

First Corinthians

February 2, 2025

Chapter 4

Paul's Instructions for Maturity

“The Requirements of the LORD”

Paul has addressed his concerns about the divisions among the saints in the Corinth Church in chapter 1. He has addressed a message to the saints in chapter 2. He states that Christ crucified and the Holy Spirit will provide the eternal provisions the saints need. The Holy Spirit will reveal to saints what they need to know to help them mature and become wise in the spiritual things of God. In chapter 3, Paul says that for now, the saints in Corinth are mere babes in Christ, still tainted by the wisdom and habits of the worldly world. Now, we come to Paul's instruction to the mature saints.

1. Paul's Instruction (4:1-21)

a) The Requirement of God's Servants (4:1)

To mature in the LORD, Paul gives the requirement of God's servants. Verse 1.

¹ *Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*

“Regard.” The Greek word is the root for our word *logic or logical*. It means to reason to the point of a logical conclusion. “...us...” is the Greek word for *man or mankind*. But Paul is using the word to refer to the saints of God. “... *in this manner*” is implied in the Greek but not found in the text. Paul is saying to the saints in Corinth, “Let the lost people of the world reason to the point of a logical conclusion that the saints of God are ‘...*servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*’” Paul is saying God's servants are required to live such a Godly life that the world's people will know they are saints of God just by watching them. Saints are “*servants of Christ.*” Each saint is a subordinate of Christ, following the directions of Christ.

They are also the “*stewards of the mysteries of God.*” “Stewards” are caretakers. They are *officials in charge of dispensing* something. Paul says saints are the officials in charge of caretaking and dispensing the “*mysteries of God.*” What are the “*mysteries of God*”? “Mysteries” mean things, such as teachings and doctrines, that some people cannot understand. As for the “*mysteries of God,*” they are the things that only His saints can understand and the people of the world cannot.

b) The Requirement of God's Stewards (4:2)

Drilling down, Paul includes an additional requirement of God's stewards. Verse 2.

² *In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.*

Stewards must be “*trustworthy.*” “Trust” means *reliance on veracity and integrity*. “Worthy” means *a notable person deserving of recognition*. As stewards of the mysteries of God, people can rightfully trust what he says, does, and offers without fear, worry, or concern. He has a reputation for truthfulness, honesty, and honor.

Paul now presents the requirement of God's saints.

c) The Requirement of God's Saints (4:

(1) The Examination (4:3-4)

Paul tells of the LORD's examination of His saints.

³ But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. ⁴ For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.

In this requirement, Paul uses himself as an example. If the immature saints in Corinth want to examine him, he is good with it. If the lost men running some court wish to examine him, he is good with it. He is not concerned with his life as a saint of God; therefore, he does not examine himself. He knows that nothing that he has done as a saint is wrong. Yet, simply because he does not know if he has done something wrong does not mean he is guilt-free. Something might be found against him. But Paul knows one thing for sure: the LORD is examining Him. It is part of being a saint of God.

(2) The Judgment (4:5)

As God's saints, judgment is involved. Verse 5.

⁵ Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

Paul makes a remarkable admission in verse 5. He admits that he does not know the full mysteries of God. He, too, is limited in his knowledge of the future things of God. He is a mere servant of the LORD and steward of what the LORD has delivered to him to share. One thing he knows is that Jesus is coming again. He will illuminate the evil in worldly men's hearts when He comes. He is the judge. The saints are not. On that day, even the worldly men will praise Him, although He will judge them.

On Sunday, Nisan 10th, 30 AD, Jesus rode a colt into Jerusalem just after high noon. The people followed Him from outside the city walls to the Temple steps. All the way, they praised Him. "Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the LORD" rang from almost every voice that day (Matthew 21:9). As the day ended, Jesus was on the Mount of Olives, looking over the city. When He comes again, everyone, even from eternity past, will "praise" Him. "Praise" means to *express admiration*.

But when Paul began the last sentence, "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time ..." he purposefully stated something he was applying to himself. He knew he was not to pass judgment before the time but to wait for the LORD to pass judgment instead. He will tell us about the limit of what even he can judge, depending on what the LORD has written in Scripture.

(3) The Limit (4:6-7)

Speaking to the Jewish "brethren," Paul warns them of the limit. Verse 6.

⁶ Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. ⁷ For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Both Paul and Apollos were included as icons in the divisions of the Church in Corinth. Therefore, Paul uses himself and Apollos "figuratively" as examples in this instruction. Even Paul and Apollos knew there was a limit to what they could use in judging. The boundaries of those limitations were found in the Holy Scripture.

So, what Scripture did the Jews have at that time in Corinth? They had the complete Old Testament. They had the instruction from James in the book by his name that was addressed to Jews. James wrote that book to the Jews 17 years before the timing of this letter to the Corinth

Church. James' letter was well circulated at the time. They also had Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians, which were well circulated among all the Churches, including Corinth. The Gospel of Mark was also being circulated at the time. It was written to Romans, so surely the Corinth Church had seen its content. At that time, those Scriptures restricted the authority of the Jewish "brethren" in Corinth.

We know what remains of Scripture to complete the New Testament. Nothing left in those books adds anything to the authority of judging already delivered when Paul writes this letter.

Therefore, the limits of authority are already set. The Jews are without excuse. They cannot claim that they had no instructions. Mostly, they cut their teeth on the Old Testament from childhood. By using himself and Apollos, and no one else, his motive is to rebuke the Church's divisions, which cannot be misunderstood. The point is this the Old Testament places all glory to God and no one else. The Jews in Corinth are derailed, placing glory on Paul, Apollos, and Peter instead of God. In those divisions, the Jews became arrogant and boastful, but they were wrong in that. They had placed their eyes on man's servants instead of God. They had no excuse for their doings. It was against God's word.

Speaking on, Paul speaks of the stupidity of their actions.

(4) The Stupidity (4:8)

Paul says,

⁸ You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.

In their stupidity as immature saints, just babes in Christ, at the beginning of their spiritual journey, they have taken what little they know and claim to know it all. As new believers, they have claimed to be "filled...rich...kings" in the knowledge of spiritual things, all without the spiritual training from the mature saints.

It amazes me, but I hear this same problem regularly with promos by Churches. Let's set the scene. A completely unchurched person has visited a Church for the first time. At the end of the service, the person accepted the LORD. Then, the Church staff recorded an interview with the person. In the interview, the person says, "It is so good to be part of a Church where God's Word is so accurately proclaimed." Question. As a first-time attendee of any Church or a new believer, how does this person know they have heard an accurate proclamation of God's Word? It is impossible. That person cannot know the accuracy of the Word of God proclaimed until the Word of God has been studied.

It is a similar example to what Paul has said to the Corinth Church. They are not mature enough to know the truth. Because they do not know the truth, they believe they are filled with the truth, rich in the truth, and kings of the truth. The last part is worse than the first two parts. Being rulers of the truth means they think they know all the spiritual truth. Paul says, *"I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you."* Here, Paul pushes back on their stupidity. He wishes they had attained spiritual maturity to join him in the ministry, but they were not mature enough to join.

At my childhood Church, regular summer mission trips were scheduled. Because the mission trip always included a work project, anyone who had entered Junior High and up could apply for part of the trip. However, to go, you had to be approved by the mission committee through an interview process. As an eleven-year-old, I wanted to go just because I wanted to go on a summer trip. I dreaded the interview. In the interview, they asked me, "Tell us how you will present the

Gospel to a lost person?” I had no idea. I did not get to go that year. That year, I started throwing a paper route. One of the committee members was on my route. Mrs. Spellman was her name. When I knocked on her door in September to collect for the month, she invited me in. She wanted to teach me Romans 3:23. *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* She spent about five minutes explaining it and sent me on my way. In October, she pulled me into the house, and we learned Romans 6:23. *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our LORD.”* Again, she explained the verse and sent me on my way. In November, it was Romans 5:8. *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* In December, it was Romans 10:9-10. *“That if you confess with your mouth Jesus as LORD, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved, for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.”* In January, it was Romans 10:13. *“For Whoever will call on the name of the LORD will be saved.”* In February, she asked me to witness to her as if she had never stepped foot in a Church in her life. I did. As she sent me on my way to collect the money for the paper at the house right next door to Mrs. Spellman, another member of the Church, the owner pulled me into the house and asked, “Can you tell me and my husband what we need to know to be saved?” I did.

As a twelve-year-old, when the question came up in the interview that year, I was able to share the Gospel with the committee. When I was through, Mrs. Spellman, who had not said a word, was beaming. It was the perfect example of what Paul wanted for the Church in Corinth. In my words, Paul had said to them, “I wish you truly knew the Gospel message so we could serve together in the work of the LORD.” However, the Church in Corinth was too immature in their spiritual journey.

An interesting point at this place in the storyline is that Corinth is now on Paul’s itinerary after he sends this letter. He will head to Macedonia first and then arrive in Corinth, where he will pen his letter to the Romans. He will surely share this information in his messages to the Church there.

Moving on, Paul addresses a word to the prudent.

(5) The Prudent (4:9-10)

Even though Paul uses the word “prudent” in this portion, he does not mean they are “prudent.” Rather, he is still speaking to the Corinth members’ arrogance compared to the Apostles’ life and work. He says in verse 9,

⁹ For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.

Notice how Paul claims that the Apostles are “condemned ... a spectacle ... fools ... weak ... without honor.” Notice how Paul claims that the immature Corinthians are “prudent ... strong ... distinguished.” Nothing could be further from the truth about the Corinthians. They were only prudent, strong, and distinguished in their own minds. Yet, what Paul has stated about the Apostles is precisely the truth. The world has condemned them. Gentiles and Jews have condemned them. Think of Paul’s story in the book of Acts and all he went through at the hands of the Gentiles and Jews. The world has made a spectacle of the Apostles, claiming they were fools, weak, and without honor. Again, look at Luke’s testimony about Peter, James, John, and Paul in the Book of Acts. As a spectacle, all Apostles except John will be executed for their work in the Gospel ministry. At this point in the timeline, only James, John’s brother, has been executed, but soon after this letter, they will all die in view of crowds across the Roman Empire, except John.

"*Prudent*," the Corinthian members were not. The Corinthians are wealthy, but Paul and the other Apostles are not. He makes that distinction next.

(6) The Distinction (4:11-13)

The conditions of the Apostles are very much different from those of the members of the Church in Corinth. Paul says about him and his fellow Apostles,

¹¹ To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; ¹² and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

For the first time written in Scripture, we have a description of the conditions the Apostles lived under as servants of the LORD. Paul says, "*To this present hour...*" Reading through the history of Paul's three missionary journeys in the book of Acts, we catch a glimpse of the Apostle's hardships, but never as compact as here in this passage. Why did Paul write these words to the Church? Was he trying to shame the Church? No. He wanted the Church to take the time to consider that something more was important.

(7) The Consideration (4:14-15)

For the Church's consideration, Paul writes,

¹⁴ I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

Here, we have Paul's tender and touching petition to the nature of their redeemed souls to look to Paul as their father in the truth of the Gospel message and training. He is saying they may have other teachers, but he looks to them as his children in the faith, and the LORD Jesus has placed him in their lives like a father in a family. If they will accept him, he has an exhortation for them.

(8) The Exhortation (4:16-17)

Paul says in verse 16,

¹⁶ Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every Church.

"*Therefore*" refers to what Paul has just concluded. He is the spiritual father of the Corinth Church because the LORD Jesus put him in that position. The word "*exhort*" means to *encourage*. What is Paul encouraging the Corinthians to do? "... *be imitators of me.*" Since Paul is in such a humble position as the Apostle and spiritual father of the Church, he asks the Church to move from their high and mighty kingship status in their minds to one of humility in all things, just as he is. Oh, the Church members live in Corinth, a wealthy seaport city; therefore, the Church members are wealthy, but that does not mean they cannot tune their hearts to live in humility for the cause of Christ. Upon the last word in this letter, Timothy will leave Ephesus and deliver it to the Church. Timothy will explain precisely what Paul means in this letter if there is any confusion. Paul then reminds the Corinthians that his message to them is no different from the message he delivered to every Church in his care.

But now, Paul delivers the rebuke to the Corinth Church. It is not directed at the whole Church; it is given to the entire Church because of some in the Church.

(9) The Rebuke (4:18)

For the rebuke, Paul says,

¹⁸ Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you.

Some commentators say that the immature thought Paul was afraid to come and face them in person; rather, he sent Timothy to handle the problem. But this cannot be so. This letter had not arrived yet when Paul wrote these words.

Instead, Paul, knowing the hearts of the immature, speaks directly in this rebuke to the current state of mind of those causing the Church's divisions. They have become “arrogant,” meaning they have considered themselves more important in the Church than they really are. They see themselves as kings and rulers in the Church, arrogant in their ways. Knowing that is how the immature think; Paul knows that it does not matter to them if he comes or not.

With that, Paul issues a warning. He is coming to the Church, and an investigation is coming concerning this issue.

(a) Warning – An Investigation Is Coming (4:19)

¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power.

Paul is not worried about the arrogance of those who are causing the divisions in the Church; rather, he is worried about their power and where that power comes from. Is their power from man or Christ Jesus? In Paul's humble position as an Apostle, he still possessed the power given to him by the LORD to be an Apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher, all combined. As an Apostle, Paul had the power to heal and raise from the dead. As a prophet, Paul could tell the future as the LORD revealed to him. Remember, the LORD has already revealed to Paul the great snatching (rapture) of the Church that he delivered in his letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:17). As an evangelist, many souls had accepted the LORD among the Jews in the synagogues and the Gentiles in the streets everywhere he stopped. As a pastor, he started Churches and set the organization structure and doctrine in place in each. As a teacher, he has taught the things of the LORD. He has the true power invested in him from Christ Jesus.

Those points lead to three questions, “What power did the immature saints in Corinth have? And, if they had power, where did it come from?” Had Christ given them the power to be divisive? Surely not.

Paul also gives a second warning when he states how the investigation will transpire.

(b) Warning – How Will the Investigation Transpire (4:20-21)

Paul says,

²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power. ²¹ What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

The kingdom of God, of which the Church in Corinth is a part, does not exist through the empty speech of one person in disagreement with another. Instead, the kingdom of God exists in the power of the Spirit of God in the spiritual realm. Therefore, Paul gives the Church a choice. They can choose. Do they want him to investigate like a king over them? Or do they want him to investigate the issue lovingly and gently?

Notice that Paul does not tell us their desire. He does not continue with the issue of divisions in the Church. Paul heard from Chloe's messengers that another problem was prevalent in the Church. He must address it. Paul must now address moral matters in the Church.