



FAITH
COMMUNITY BIBLE CHURCH

Gospel Atmosphere
I CORINTHIANS



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So if you've been with us for our study of 1 Corinthians, we've learned that Paul opens the book by addressing these personality factions in the church. And he does this by pointing to the fact that men cannot ever be the source of power and wisdom in ministry. God is the power; men are simply tools through which God works.

So men are not the causal agents of ministry fruit. From a factual point of view, it's just incorrect to credit people with ministry success. But there's way more at stake than just correct facts. Last week we talked about the destructive danger of looking at ministry results and crediting men for those results.

And here's what we saw: the problem with crediting men with the results of the Holy Spirit's work is that it destroys his church. Any time we credit men with God's work the unconscious side effect is that we destroy by comparison.

And here's how it happens. We say this guy had a lot of results. And then you look over at this other guy and you think, well he is better than that guy. Paul is better than Apollos. And that kind of talk is inevitable when you think that the causal agent is men and not God. We all want results and so instead of turning to God and pleading for ministry results, we look to men. It's incredibly divisive and is like a wrecking Paul into the side of a temple.

And so that's why we need to think of ourselves as tools. We are like paint brushes in the hand of the artist. We are chisels in the hands of the sculptor. The power is in the Holy Spirit and the wisdom for design is in God. TOOLS have neither power nor the wisdom.

The analogy breaks down a bit because in some strange twist of mystery, yes we are tools but we are not inanimate, blunt objects like hammers or anvils. God's ministry tools are humans that possess a will. We are different than a garden rake. we can choose to disobey. We can rebel.

What role does our will play in this whole ordeal? Well Paul gives us a fourth word picture that helps us in this regard.

1 Corinthians 4:1-4, This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. 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. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

So this is kind of a summary word picture of everything he's said so far. We are tools in the shed. We are minimum wage construction workers. We are bricks in a temple. Summary: We are faithful servants to the master.

Now there is a bit of mystery in faithfulness and we want to talk about it. Faithfulness to God is mysterious. It's not mystery in the sense of a mysterious crime where things are cloaked in secrecy or something like that. I mean mystery like we can't really explain why something works because it is so complex but it's obvious it works.

Like for example, you can easily show that people who grow up with loving families are more successful and happy in life. That's obvious but kind of a mystery if you try to distill it down into a science paper. It's very complex how love and security fill a most basic human need and give identity and shape the brain and how that translates into confidence and success.

So faithfulness is mysteriously complex

But it's also mysterious in another way. It's mysterious in the same way that the pursuit of happiness is mysterious. If you try and pursue happiness you'll never be happy. But if you discard the pursuit and try to honor the Lord with your life at any cost, you will find yourself happy.

So faithfulness is mysteriously complex. But it's also mysteriously elusive. faithfulness is something you choose to do in many ways it's more of byproduct of something greater. So let's examine this complex, elusive mystery of faithfulness.

THE MYSTERY OF FAITHFULNESS

1. Complete insight is not a *prerequisite* to faithfulness

Paul says, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."

Now here's the idea here: you don't have to have it all figured out to obey and be a faithful servant. In fact the text guarantees you will not figure it out. The thing you are supposed to steward is the

mystery of God which by definition means that in your obedient faithfulness you have questions. You don't get how it all works but you trust the one who does.

The idea of being a steward is actually a helpful picture. What is a steward? A steward was the number one slave in a great mansion. The steward was the slave with authority even above other slaves. But how did he get that authority? By being faithful.

It's one of those classic chicken/egg questions. Don't you have to trust the master in order to be faithful? Well how do you begin to trust him? Be faithful to him and he entrusts you with more and it makes you want to be more faithful and he trust you with more which makes you want to trust him in your lack of understanding and you become more faithful. And that's how it works with God as well.

Faithfulness is achieved not by trying to figure God out but in submitting and obeying to him. Because, let's just admit it, you are never going to figure him out. You are never going to just all of the sudden understand. There's mystery to that.

Any time you talk about the divine and human you are going to have lots of questions. The greatest mysteries of theology always center around intersection of the divine and human. For example:

- How is that we choose God, it was a real choice and that our eternal destiny hangs on that choice and at the same time we predestined before the beginning of the world to the praise of his glorious grace? - I have no idea.
- How is it that we exercise our wills as finite sinful humans to pray and that God uses the effective prayer of a righteous man to accomplish kingdom results? I have no clue.

- How do we work out our salvation with fear and trembling knowing all along that it is God who is working and willing to his good pleasure. I have no idea.

And here Paul says, "I am a steward of the mystery of God." The gospel changes people and I steward that, but I don't entirely understand how that works. In fact, I have no idea.

But listen Corinthians, that doesn't mean we can't obey. We just choose to be faithful servants. We are a steward of that mystery, and the more you steward it, the more you will be rewarded and the more faithful you will be.

If you wait until you understand how it works before you obey, you will be waiting a long time. We've been writing books about it for 4000 years and I don't think we are any closer than Abraham was to figuring it out.

Now I say that in a light sort of way, but there is a serious point to make here. We obey things all the time that we don't understand. We are faithful stewards of mystery all the time. But other times we are questioning skeptics. What's the difference? Think about it.

Maybe you work for a large company and you are immersed in the corporate world. Maybe you work at Micron and you know that at the end of the day your company makes money by selling memory. And you've been working for six months on a project and then all of the sudden, the management decides to scrap your project and get you working in a different direction. That's a tough blow; you have to just abandon everything you've worked so hard for. But even though it's hard you don't throw your hands up and quit. You keep working. And you don't have to ultimately understand why that decision was made.

You just trust that someone up there who thinks about all this stuff has determined that my project was not going to be successful given the current market conditions we have to go a different direction. And then next quarter, sure enough the company made another billion dollars.

Or maybe even a better example, there have been thousands of soldiers who have gone into battle having ZERO idea how this battle decision was made. They had no view of the big picture. They had no idea how risky it was. They just were faithful soldiers and they didn't question.

We can conceive of having this kind of faithfulness as servants of a higher organization. But we can also conceive of being unwilling.

Under what conditions do we demand to first understand before we obey? I know you want me to be faithful, but I need to understand a few things. In what situations do we demand understanding before we decide to be faithful? It's when we don't trust the leader, right? Hey, I'm not sure I trust you. you've proven yourself unfaithful to me and so before I decide to go all in and decide to be faithful to you, I have a few questions for you. You are asking me to give up, to sacrifice, to experience some pain and suffering and loss. I'm not so sure that you have my best interest in mind. In fact, it sounds to me like this particular thing you are asking me to do, is motivated by some gain for you. So before I serve you, I demand that you explain yourself. How exactly is this a good idea?

Do you see why being faithful servants of mystery is important? Do you see why obeying regardless of your level of understanding is important? Because demanding understanding before faithfulness is a sign that you don't trust him.

Now I want to answer an objection to some of you out there who are maybe not believers or very young in the faith. Maybe you are a high school student and you hear me say this and you think, "Well that's fine for you who already trust God but I don't trust God, at least not yet. How do I get to the point where I trust him that even if it seems like a bad idea, he's got my best interest in mind." That is a great question. If you don't trust God be honest about that. I'm not sure I get that. I'm not sure I believe that. So what do I do? The answer is the same. Obey him. Do what he says and see! It's the same way you build trust with anyone. If you risk a bit and give someone a piece of you, what are they going to do with it. If they love you in it, you give them more, and then a bit more. Start by obeying what you know God wants you to do and see what happens. God showed you that he loves you by dying for you so trust him in some way, obey him in some way and see what happens. Maybe it's actively obeying or really start allowing him into the secret places of your life or allow him to help you forgive or something like that. If you've never given him the chance to be faithful to you, how can you be faithful to him?

THE MYSTERY OF FAITHFULNESS

1. Complete insight is not a *prerequisite* to faithfulness
2. Peer approval is not an *indicator* of faithfulness

Here's the overarching thought here. The root idea of faithfulness in having a singularity in your loyalty, affections and motive. Being faithful means you don't care about what other people think. You just care about what one person thinks. So a faithful husband is one whose eyes, hearts, mind, affections go to one woman and one woman only.

At any decision point, someone who is faithful is filtering and funneling everything through a single filter, how do I devote myself completely to this person. What decision would make this person the most happy. The opinions of others really don't factor in. That's why Paul can say.

1 Corinthians 4:1-4, This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. *Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. 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. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.*

Paul is saying, I am trying to be faithful to you God and you alone.

And God is going to be the judge of effectiveness. God determines who is faithful and who is not. It's not the opinion of people that matter, it's the opinion of God.

Now there are some huge points to make here. I really think this is a timely passage for our church given the values of our society and in our cultural moment. To illustrate just how applicable this is, answer in your mind these questions:

- How can I tell if I'm being a good husband, wife, father, mother? My wife will be thankful for me and enjoy hanging out with me. My kids will love me. Sounds like a safe answer right.
- How can I tell if I'm being a good employee? I will solve problems. I will be efficient. My boss will appreciate me. I'll probably get a raise. I will get promoted.
- How can I tell if I'm being a good coach? The players will appreciate me. We'll probably win some games.

But do you hear how every one of those measurements are using the measuring stick of people's opinions.

Paul says, "Listen, I don't want to be rude, but it's a very small thing to be judged by you or by any human court." Now some have taken this as a biblical warrant to be arrogant and unteachable. I think when Paul's point is not that he is unwilling to listen to human insight, he's just saying, human opinion is fickle and unreliable.

- Some of the greatest parenting moves in the world haven't been appreciated by the children.
- Some of the best employees in the world have been fired.

Of course I care what people think, it's just not ultimate. It's just not going to weigh in very heavily in the decision making process.

In church ministry it's totally amazing to me the spectrum of opinions people have on different issues. It really floors me. Just take the single issue of where we should focus the teaching ministry here.

Consider all the possible ways we could structure things. Should we:

- Focus on Systematic Theology
- Focus on Biblical Theology
- Focus on Biographies
- Focus on Expositional Preaching
- Focus on Outreach More
- Focus on Missions More
- Focus on The Gifts of the Spirit
- Focus on Church History
- Focus on Archeology
- Focus on Counseling
- Focus on Hermeneutics
- Focus on Eschatology and End Times or Prophecy
- Focus on Apologetics
- Focus on Catholicism or LDS or cults
- Focus on Textual Criticism
- Focus on Learning the Original Languages
- Focus on the OT prophets
- Focus on Judaism and Israel

And all of that is good. But where do you place the emphasis? In the course of a year the elders will hear some very strong opinions that we are way off track in the emphasis and that we should be focusing on one of these areas. And it is often the case that we will simultaneously hear strong voices in opposite directions. And I am actually very, very grateful for these opposing voices because it's a no win. You are guaranteed to offend. So if you have to choose someone who is it going to be? Frank, Deborah, Leah, Julie or God.

That's what this passage is saying,

"I'm not trying to be a politician who attempts to placate people." "I'm not trying to build a party by catering to a certain demographic" "I'm

trying to do those things that would honor God. I want to honor Jesus Christ. I don't want to QUENCH the Holy Spirit. That's all I care about." It's the concept of having an audience of one.

What Motivates You?

Now I want you to really think about this on a motive level. Let's take just a few minutes to think about why you do what you do.

How many of your conscious thoughts in a day are,

- "Lord I know my boss wants me to do this, but it's a very small matter to me what my boss thinks of me. I am really doing this, not to be a good employee, but I'm doing it because I want to be a faithful servant of you." That is not a small question. There is a MASSIVE difference between those two. MASSIVE.
- Lord, I know that cleaning the dishes here would make my wife happy, but it is a very small thing to me whether my wife is happy or not. I want to HONOR you. I want to walk in the Spirit. I don't want to fulfill the desires of my flesh.
- Lord, I know that taking my kids fishing or playing catch in the park will totally make their day but it's a very small thing to me what they think. I really want to honor you by being a good father.

Do you see the massive difference? You want to know why this is so huge, because when your hard work goes unnoticed by the boss, when the clean dishes go unnoticed by your wife, when your sacrificial effort goes unnoticed by your kids, nothing changes. You didn't get ripped off in any way. You got exactly what you wanted. You got the approval of the Lord.

Compare that to putting in 100 hours in a project and your coworker gets the raise instead of you and you get infuriated. Or you do the dishes and your wife doesn't notice and you say, "Well, we'll just see

how much you like it if I stop helping out around the house."

Do you see the difference? What is really motivating you? It's not like Paul is saying he is entirely unaware of people, they just function as very secondary motives.

If you bump into your friend at Albertsons and they see your buying Roses, "Why did you buy those Roses for your wife? Special occasion?" Well, I bought those Roses because I was four points away from get a .30 cent discount on gasoline from Albertsons." That's messed up. The 30 cent discount is great, but that should not be a motivator. The reason you buy Roses is because you love your wife.

If at the checkout you don't get your 30 cent reward, your motive will be seen. You'll either flip out or shrug your shoulders.

Now that makes sense, and yet how many of our decisions for obedience in life are motivated by all these gimmicks.

- Why should I be kind with my words? Well, because it creates peace in the home and nobody likes conflict!
- Why should I be hospitable? Because I want to be seen as a nice person.
- Why should I be respectful to my wife. Because if moma aint happy, aint nobody happy.

That's not the reason. That might be true, but I'm telling you, that's the garnish on the side. You do it because you are faithful to the Lord and you care about his opinion and you don't give a rip about what others think of you.

Listen, high school and college kids, I want to talk to you a moment.

There is so much pressure for you to care about what others think. But please, please, listen to Paul. Care about what the Lord thinks. Please the only one that matters.

Now there's a final point here which is pretty shocking. Paul says, I'm going to be faithful, regardless of my understanding, regardless of other's opinions of me and even regardless of my opinion of myself.

THE MYSTERY OF FAITHFULNESS

1. Complete insight is not a *prerequisite* to faithfulness
2. Peer approval is not an *indicator* of faithfulness
3. Internal innocence is not a *guarantee* of faithfulness

Here's the overarching thought here. Faithfulness, if it really is faithfulness, cannot have other people in mind. True but it also can't have self in mind.

1 Corinthians 4:1-4, This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. 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. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.*

Paul says, "I don't care if I'm judged by you or any human being." In other words, he says, "I don't care what you think of my performance. You can judge me all you want but I don't care about your verdict."

You can hear that attitude and think your talking to some arrogant punk. "Obviously, if he doesn't give a rip about other's opinions, if he's not getting his confidence from other people's verdicts on his performance, it must be he only cares what he thinks."

You see, you can hear secular advice all day long that will preach point two with heated passion. Don't let what other people think control you! Right, you've heard that. If people don't like what you are doing, ignore them. You do what you need to do. Don't focus on that. Focus on what you want to do and let that be your guide. If you can't get applause from others, get applause from yourself. All that should matter is what you think of your performance. Forget the applause of others. You need the applause of self.

Let me say that doesn't work. I can appeal to you both on the basis of experience and logic. Think about it. Let's say you are failing as an employee at work because you are never on time, always have wrong information, you are lazy and steal from the company.

People have a standard for you and you are failing according to their standard. So what are you going to say? Well, I may fail by your standard, but I am flourishing by my standard. The only way you can feel better about your performance is by lower your standards? You see, I'm a person with low standards, that's why I feel so good. That doesn't make any sense.

When Paul says, "I don't care what you think," he doesn't get that incredible confidence and boldness by saying, "I only care what I think." What he says in 1 Corinthians 4 is, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself." Now that is off the map. He does not have low self-esteem, but he does not have high self-esteem. He has no self-esteem. His aim is for zero self esteem.

He says, "I don't care what you think of my performance, but I have learned that I don't care what I think either. I don't care about your opinion of me. I don't care about my opinion about me. I don't care what you think of me, and I don't care what I think of me."

I only care what God thinks of me. Do you see how transformational this can be?

Now I want to close with a point here that might be very new to you. I know it's a new thought for me. When Paul speaks here of judgment and being judged by God it's not a negative thing. We almost always hear in that word negativity. But look at verse 5. This is a teaser for

next week. This is a judgment where God looks at your life and where obedience was to be had, where you were serving him as a servant, as a steward, he looks at that work and commends you! He rewards you.

And I know how that thought strikes many of you. To think of God rewarding you, it turns into a non-motivator because you can't seriously believe he would reward anything you've done in your life.

I think for many of us we have such a bleak outlook on our human condition that we seriously doubt a single thing in our life is worthy of commendation. And so it factors in as such minor motivation to us to think of God commending us.

But I want to challenge that in a major way. Having this idea of an audience of one, having this idea of living for the approval of God should be a major motivator for you.

Can God be genuinely pleased with your imperfect obedience? Of course he can. Can God rejoice over you with and even dance with joy in your imperfect progress and mixed motives? Yes!

If you are a parent, you rejoice all the time. Many of our kids have struggled with lying. Probably because their dad has struggled and still struggles with lying. And there have been times when we have worked and worked and worked at this and no progress. And then there will be that moment when the child sneaks a treat or hides the phone or whatever it is and we ask them, "Did you do it?" And they say, "Yes, I did." And what comes out of me as a parent? A happy dance! I'm singing over them. I'm rejoicing. I'm ecstatic!

Don't you think God, as in infinitely loving parent, and as infinitely

more compassionate and gracious than us, will do the same for you. If we being sinful parents can do that with our kids, how much more so will God do that for you?

Allow the approval of God to really motivate you. Can you imagine your faithfulness causing God to leap for joy! That he would jump out of his seat in exultation.

Can you allow that to motivate you. To envision the divine accolade, the divine applause, the thunderous wild praise from God. This is what we are after. This is what we all need. In fact, if you struggle with the need to please people, just look at that as your insatiable, God-given need to please God. And he is pleased when you live for him. That's what you need.