

THE PATTERN FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

4 So then, men ought to view us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ²With regard to this matter of stewardship, it is required that a man be found trustworthy. ³Now it is a very insignificant matter to me that I should be judged by you or by [any] human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴I know of no charge against me; but this does not justify me. The one who judges me is the Lord. ⁵Therefore, judge nothing before the [appointed] time, wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the things hidden in darkness and will reveal the intentions of the hearts, and then each one shall receive from God the praise [he deserves]. ⁶Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the [principle], “Do not go beyond what has been written,” and that none of you be arrogant by favoring one [minister] over against another.

⁷What makes you superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you received it, why do you boast as if it had not been given to you? ⁸You have already been filled, you have already become rich, you have come to reign without us. Indeed, I wish that you did reign, so that we also might reign with you. ⁹It seems that God has put us apostles at the end [of the procession], like men sentenced to death—we have been made a spectacle to the [whole] world, both to angels and to men. ¹⁰We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are honored, but we are dishonored. ¹¹To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are dressed in rags, we are treated brutally, and 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 [speak words of] comfort. To this [very] moment, we have been [treated] like the filth of the world, like the scum that is scraped off of all things.

¹⁴I am not writing these things to put you to shame, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵Although you may have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers; for by Christ Jesus through the gospel I am your father. ¹⁶Therefore, I urge you to imitate me. ¹⁷For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, he is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord. He will remind you of my instructions—which are by Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. ¹⁸Now since I have not come to you, some of you are arrogant. ¹⁹But I will come to you soon, if it be the Lord’s will. Then I will know, not [merely] the words of those who are arrogant, but [their] power; ²⁰for the kingdom of God is not a matter of words, but of power. ²¹What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod [of discipline], or in love and a spirit of gentleness? (1 Cor. 4:1-21)

Introduction

John was a self-professed “expert.” He had studied at the Summer Institute of Linguistics where he learned how to approach the difficult task of language translation in a scientific manner. Now, equipped with his training in the latest techniques of language translation, John was sent off to the mission field. He was assigned to the jungles of Venezuela where he was to help a veteran missionary translate a native Indian language. Since another missionary, by the name of Jim, did not have the linguistic training John possessed, John tended to look upon his

colleague's efforts with a critical, judgmental eye and a rather condescending attitude—after all, John was the “expert” and Jim was an untrained amateur.

As John and Jim worked together on this translation project, it became apparent that Jim was actually more effective at the job of translating than was John. Jim exhibited a loving patience with the people and the emotional stability to see him through difficult situations. Jim also had a sensitive ear to hear new sounds and the ability to discern the meaning of never-before-heard phrases from the situation in which they were used.

In the course of time John, the “expert,” found himself occupying the supportive role to Jim. John was doing the jobs that required little linguistic expertise: copying, filing, and typing. He was also doing the household chores while Jim did the actual work of translation.

One night, after washing the supper dishes, the situation struck John with the impact of a tidal wave. Jim, the “amateur” linguist, was doing the real work of translation; while, he, John, the technically trained “expert,” was washing the dishes. The irony of it was more than his poor soul could stand. He found himself, at least inwardly, balking at his position and entertaining a defiant spirit, rather than a willingness to cooperate in his supportive, subordinate role. But then the Lord began to enlighten John, revealing to him just how much the spirit of the world was controlling his life.

By the grace of God, John came to terms with the situation in which he found himself as well as with the worldly attitudes that were dominating his life. He turned over to Christ his judgmental, proud and defiant attitudes, and accepted the role Christ had assigned to him. In time, John became a valuable member of the translating team, faithfully carrying out his supportive role for the sake of Christ; and in so doing, his life became to others a real pattern for Christian living. (*POWER*, 11/12/89, pp. 4-5)

What John had to learn was something that the Corinthians also had to learn. When the Corinthian Christians exhibited the judgmental (4:3), proud (4:7), defiant (4:18) spirit of the world, the Apostle Paul lovingly called them to imitate a more godly pattern of living.

Because we are called to become like Christ our Savior, we as Christians must imitate the patterns of Christ-like living the Lord provides for us—where we see the life of Christ and the character of Christ being exhibited in one another's life. In the passage presently before us, the Lord provides such a pattern by the life of the Apostle Paul. As Paul himself will declare, “*I urge you to imitate me*” (4:16.) As we consider this present passage of Scripture, let us learn and let us implement the lessons that are offered to us by the Holy Spirit as He worked in the life of the Apostle Paul.

I. Let Us Serve Christ Faithfully (4:1-6)

In verse 1 the Apostle Paul describes himself and his fellow laborers as *“servants of Christ.”* The Greek term, ὑπηρέτης, means, “a personal attendant.” Paul’s testimony, recorded in Acts 21:3, shows his devotion to Christ his Savior and Lord: *“Then Paul answered, ‘Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’”* Referring to his present trial, Paul informs the Philippians,

I know that, through your prayers and the help [provided] by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the result of all this [i.e.; his present trial] will be my deliverance. ²⁰This is in keeping with my heart-felt expectation and hope that in no circumstance will I be put to shame; on the contrary, I have all confidence that as always, so now also, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. (Phil. 1:19-20;) note that Paul’s main concern and confidence is that Christ shall be magnified in his life.

Paul further describes himself and his fellow laborers as *“stewards of the mysteries of God.”* Paul views himself and his fellow apostles as being those to whom the mysteries of God—the revelation of the plan of salvation and the purposes of God—have been entrusted for public proclamation and preservation.

The primary attribute that is required of stewards is faithfulness: *“with regard to this matter of stewardship, it is required that a man be found trustworthy”* (vs. 2.) By way of example, if you are looking for a financial planner to take care of your monetary investments, one of the most important concerns would be his trustworthiness: the attributes of reliability and responsibility would be essential. These traits are all the more essential for those who are entrusted with the sacred truth of God, note 1 Timothy 1:12, *“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has enabled me, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.”*

As he carried out his apostolic ministry, Paul was aware that the Corinthians were critical and judgmental of his work (vs. 3.) In their estimate he was neither dynamic nor authoritative, note their evaluation of his ministry as it is presented in 2 Corinthians 10:10, *“His letters, they say, are weighty and strong; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech is of no account.”*

How does Paul handle such a spirit as that exhibited by these Corinthians? He does not allow himself to become distraught by human judgments that evaluate him by the standards of the world rather than by the Word of God. He does not concern himself with any human day of judgment (vs. 3); rather, he lives in the expectation of the divine day of judgment, as he expresses it in 2 Corinthians 5:9-10,

We make it our goal to please him—whether we are at home in the body or absent from it—¹⁰for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; so

that each one may receive what he deserves for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. (2 Cor. 5:9-10)

In verse 5 Paul gives to the church this exhortation: *“Judge nothing before the [appointed] time, wait until the Lord comes.”* That is to say, we are to refrain from exhibiting a judgmental spirit; we must recognize that the Lord Himself is the Judge and we must not usurp His role. We must especially be careful not to bring a condemning judgment against a servant of Christ, note Romans 14:4, *“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? Before his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand”* (Rom. 14:4.)

Paul goes on to inform the Corinthians, *“[the Lord] will bring to light the things hidden in darkness and will reveal the intentions of the hearts, and then each one shall receive from God the praise [he deserves.]”* Note: *“the things hidden in darkness”* here is a reference to the good works that have been done for Christ but have gone unnoticed and unappreciated by the church and by the world—this is evident from the fact that these works shall receive praise from God. On the Last Day the Lord Jesus shall publicly acknowledge all such works and bestow His honor and blessing upon those who have done such works for His sake. Furthermore, the Lord will also reveal *“the intentions of the hearts”* (i.e.; the good intentions and desires that His people were unable to bring to realization, being prevented from accomplishing such purposes through no fault of their own. The Lord will also recognize these desires and will credit them to His people as accomplished facts of ministry and service done for Him, as is evident from the fact that He shall reward His servants for both the deeds and the desires of service they exhibited.

Applying these things to ourselves, let each of us strive to serve Christ faithfully. Whatever we do for Christ, let us do it diligently with all our heart, for Christ our Lord is supremely worthy of our service and devotion. Let us recognize that as we employ our spiritual gifts we are handling and ministering the very grace of God in its various facets, as the Apostle Peter informs us, *“As good stewards of the manifold grace of God, each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others”* (1 Pet. 4:10.) When our efforts meet with criticism and a judgmental spirit, let us learn to improve our Christian service, but let us not wither under human judgment—let us remember that in the final analysis we are only accountable to the divine judgment of Christ, not the judgment of men when they judge with human criterion. When our efforts are unnoticed or unappreciated by men, let us remember that they are seen and are appreciated and shall be rewarded by Christ our Lord. May we be encouraged by the teaching of 1 Corinthians 4:5, as well as by the words of the hymn writer, Horatius Bonar:

Go, labor on. It is not for nothing.
Your earthly loss is heavenly gain.
Men heed you, love you, praise you not;
The Master praises. What are men?

II. Let Us Serve Christ Humbly (4:6-16)

In verses 6-16 the Apostle Paul addresses the spirit of conceit and arrogance that existed in the hearts of these Corinthian Christians.

Their pride was actually causing them to “go beyond what has been written,” (a reference to the Scriptures. They thought themselves free to depart from the Word of God and did not consider themselves to be bound by it, their pride was such that they even disparaged the written Scriptures. Note that in contrast to these Corinthians, Paul has testified that he and the other apostles are “*stewards*” of the Word of God—those who are committed to abide by and preserve the sacred Word of God entrusted to them.

Furthermore, the Corinthians’ pride caused them to view themselves as being superior to all other Christians by virtue of the abundance of the spiritual gifts bestowed upon them and the spiritual experiences granted to them by God. Paul does acknowledge that the Lord has blessed the Corinthian church with an abundance of spiritual gifts: “*in everything you were enriched in him—with all speech and all knowledge*” (1 Cor. 1:5.)

In order to counteract their arrogance, and redirect their thinking, Paul inquires, “*What makes you superior?*” Paul is asking what, or the passage may be translated to mean, who, causes the Corinthians think that they are superior and distinct from other believers in Christ. It surely was not God, because God called them into the fellowship of His Son, a fellowship that He holds with every true Christian, a fact of which the apostle had reminded them in the introduction of his present epistle:

... to the church of God that is in Corinth—to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints together with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, (he is both their Lord and ours.) (1 Cor. 1:2)

Paul goes on to inquire, “*And what do you have that you did not receive?*” Whatever spiritual experiences the Corinthians have enjoyed and whatever spiritual gifts they possess, have come from God by His grace and for His glory and for the welfare of His church. We must never think that such gifts originate from ourselves or such experiences are bestowed upon us because of a uniqueness inherent in ourselves.

In verse 8 Paul addresses the Corinthian congregation in a mildly sarcastic manner in order to expose the foolishness of their proud spirit: “*You have already been filled, you have already become rich, you have come to reign without us. Indeed, I wish that you did reign, so that we also might reign with you.*” The conceited manner in which the Corinthians viewed themselves gives the impression that they have already entered into the glorified state; their attitude

gives the impression that they have attained the highest and final level of spiritual life—and have done so ahead of all the rest of Christ’s church and ahead of the apostles themselves! Paul expresses his wish that they, indeed, had attained the final state of glory; because if they have, then the apostles and the rest of Christ’s church would join with them in that blessed state! This is Paul’s way of reminding the Corinthians that the whole church of Christ will enter into glory together as members of Christ’s body; only Christ Himself has the privilege of attaining that state in advance of His church, note 1 Corinthians 15:20,23, *“Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep [in death.] ... ²³But each in his own turn: the first fruits, [which is] Christ; then those who belong to Christ when he appears [in glory.]”*

In verses 9-10 Paul contrasts the Corinthians (in their own self-estimation) with the apostles—he does so in somewhat exaggerated terms in order to expose and deflate the pride of these spiritually immature Christian people. Paul facetiously declares that the Corinthians are leading the procession into glory, they are at the “head of the parade;” indeed, they have already passed through the gates of glory, while the apostles are bringing up the rear of the procession (vs. 9a.) The apostles are not only at the tail end of this procession into glory, they are in a completely different procession: while the Corinthians are parading in triumph, the apostles are being led as prisoners to the place of execution (vs. 9b.) Paul declares that he and his fellow apostles are fools for Christ’s sake, while the Corinthians are wise in Christ; the apostles are weak, while the Corinthians are strong; the Corinthians enjoy glory, while the apostles experience dishonor (vs. 10.) Paul facetiously presents this contrast between the Corinthian church and the apostles of Christ in order to emphasize to the Corinthians that Christ’s call to glory leads through a route of trial and even humiliation before the world. But, as verses 11-13 testify, in the midst of their humiliation, the apostles possess and exhibit the grace of Christ in their lives: *“When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³when we are slandered, we [speak words of] comfort.”*

Applying these things to ourselves, let us each strive to serve Christ humbly. Let us not think of ourselves as being distinct and superior to the rest of the body of Christ; we must never lose sight of the spiritual union of the body of all true believers in Christ. Let us not think of ourselves as having attained unto the state of glory and the fullness of spiritual knowledge; a false understanding that the apostle corrects in 1 Corinthians 8:2-3, *“The man who thinks he knows something [exhaustively] does not yet know as he ought to know. ³But the man who loves God is known by God.”* The Greek verb, γινώσκω, occurring in the perfect tense has the meaning, “to know exhaustively or completely.” Let us not think of ourselves as having attained unto an unassailable state of sanctification in which we are no longer susceptible to the temptations we encounter in the world; a dangerous view that the apostle will also confront later in this epistle: *“let the one who thinks he is standing [secure], be careful not to fall”* (1 Cor. 10:12.) Let us

entertain a humble spirit; and when we suffer humiliation, may it be for the sake of Christ—and then may we exhibit the grace of Christ in our lives.

III. Let Us Serve Christ with a Submissive Spirit (4:17-21)

In verse 17 Paul informs the Corinthians that he is sending Timothy in order to remind them of *“my instructions.”* Timothy is to remind the Corinthians of Paul’s apostolic administration of the churches. Paul goes on to indicate that the instruction of which he speaks are *“instructions—which are by Christ.”* In giving the church his apostolic instruction, Paul is not acting on his own initiative nor is he merely exercising personal authority; on the contrary, he is communicating the will of Christ, the One who is the Head of the church. He further informs the Corinthian church that these are the same instructions that pertain to the whole body, they are instructions *“just as I teach everywhere in every church”*. The Corinthian congregation is not being singled out for more severe treatment; nor are the Corinthians exempt from the rule of Christ that applies to every other congregation of His people.

As he indicates in verse 18, Paul is aware that there were some within the Corinthian church who were intent on defying the spiritual authority entrusted to him by Christ: *“some of you are arrogant.”* In verses 19-20 Paul warns that if those who are *“arrogant”* insist on maintaining a defiant attitude towards Christ’s servants they will be confronted with the power of God. If it proves to be necessary, the “power” of these defiant people will be confronted by the power of God.

There is a divine authority, a spiritual power that Christ exercises over the church through the church’s appointed leaders; it is an authority intended for the building up of the body:

This is why I write these things when I am absent, so that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down. (2 Cor. 13:10)

But when necessary, it is an authority to confront, rebuke, and discipline those who live contrary to the commandments of Christ—as will become evident from the apostle’s counsel to the church in chapter 5 concerning the action they are to take on behalf of Christ to discipline a brother who was persistently living in sin.

Applying these things to ourselves, let us each strive to serve Christ with a submissive spirit. Let us acknowledge the authority of Christ and the fact that He is the Lord of our lives and the Head of His church. May those who are called to be leaders in Christ’s church exercise the spiritual authority entrusted to them with a humble, gentle spirit for the honor of Christ and for the good of His body:

... shepherd the flock of God that is among you. Do not exercise oversight [merely] because you must do so, but [do so] willingly for God. [Do not do so] for material gain, but with a willingness [to serve]. ³Do not lord yourselves over those who are under your care; on the contrary, be examples for the flock. (1 Pet. 5:2-3)

As members of Christ's church, let us honor the authority of Christ by giving respect and submission in the Lord to the leaders of the church:

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb. 13:17)

Conclusion

Living in this present world it is so very easy to become infected with the ungodly spirit of the world: a judgmental, proud, defiant spirit. But because we have been called to forsake the world and to become like Christ our Savior, let us, by the grace of Christ, imitate the patterns of Christ-like living that the Lord provides for us. Let us strive to imitate the pattern provided for us in 1 Corinthians 4, and in so doing we shall become patterns of Christ-like living for one another.