

Challenges Christians Face

The Faithful Minister

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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The Faithful Minister¹

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is a clear understanding of the characteristics of faithful ministers. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "The Faithful Minister."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5:

¹ This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4:1–5)

Introduction

I had been an Associate Pastor for about a year when I contracted chicken pox. Since I had chicken pox as a child this was the second time I had the illness. You may have heard people say that getting chicken pox as an adult is very hard; let me assure you that they are right! I was miserable! I just wanted to die, which was not what my new bride wanted to hear!

I had pox marks all over my body, including my face. I did not shave as I did not want to create scabs on my face. Finally, af-

¹ Much of the material for this sermon is from John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 95–105.

ter more than two weeks I felt better and was able to go back to work. But I thought that I might as well grow a beard since I had a good start on it.

I don't grow a nice-looking beard. I have what is known as an "Apache" beard—a patch here and a patch there!

Finally, after about 6 months I shaved off my beard. I could not believe the comments after I shaved my beard off. Everyone was so glad that I had shaved off my beard! Apparently, people would comment every Sunday at lunch about how bad my beard looked! Someone even went so far as to say that instead of having roast beef for lunch each Sunday, they would have "roast Freddy"!

Over the years I have learned that the appearance of pastors is not the only thing that Christians evaluate. Christians constantly evaluate their pastors. And all kinds of criteria are used to evaluate their pastors, such as success, influence, giftedness, effectiveness, and so on. Pastor John MacArthur says that "some magazines periodically make surveys and write up extensive reports, carefully ranking the pastors by church membership, attendance at worship services, sizes of church staff and Sunday school, academic and honorary degrees, books and articles written, numbers of messages given at conferences and conventions, and so on." And then he concludes with this challenging statement, "As popular as that practice may be, it is exceedingly offensive to God."²

In today's passage Paul focuses our attention on the characteristics of faithful ministers. He sets before us the characteristics of the faithful minister of God.

Lesson

And so, in today's lesson we learn about the characteristics of the faithful minister of God.

Let's use the following outline for today's lesson:

1. The Identity of the Minister (4:1)
2. The Requirement of the Minister (4:2)

² John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 95.

3. The Evaluation of the Minister (4:3-5)

I. The Identity of the Minister (4:1)

First, let's examine the identity of the minister.

Paul said in verse 1a, **“This is how one should regard us. . . .”**

Who is the **“us”** to whom Paul is referring? **Us** refers back to Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (i.e., Peter) in the previous paragraph (1 Corinthians 3:22). And it also refers, by extension, to all “God’s fellow workers” that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 3:9.

So Paul is about to give criteria for identifying true ministers of God. The identity of true ministers should not be determined by the criteria of our culture, community, or even our church. The identity of true ministers is not based on success, influence, giftedness, effectiveness, popularity, personality, degrees, books sold, numbers, and so on. The identity of true ministers should be determined by the criteria given to us in the Word of God.

So, what is the identity of true ministers of God?

A. *Ministers Are Servants of Christ (4:1b)*

First, ministers are servants of Christ.

Paul said in verse 1b: **“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ. . . .”**

Servants (*hupēretēs*) means literally, “under rowers,” originally indicating the lowest galley slaves, the ones rowing on the bottom tier of a ship. They were the most menial, unenvied, and despised of slaves. From that meaning the term came to refer to subordinates of any sort, to those under the authority of another.

Christian ministers are first and above all else **servants of Christ**. In everything they are subordinate and subject to him. They are called to serve people in Christ’s name; but they cannot serve people rightly unless they first serve their Lord rightly. And they cannot serve him rightly unless they see themselves rightly: as

his under-slaves, his menial servants.

To look first of all at the needs of people is to fail people as well as to fail the Lord. A minister who becomes so occupied with helping his congregation and community that he spends little time in the Word is unable to meet those people's deepest needs, because he has neglected his greatest resource for correctly knowing and adequately meeting those needs. That usually leads to compromising God's truth for the sake of peoples' desires. Before all else he must be a servant of Jesus Christ, "serving the Lord with all humility" (Acts 20:19). Then, and only then, can he best serve people.

Paul, though an apostle, considered himself to be a *hupēretēs*, a galley slave, of his Lord, and he wanted everyone else to consider him, and all of God's ministers, as that. Galley slaves were not exalted one above the other. They had a common rank, the lowest. They had the hardest labor, the cruelest punishment, the least appreciation, and in general the most hopeless existence of all slaves. As Paul had already written, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants [*diakonoī*] through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each" (3:5). A minister of Christ can be useful only as the Lord gives opportunity and power: "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (3:7).

So, first of all, ministers are servants of Christ.

B. Ministers Are Stewards of the Mysteries of God (4:1c)

Second, ministers are stewards of the mysteries of God.

Paul said in verse 1c: "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ **and stewards of the mysteries of God.**"

The Greek word for **stewards** (*oikonomos*) literally means "house manager," a person placed in complete control of a household. The steward supervised the property, the fields and vineyards, the finances, the food, and the other servants on behalf of his master.

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Peter speaks of all Christians as “good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10), but ministers are stewards in an especially important way. The minister, “as God’s steward, must be above reproach” (Titus 1:7), because he is entrusted with proclaiming **the mysteries of God**.

The word “mystery (*mustērion*),” as used in the New Testament, is that which was hidden and can be known only by divine revelation. As a steward of God’s mysteries, a minister is to take God’s revealed Word and dispense it to God’s household.

He is to dispense all of God’s Word, holding nothing back. Paul could tell the Ephesian elders, “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. . . for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:20–21, 27). That which is profitable is “all Scripture” (2 Timothy 3:16).

The reason so many Christians have spiritual malnutrition is that so many preachers dispense an unbalanced diet of biblical truth. What they preach may be scriptural, but they do not preach the full counsel, the whole purpose, of God.

Pastor John MacArthur shares the story of a magazine interview of a certain well-known pastor. The gist of his statement was:

I decided that the pulpit was no longer to be a teaching platform but an instrument of spiritual therapy. I no longer preach sermons; I create experiences. I don’t have time to write a systematic theology to give a solid theological basis for what I intuitively know. What I intuitively believe is right. Every sermon has to begin with the heart. If you ever hear me preaching a sermon against adultery, you’ll know what my problem is. If you ever hear me preaching a sermon about the coming of Jesus Christ, you’ll know that’s where I am heart-wise. It so happens I’m not hung up on either of those areas so I’ve never preached a sermon on either one. I could not in print or in public deny the virgin birth of Christ or the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ or the return of Christ.

But when I have something I can't comprehend, I just don't deal with it.³

That is the description of a totally corrupted and perverted ministry. Those who listen to that man are not hearing all God has to say. Rather than bringing men to God, he is standing between men and God. God's Word is explicit about adultery, the virgin birth of Jesus, and his second coming. God's ministers are not required to understand fully those truths, but to proclaim them fully and faithfully. Otherwise they will be "like so many, peddlers of God's word" (2 Corinthians 2:17), selling a cheapened gospel and a cheapened Bible, made more palatable by removing essential truth. Acceptance of such a huckstered message may be damning.

A minister who does not study the Word cannot properly teach the Word. He cannot handle accurately that which he does not know.

So, first of all, ministers are servants of Christ. And second, ministers are stewards of the mysteries of God.

II. The Requirement of the Minister (4:2)

Second, let's look at the requirement of the minister.

Paul said in verse 2: **"Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy."**

The Greek word (*pistos*) for **trustworthy** refers to someone who is "faithful, trustworthy, dependable, and reliable."⁴ A steward is entrusted with his master's household and possessions, and he is expected to manage both well, to his master's satisfaction.

The overarching, all-encompassing requirement that God has for a minister is to be **trustworthy**. God requires that ministers be consistently obedient to his Word, unwavering in their commitment to be faithful. He does not require brilliance or cleverness or

³ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 98.

⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1996), 376.

creativity or popularity. He can use servants with those qualities, but only **trustworthiness** is absolutely essential. **It is**, as Paul said, **required**.

Servanthood and stewardship are inseparable from faithfulness. An unfaithful servant or an untrustworthy steward is a self-contradiction. “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?” Jesus asked. “Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes” (Matthew 24:45–46). When the Lord returns, the only absolute requirement by which he will judge his ministers is trustworthiness: were they true to their Lord’s commands?

God supplies his Word, his Spirit, his gifts, and his power. The only thing that the faithful minister supplies is his faithfulness in using those resources. The work is demanding but is basically simple: taking God’s Word and feeding it faithfully to his people—dispensing the mysteries of God, proclaiming the hidden truths he has made known.

The best that any minister can be is faithful, which is just fulfilling the basic requirement.

III. The Evaluation of the Minister (4:3-5)

And third, let’s observe the evaluation of the minister.

When it comes to the evaluation of the minister, Paul said that there were three groups who evaluated the ministry of the minister. Two of them did not really count; only one evaluation really counted.

So, let’s look briefly at each evaluation in turn.

A. The Evaluation by Others (4:3a)

First, let’s look at the evaluation by others.

Paul said in verse 3a: **“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.”**

Paul made it clear that it was **a very small thing** that his ministry was evaluated by the Corinthians.

It should be **a very small thing** to ministers when their ministry or spiritual life is criticized or praised, whether by fellow Christians, **by any human court**, or any other of human tribunal. Ministers can benefit greatly from the counsel of a wise, spiritual friend, and sometimes even from the criticisms of unbelievers. But no human being is qualified to determine the legitimacy, quality, or faithfulness of a minister's work for the Lord. Matters of outward sin are to be judged as 1 Timothy 5:19–21 indicates. But apart from the discipline of sinning ministers, no-one can make an absolutely accurate judgment as to the faithfulness of heart, mind, and body of any minister of God.

A caring minister cannot be insensitive to the feelings, needs, and opinions of the people he serves. He should not try to be. A sincere word of appreciation after a sermon is encouraging, and reflects spiritual concern and growth in the listener's life. A word of helpful criticism can be a needed corrective and even a blessing. But no minister can remain faithful to his calling if he lets his congregation, or any other human beings, decide how true his motives are or whether he is working within the Lord's will. Because their knowledge and understanding of the facts are imperfect, their criticisms and compliments are imperfect. In humility and love, God's minister must not allow himself to care about other people's evaluations of his ministry.

B. The Evaluation by Himself (4:3b-4a)

Second, let's look at the evaluation by himself.

Paul said in verses 3b-4a: **“In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.”**

A minister must not allow himself to care about his own evaluation of his ministry. All of us are naturally inclined to build ourselves up in our own minds. We all look into rose-colored mir-

rors. Even when we put ourselves down, especially in front of others, we often are simply appealing for recognition and flattery. The mature minister does not trust his own judgment in such things any more than he trusts the judgment of others. He agrees with Paul that his own evaluation may be as unreliable as that of anyone else.

Paul knew of no serious sin or deficiency in his own life. **“For I am not aware of anything against myself”** (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:12). But he knew he could be wrong in that assessment; even as an apostle he could be wrong about his own heart. He, too, needed to remember to take heed when he stood, lest he should fall (1 Corinthians 10:12). So he continued explaining to the Corinthians, **“But I am not thereby acquitted.”** He was not proud that he knew of nothing wrong, and he did not worry because he might be mistaken. His own evaluation, favorable or unfavorable, made no difference to the way in which he carried out his ministry.

C. The Evaluation by God (4:4b-5)

And third, let’s look at the evaluation by God.

Paul said in verses 4b: **“It is the Lord who judges me.”**

The only evaluation that makes a difference is the Lord’s. **“It is the Lord who judges me.”** Only his evaluation counts. Paul had long followed the counsel he gave to Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself *to God* as one approved” (2 Timothy 2:15). He was not concerned about presenting himself to others for approval, or even to himself for approval, but only to his Lord for approval.

A minister serves his people spiritually only when he is a faithful servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God. And God alone is the judge of the true spiritual value of that service.

Paul concluded his comments with verse 5: **“Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.”**

Conclusion

Let me close with the following application: *Be careful how you evaluate ministers of God.*

All of us evaluate people all the time. It is part of human nature.

When you go to a movie with some friends, what is the first thing you ask after the movie? You ask, “What did you think about the movie?” You talk about the plot and the drama and so on, and after a short while you start evaluating the performance of the various actors. In fact, once every year an Academy Award is given to actors in various categories such as best male actor, best female actress, best supporting male actor, best supporting female actress, and so on. That is all good and well. And there is a place for that.

But when it comes to evaluating Christian ministry, be careful how you evaluate ministers of God. The tendency is to evaluate ministers based on success, influence, giftedness, effectiveness, popularity, personality, degrees, books sold, numbers, and so on.

However, there is only one criteria by which to evaluate a minister of God. That criterion is *trustworthiness*, which is also known as *faithfulness*. And ultimately, only God’s evaluation is the one that counts.

God has given ministers his Word, his Spirit, his gifts, and his power. Ministers must faithfully use the resources that God has supplied. They are to preach and teach in such a way as to gather and perfect the saints. It is very simple, but extremely demanding. That is their calling.

So, may God help us to evaluate the ministry of God’s ministers by using the correct criteria for evaluation. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAAYER:

Our Father, we who are ministers cry out to you to make us trustworthy and faithful—like the apostle Paul was.

And we who are followers cry out to you for ministers who will be trustworthy and faithful. Help us not to use the wrong criteria to evaluate the faithful minister of God. But help us to look for men who study and proclaim your Word in the power of the Holy Spirit, using the gifts that you have given to them.

And may the end result be that your name is glorified and your kingdom advanced.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, pray that God will enable you to pray for faithful ministers of God!