

SERVANTS AND STEWARDS

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



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1 Corinthians 4:1-21
Fifth Message
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1 Corinthians 4:1-21

When John Leax was twelve years old, someone at the church he was attending asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. He answered, without having thought of it before that moment, “A minister.”

Leax writes: “When she gushed in response, I knew I’d found my calling. Nothing else that I could imagine could possibly bring that depth of approval. And so I became, in my mind as well as in the minds of adults, the good boy set apart to become a minister.”

However, Leax writes of his confusion as an adolescent: “I had no idea who I was, and my self-definition as the boy who would be a minister failed to shore up the disintegration.”

In high school, he became a wrestler—and a rather good one at that:

The most important thing I learned, I learned in the privacy of my room the night I won my league championship. I wrote a poem describing the fear I’d felt as I stood alone on the mat—knowing I’d won the championship, waiting for the referee to raise my arm signifying a victory that felt as empty and hollow as a defeat. For the first time in my life, as I wrote that poem, I made contact with my deepest self. I learned that words matter, that words are the way to truth. And I realized that I wanted, needed, to follow the way of words.

However, to Leax, becoming a writer meant serving himself, and becoming a minister meant serving God. Convinced that his vocation was in ministry, he enrolled in an evangelical college. “There I quickly lost whatever sense of sureness I’d felt about my calling. I found myself within a community that defined commitment as conforming to the norms of a narrowly defined Christian life . . . I had neither a tradition that could comprehend an artistic vocation nor a spiritual leader to whom I could turn. In confusion I dropped out of college . . .”¹

The apostle Paul writes that he and the other apostles are “stewards of the mysteries of God.” Something was

entrusted to them. Has something been entrusted to us? If so, what is it? And how can we go about finding what it is?

Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 4 have contributed to my understanding of what God has called me to do, what he has entrusted to me. Therefore, I will share personal reflections after each of the six sections. In doing so, I hope that you will find aspects of your own story reflected in my story.

In conclusion, I will offer some suggestions concerning how we all might respond to 1 Corinthians 4.

Servants and stewards

1 Corinthians 4:1-2:

**This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.
² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.**

Paul describes himself and the other apostles in lowly terms: servants and stewards. Neither servants nor stewards, who are kinds of servants, are in charge. On the contrary, they take orders from the master. In this case, the master is Christ. They serve his purposes.

As stewards, the apostles dispense the “mysteries of God”: the “secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7). When Paul visited the Corinthians, he served up the mysteries of God, which have now been revealed to the apostles. As he writes to the Corinthians, he is serving up such mysteries.

What does Christ require of his stewards? He requires them to be “faithful.” Faithful to do what? Faithful to serve up the mysteries. An unfaithful steward would fail to serve up the mysteries or would change them to make them more palatable. What people do with the mysteries, once dispensed, is not the responsibility of the stewards.

Paul wants the Corinthians to think of him and the other apostles in such terms.

The best I can do

I'm not in charge. Christ is in charge. The best I can do is take orders from him, beginning with the orders he issues me in the gospels. I strive, or at least I want to strive, to serve the Lord's purposes, not my own.

The prophets and apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have revealed the mysteries of God in the Scriptures. I am not a steward of the mysteries the way they were. However, as a pastor-teacher, I understand myself to be a steward in this sense: I apply myself to the task of studying and teaching the Scriptures.

If the Lord has entrusted the Scriptures to me, I must be faithful to study the word and teach the word. I pray for the ministry of the Spirit as I study and as I teach, but what the Spirit does with my efforts in the hearts of men, women, and children is up to him, not me. I must concern myself not primarily with results but with faithfulness.

Unqualified judges

1 Corinthians 4:3-5:

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

As a servant and steward, Paul is responsible to God, not the Corinthians. He therefore cares little for the evaluation of the Corinthians—or anyone else, for that matter. As Paul says elsewhere, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls” (Romans 14:4).

In fact, Paul doesn't even bother with evaluating himself. On the one hand, he is not aware that he has been unfaithful in some way. On the other hand, he also knows that his awareness is limited. Only the Lord, to whom he is responsible, is qualified to evaluate him.

The Corinthians shouldn't expect anything more or less of the apostles, who are servants and stewards, than simple faithfulness. Even then, the Corinthians aren't qualified to evaluate them. Moreover, it's too soon to evaluate them—or anyone else, for that matter. The Lord hasn't come yet.

For now, things are “hidden in darkness” in people's hearts, away from view. The “purposes of the heart” can't be seen. The Lord, who “searches all hearts,” will bring to light such things and disclose such purposes when he comes (1 Chronicles 28:9).

Paul does not say whether the things hidden and the purposes of the heart will be exposed to everyone or just to the person who is being evaluated. In any case, God will not condemn those who believe in Christ, for there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). On the contrary, when all is said and done, “each one will receive his commendation from God.”

In the end

If I am a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God, I am beholden not to the evaluation of others, though I must listen to others to see what I can learn. I am not even beholden to my evaluation of myself, though I can learn from myself also. Human evaluations are always flawed to some extent, and they are never final. In the end, I will stand before the Lord. I will answer to him and no one else.

In Paul's words, I must not peddle the word of God to please people (2 Corinthians 2:17). When I first started as a pastor, I pinned this verse on my bulletin board: “But Micaiah said, ‘As the Lord lives, what my God says, that I will speak’” (2 Chronicles 18:13). One of the advantages of teaching an entire book or section of Scripture is that it forces us to study and teach the hard parts.

However God judges me, I am confident that he will not condemn me and that I will receive my commendation from him for my faithfulness to him, insofar as I've been faithful.

What is written

1 Corinthians 4:6-8:

I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in

favor of one against another. ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? ⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!

Paul has been speaking metaphorically to describe himself and Apollos, not only in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 but also in 1 Corinthians 3:8-15, to dissuade his readers from going beyond “what is written.” The Scriptures that Paul has invoked so far would disabuse his readers from boasting in men and separating into rival groups according to their preference in leaders (1 Corinthians 1:19, 3:19-20). After all, Paul is only a planter and Apollos is only a waterer. Both are merely servants and stewards.

Therefore, the Corinthians should not be “puffed up in favor of one against another,” whether the one and the other are apostles or leaders in their midst. Their pride is driving their rivalries.

What makes the Corinthians qualified to make such assessments and foment such rivalries? Well, nothing. In so many words, Paul asks, “Who do you think you are?” Are they smarter than God?

Paul undercuts the pride of his readers. They don’t have anything that they haven’t received, including and especially the gospel. Therefore, they have nothing to boast about. With biting irony, he accuses the Corinthians of being full of themselves.

Merely human

Earlier in my life, I was looking for heroes. When I started training for pastoral ministry and even after I began pastoral ministry, I was looking for heroes. But I learned that even the best of those I idolized had feet of clay. They were merely human. At best, they were servants and stewards—nothing more, nothing less.

In some sense, I think I also wanted to be a hero, someone whom others could look up to. In my insecurity, I alternated between two opinions of myself, between thinking of myself as superior and inferior. Over time, there was more than enough evidence to disabuse me of both opinions. At best, I’m a servant and a steward—nothing more, nothing less.

I have nothing that I have not received. I have no reason to exalt myself, as if I could boast in what I have received. Neither do I have reason to belittle myself, as if I haven’t received my fair share, as if fairness had anything to do with faith.

Last of all

1 Corinthians 4:9-13:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

Having suggested that the Corinthians deem themselves superior, Paul informs them that he thinks of himself and the other apostles as “last of all.”

Paul invokes the imagery of a Roman triumph, in which conquering generals would return with prisoners who brought up the end of the parade and were then executed. In this case, God is the conquering general, who makes a spectacle of the prisoners before the watching throngs, both seen and unseen, and the apostles are the prisoners sentenced to death.

Indeed, the apostles have been captured by God. They carry their crosses, as men who have already died to themselves to serve the purposes of Christ. Execution awaits most of them. As such, they are no one’s model for how to live the good life.

The apostles therefore are seen as fools, as weak, and as disreputable. By contrast, the Corinthians deem themselves wise, strong, and honorable.

Although the apostles are suffering, they are conforming to the sufferings of Christ. Moreover, like their Lord and in obedience to their Lord, they bless those who are persecuting them (Luke 6:28, Romans 12:14).

The apostles are dismissed by the world as “scum” and “refuse”—discarded as good for nothing.

Captured by God

I have been captured by God. What he does with me his first his concern, not mine. I must submit what I want to what he wants. And I know what he wants is for me to take up my cross in self-giving love, which I cannot do apart from the Holy Spirit, who helps me understand God’s love for me and empowers me in ways beyond my understanding.

Even when I do well, I may have to live with being opposed or misunderstood. Especially when I do well, I may be opposed or misunderstood.

Models to follow

1 Corinthians 4:14-17:

I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶ I urge you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

Paul’s purpose is not to shame the Corinthians. He’s not challenging their personhood; he’s challenging their thinking. Moreover, he’s doing so as a father who loves his children and wants the best for them.

Whatever contributions, good or ill, anyone else has made to their lives, they only have one father, so to speak: Paul. They began their new life in Christ when Paul preached the gospel to them. Especially because they have embraced flawed versions of the life of faith, Paul offers his own life as a model. As a father, Paul shows his children how to live.

Paul, of course, has more “children” in addition to the Corinthians. One such child is Timothy. Paul sees in Timothy what he wants to see in the Corinthians. He his Paul’s “faithful” child in the Lord. What is required of stewards? Faithfulness. Timothy is faithful.

Although the Corinthians can for now follow Paul’s example from afar, he has sent Timothy to them so that

they have an up-close example to follow. Paul says that Timothy, both by his words and his actions, will reinforce Paul’s words about his “ways in Christ.”

Paul is not singling out the Corinthians; Paul teaches the same ways in every church.

Theological ministry

I was not reared in the church or by followers of Jesus. Therefore, I’m especially thankful for mentors and peers who have modeled the life of faith and/or pastoral ministry for me, often without even trying to do so.

Last month, on my way to play in a Young Life golf tournament, I met with a friend in a café in Pleasanton, where I lived and worked more than thirty years ago. While I was chatting with my friend, she spotted the former pastor of the church we were involved with back then. I hadn’t seen him in many years, and I’m not sure I would have recognized him if not for my friend.

Leron, now retired, was meeting with a younger man, encouraging him in his faith. I approached the two of them, reconnected with Leron, and then spoke to the man with whom he was meeting:

“I was with Leron and Valley Community Church from 1986 to 1990. Leron met with me every week for a year as we discussed first a theology book and then a church history book together. I came to the church as a journalist, and I left as a pastor.”

I didn’t say this but now that I think about it, I should have: I left as a theological pastor. Leron modeled theological ministry for me.

Coming soon

1 Corinthians 4:18-21:

Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. ²¹ What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

Earlier, Paul admonished the Corinthians not to “be puffed up in favor of one against another.” Now he says that some are literally “puffed up” against Paul, claiming

that Paul will not come to the Corinth again, implying that he has abandoned them.

Paul assures them of his plans to come soon. When he does, he will expose those who are puffed up in pride and who deny the power of the gospel and the life it calls for. Therefore, such people should change their ways before Paul arrives. If they don't, he'll come to them with a "rod" of discipline.

Wouldn't they rather change their ways so that Paul can come "with love in a spirit of gentleness"?

Puffed up against me

I have on occasion had to deal with people who have opposed me, even publicly. You may have noticed that some people have strong opinions about church and pastors. It's been difficult to understand at times what I should listen to and what I should discard.

Some criticism seemed so off-base that I knew I had to dismiss it, but dismissing it didn't immediately take the sting away. One or two may have been "puffed up" against me.

In one case, I know that a person was puffed up against me, because four years after leaving the church, she made an appointment with me and in so many words confessed that she was puffed up against me. She came to me with a list of her offenses against me and confessed them to me, one by one, slowly and gently, giving me space to respond. After she confessed each offense, I said, "____, I forgive you."

The time was holy.

Start with desire

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are a servant and a steward: a servant of Christ and a steward of what God has entrusted to you. What has God entrusted to you? Two answers are obvious: the gospel and your life. Live as a servant of Christ. The Scriptures, at least in a general sense, give us ample guidance on how to do so.

Moreover, God has created us and gifted us uniquely, so each of us is a steward in a unique sense. How has God created you and gifted you? What has he entrusted to you? What do you do with your life? What do you do with the next year, the next month, the next day? How do you answer such questions?

Start with desire. What are you passionate about? Begin with desire, and watch what God does with desire: how it grows or shrinks or morphs, how he directs and redirects, what doors open, what doors close.

At the beginning, when Jesus called his disciples, he called "those whom he desired" (Mark 3:13). At the end, he told his disciples, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). The Passover they shared, which we now call the Last Supper, symbolized what Jesus came to do.

Expect opposition

However, be prepared to face opposition.

At the beginning and at the end, Satan tried to keep Jesus from doing what God called him to do. In the wilderness, Satan taunted Jesus with the words, "If you are the Son of God," thereby suggesting that he could fulfill his vocation in a way that avoided the cross (Matthew 4:1-11). On the cross, the passersby, echoing Satan, taunted Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matthew 27:40).

Listen to the opinions of others and seek counsel, but as a follower of Jesus, you are not beholden to the opinions of others. In the end, you are responsible to God, not opinions.

Don't live someone else's life. Don't live the script written for you by someone else. If you do, you'll be like David when he tried to fit into Saul's armor. Live as a servant of Christ and as a steward of what God has entrusted to you.

Without approval

Remember John Leax? After dropping out of college to work as a laborer, he wrote some poems, sent them to a minister he knew, and made an appointment with him. When Leax asked the minister about the poems, he said, "Young man, it's time for you to put that nonsense behind you and get on with what's important in your life."

Leax's response? "I went out in silence and closed behind me a door I never again went through. In the strangest possible way, writing the crookedest line imaginable, God had fixed my vocation; for when I closed that door, I closed it with a cold determination to go without approval, to be an artist and not a minister."

Leax concludes: “Desperate for approval, my false self had latched on to the ‘ministry’ course that had brought me the strongest and quickest approval I’d ever felt What I learned was that the self I had to reject was not the poem-making self that brought me disapproval but the praise-seeking self that would have used the ministry to gratify its basest desire.”²

Indeed, Leax went on to become a poet and an English professor. After retiring as a professor, he continued to write poems up until his death last month at the age of eighty-one.

Endnotes

1. John Leax, *Grace Is Where I Live: The Landscape of Faith and Writing* (La Porte, IN: WordFarm, 1993), 36-44.
2. Leax, 44-45.

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