

1 CORINTHIANS 4:1–21, “TO THE CHURCH OF GOD”

¹So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. ²Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. ³I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

⁶Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not take pride in one man over against another. ⁷For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

⁸Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! ⁹For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. ¹⁰We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! ¹¹To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, 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 answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

¹⁴I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. ¹⁵Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶Therefore I urge you to imitate me. ¹⁷For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

¹⁸Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. ¹⁹But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. ²⁰For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. ²¹What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

Discussion Questions (Choose a manageable number to discuss)

1. What about criticism by those in the Corinthian church drove Paul (v. 8) to sarcasm?
2. Have you ever accused someone of something you subsequently learned to be false? Have you dished out criticism you later realized was off base?
3. How can you guard against: an inflated opinion of your own accomplishments?
... certainty that yours is the only correct take on a Scripture passage’s intent?
... assuming you can detect the motives behind others’ actions?
4. How (vv. 6b–7) can you arrive at a realistic evaluation of your own standing?
5. When unjustly criticized, did you strike back? ... crawl into your shell? ... or what?
6. What should be the relative weight (vv. 4–5) of human blame and of divine evaluation?
7. What did Pastor Josh Moody mean when he said the way to deal with criticism is to internalize the gospel by talking to ourselves?
How (v. 4) does this promote a clear conscience?
How (v. 5) does this provide a perspective that fuels endurance?
8. Pastor Josh noted that suffering opposition paves the way to spiritual power. What are some ways (vv. 9–13) by which we are to put the gospel “on display”?
9. Why (vv. 14–21) is discipline an essential part of a father’s tough love, either in a family (see Prov.13:24), or—to protect the authenticity of the gospel—in a congregation?
10. Why must dealing with negative criticism in the church sometimes go beyond positive example to warning?