

ANSWER NINE: LETTING GOD JUDGE MINISTERS 1 CORINTHIANS 04:01–05

Introduction

One of the serious problems in the Corinthian church concerned former ministers. Some of the church members were esteeming one minister above the other ministers. They were judging the gifts, ministry and effectiveness of their former ministers; and the inevitable happened:

- => Some of the people had been helped and blessed by Apollos, so they spoke up for Apollos.
- => Others had been helped and blessed by Cephas, so they spoke up for Cephas.
- => Still others had been helped and blessed more by Paul, so they defended Paul.

The matter became critical, for the people began to judge the ministers' preaching style, ability, eloquence, charisma, intelligence, gifts, call and success - the whole scope of their ministry. Little groups were buzzing about talking up the merits of their favourite minister. Deep feelings settled in, and the fellowship of the church was threatened.

What was to be done? Paul gives eleven solutions to a divided church. One solution is the message of this passage, and it is a message desperately needed by the church: let God do the judging of ministers.

- I. Count ministers for what they are (vv. 1-2).
- II. The judgment and approval of men matter little (v. 3).
- III. The judgment of Christ is all that matters (vv. 4-5).

I. 1 Corinthians 04: 01–02 Ministers of Christ

First, count ministers for what they are. Three things should always be kept in mind about ministers.

1. Ministers are *ministers of Christ*. The words “servant or minister” (huperetes) mean an *under-rower*. It refers to the slaves who sat in the belly of the large ships and pulled at the great oars to carry the boat through the sea. Christ is the Master of the ship and the minister is *one of the slaves of Christ*. Note: he is only one of many under-rowing servants. Remember also that slaves in the belly of the ship were bound by chains. They were allowed to do nothing but serve the master of the ship. The minister is a bound slave of Christ: he exists only to row for the Master. He does not and cannot serve anyone else.

Thought 1. No person who serves Christ is to be elevated above other ministers or servants - not his eloquence, ability, personality, charisma or any other trait. No matter how much the minister has meant to a person's life, he is only the *under-rower*, a slave of the Master of the ship; and he is only one of many other under-rowers and servants. Believers are not to judge and elevate ministers above each other.

2. Ministers are stewards of God. The Greek phrase “those entrusted” (oikonomos) means a steward, a house manager, the overseer of an estate. The steward was always a slave, subject to a master, but he was *placed in charge* of the other slaves throughout the master's house or estate. He controlled the staff and ran the whole operation for the master. He was set over others, yet he himself was still a slave of the master. His work was not closely supervised; therefore, he had to be trustworthy and responsible. Note what the minister is made a steward over: the mysteries of God. A mystery is not something hard to understand. Rather, it is something that has been hidden and kept

secret. It is something that was undiscoverable by human reason, but now is revealed by God. It is crystal clear to those to whom it is revealed, but it is completely alien to those who do not receive it. What are the mysteries of God? They are the truths - the glorious truths - of God's Word. Who are the ones to whom the mysteries are revealed? The stewards, the ministers, the believing servants of Christ.

There are several mysteries now revealed to the believer. (See *Mystry, Secret*, 1 Cor. 2:7.)

Thought 1. Every minister is to be esteemed highly for his work's sake. He is *only* a servant of God, but he is the servant whom God has made steward over His household, over His church and His people. He has been honoured by God: he has been made responsible for the imperishable mysteries of God, the great truths of God's Holy Word. The minister does not deal with perishable things such as money and possessions, but with the eternal things of God Himself, the eternal truths that God wants proclaimed to the world.

2 Cor 3:06 *He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant - not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

2 Cor 4:01 *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.*

2 Cor 5:18-21 *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's*

behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Eph 3:07 *I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.*

Col 1:23 *If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*

2 Tim 1:09-11 *Who has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.*

Titus 1:07-09 *Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless - not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.*

3. Ministers are required to be faithful. This is the one essential for the minister. There is no other requirement of him.
 - a. The minister is not required to be eloquent, brilliant, intelligent, loaded with ability or successful. He is required to be *faithful*.

- b. The minister is not required by God to be an administrator, counsellor, visitor, door-greeter or socialisers - as important as these ministries are.
- c. The minister is required to be *faithful* in ministering the mysteries of God. He is held accountable and shall be judged for how well he ministers the mysteries of God:
 - => He must not hold back or fail to share the mysteries of God.
 - => He must not substitute some other message for the mysteries of God.
 - => He must not mix some other message with the mysteries of God.

The minister of God must be faithful to his call. He is the minister of Christ and the steward of the mysteries of God. He must - absolutely must - proclaim those mysteries.

1 Cor 9:17 If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me.

Gal 1:06-09 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Col 1:25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness.

1 Th 2:04 On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.

1 Tim 1:11-12 That conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.

Titus 1:02-03 A faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Saviour.

1 Pet 4:10 Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

Thought 1. Believers are not to judge ministers, thinking and talking about the gifts and abilities of one over another. They are not to think too highly of a minister nor too lowly. They are to count ministers for just what they are.

- 1) The servants of God.
- 2) The stewards of the mysteries of God.
- 3) The servant who has been made a steward for *one purpose only*: to be faithful to the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

II. 1 Corinthians 04:03 Judgment of Men

Second, the judgment or approval of ministers by men matters little. Note: criticism and disapproval hurt and cut the heart, but they do not matter at all in the judgment of God. Man's judgment of God's minister has no bearing whatsoever upon what God will do with the minister. The congregation or some clique in the church may cut the minister to shreds, and they may break his heart, but they have absolutely nothing to do with the judgment of the man's faithfulness and unfaithfulness.

Men may put God's minister on trial. He may be "judged" (*anakrino*), that is scrutinized, investigated, questioned and cross-examined either to his face or behind his back. He may be judged as to his eloquence, intelligence, ability or whatever else some may or may not like. But none of it matters to God - not one word, not even one critical or negative thought.

Note something else: Paul does not even judge himself. Paul knew precisely what every honest and thinking person knows.

=> No minister can honestly judge his own ministry: its true success; his motives for every single thing he has done; how much fruit he has really been borne in people's lives and how much should have been borne.

=> A person who begins to judge his own works either begins to think too highly of himself or too lowly. To varying degrees he becomes prideful or discouraged.

Paul, of course, is not talking about a minister evaluating his ministry for the purpose of strengthening it. He is talking about passing judgment upon his ministry in comparison to other ministries and as to its fruitfulness. Is his ministry as good as someone else's? Is it as fruitful? Are his motives as pure as they should be in the work which he does? Is Christ as pleased with his ministry as he is with the ministry of others?

This is the kind of thing Paul does not judge, and believers are not to judge. No man has the right to judge such things.

Mat 7:01 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged."

Rom 2:01 You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are

condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

Rom 14:13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

III. 1 Corinthians 04:04-05 Judgment of Christ

Third, the judgment of Christ is all that matters. Note two points.

1. The Lord alone justifies a man and his ministry. This is a significant statement by Paul. He knows of no place he is coming up short in the ministry. To his knowledge he is faithful in the ministry and pleasing to the Lord. But he is not justified and approved by his judgment. The Lord Jesus alone can put the stamp of approval upon his ministry. No man is able or competent in judging the fruitfulness, dedication and success of a ministry. Only Christ can judge a man and the faithfulness of his life and ministry.
2. Therefore, believers are to judge nothing. They have no right or prerogative to judge.
 - a. No believer can know the hidden things of darkness within a man. Only Jesus Christ can bring the secret, hidden things to light.
 - b. No man knows the real motives within a man. Only Christ can reveal the motives and counsels of the human heart.

Luke 12:02 "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known."

1 Cor 4:05 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.

Job 10:14 *If I sinned, you would be watching me and would not let my offense go unpunished.*

Psa 19:12 *Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.*

Psa 90:08 *You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.*

Jer 16:17 *My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes.*

Hosea 7:02 *But they do not realize that I remember all their evil deeds. Their sins engulf them; they are always before me.*

There is to be no judgment of ministers nor of anyone else until the Lord returns. He and He alone has the right and is capable of judging ministers and believers. Both ministers and believers will have the praise of God when Christ returns and judges their work, not before. No matter how successful men may judge one another to be - no matter how much praise men may heap upon one another - no person will have the praise of God until Christ returns and judges the secret things of a man's heart and life. This is the reason men are not to judge the ministers and servants of God.

Rom 14:04 *Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*

James 4:12 *There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you - who are you to judge your neighbour?*

Jer 17:09-10 *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve." ■*