

Measuring Up
I Corinthians 3:18–4:5

A guy is driving around and he sees a sign in front of a house: "Talking Dog For Sale." He rings the bell, and the owner tells him the dog is in the backyard. The guy goes into the backyard and sees a Labrador Retriever sitting there.

"You talk?" he asks. "Yep," the Lab replies. "So, what's your story?"

The Lab looks up and says, "Well, I discovered that I could talk when I was pretty young, and I wanted to help the government; so I told the CIA about my gift, and in no time at all they had me jetting from country to country, sitting in rooms with spies and world leaders, because no one figured a dog would be eavesdropping. I was one of their most valuable spies for eight years running."

"But the jetting around really tired me out, and I knew I wasn't getting any younger so I wanted to settle down. I signed up for a job at the airport to do some undercover security work, mostly wandering near suspicious characters and listening in. I uncovered some incredible dealings and was awarded a batch of medals. I got married, had a mess of puppies, and now I'm just retired."

The guy is amazed. He goes back in and asks the owner what he wants for the dog. "Ten dollars."

The guy says, "This dog is amazing. Why on earth are you selling him so cheap?"

The owner replied: "Because he's a liar. He didn't do any of that stuff."

People see things differently. They measure things differently. Paul, in the passage we will look at this morning, returns to the issue he began to address in chapter one. That was the issue of people aligning themselves behind one of the greater personalities in their Christian world: Paul, Apollos and Peter.

Let me read the passage and then we will go back and look more closely at what Paul says.

I Corinthians 3:18 – 4:5

Forget the chapter division which was added centuries after this letter was written. The two paragraphs are linked together by their introductory phrases in the Greek text:

1) Let no one deceive himself; and 2) So let a man reckon us as servants.

Paul is going to talk about measuring oneself and measuring those who are servants of Christ. The Corinthians were all about measuring the importance, the position, the status of themselves and those who were ministering among them.

Paul warns about self-deception. And here's the reason for such deception. He says: "If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God."

In this entire section, Paul has talked about the fact that the wisdom of man is foolishness to God. And what is perceived by the world as foolish, in particular the cross, is the wisdom of God. Anthony Thiselton writes:

Most of all, he [Paul] urges *the sufficiency of the gospel of the cross interpreted within the framework of biblical tradition*, as against the misguided and indeed damaging effects of trying to *add* "wisdom" aspects or notions of being "people of the Spirit" without the cross.

Folks, the world's wisdom regards the Bible as an ancient book filled with some nice stories, sort of like a children's book of tales and fables. The world's wisdom regards the clear teaching of Scripture on subjects like the value of all human life, the sanctity of marriage and the boundaries of appropriate sexual relationships as outdated at best, and simply wrong, at worst.

Let me illustrate from a column in *The Washington Post* a week ago yesterday (April 13) by Sally Quinn. Her weekly column is titled *OnFaith*. The heading of this particular piece was: "Still opposed to gay rights? The shame of being on the wrong side of history."

Early in the column she makes this statement:

There are decent people with good values who are against gay marriage. One day, in the not-so-distant future, these people will be ashamed of their position. If any of the Supreme Court justices vote against it, they will eventually be ashamed as well. Not only that but their children, their grandchildren and their heirs will be ashamed of them.

Quinn talks about how public opinion is so much in favor of her view, but some religious leaders continue to hold out. She says many have confided in her that they take their position out of fear of losing their congregations. Then she writes: "One day, they will have to come around or they really will lose their congregations. They have one thing going for them. Most religions believe in redemption. They'll need to pray for it big-time."

What is most painful to me as a believer in the authoritative Word of God is how she closes her column. She says of those religious leaders about whom she has written should be ashamed: “They should turn to their Bibles, to Ephesians 5, for guidance.” Here is the passage she quotes:

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly, but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

How ironic can you get! You can quote the Scriptures to say whatever you think they should say. But to hold to the clear meaning of God’s Word is foolish; it is shameful. Paul writes: “Let no one deceive themselves.” If you would be wise in God’s eyes, you must become a fool in the world’s eyes.

Henry Alford, in his *Greek Testament*, says that the phrase “let him become a fool” has to do with “receiving the gospel in its simplicity, and so becoming foolish in the world’s eyes.” The gospel speaks to men and women who are sinful and who do sinful things. The Bible tells us what those sinful things are.

But the wonderful and simple truth of the gospel is that there was in time/space/history a cross upon which the eternal Son of God bore our sins to satisfy the justice of God. The gospel is “good news” because it addresses the human need of forgiveness and reconciliation with the God who, if he is really God, must pour out his wrath against unrighteousness and ungodliness, as Paul writes in Romans 1.

God defines what sin is, and God defines the means of redemption – the cross of Christ. The cross contains a wisdom that the world cannot and will not accept – in part, because the world disagrees with God about sin and accountability.

The gospel puts all people on equal footing – sinners in need of redemption. That’s why Paul says, “Let no one boast in men.” He relates back to their divisions and dissensions of saying, “I’m of Paul;” “I’m of Apollos;” “I’m of Peter.”

In fact, Paul says, all of these teachers are yours. You miss out on God’s blessing when you attach yourselves to just one teacher as over the others. “All things are yours.” Verse 23 explains why that is.

The English conjunction “and” would be better translated here “but.” “All are yours, but you are Christ’s....” This isn’t a continuation of the preceding list, but rather a contrast leading to responsibilities. Christians should lead lives in keeping with those who are Christ’s, who belong to him.

Paul completes the picture by saying that “Christ is God’s.” He is talking here about Christ’s saving work. Jesus is fully God, yet subordinate to God the Father in the work of redemption. Paul talks later in the resurrection chapter, chapter fifteen, about this relationship.

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. – *I Corinthians 15:28*

Jesus came to earth in subjection to his Father and his Father’s will to accomplish the work of salvation. And as the Son is in the Father, so each believer is in the Son. Paul says that the Corinthians should view their relationship with the apostles and other teachers in the broader context of the Lordship of Christ.

One writer puts it this way: “All things are yours” – that’s Christian liberty; “You are Christ’s” – that’s Christian responsibility.

Paul says to the Corinthians, and to us – measure yourselves rightly, accurately, appropriately, biblically. Understand that God’s wisdom, his standards, his ways don’t conform to those of the world. If you would be wise spiritually, you may be foolish in the eyes of the world.

Paul turns a corner here and continues with how the Corinthians should measure those who were working among them. There are two ways, he says, that they should be measured. First, they should be regarded as *servants* of Christ.

Paul described himself and Apollos as servants back in chapter three, verse 5. There, he used the word *diákonos*, which simply means “one who serves.” He uses a different word here – *hupēretēs*. This word means *assistant*. It referred to “an assistant of someone in an official position” (*A Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians*, Paul Ellingsworth and Howard Hatton).

I think his point here is that he and his fellow workers were servants of the Corinthians believers, but the Corinthians were not their masters. Their only master was God.

Paul says, “We are assistants of Christ.” Then he adds another measurement: “stewards of the mysteries of God.” Let’s talk about the word *mysteriēs* first.

When the New Testament uses the word *mystery*, it doesn't mean something mysterious. The mystery religions of the day, including early Gnosticism, used it to describe secrets available only to the initiated, to those with special knowledge. It became a very prideful thing to possess such knowledge of the mysterious.

The biblical concept of *mystery* means something quite different. Vine, in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, writes:

In the N.T. it denotes, not the mysterious (as with the English word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those only who are illumined by His Spirit. In the ordinary sense a mystery implies knowledge withheld; its Scriptural significance is truth revealed.

Paul speaks of this mystery to the Colossians, which fits well with this discussion with the Corinthians. He speaks of his stewardship of making the word of God known –

...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. – *Colossians 1:26-27*

In the next chapter, Paul speaks of –

...the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. – *Colossians 2:2-3*

This is the content of their ministry. The conduct of their ministry is as a *steward*. The steward was the highest ranking servant of a wealthy landowner. This person was in charge of the entire estate while the owner was away. He carried the authority of the owner in his absence. Though yet a slave, he was in charge of all the master's possessions.

What an awesome picture of privilege and responsibility. Think about this for us today. While Christ, the master/the owner, is away, we are entrusted with his "estate." Church leaders are servants, but they are also servants with authority.

Verse two gives the criteria by which they might be measured – **Verse 2.**

The word *trustworthy* means "faithful." The criteria for measuring ministry is faithfulness, not success. Tim Hansel tells this true story in his book *Holy Sweat*, a story that illustrates what Paul is saying.

Clarence Jordan was a man of unusual abilities and commitment. He had two Ph.D.s: one in agriculture and the other in Greek and Hebrew. He was so gifted he could have chosen to do anything he wanted. He chose to serve the poor. In the 1940s, he founded a farm in Americus, Georgia, and called it Koinonia Farm. It was a community for poor whites and poor blacks.

As you might guess, the idea did not go over well in the Deep South of the 1940s. The town people tried everything to stop Clarence. They tried boycotting him, and slashing the workers' tires when they came to town. Over and over, for fourteen years, they tried to stop him.

Finally, in 1954, the Ku Klux Klan had enough of Clarence Jordan, so they decided to get rid of him once and for all. They came one night with guns and torches and set fire to every building on Koinonia Farm but Clarence's home, which they riddled with bullets. They chased off all the families but one black family that refused to leave. Clarence recognized the voices of the Klansmen, some of whom were church people. One Klansman was a local newspaper reporter. The next day, the reporter came out to see what remained of the farm. The rubble was smoldering, but he found Clarence in the field, hoeing and planting.

"I heard the awful news," he called to Clarence, "and I came out to do a story on the tragedy of your farm closing." Clarence just kept on hoeing and planting. The reporter kept poking trying to get this quietly determined man to get angry. Instead of packing, Clarence was planting. Finally, the reporter said in a haughty voice, "Well, Dr. Jordan, you got two of them Ph.D.s and you've got fourteen years into this farm, and there's nothing left of it at all. Just how successful do you think you've been?"

Clarence stopped hoeing, turned toward the reporter with his penetrating blue eyes, and said quietly but firmly, "About as successful as the cross. Sir, I don't think you understand us. What we are about is not success but faithfulness. We're staying. Good day." Beginning that day, Clarence and his companions rebuilt Koinonia and the farm is going strong today.

Whatever ministry you have, be faithful. This is "required" of all who are God's children. This applies to our responsibilities in church. Somebody told the story of a choir director who was so stressed out because at least one or more members of the choir were absent at every rehearsal for a concert. Finally came the last rehearsal and he announced: "I want to personally thank the pianist for being the only person in this entire church choir to attend each and every rehearsal during the past two months." At this, the pianist rose, bowed, and said, "It was the least I could do, considering I won't be able to be at the concert tonight."

Matters of ministry are to be judged differently than matters of the world. While there are many principles of business applicable in the church, Paul says that the measurement of ministry is faithfulness, not success – at least not success by the world’s definition. Specifically, what might be the implications? Let me suggest three important ones:

- 1) Ends never justify the means;
- 2) Worldly, fleshly standards are not our guide;
- 3) God isn’t asking us to be successful, but faithful.

This doesn’t mean that ministry shouldn’t be evaluated and measured. We just have to be careful about what criteria is used.

In verses three to five, Paul lists three possible standards by which you might be judged.

1) The Judgment of Others – Verse 3: “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.” Paul’s point is not that we despise the judgment of others. It’s just that compared to God’s judgment, it matters little.

He isn’t saying there is no place for measuring others, judging others. In fact, Paul will teach elsewhere about the need to judge rightly and appropriately. In chapter five he will deal with judging related to church discipline, and in chapter six resolving legal disputes between Christians.

Paul mentions another standard:

2) The Judgment of Oneself – Paul says, “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.”

His point is that human judgment, whether it is the judgment of others or of himself, is only preliminary; it is not final. The ultimate judgment is by God. That’s why he adds the third standard of measurement.

3) The Judgment of God – **Verse 5.**

God’s judgment is that which will be final, ultimate, accurate! It is his judgment we should be most concerned with, not that of others or even of ourselves. There is definitely accountability within human structure, like the church. But the accountability we should be most concerned with and mindful of is God’s judgment which will deal with the things of the heart.

The outcome of that will be commendation from God. The Corinthians, and even we in the 21st century, should not be looking for commendation from others such that we value their measurement more than we do God's.

It should be his judgment, his assessment, we most desire to hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your Master." This should be what motivates us to be involved in ministry as "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." It's not focusing on the judgments of others.

The story is told of a man and his grandson traveling down the road, walking and leading a donkey. They met a man who said, "How foolish for you to be walking. One of you should be riding the donkey." So the man put his grandson on the animal.

The next traveler they met frowned and said, "How dreadful for a strong boy to be riding while an old man walks." So the boy climbed off the donkey and his grandfather climbed on.

The next person they met said, "I just can't believe a grown man would ride and make a little boy walk." So the man pulled the boy up and they rode the donkey together. That is, until they met another man who said, "I never saw anything so cruel in all my life -- two human beings riding on one poor defenseless donkey!"

Down the road a ways, they met a couple of men. After they passed, one of the men turned to the other and said, "Did you ever before see two fools carrying a donkey?"

The point is: We can't please everyone we meet. It's impossible. Paul made the statement, "Do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (*Galatians 1:10*).

Be faithful; seek to please God – and leave the results to him. This is the biblical approach to being involved in God's work. We are to be faithful, knowing that in the end God will judge our work according this criteria; his measurement will be all that matters.

Do you remember the movie, *Ben Hur*?



When Charlton Heston was concerned about not being able to win the chariot race in the movie, Cecil B. DeMille told him, "Your job is to stay on [the chariot]. It's my job to make sure you win."

We need to stay on the chariot. It doesn't matter what others say. God will make sure you win in the end. You will finish with his commendation. Is there anything we should desire more?