell us that we really need and want to know, why did the Savior of the world spend a full 15 percent of his recorded words on this one subject? Why did he say more about how we are to view and handle money and possessions than about any other single thing? Why?”⁴ Alcorn goes on to answer this question in the next 451 pages of his encyclopaedic work. But the short answer is this, “Our stewardship of money tells a deep and consequential story. It forms our biography. In a sense, how we relate to money and possessions is the story of our lives.”⁵ Paul says he is a steward, the Corinthians are stewards and we too are stewards.

In light of all this Paul says in v. 5, “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.” A faithful steward is proved by not making hasty judgements about men’s motives or the hidden things in the darkness of their own “shadow self” or that of others. Christ will both judge **and** reward the faithful stewards. Paul’s language here suggests that Jesus will find something to praise in each one of us. How encouraging to know that while there may be loss as the wood, hay and straw burns, He will nevertheless find at

² J. Vernon McGee; *1 Corinthians; Through The Bible Books; Pasadena Cal; 1977; p. 52*

³ Michael P. Green; *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching; Baker Books; 1982; p.143*

⁴ Randy Alcorn; *Money, Possession and Eternity; Tyndale House; 1989; p. 16-17*

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 21-22

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least something in which each one of us will receive our praise from God. Let us be proved faithful stewards.

But the Corinthian believers were far from being humble under-rowers and faithful stewards. Rather they were full of pride.

2.) Pride of the Corinthians (V. 6-13) *“6Now, 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. 7For 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? 8Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings--and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! 9For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. 10We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! 11To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. 12We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 13when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.”*

It’s been said that “Pride is the only disease known to man that makes everyone sick except the person who has it.” And unfortunately for the Corinthians they were feeling fine. In fact they were feeling really fine. Their pride had so “puffed them up”, which is exactly what the Greek word used here means, they felt like kings. They were on top of the world, already reigning as Kings and doing so without Paul. They were already so wise in Christ; they were already so strong; they were already so honoured. They were so “puffed up, so “full of hot air” that they were taking pride in one man over another and were going beyond what Paul had written to them about viewing men as under-rowers and stewards. Paul tries to deflate their “puffed up Michelin Man” perception of themselves by three questions meant to remind them that it is God alone who makes one man different from another; that they have received nothing that didn’t come from God and that it was only their pride that made them forget these most basic truths.

By way of contrast to the Corinthians powerful, wise and kingly reign mindset, Paul says he and the other apostles were dishonoured, weak, literally “morons” for Christ; like men condemned to die in the arena; men who had been made a spectacle. What he literally says is men who had been made a “theatron”, the word we get the English word “theatre” from. Warren Wiersbe reminds us that this was “an image familiar to people in the Roman Empire. The government kept the people pacified by presenting entertainments in different cities. The amphitheatres would be filled with citizens, eager to see men compete in the games and prisoners fight with the beasts...When the “main events” were ended, then the poorest and weakest prisoners were brought in to fight with the beasts. Nobody expected too much from their performance. What a picture of the apostles of Jesus Christ!”⁶

It is a sobering thing to be reminded of how the world treats the true disciples of Jesus. They are more often than not treated like Paul, like the scum of the earth and the refuse of the world. Jesus said in John 15:18-25 ““If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. 20 Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No

⁶ Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise - 1 Corinthians*; Victor Books; 1984; p. 56

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servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. 21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.”

This reality ought to be a pin prick to deflate any puffed up notions of pride in us as it should have been for the Corinthians. But unfortunately it wasn't going to prove to be enough and the apostle Paul was going to have to exercise an additional steward's responsibility, namely a spiritual father's discipline.

3.) Power of a Patron (V. 14-21) *“14I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. 15Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. 16Therefore I urge you to imitate me. 17For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. 18Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. 19But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. 20For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. 21What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?”*

The pride of the Corinthians had developed to the point that some had become arrogant (lit. puffed up) and were acting as if the Apostle Paul was nothing to them. But the fact is Paul was their Patron, he was their spiritual Father and as such he had a responsibility to ensure that his children didn't go off the rails, but grew up and honoured the family name. In these last few verses Paul demonstrates his past, present and future power as their patron.

First, we see his past power in v. 15 where he reminds the Corinthians that the reason they are believers is because he “became their father through the gospel”, literally in the Greek he “begot” them. They may have had many guides or local child trainers, but they only had one spiritual father and it was Paul himself. He laid the foundation of Christ in their lives by bringing them the gospel. But some arrogant ones there were acting like “bastards”; like illegitimate children who had no father. He tells them to stop acting like “bastards” and to imitate him...literally mimic him. “Enough about your foolish pride in men. I'm your father. Now follow my example of humility and willingness to suffer for Christ.”

Second, we see his present power in v. 17 where he sends Timothy to them to “remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.” Paul had such confidence in Timothy to not only remind them of Paul's words, but Timothy's very life would model for them in person their spiritual father's way of life in Christ Jesus. Paul knew that actions modelled have a way of piercing the deaf ears of the stubborn. I think we all agree and understand that we have the capacity to impact others by how we live, by the example we model. But I wonder how many of us could be sent to a distant city and an assembly of prideful and immature boasting baby believers, and have our lives, not just our words, model the life of Paul or Jesus in a truly redemptive way? This was young Timothy and his stewardship.

Years ago the communist government in China commissioned an author to write a biography of Hudson Taylor with the purpose of distorting the facts and presenting him in a bad light. They wanted to discredit the name of this consecrated missionary of the gospel. As the author was doing his research, he was increasingly impressed by Taylor's saintly character and godly life, and he found it extremely difficult to carry out his assigned task with a clear conscience. Eventually, at the risk of losing his life, he laid aside his pen, renounced his atheism, and received Jesus as his personal Savior.

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Whether we realize it or not, our example leaves an impression on others, even after we’re long gone.

Finally, we see Paul’s future power in v.19-21 “19But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. 20For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. 21What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?”

“The arrogant Corinthians had no problem “talking big”, the way children often will do; but they couldn’t back up their talk with their “walk”. Their religion was only in words. Paul was prepared to back up his “talk” with his power.”⁷ Like the Mother at the end of her rope who said to her disobedient six year old, “Look buster, I brought you into this world...I can take you out.”

We can all smile and laugh at this illustration, but Paul was not mucking around. Do you remember how he exercised his apostolic power on the Island of Cyprus?

(Acts 13:8-12) “But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. 9Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 10“You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? 11Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun.” 12Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.”

Paul will later warn the Corinthians in 2 Cor. 10 “By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you--I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” when away! 2I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. 3For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. 4The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 5We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. 6And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.”

Next week in Ch. 5, we’ll see this power on display in a very sobering and dramatic display of apostolic authority and power.

As we close this chapter this morning, let us ask ourselves three penetrating questions, in the confidence that confession of sin and weakness is always met with grace and supply to change:

1. How faithful have I been as a steward of the time, gifts and money God has loaned to me to manage for Him until He returns or calls me home?
 2. Am I willing to be made a spectacle now and delay “reigning as a king” until the Day of Christ?
 3. How trusted could I be to model the life of my spiritual father and Jesus Christ to a disobedient people?
- Let us pray...

⁷ Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise- 1 Corinthians*; Victor Books; 1984; p. 61