

A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

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Chapter Four

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CHAPTER FOUR

Being Stewards of the Mysteries of God

BACKGROUND: Chapter Three closes with the reminder that though he who strives for knowledge of God's Kingdom may be considered a fool by the world, he is the possessor of true wisdom. This chapter begins with the responsibilities of those who, knowing this, have glimpsed the mysteries of God.

4:1-2. *Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.* A steward is responsible for overseeing his master's household. A Christian's Master is God. God's household is the Church, which is made up of those who are true followers of Jesus Christ. Paul's emphasis here is that all Christians are charged with teaching the truth about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the *mysteries of God* (1 Cor 2:6-9), and with building up the Church (1 Cor 3:9).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). How can we be *stewards of the mysteries of God*?

4:3-5. *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore, judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts; and then each one's praise will come from God.* As a steward of the mysteries of God, Paul is answerable to Him, not to the self-proclaimed authorities in Corinth, where...

Religious men and dear to God were ridiculed and cast out for their want of learning; while others, brimful of evils innumerable, were classed highly because of their fluent speech. Then like persons sitting in public to try causes, these were the sort of votes they kept rashly passing: "this one is worthy; this one is better than that one; this man is inferior to that; that better than this." And, forgetting to mourn for their own bad ways, they had become judges of others; and in this way again were kindling grievous warfare.

CHRYSOSTOM'

In other words, those who lived in an ungodly manner but spoke eloquently were held in higher regard than those who used more ordinary speech but were trying to live Christ-like lives and to bring others to Him. Paul reminds them that no one has the right to judge individuals and to class them according to false worldly standards. We should not judge ourselves because to do so could bring undue pride or despondency. We should not judge others because only God knows the secrets of each heart and the hidden circumstances of each life. When Christ returns to earth, He will judge each person according to His standards.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). If we are not to judge, should we be unconcerned as to what is right and what is wrong in the world in which we live?

4:6-7. *Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?* Everything good that anyone has or is comes from God, so no one has the right to boast, to feel superior to another, or to give to any person the honor that belongs to God alone.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). Why is it said that we have achieved nothing of value solely of our own accord?

If we receive praise and glory for our good deeds on earth, we have been recompensed—God owes us nothing. If, however, we devote ourselves to Christ unselfishly, our reward will come from Him, Who alone knows the secrets of our heart and our unpublicized deeds. He has ordained that this be so in order to discourage competition, envy and pride among His people (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18). Several times in this letter, Paul mentions that conceit and arrogance are to be guarded against (1 Cor 4:18, 5:2, 8:1, 13:4).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (d). Why are conceit and arrogance so detrimental in our relationship with Christ?

4:8. You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you. Paul admonishes the Corinthians for considering themselves worthy of praise, as if becoming a Christian was the end rather than the beginning of the spiritual struggle. If this were so, Paul says, the Apostles could be enjoying glory with them, instead of struggling and suffering as they were.

4:9. For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. Jesus said: *If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all* (Mk 9:35). The Apostles, in worldly terms, appeared to be held in very low esteem. They were paraded and ridiculed in public, imprisoned, put to death. Their sufferings were witnessed by everyone. This was the cross that Jesus said one who follows Him must bear (Mt 16:24), which differs for each person. Those who accept this fact, however, will be *first* in the Kingdom of Heaven, unlike those who take the path of ease and comfort in this life.

4:10-13. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished but we are dishonored! Even to the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure it; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the off-scouring of all things until now. Unlike the teachers, the students were experiencing none of the difficulties of the Christian life because they have been more concerned with pleasing the world than with pleasing God.

This puts the whole world into confusion, that we do all things with an eye to men, and even for our good things, we esteem it nothing to have God as an admirer but seek the approval that comes from our fellowmen... yet surely they shall stand with us before that tribunal, doing us no good... yet, though we know these things, we still gape after men, which is the first of sins. Thus were a man looking on, no-one would choose to commit fornication; but even though he be ten thousand times on fire with that plague, the tyranny of the passion is conquered by his reverence for men. But in God's sight men not only commit adultery and fornication; but other things also much more dreadful many have dared and still dare to do. Is this alone not enough to bring down from above ten thousand thunderbolts? Adulteries, did I say, and fornications? Things even far less than these we fear to do before men: but in God's sight we fear no longer. From this, in fact, all the world's evils have originated; because in things really bad we reverence not God but men. CHRYSOSTOM²

Chrysostom's point, of course, is that most of us worry about the impression we make on those around us. We don't want to be seen doing anything that will lessen their esteem for us, yet we seem to forget that God is all-seeing, all-knowing. He knows everything we do, say, think—everything we are.

If you wish to sin, seek a place where He cannot see you, and then do what you will. AUGUSTINE³

4:14-15. I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel. As the spiritual father of the Christians of Corinth, Paul's intention is not to shame them but to lovingly yet firmly correct and direct them, as a parent should.

4:16. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. He urges them to imitate him, because he imitates Christ, not man (see 1 Cor 11:1).

4:17. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. The truths Paul brought the Corinthians, which Timothy reinforced, are the same for everyone everywhere.

4:18-20. Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. In Paul's absence from Corinth, leaders had arisen who, through conceit and pride, brought divisions to the Church there. These false leaders had boasted of their eloquence and wisdom. Paul wrote that when he arrived he would be able to discern whether they truly possessed power from God or merely spoke empty words. (Read 2 Peter 2.)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (e). To what power is Paul referring? What power did the Apostles exhibit (Mt 10:8)? What power do Christ's disciples have today (Acts 1:8, Eph 3:7-21, 1 Thess 1:5)?

4:21. What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness? The spirit of Paul's next visit to the Corinthian Christians will be determined by whether or not they amend their ways. The conduct of children determines their father's demeanor toward them. Though he loves them "unconditionally," if they disobey he must use stern measures to correct their behavior for their own good. If they are obedient, he may have the privilege to relax, and exhibit gentleness.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). How can we be stewards of the mysteries of God? To be faithful stewards, His Kingdom has to be our priority. We must grow in knowledge of God's word and teach it to those around us whenever and wherever possible.

God's gifts are marvelous, aren't they? Some of them we know and enjoy already: the experience of life that knows no death; the splendor of His sheer goodness; the truth that is honest and complete; faith that gives assurance and confidence in God; a purity that is infinitely better than self-indulgence.

But there are other gifts of God which by their very nature we cannot know yet. They can only be revealed by the Creator and Father of eternity, and only He knows how magnificent they are. But if they are better than the gifts we know already, how wonderful, how utterly desirable they must be!

For such gifts it is worth waiting patiently. But it is also worth straining every nerve to achieve them, by fixing our minds on the Giver, by seeking to discover His will for us and then doing it; by

renouncing deceit and pursuing truth. And—most of all—by coming to Jesus Christ, the High Priest who is the appointed way to Heaven and our Protector on earth. Through Him alone can our eyes look up to the highest Heaven, even to the face of God. Through Him alone the Father allows us to taste those wonderful joys of eternity, all of which are “in Him.” CLEMENT⁴

(b). If we are not to judge, should we be unconcerned as to what is right and what is wrong in the world in which we live? If the Kingdom of God is to be our priority, we must make judgments as to what is true about God and His word and what is not, and to distinguish right actions from wrong, good from bad. To do so, we must know God’s word (Acts 17:11) and the fullness of the truth about its interpretation, which the Church has preserved. We must also examine our own lives regularly to be sure we are really trying to grow in the image of Christ (1 Cor 11:27-31), according to Scripture.

(c). Why is it said that we have achieved nothing of value solely of our own accord? God is the Creator of everything that is good (Jas 1:17). If we achieve anything of merit, we do so in cooperation with Him (as His “fellow-workers”), through the capabilities He has given us. The composer creates beautiful music with God-given talents and with the sounds God has put in the world, which man-made instruments can only try to capture. The sun, the moon, the stars, our loved ones—all good things—come from Him. The ultimate good, eternal life with Him in His Kingdom, comes to us only through His beneficence.

(d). Why are conceit and arrogance so detrimental in our relationship with Christ? Conceit and arrogance indicate a love of oneself over and above anyone or anything else, including God. To love anyone or anything more than God is to love the creation rather than the Creator and is a violation of the first Commandment (Ex 20:3).

(e). To what power is Paul referring? What power did the Apostles exhibit (Mt 10:8)? What power do Christ’s disciples have today (Acts 1:8, Eph 3:7-21, 1 Thess 1:5)? Paul is referring to the power of the Holy Spirit, to which a person who has strong faith in and love for God and an understanding of His will for man has access.

The Apostles had power to *heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons*, and rightly discern the word of God (2 Pet 3:15-16). The ability to affect the lives of man physically pointed to the more important power to effect change spiritually. All true Christians have power to be used as vehicles to direct and redirect lives and souls by witnessing to the truth about Jesus, with their words and with their lives. Thus the power to heal, cleanse, bring sinners back from spiritual death (to eternal life) and to cast out demons (of sin) continues.

¹ Schaff, “Homily XI,” Vol. XII, p.58.

² *ibid*, “Homily XII,” p.67.

³ Toal, Vol. Three, p.153.

⁴ Winter (Day 39).