

“Heavenly Minded and Earthly Good” (1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5)

There is an old expression that states, “Don’t be so heavenly minded that you are of no earthly good.” Clever and catchy cliché, isn’t it? The only problem is that these words are unbiblical. The Bible says, “Set your mind on things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col 3:2). Contrary to popular opinion, being heavenly minded always inspires us to be *more* earthly good. Thus, our goal as Christians must be to set our minds on things above and faithfully serve the Lord.

Paul is going to teach us that *God’s approval is better than man’s applause*. In 1 Cor 3:18-4:5,¹ he will instruct us how to regard ourselves and others. He will do so by sharing two prohibitions: (1) Do not adopt the world’s wisdom and (2) do not judge God’s servants.

1. Do not adopt the world’s wisdom (3:18-23). This section refers back to 1:18-2:16 where Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world with the foolishness of God. In the following six verses Paul carefully contrasts the wisdom of this world (3:18-20)² with the wisdom of God (3:21-23). He is going to answer the question: How can we be truly wise? The answer he gives is simple—by trusting in the foolishness of God’s wisdom. In 3:18, Paul writes, **“Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks³ that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise.”** For the first time in his book, Paul calls upon his readers to do something, to change something. The key word is the word “let” (3:18). Paul will use this command two more times in this section (3:21; 4:1).⁴ In 3:18 Paul’s readers are commanded to stop deceiving⁵ themselves with worldly wisdom. Apparently, Paul believed that it was possible for Christians to be deceived because he warns each person against falling victim to self-deception. This means no one can stand before God and claim to have been inadvertently swept along in the fast-flowing current of false wisdom. Rather, one chooses to follow either “the wisdom of this world” or the wisdom of God. And each person must accept the consequences of the choice made.⁶ Additionally, Paul informs us that the danger is “among you” and does not come from outsiders who might deceive them. This section (3:18-23), like our previous section (3:16-17), demonstrates the tendency of Christians to be deceived and to be deceivers. Therefore, Paul urges his readers to turn away from attitudes the world regards as wise and to adopt God’s viewpoint so they would be truly wise.⁷ He argues that in order to become wise the Corinthians must give up their own “wisdom.”⁸ The bottom line: It is better to be God’s fool than man’s genius.

So how does a Christian become wise? By having theology and practice centered on the cross of Jesus Christ! After all, this is the fountain of wisdom. If we are consumed with the cross of Christ, we will be sacrificial servants who will die to our spouse, children, employer, and fellow believers. We will fall in love with Christ and be out of step with the world. Yet, *God’s approval is better than man’s applause*.

A church becomes wise in the same way an individual can become wise—by depending upon God’s wisdom. The world depends on promotion, prestige, and the influence of money and important people. The church depends on prayer, the power of the Spirit, humility, sacrifice, and service. The church that imitates the world may seem to succeed in time, but it will turn to ashes in eternity. The church in the book of Acts had none of the “secrets of success” that seem to be important today. They owned no property; they had no influence in government; they had no treasury (“Silver and gold have I none,” said Peter); their leaders were ordinary men without special education in the accepted schools; they held no attendance contests; they brought in no celebrities; and yet they turned the world upside down!⁹

Now will you be mocked and scorned for being God’s fool? Yes, you will! Peter Lord once said, “If you are living in a world where everyone limps, a person who walks normally is considered abnormal.”¹⁰ Our world will consider you a lunatic who is out of your mind. Yet, God insists that His worldview is the only one that will satisfy you. He will teach you the true meaning of wisdom as you depend upon Him.

The reason (“for”) that world’s wisdom must be forsaken is given in 3:19-20: **“For the wisdom of this world is foolishness¹¹ before God.¹² For it is written, ‘He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES¹³ THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS;’ and again, ‘THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS¹⁴ of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS.’”** Paul bolsters his argument in 3:19 by citing two Old Testament passages.¹⁵ The first, from Job 5:13,¹⁶ pictures a hunter stalking prey and capturing it. God catches the crafty with their own craftiness.¹⁷ The second quote Paul employs comes from Ps 94:11. It is interesting that the Psalm actually reads: “The Lord knows the thoughts of man, that they are a mere breath.” Paul’s citation is significant in that it varies slightly at two points. First, Paul exchanges the word “wise” for the word “man.” In the context of the Psalm, it becomes clear that the unbelieving man thinks himself wise when he is really foolish (see 94:2, 4, 8). The psalmist thunders against the intellectually elite and politically powerful. He calls these people, who pride themselves on their intellectual prowess, “stupid” and “senseless.” Second, Paul uses the rendering “useless,” while the translators of the Psalm use the expression “mere breath.” The point being: The wisdom of the world won’t endure the test of time. The thoughts of arrogant (wise) men are futile, or useless, because they are temporal rather than eternal. Man’s thoughts are restricted to “this age” and God’s thoughts are eternal. Man’s thoughts, even if true in this age, are not true in the next. They pass away. Merely temporal truths are thus “useless” truths, so far as eternity is concerned. In light of this we must always remember that *God’s approval is better than man’s applause.*

How can we recognize the self-deceived, self-important wisdom of this age where it has crept into our church? We see it in people who feel the need to express their opinion on virtually everything, and in those who aren’t happy unless they stand in opposition to the majority. Intellectual pride isn’t content to listen gratefully and appreciatively. It always needs to criticize. Its very nature requires it to win on any issue. It can’t stand opposition or contradiction. It responds to disagreement with condescension. Worldly wisdom also makes rash decisions without consulting God. The majority of us do not enthrone God, we enthrone common sense. We make our decisions and then ask the real God to bless our god’s decisions.¹⁸ We must be careful that we are not guilty of these patterns, and when we are that we confess our reliance upon worldly wisdom.

[In the first three verses (3:18-20) Paul has critiqued the wisdom of this world. Now in 3:21-23, he affirms the wisdom of God.]

In 3:21-23, Paul brings out his second command with the word “let.” **“So then let no one boast in men.¹⁹ For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death²⁰ or things present or things to come;²¹ all things belong to you,²² and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.”²³** “So then” marks the apostle’s conclusion to this paragraph. In light of all that he has said, Paul concludes this section by forbidding boasting in men. One of the overarching problems in Corinth was that the church was caught up in personalities. So Paul doesn’t want the church to reject God’s good gifts by not appreciating all the people God had sent to help them. All of God’s servants were God’s gifts to them. Nevertheless, we must recognize that as wonderful as many servants are, they are mere men and women whom ultimately belong to God.

In 3:22-23, Paul rattles off a list of things that can enslave us and hold us in bondage: people, the world, life and death, and the present and future. Yet, Paul states twice that “all things belong to you” (3:21-22). As Christians we have all been given all of these things for our benefit. Though all things belong to us, they are not centered on us, for all things actually and finally belong to God. Thus, in Him we possess all things, but it is only in Him that we do. This leads to the natural question: Why would we want to be limited to the wisdom of men when we have at our disposal the wisdom and resources of God Himself? God has given us everything pertaining to life and godliness. It is all at our disposal, but we must seek to reject the world’s wisdom and appropriate God’s wisdom. *God’s approval is better than man’s applause.*

During my senior year of high school, my dad took me out to *Azteca*. My dad and I agreed that we would take advantage of a buy-one-get-one-free coupon for an enchilada dinner. We also decided that we would have water to save money. When the waiter came he asked if I would like guacamole and sour cream with my enchiladas. I replied, “Yes, that would be wonderful.” He then turned to my dad and asked the same question. My dad followed my lead. When the waiter left we couldn’t help but feel good about ourselves. We were going to have an enchilada combination dinner for \$4.95. The Krell family is well known for being cheapskates. (I prefer “wise stewards.”) When the waiter finally brought our bill my dad was shocked to learn that we had been had! The waiter charged us \$4.00 for our guacamole and sour cream! We paid as much for our condiments as did for our entire meal! The Krells had been burned! We failed to ask that critical question, “Does it come with the meal?” Since that time, whenever a waiter or waitress asks me a similar question, I always ask, “Does it come with the meal?”

These verses teach us that there are a lot of blessings that come with our spiritual meal. In fact, Paul says that all things belong to us because we belong to Christ! We don’t have to miss out on anything. We don’t need the world’s wisdom...we have everything we need in God’s wisdom. And *God’s approval is better than man’s applause*.

[Paul has told us that we must not adopt the world’s wisdom. But a question still lingers: How should we regard God’s servants?]

2. Do not judge God’s servants (4:1-5). In this section, Paul challenges us to hold off on judging one another. Instead, we ought to let Jesus Christ judge His servants. Paul begins 4:1 with his third command, using the word “let:” **“Let a man²⁴ regard us²⁵ in this manner,²⁶ as servants²⁷ of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”²⁸** The Corinthians are to regard one another as “servants” and “stewards.” These two terms are very important, so we will look at them one at a time. First, this is not the common word for “servant” (*huperetes*) that is usually used in the New Testament. As a matter of fact, this is the only place in Paul’s writings where this specific word is used. It’s a word that literally means “under-rower.” It originally referred to the galley slaves who were chained to the rowing benches in the bottom tier of the Roman war ships.²⁹ By the first century the term had developed from “under-rowers” to “assistants of physicians and courts,” and so came to mean those in secondary service to persons of official position.³⁰ The apostle Paul says that he and other teachers are servants who are responsible to their Master, Jesus Christ. That’s what all of us are who are in leadership—subject to Christ and to His revealed word.³¹

How do you know if you are a godly servant? Servanthood begins where gratitude and applause ends. Are you willing to serve in thankless jobs? Are you willing to serve with a joyful attitude? Do you serve with excellence? If so, you are following in Paul’s footsteps.

The second significant term is “steward.” A steward is a servant who manages everything for his master, but who himself owns nothing. The word “steward” is very common, and everyone in the church in Corinth would have known what that word meant. In a Greek household the steward was a slave who administered all the affairs of the family. He directed the staff, and he was in charge of all the material resources that the household needed in order to function. In effect, he ran the entire household for his master. It was a position of great responsibility, and he had to be completely trusted by the master of the house. We still use that term today to refer to the men and women who serve us on airplanes—stewards and stewardesses. They have similar areas of responsibility while we’re with them on the flight. Teaching leaders in the church are not stewards of the church. Paul isn’t saying that we manage the household of faith. The phrase is very clear: We are stewards of the provisions that the household needs to be fed; that is, the mysteries of God.³² We’ve been entrusted with these important provisions, and we’re to communicate them. The mysteries of God refer to the truths of the Christian faith.

Most people would be especially careful with an expensive piece of equipment that was borrowed from the owner and had to be returned in the same condition. The fact is, this is the way God wants us to treat the resources He has given us. And since it all belongs to Him anyway, we don't need to hang on tight to our time or money or anything else when God asks us to give part of it to Him. Today, ask yourself whether you're living like the owner or like a manager.

In 4:2, Paul informs servants and stewards that they are responsible to be faithful to God. Paul writes, **“In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.”** The responsibility of the steward is to be faithful to his master.³³ A steward may not please the members of the household; he may not even please some of the other servants; but if he pleases his own master, he is a good steward.³⁴ So the main issue is not, “Is Paul popular?” or, “Is Apollos a better preacher than Paul?” The main issue is, “Have Paul, Apollos, and Peter been faithful to do the work God assigned to them?”³⁵ How we manage little things indicates what we would do if we had more. After all, why would God give dynamite to someone who can't handle a firecracker?³⁶

What does faithfulness mean?³⁷

- ***Faithfulness means excellence.*** Faithfulness doesn't necessarily mean doing more, but doing things better. Doing our best in every situation is one proof of faithfulness. It includes our financial stewardship, family responsibilities, job assignments, and ministry opportunities. God is primarily concerned with how we handle the unnoticed, everyday deeds that don't make the newspaper headlines on earth. In God's eyes little things truly are big.
- ***Faithfulness means integrity.*** Faithfulness means that we are above moral reproach at all times. Remember: God still sees us, even when no one else is watching. A store owner interviewed a young man for a job and he asked, “If I hire you to work in my store, will you be honest and truthful?” The young man answered, “I will be honest and truthful whether you hire me or not.”
- ***Faithfulness means dependability.*** A lazy worker retired and a dinner was given in his honor, to present him an award. The Toastmaster said, “As a token of our appreciation, we would like to give you this watch to serve as a constant reminder of your faithfulness to our company. It has to be wound frequently, it's always a little late, and it quits working every day at a quarter till four.” Does that describe you? Faithful people can be relied upon to fulfill their commitments. When a job is delegated to a faithful worker the boss never has to worry if the job will get done.
- ***Faithfulness means perseverance.*** Vance Havner once said, “Too many people go up like rockets and come down like rocks.” Lots of people start running the race of life with a flash, but few finish well. Others might get sidetracked or drop out of the race, but we must keep running with our eyes fixed on Jesus. Faithfulness means that we persevere to the finish line.

It is important for us to recognize that God is concerned with faithfulness, not fruitfulness. Sometimes we are so preoccupied with counting our spiritual apples and oranges that we forget to spend time watering our roots, by just serving Jesus. Try forgetting about being fruitful for a while. It will happen naturally if you let His living water soak into the depths of your soul.³⁸ *God's approval is better than man's applause.*

In 4:3-4, Paul testifies that he is not terribly concerned about the judgments of others or even his own judgment. Rather, he is supremely concerned about what Jesus Christ has to say about him. Paul writes, **“But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court;³⁹ in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.”** It mattered little to Paul how well the Corinthians or anyone else thought he was carrying out his stewardship.⁴⁰ His personal evaluations of his own performance were irrelevant too. What did matter to him was God's estimation of his service. Paul did not give much time and attention to introspection, though he sought to live with a good conscience before God. Rather, he concentrated on doing the job God had put before him to the best of his ability.

The reason that Paul does not judge himself is given in 4:4: As far as Paul knew he was serving God faithfully. However, he realized that his conscience might not be as sensitive as it should be.⁴¹ Only his Master had the insight as well as the authority to judge him.⁴² Sometimes we do not really know ourselves. There can be a fine line between a clear conscience and a self-righteous attitude, so we must beware. One would hope that every leader could line himself or herself up with Paul's perspective here. Sometimes we spend too much time worrying about what others might say about how we are doing. On this side of heaven others will either praise us or criticize us. It is all too easy to be encouraged or devastated over the opinions of others. Yet, we must learn not to take ourselves very seriously. Instead, we must fear God and take Him seriously (2 Cor 5:10-11). It is His evaluation that ultimately matters. *God's approval is better than man's applause.*

In 4:5, Paul concludes our passage with these instructive words: **“Therefore do not go on passing judgment⁴³ before the time,⁴⁴ but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness⁴⁵ and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each⁴⁶ man's praise will come to him from God.”⁴⁷** Since only one Person has enough insight and is authoritative enough to pass final judgment, it is unwise for us to try to do so. Let there be no “pre-judgment seat judgment!”⁴⁸ Of course we must make judgments from time to time, but we should always do so with the knowledge that our understanding is imperfect. God will judge our lives at the judgment seat of Christ.⁴⁹

In light of this sobering reality, we must strive to have godly motives and intentions. Keep in mind, if the devil can't get us to do wrong, he will tempt us to do right for the wrong reasons. If you are serving the Lord, *why* are you doing it? Is it out of obligation? Has someone pressured you to do it? Is it because you'll feel guilty if you don't? Do you want others to see you serve so they will admire you? All of these motives are wrong. God wants us to serve out of a heart that burns with love for Him.⁵⁰

As we serve Christ faithfully with the purest motives possible, He promises us “praise” at the judgment seat of Christ. This praise will resound forever. It will mean more to you than anything you've ever received in this life. *God's approval is better than man's applause.*

Last month, Hartford Insurance ran a new marketing campaign encouraging Baby Boomers to “Prepare to Live” in retirement. These 15 second spots have a red hart stag that serves as a symbol of stability, strength, and wisdom. The message of these commercials is: You can't depend on social security benefits, defined pension programs, or retiree health benefits to fund your retirement. Furthermore, you are unsure about your ability to pay for rising health care costs in retirement. Through this campaign Hartford Insurance is encouraging Baby Boomers to understand their personal financial picture and goals, and take control of their financial future. By seeking education and facts about their own situation, they can prepare with confidence for what should be one of the most rewarding times in their lives—their retirement.

Likewise, Jesus says, I too want you to prepare to live, not merely in this life but in the next life! Will you recognize the importance of rejecting the world's wisdom and refusing to judge my servants? If so, you will be prepared to live, for *God's approval is better than man's applause.*

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Scripture Reference

1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5
Job 5:12-13; Psalm 94:11
Matthew 23:8-12
Mark 9:35; 10:42-45
Luke 12:42; 16:8-12
Romans 2:25-29
1 Peter 1:7

Study Questions

1. Over the course of my Christian life, how have I trusted in the world's wisdom (3:18-20)? How am I presently struggling with adopting the attitudes, views, and actions of the world? In what one area of my life do I need to adopt God's foolishness, which leads to wisdom (e.g., marriage, family, finances, work, ministry)?
2. Have I ever been guilty of esteeming various Christian leaders over God (3:21-23)? If so, how has this happened? What has it looked like? Am I currently guilty of prioritizing various individuals in my life over God (e.g., spouse, children, parent, employer)?
3. What is my view of Christian leaders (4:1-3)? Do I have a healthy view of those in authority? Am I balanced in my perspective (i.e., acknowledging their sinful frailty, yet respecting their service and position)? Where am I out of balance? What can I do to adjust my mindset?
4. If I am a leader in the local church how do I see myself (4:1-5)? To what degree do I acknowledge that I am a humble servant and steward? How have I squelched the pride that lurks within me? Where am I most prone to struggle with pride?
5. How can I prepare for Christ's judgment of my life and ministry (4:4-5)? Do I feel ready to stand before Christ and give an account of my life and service? If so, why do I have this confidence? How have I been faithful? Where do I still have room for growth? Who can help me progress in my Christian maturity?

Notes

¹ There is an unfortunate chapter division here. It seems clear that both of these sections belong together (3:18-23; 4:1-5), since both begin with a third person singular command: “Let no man deceive himself” (3:18) and “Let a man regard us in this manner” (4:1).

² These three verses (3:18-20) form a counterpoint to 1:18-25, where Paul declares that what God does looks foolish to the world. Here the tables are turned, and what the clever thinks and does looks foolish to God. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 152.

³ Paul uses the phrase, “If anyone thinks” as a gentle reproof (see 1 Cor 8:2 11:16; 14:37; cf. 10:12; Jas 1:26). David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 123.

⁴ Bob Deffinbaugh, “A Call to Repentance” (1 Cor 3:18-23): http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=786.

⁵ Paul uses the verb “deceive” (*exapatao*) in Rom 7:11; 16:18; 1 Cor 3:18; 2 Cor 11:3; 2 Thess 2:3; and 1 Tim 2:14. No other authors of Scripture use this word.

⁶ Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “1 Corinthians” in the *Revised Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, awaiting publication), 87.

⁷ Morris writes, “If anyone is to have real spiritual insight he must become what the world calls ‘a fool’. The true wisdom is found in renouncing ‘the wisdom of this world’...The worldly wise, whom the Corinthians held in such high esteem, are totally unable to penetrate the divine mysteries. These are open to the humblest man of faith but are forever hid from the wise of this world.” Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1958] 1990), 68.

⁸ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians: Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 58.

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Dynamic, Be Daring*, Electronic Ed.

¹⁰ Kent Crockett’s Sermon Illustrations, www.kentcrockett.com.

¹¹ The only other four uses of “foolishness” (*moria*) in the NT are in 1 Cor 1:18, 21, 23; and 2:14.

¹² In 1:18-25 Paul had said that the wisdom of God, namely Christ crucified, is foolishness to the world. Here he made the same point in reverse: the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God’s sight.

¹³ Mare writes, “The graphic word ‘catches’ vividly portrays the idea that men in their craftiness are no match for God—they set up their schemes of salvation against God’s but he catches them up short.” Harold W. Mare, “1 Corinthians” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1976] 2001), Electronic Ed.

¹⁴ The Greek word for “reasonings” is *dialogismos*, from which we get the word dialogue. The wisdom of the world can be very dialogical or conversational; it can sound very reasonable. But God says at the end of 3:20 that it ends up being “useless.”

¹⁵ In citing OT Scriptures Paul demonstrates that what he is saying is not merely personal opinion. Paul used OT quotations previously in 1 Cor 1:19, 31; and 2:9, 16.

¹⁶ This appears to be the only citation of Job in the NT. The wording here differs from the LXX, suggesting that Paul is familiar with and producing his own translation from the Hebrew. The Job 5:13 quotation (“he catches the wise in their craftiness”) comes from one of Eliphaz’s speeches. Like Job’s other “friends,” Eliphaz is not always a reliable interpreter of God’s perspective. But this particular statement proves true as a generalization, even if Eliphaz seems to have misapplied it to Job.

¹⁷ Paul uses this term negatively in 2 Cor 4:2; 11:3; and Eph 4:14.

¹⁸ Preaching Today citation: Oswald Chambers in “The Oswald Chambers Devotional Reader.” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 36, no. 9.

¹⁹ This command harkens back to 1 Cor 1:29, 31, where the apostle also ruled out all boasting except for boasting in the Lord.

²⁰ Morris writes, “Paul’s saying ‘to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain’ (Phil 1:21) gives us the clue to his reference to *life* and *death*. Life in Christ is the only life, and the Christian possesses this. To the unbeliever, *death* is the end of all things. But Christ has overcome death and for the Christian it is not disaster, but ‘gain’.” Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 70.

²¹ This list is similar to the one in Rom 8:38-39 and, as there, is a way of saying “everything.” The figure of speech is a merism. In a merism two objects that are poles apart stand for everything between them. Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on 1 Corinthians* 2005 ed.: <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/1corinthians.pdf>, 37.

²² Morris writes, “Paul turns the thoughts of the Corinthians away from the wisdom of men which had meant so much to them, to the far greater treasures that they really possessed in Christ.” Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 70. Thiselton remarks, “It may be that some at Corinth were claiming a particular teacher as their

own – ‘he is our man’. Paul turns their catch phrase around and declares that all Christian ministry is Christian ministry *for them*. “Each minister is perceived as part of a comprehensive range of gifts and resources, all lavished upon them as a corporeity or plurality to be used without picking and choosing the gifts.” Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 326.

²³ Even Christ belongs to God, in the sense of being under the authority and protection of the Father (cf. 8:6; 11:3; 15:28). This is functional rather than ontological subordination. All things belong to the Christian because the Christian belongs to Christ, and all things are His.

²⁴ Here the word “man” (*anthropos*) is both indefinite and general, “one”; “a person” (BDAG *anthropos* s.v. 4.a.γ).

²⁵ The pronoun “us” (*humas*) in 4:1 is undoubtedly a reference to the Apostles, particularly the ones mentioned in 3:22 of the previous chapter—Paul, Apollos, and Peter. Nevertheless, the principles given here apply indirectly to all ministers, both paid and unpaid.

²⁶ The word translated “in this manner” (*houtos*) refers back to 3:21-23 and 3:5-9, which mention servants and co-workers corresponding to servants and stewards. See Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 125.

²⁷ Paul used a different word for servants here (*huperetai*) than he did in 3:5 (*diakonoi*). It is significant that this term is employed by Paul, especially in the light of Paul’s testimony in Acts 26:16: “But arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister [*hupereten*] and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you.” The first words our Lord spoke to Paul on that Damascus road characterized his ministry as an apostle as that of lowly service. No doubt this influenced his choice of words in 4:1. “The word [*huperetas*] originally denotes those who ... in the lower tier of a trireme, and then came to mean those who do anything under another, and hence simply ‘underlings.’” Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), 74.

²⁸ The New Testament word “mystery” does not mean something mysterious (as in the English word). Instead it refers to what can’t be made known only by divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God. The “mysteries of God” indicates those mysteries of salvation God has revealed in his Word (Rom 16:25; Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4; 1 Tim 3:16—the things man cannot discover by his human wisdom).

²⁹ They were the lowest, most menial and despised slaves in the empire. If you saw the movie *Ben Hur*, you may remember his stint as an under-rower of the Roman empire, chained to the benches, under the command of the captain of the ship, who told them when to row, when to stop rowing, when to speed up, when to slow down. When a right turn was to be made, those on the left side had to quit rowing, and vice versa. Those slaves did nothing without receiving a command from the captain of the ship. And no galley slave was ever exalted above any other galley slave. They had a common rank, and it was the lowest rank. They had the hardest labor, the cruelest punishment, the least appreciation, the most hopeless existence of all slaves in the empire. Doug Goins, “A Crisis in Ministry”: <http://www.pbc.org/library/files/html/4516.html>.

³⁰ William F. Orr and James Arthur Walter, *1 Corinthians: A New Translation* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 177.

³¹ Paul has already made this point clearly. In 3:5-7 he says, “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.” It’s the word of God that is life giving, not the teachers. As God’s servant I have to be a galley slave of the Scriptures, a minister of the Word of God.

³² Paul has already introduced us to “the mysteries of God.” In 1 Cor 2:7 he is talking about his teaching ministry in Corinth: “...We speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory...” This mysterious, hidden wisdom isn’t understood by the natural man apart from Jesus Christ. It can be known only through divine revelation. It is the biblical deposit of truth that contains the secrets of life. So a teacher or a preacher in this household of faith is to take God’s revealed word and dispense it to the household. We’re to administer all of it, to hold nothing back.

³³ Cf. Matt 25:14-30; Luke 16:1-13; 19:11-27; and 1 Pet 4:10.

³⁴ Cf. Rom 14:4 where Paul writes, “Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

³⁵ Jesus had this same test in mind when He told the parable recorded in Luke 12:41-48. If a servant of God is faithful in his personal life, in his home, and in his ministry of the Word, then he is a good steward and will be adequately rewarded.

³⁶ Kent Crockett, *Making Today Count for Eternity* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 150.

³⁷ This comes from Crockett, *Making Today Count for Eternity*, 154-155.

³⁸ Charles R. Swindoll, *Strong Reproofs for a Scandalous Church: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1:1-6:11* (Fullerton, CA: Insight for Living, 1988), 64.

³⁹ The Greek idiom translated “by any human court” refers to having one’s day in court. The phrase is literally translated “by any human day” and is to be contrasted with “the Day” (1:8; 3:13; 5:5). David W.J. Gill, “1 Corinthians” in *Zondervan Illustrated Biblical Background Commentary: Vol 3 Romans to Philemon* edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 124.

⁴⁰ Morris writes, “The Christian is to be judged by his Master. His own views on himself are as irrelevant as those of anyone else. This needs emphasis in a day when many are tempted to be introspective. Often they think that they themselves know just what their spiritual state is and just what their service for God has effected. The result may depress unduly or exalt above measure. But it is not our task to pass such judgments. We should get on with the job of serving the Lord. This does not mean that there is no place for times of heart searching and rigid self-scrutiny with a view to more whole-hearted and more efficient service. It is an attempt to anticipate the judgment of the Lord that Paul is condemning.” Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 73.

⁴¹ Paul told Felix in Acts 24:16: “In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men.”

⁴² Morris writes, “Paul is saying that he is not aware of any great matter in which he has failed in his stewardship. But he does not rest his confidence in that...Paul’s acquittal does not stem from his own estimate of his work. The assessment is made by the Lord.” Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 73. Thiselton writes, “Hence Paul trustfully leaves everything in the hands of God who alone has competency to judge in an absolute, irrevocable sense. Neither other people’s verdicts nor one’s own self-awareness can penetrate unconscious motives and stance: everything, these included, are left with God.” Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 341.

⁴³ How can Paul instruct us to cease judging, when we know there are times when we must judge? What is wrong with the Corinthians’ judging that might not be wrong with other judgments? Let us pause for a moment to consider what the Bible as a whole has to say on the subject of judging. We are required to judge many things. Let me mention some of them. The book of Proverbs is written to enable us to discern character, and various character types are vividly described: the naive, simple or gullible, the fool, the sluggard, and the scoffer. Contrasted with these is the wise. We are to deal with a person according to their character, and thus we must judge character, based upon the descriptions given in Scripture. We are to judge sin, which is clearly defined in the Scriptures, and clearly evident in our life (1 Corinthians 11:17-31) and in the life of another (1 Corinthians 5). We are also to make judgments on spiritual matters involving believers (1 Corinthians 6). We are to judge the doctrinal truth of what we are taught (Acts 17:10-11).

There are also things we must not judge. We are not to judge the convictions of a brother in the Lord, since these are not matters of biblically defined sin, but of liberties (Rom 14:4). Neither are we to judge or speak against a brother in any matter which the Scriptures have not defined as sin, and for which we have no biblical support. To do so is to place ourselves above the Word of God and to pass judgment on God’s law and God, the Lawgiver and the Judge (Jas 4:11-12). Deffinbaugh, “A Call to Repentance.”

⁴⁴ In contrast to *chronos*, which generally denotes chronological time, *kairos* means time in the sense of “opportunity” or “appointed moment.” Verbrugge, “1 Corinthians,” 93.

⁴⁵ “The things hidden in the darkness” (*ta krupta tou skotous*) are the acts and motives concealed in the inner recesses of a person’s mind and heart. In Hebrew poetic style (cf: Ps18:10; 22:1), Paul says the Lord will “expose the motives of men’s hearts” in explanation of his statement “the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness.”

⁴⁶ Wallace suggests the rendering, “...then **the** praise will come to each one from God.’ A smoother translation would be, ‘then praise will come to each one from God,’ but this would miss the point of the article: each individual believer is to receive specific praise. The idea is “each one will receive his or her praise from God.” Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 217.

⁴⁷ Barrett writes, “He [Paul] says nothing here about those who will receive not praise but blame [cf. 1 John 2:28]; he is still thinking in terms of the Corinthian situation, in which some have praise for Paul, some for Apollos, some for Cephas.” C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians: Harper’s New Testament Commentaries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 104.

⁴⁸ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “1 Corinthians,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. Edited by Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 1235.

⁴⁹ If Paul's references to his judgment by God in his epistles are any measure of how he regarded that event, he took it very seriously and thought about it often (cf. 2 Cor 1:14; 5:10; Phil 2:16; 1 Thess 2:19-20; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8; et al.). Constable, *1 Corinthians*, 39.

⁵⁰ Crockett, *Making Today Count for Eternity*, 82.