CRAWFORD BIBLE COMMENTARY

BIBLE STUDY

1 Corinthians Chapter 4 — Faithfulness in God's Household

A Verse-by-Verse Bible Study from the Crawford Standard Bible

Introduction

1 Corinthians Chapter 4 brings Paul's long answer about divisions to a close.

For three chapters, Paul has been dealing with a church that was proud of its leaders, proud of its wisdom, and proud of itself.

In Chapter 3, he told them that leaders are only servants and that God gives the growth.

Now he explains how the church should think about those servants.

They are **servants of Christ.**

They are **stewards** in God's household.

And the one thing required of a steward is faithfulness.

This means the Corinthians were not qualified to judge Paul.

Neither was any human court.

Not even Paul himself.

Only the Lord can judge, and He will do it when He comes.

Then Paul does something unexpected.

He uses sharp irony.

The Corinthians acted as if they were already kings.

They felt rich, wise, strong, and honored.

Meanwhile, the apostles were hungry, poorly dressed, beaten, homeless, and treated like the garbage of the world.

Paul is not complaining.

He is showing them what true Christian leadership looks like.

It looks like the cross.

Finally, Paul's tone changes.

He speaks as a father to his children.

He urges them to imitate him.

He sends Timothy to remind them of his way of life.

And he warns the proud that he is coming.

Will he come with a rod of discipline?

Or with love and a gentle spirit?

That choice was up to them.

The chapter moves through five movements:

- Ministers and Stewards (verses 1–5).
- Pride and Humility (verses 6–8).
- Apostles as Spectacles (verses 9–13).
- A Father's Warning (verses 14–17).
- The Kingdom in Power (verses 18–21).

The central truth of 1 Corinthians 4 is:

God's servants are stewards who must prove faithful to Him, and since everything we have is received from God, the true mark of His people is not pride but humble, suffering faithfulness.

I. SERVANTS OF CHRIST

1 Corinthians 4:1 — “Stewards of the Mysteries of God”

“So then, people ought to regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

Paul tells the church how to think of its leaders.

Not as celebrities.

Not as party heads.

But as **“servants of Christ.”**

The word Paul uses here was used for an assistant who worked under someone else's orders.

The servant did not set the plan.

He carried it out.

Paul also calls them **“stewards.”**

A steward was a household manager.

He was often a slave himself.

But the master trusted him with the household's resources.

He managed what belonged to someone else.

What were the apostles trusted with?

“The mysteries of God.”

This is the gospel, the hidden wisdom of God that has now been revealed in Christ.

The apostles did not own the message.

They were trusted to manage it faithfully.

Cross References

Titus 1:7

> An overseer manages God's household, so he must be blameless. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered, not a heavy drinker, not violent, and not greedy for money.

1 Peter 4:10

> Each of you has received a gift. Use it to serve one another, as good managers of God's grace in its many forms.

1 Corinthians 3:5

> What, after all, is Apollos? What is Paul? We are only servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord gave each of us our work.

Spiritual Principle

Christian leaders are managers of God's truth, not owners of it.

Key Truth

Every believer is a steward of something God has entrusted to them.

Our gifts, our time, our money, and the gospel itself belong to God.

II. REQUIRED TO BE FAITHFUL

1 Corinthians 4:2 — The One Requirement

“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”

What does a master want most from a steward?

Not cleverness.

Not popularity.

Not impressive speech.

Faithfulness.

The Corinthians were judging leaders by how well they spoke and how wise they seemed.

God judges them by whether they were faithful.

Did they manage what He gave them the way He wanted?

Did they deliver the message without changing it?

Did they serve His people well?

This is a great relief to ordinary believers.

God does not require you to be famous.

He does not require you to be gifted above others.

He requires you to be faithful.

Cross References

Luke 12:42

> The Lord answered, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager whom the master puts in charge of his household servants, to give them their food at the right time?”

Luke 16:10

> Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much. Whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.

Matthew 25:21

> His master said, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You were faithful with a few things, so I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's joy.”

Spiritual Principle

God measures His servants by faithfulness, not by fame.

Application

Be faithful in the small things God has given you.

Faithfulness in little is the path to faithfulness in much.

III. NOT JUDGED BY HUMAN COURTS

1 Corinthians 4:3 — “It Matters Very Little”

“But to me it matters very little if I am judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself.”

The Corinthians were sitting in judgment on Paul.

Some liked him.

Some preferred Apollos.

Some thought Paul was not impressive enough.

Paul says their opinion **“matters very little.”**

He is not being proud.

He is not saying he does not care about them.

He is saying their verdict is not the final verdict.

Neither is the verdict of **“any human court.”**

Then Paul goes further:

“I do not even judge myself.”

Paul did not trust his own self-evaluation to be the final word either.

People can be too hard on themselves.

People can be too easy on themselves.

Only one Judge sees perfectly.

Cross References

Romans 14:4

> Who are you to judge someone else's servant? Whether he stands or falls is up to his own master. And he will stand, because the Lord is able to make him stand.

1 Samuel 16:7

> But the LORD said to Samuel, “Don't look at his appearance or how tall he is, because I have rejected him. The LORD does not see as people see. People look at the outside, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

2 Corinthians 10:18

> It is not the person who praises himself who is approved, but the person the Lord praises.

Spiritual Principle

The servant of Christ lives for an audience of One.

Application

Do not be crushed by people's criticism.

Do not be puffed up by people's praise.

Live for the Lord's approval.

IV. THE LORD IS MY JUDGE

1 Corinthians 4:4 — A Clear Conscience Is Not Enough

“My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.”

Paul was not aware of any unfaithfulness in his ministry.

“My conscience is clear.”

But he knew that a clear conscience does not prove innocence.

The conscience can be mistaken.

We may have blind spots we cannot see.

So Paul does not rest in his own feelings about himself.

“It is the Lord who judges me.”

This is both humbling and freeing.

Humbling, because the Lord sees what we miss.

Freeing, because the One who judges us is also the One who died for us.

Cross References

Psalm 143:2

> Do not bring Your servant into court, because no one alive is righteous before You.

Job 9:2

> Yes, I know this is true. But how can a person be right before God?

Romans 8:34

> Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is the One who died—more than that, who was raised to life—and He is at the right hand of God, praying for us.

Spiritual Principle

Our own conscience is a helpful witness, but it is not the final judge.

Key Truth

We are not judged by how we feel about ourselves.

We are judged by the Lord, who knows everything.

V. WAIT UNTIL THE LORD COMES

1 Corinthians 4:5 — Judge Nothing Before the Appointed Time

“Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.”

Paul draws the conclusion.

“Judge nothing before the appointed time.”

This does not mean believers should never tell right from wrong.

In the very next chapter, Paul will tell the church to judge sin in its midst.

Here he is speaking about judging the hidden worth of another servant's ministry and heart.

That judgment belongs to the Lord, and it will happen **“when the Lord comes.”**

On that day He will do two things.

He will **“bring to light what is hidden in darkness.”**

He will **“expose the motives of the heart.”**

Every secret action and every hidden motive will be seen.

And then Paul ends with a beautiful promise:

“Each will receive their praise from God.”

Paul expects that faithful servants will be praised by God Himself.

Cross References

Romans 2:16

> This will happen on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, just as my good news says.

Romans 14:10

> So why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you look down on them? We will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Daniel 2:22

> He reveals deep and hidden things. He knows what is in the darkness, and light lives with Him.

Spiritual Principle

God alone can judge the motives of the heart.

Key Truth

The praise that matters most is not the praise of people.

It is the praise that comes from God.

VI. NOT BEYOND WHAT IS WRITTEN

1 Corinthians 4:6 — Puffed Up Over Leaders

“Brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn not to go beyond what is written. Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other.”

Paul explains why he has been using himself and Apollos as examples.

It was **“for your benefit.”**

He wanted the Corinthians to learn a lesson.

“Not to go beyond what is written.”

This most likely means: Do not go beyond what Scripture teaches.

Paul had been quoting the Old Testament again and again to show that God humbles the proud.

The Corinthians were going beyond Scripture by building up human leaders.

The result was that they were **“puffed up.”**

This word pictures something swollen with air.

It looks big, but it is empty inside.

Paul will use this word several times in the letter.

It was one of the Corinthians' greatest problems.

Cross References

1 Corinthians 3:21

> So stop bragging about human leaders. Everything belongs to you.

1 Corinthians 8:1

> Now about food offered to idols: We know that “we all have knowledge.” But knowledge makes people proud, while love builds people up.

Deuteronomy 4:2

> Do not add to what I command you, and do not take anything away from it. Keep the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you.

Spiritual Principle

Staying within Scripture keeps us humble.

Spiritual Warning

Pride puffs us up, but it leaves us empty.

VII. WHAT DO YOU HAVE THAT YOU DID NOT RECEIVE?

1 Corinthians 4:7 — Three Questions That Destroy Pride

“For 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?”

This verse is one of the most powerful cures for pride in the Bible.

Paul asks three questions.

“Who makes you different from anyone else?”

If you have gifts or knowledge others do not have, who gave them to you?

“What do you have that you did not receive?”

The answer is: Nothing.

Life, breath, talent, intelligence, opportunity, salvation, spiritual gifts.

Everything was received.

“Why do you boast as though you did not?”

Boasting about a gift is like a child bragging about a present someone else bought.

If it was given, it cannot be a reason for pride.

It can only be a reason for thanks.

Cross References

James 1:17

> Every good and perfect gift comes from above. It comes down from the Father who made the lights in the sky. He does not change like shifting shadows.

John 3:27

> John answered, “A person can receive only what is given to him from heaven.”

1 Chronicles 29:14

> But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give so generously? Everything comes from You, and we have only given You what came from Your hand.

Spiritual Principle

Everything we have is a gift, so everything we have should lead to gratitude, not pride.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Grace received leaves no room for pride.

VIII. ALREADY KINGS?

1 Corinthians 4:8 — Paul's Sharp Irony

“Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you.”

Now Paul uses strong irony.

The Corinthians were acting as if they had already arrived.

“Already you have all you want!”

“Already you have become rich!”

“You have begun to reign!”

They acted as if the kingdom of God had fully come and they were already sitting on thrones.

And they were doing it **“without us”**—without the apostles who had brought them the gospel.

Then Paul's tone turns sad.

“How I wish that you really had begun to reign.”

If the kingdom had truly come in its fullness, the apostles would be reigning too.

But they were not.

They were suffering.

The Corinthians had forgotten that the Christian life in this age includes the cross before the crown.

Cross References

Revelation 3:17

> You say, “I am rich. I have become wealthy and need nothing.” But you do not realize that you are miserable, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.

Luke 6:25

> How terrible for you who are full now, because you will be hungry. How terrible for you who laugh now, because you will mourn and weep.

Hosea 13:6

> When I fed them, they were satisfied. When they were satisfied, they became proud. Then they forgot Me.

Spiritual Principle

The crown comes after the cross, not before it.

Spiritual Warning

Spiritual pride often feels like spiritual success.

The Corinthians felt full, rich, and royal.

In reality, they were in danger.

IX. A SPECTACLE TO THE WORLD

1 Corinthians 4:9 — At the End of the Procession

“For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole world, to angels as well as to human beings.”

Paul paints a picture his readers would have known well.

When a Roman general won a great victory, he led a parade through the city.

At the very end of the procession came the captives.

Many of them were condemned to die, sometimes in the arena as entertainment for the crowds.

Paul says that is how God has displayed the apostles.

Not at the front of the parade.

At the back, among those condemned to die.

They had become **“a spectacle.”**

The word is the one from which we get our word **theater.**

The whole world was watching.

Even the angels were watching.

The Corinthians wanted to be admired.

The apostles were treated like the lowest of the low.

Cross References

2 Corinthians 4:9

> We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We are knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

Hebrews 10:33

> Sometimes you were publicly mocked and mistreated, and at other times you stood beside others who were treated that way.

Romans 8:36

> As Scripture says: “For Your sake we face death all day long. We are treated like sheep led to be slaughtered.”

Spiritual Principle

Following Christ often means being on the losing side in the eyes of the world.

Key Truth

Heaven watches how God's people suffer.

Faithfulness in suffering is a testimony to angels as well as people.

X. FOOLS FOR CHRIST

1 Corinthians 4:10 — Three Sharp Contrasts

“We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored!”

Paul sets the apostles beside the Corinthians.

Fools and wise.

Weak and strong.

Dishonored and honored.

Every contrast is a gentle rebuke.

The apostles were living out the message of the cross.

The Corinthians were living by the values of Corinth.

Remember what Paul said in Chapter 1.

God chose the foolish and the weak to shame the wise and the strong.

The apostles were willing to be counted foolish and weak for Christ.

The Corinthians wanted to be counted wise and strong in the eyes of the world.

Paul is asking: Which group looks more like Jesus?

Cross References

2 Corinthians 13:9

> We are glad when we are weak and you are strong. And we pray that you will become complete.

1 Corinthians 1:27

> But God chose the things the world thinks are foolish to shame the wise. God chose the things the world thinks are weak to shame the strong.

2 Corinthians 6:8

> We serve through honor and dishonor, through bad reports and good reports. We are called liars, yet we tell the truth.

Spiritual Principle

It is better to be a fool for Christ than wise in the eyes of the world.

Application

Are you willing to look foolish for Jesus?

XI. HUNGRY, THIRSTY, AND HOMELESS

1 Corinthians 4:11 — “To This Very Hour”

“To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.”

Paul now describes the life of an apostle in plain terms.

Hungry and thirsty.

In rags.

Brutally treated.

Homeless.

Notice the words **“to this very hour.”**

This was not a past season.

It was still happening as Paul wrote the letter.

Paul was not describing a failed ministry.

He was describing a faithful one.

He was following a Master who Himself had no place to lay His head.

Cross References

2 Corinthians 11:27

> I have worked hard and often gone without sleep. I have been hungry and thirsty and often without food. I have been cold and without enough clothing.

Romans 8:35

> Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, hardship, persecution, hunger, nakedness, danger, or violent death?

Matthew 8:20

> Jesus answered, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.”

Spiritual Principle

Hardship is not proof that God has abandoned His servant.

Key Truth

Comfort is not the measure of faithfulness.

Many of God's most faithful servants have suffered the most.

XII. WORKING, BLESSING, ENDURING

1 Corinthians 4:12 — The Way of Christ

“We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it.”

Paul continues the description.

“We work hard with our own hands.”

In Corinth, Paul worked as a tentmaker alongside Aquila and Priscilla.

Greek culture often looked down on manual labor.

Respected teachers expected to be supported.

But Paul worked with his hands so that he would not be a burden and so that no one could say he preached for money.

Then Paul describes how the apostles responded to mistreatment.

“When we are cursed, we bless.”

“When we are persecuted, we endure it.”

This is exactly what Jesus taught.

Love your enemies.

Bless those who curse you.

Paul was not just preaching the Sermon on the Mount.

He was living it.

Cross References

Acts 18:3

> Because Paul was a tentmaker just as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

1 Thessalonians 2:9

> Brothers and sisters, you remember our hard work and effort. We worked night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you while we preached God's good news to you.

Romans 12:14

> Bless those who persecute you. Bless them and do not curse them.

Spiritual Principle

The way we respond to mistreatment shows whether we have truly learned from Christ.

Application

The next time someone curses you, answer with a blessing.

That is the way of the cross.

XIII. THE GARBAGE OF THE WORLD

1 Corinthians 4:13 — “Right Up to This Moment”

“When we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.”

“When we are slandered, we answer kindly.”

The apostles did not fight back with insults.

They answered with gentle words.

Then Paul uses two of the strongest words he could find.

“The scum of the earth.”

“The garbage of the world.”

These words described the dirt scraped off a dirty pot or the filth wiped away and thrown out.

That is how the world treated the apostles.

The Corinthians wanted honor.

The apostles were treated like trash.

And Paul says this was still true **“right up to this moment.”**

Cross References

Lamentations 3:45

> You have made us like trash and garbage among the nations.

Matthew 5:11

> You are blessed when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil things about you because of Me.

1 Peter 2:23

> When people insulted Him, He did not insult them back. When He suffered, He did not threaten. Instead, He trusted Himself to God, who judges fairly.

Spiritual Principle

The world's opinion of God's servants is not God's opinion of them.

The world called the apostles garbage.

God called them His treasured servants.

Key Truth

Jesus was also treated as worthless.

Those who follow Him should not be surprised when they are treated the same way.

XIV. NOT TO SHAME BUT TO WARN

1 Corinthians 4:14 — “My Dear Children”

“I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children.”

Paul's tone changes completely.

After the sharp irony, he speaks with tenderness.

He did not write to **shame** them.

He wrote to **warn** them.

Shame pushes people down.

Warning lifts them up and turns them around.

And notice what he calls them:

“My dear children.”

Paul loved the Corinthians.

Even his hardest words came from a father's heart.

Cross References

1 Thessalonians 2:11

> You know that we treated each of you the way a father treats his own children.

Hebrews 12:6

> The Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He corrects everyone He accepts as His child.

Colossians 1:28

> We tell others about Christ, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we can present everyone mature in Christ.

Spiritual Principle

Loving correction aims to restore, not to humiliate.

Application

When you must correct someone, ask yourself:

Am I trying to shame this person, or to help this person?

XV. MANY GUARDIANS, ONE FATHER

1 Corinthians 4:15 — “I Became Your Father Through the Gospel”

“Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.”

Paul explains his special relationship with the Corinthians.

In a wealthy Roman household, a child might have a **guardian.**

This was usually a trusted slave who took the child to school, watched over him, and corrected him.

A child could have many guardians over the years.

But he had only one father.

The Corinthians had many teachers.

Apollos and others had helped them.

But Paul was the one who first brought them the gospel.

“In Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.”

He was their spiritual father.

Notice that it was **“in Christ Jesus”** and **“through the gospel.”**

Paul did not give them new life by his own power.

God did it through the message Paul preached.

Cross References

Galatians 4:19

> My dear children, I am again going through the pain of childbirth for you until Christ is formed in you.

Philemon 1:10

> I am appealing to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son in the faith while I was in chains.

1 Timothy 1:2

> To Timothy, my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Spiritual Principle

Teachers instruct, but spiritual fathers and mothers love, sacrifice, and stay committed.

Application

Who has been a spiritual father or mother to you?

To whom could you be a spiritual father or mother?

XVI. IMITATE ME

1 Corinthians 4:16 — A Father's Example

“Therefore I urge you to imitate me.”

Children learn by watching their parents.

So Paul urges his spiritual children:

“Imitate me.”

This is not pride.

Paul has just described what his life looked like.

Hunger.

Hard work.

Blessing those who cursed him.

Answering slander with kindness.

Being treated like garbage for Christ.

He is calling them to follow him in the way of the cross.

Later in the letter, Paul will add the key phrase:

“Follow my example, just as I follow the example of Christ.”

Paul is a safe example only because he is following Jesus.

Cross References

1 Corinthians 11:1

> Follow my example, just as I follow the example of Christ.

Philippians 3:17

> Brothers and sisters, join together in following my example. Pay attention to those who live the way we showed you.

2 Thessalonians 3:9

> We did this not because we don't have the right to receive support, but to give you an example to follow.

Spiritual Principle

The Christian life is learned by example as well as by teaching.

Application

Could you honestly say to a younger believer, “Follow my example”?

XVII. TIMOTHY, MY BELOVED SON

1 Corinthians 4:17 — A Faithful Reminder

“For this reason I have sent 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.”

Paul could not come right away.

So he sent **Timothy.**

Timothy was from Lystra.

Paul had met him on his second missionary journey.

He became Paul's closest coworker.

Paul describes him in three ways.

“My son.” Timothy was Paul's spiritual son.

“Whom I love.” Paul's affection for him was deep.

“Faithful in the Lord.” Timothy was the kind of steward God requires.

Timothy's job was to **“remind”** them of Paul's way of life in Christ.

Paul's life and Paul's teaching matched.

And his teaching was the same **“everywhere in every church.”**

Paul did not have one message for Corinth and another for somewhere else.

Cross References

2 Timothy 1:2

> To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Philippians 2:22

> But you know how Timothy has proven himself. Like a son working with his father, he has served with me in spreading the good news.

Acts 16:1

> Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra. A disciple named Timothy lived there. His mother was a Jewish believer, but his father was Greek.

Spiritual Principle

A faithful life and faithful teaching must go together.

Key Truth

Paul's example was worth imitating because it matched his message.

XVIII. SOME HAVE BECOME ARROGANT

1 Corinthians 4:18 — As If Paul Were Not Coming

“Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you.”

Paul now speaks to a specific group.

Some in Corinth had become **arrogant.**

The word is the same one Paul used in verse 6—**puffed up.**

They thought Paul was not coming back.

Maybe they thought he was afraid to face them.

Maybe they thought sending Timothy meant Paul was staying away.

With Paul gone, they felt free to act as the leaders of the church and to look down on his teaching.

Pride often grows when people think no one will hold them accountable.

Cross References

1 Corinthians 5:2

> And you are proud! Shouldn't you have been filled with grief instead, and removed from your group the man who did this?

2 Corinthians 12:20

> I am afraid that when I come, I may not find you the way I want you to be. I fear there may be fighting, jealousy, angry tempers, selfish ambition, gossip, slander, pride, and disorder.

2 Corinthians 13:2

> I already warned you when I was with you the second time, and I warn you again now that I am away: When I come again, I will not spare those who sinned before or any of the others.

Spiritual Principle

Pride grows where people think they will never have to give an account.

Spiritual Warning

The Lord's servant may be delayed.

The Lord Himself is coming.

Live as if He could arrive today.

XIX. IF THE LORD IS WILLING

1 Corinthians 4:19 — Talk or Power?

“But 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.”

Paul answers the proud.

“I will come to you very soon.”

But notice his humility:

“If the Lord is willing.”

Paul made plans, but he submitted them to God.

And when he came, he would test the arrogant.

Not by their words.

The Corinthians were good at talking.

But by their **power**—the real spiritual power of God at work in their lives.

Big talk is easy.

Real spiritual power is shown in changed lives, love, holiness, and faithfulness.

Cross References

James 4:15

> Instead, you should say, “If the Lord wants, we will live and do this or that.”

Acts 18:21

> But as he left, he promised, “I will come back to you if God wants me to.” Then he sailed from Ephesus.

Acts 19:21

> After all this happened, Paul decided, led by the Spirit, to travel through Macedonia and Achaia and then go to Jerusalem. “After I have been there,” he said, “I must also visit Rome.”

Spiritual Principle

Make your plans, but hold them in submission to God's will.

Key Truth

God is not impressed by what we say.

He looks for what His power is doing in us.

XX. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS POWER

1 Corinthians 4:20 — Not a Matter of Talk

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.”

Here is one of the great sentences of the chapter.

The Corinthians loved words.

Speeches, debates, clever arguments, and spiritual talk.

But Paul says the kingdom of God does not consist in talk.

It consists in **power.**

This is the power of the Holy Spirit.

The power that saves sinners.

The power that changes lives.

The power that produces love, humility, and holiness.

A church can be full of talk and empty of power.

Cross References

Romans 14:17

> For the kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking. It is about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 1:5

> Our good news came to you not only in words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep confidence. You know how we lived among you for your benefit.

Mark 9:1

> And He said to them, “I tell you the truth, some of the people standing here will not die before they see God's kingdom come with power.”

Spiritual Principle

The true test of faith is not what we say but what God's power produces in us.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Words describe the kingdom; power displays it.

XXI. A ROD OR A GENTLE SPIRIT?

1 Corinthians 4:21 — The Choice Is Yours

“What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?”

Paul ends the chapter with a question.

He is coming.

That is settled.

But how will he come?

With a rod of discipline?

A father who loves his children will correct them when they need it.

Or in love and with a gentle spirit?

This is clearly what Paul wanted.

Notice that both options come from love.

Discipline is also love.

But Paul preferred gentleness.

The difference would depend on how the Corinthians responded to his letter.

If they repented, he could come gently.

If they stayed proud, he would come with correction.

Cross References

Proverbs 13:24

> Whoever refuses to discipline his son hates him, but the one who loves him is careful to correct him.

2 Corinthians 10:1

> I, Paul, appeal to you by the gentleness and kindness of Christ—I who am said to be timid when I am face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away.

Galatians 6:1

> Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should gently help that person back on the right path. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

Spiritual Principle

Correction flows from love, and the response of the heart decides whether it comes gently or firmly.

Application

God also deals with His children this way.

A humble heart that responds to His word spares itself much harder correction.

XXII. SIX GREAT LESSONS FROM 1 CORINTHIANS 4

1. Faithfulness Is Required

Stewards must prove faithful.

Principle:

A steward's value is not measured by human opinion but by God's judgment.

2. Boasting Is Empty

“What do you have that you did not receive?”

Principle:

Everything we have is received from God; pride has no place in the kingdom.

3. True Apostleship Suffers

The apostles were hungry, homeless, mistreated, and treated like garbage.

Principle:

Faithful service to Christ often brings hardship and humiliation in this world.

4. Spiritual Fatherhood Matters

Paul became their father through the gospel and urged them to imitate him.

Principle:

God uses spiritual fathers and mothers to bring believers to life and to model the way of Christ.

5. The Kingdom Is Power, Not Just Words

The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.

Principle:

Empty talk is worthless unless it is backed by the transforming power of God.

6. Correction Flows from Love

Paul would come with a rod or with gentleness.

Principle:

Loving leaders prefer gentleness but will discipline when needed to protect Christ's church.

XXIII. STEWARDS IN THE ANCIENT HOUSEHOLD

Paul's picture of a steward would have been familiar to the Corinthians.

Who Was a Steward?

A household manager, often a slave, placed in charge of the master's property.

What Did He Do?

He managed the household's money, supplies, and servants.

He made sure everyone received what they needed at the right time.

What Did He Own?

Nothing.

Everything he managed belonged to his master.

What Was Required of Him?

Faithfulness.

The master needed to be able to trust him completely.

Who Judged Him?

Only the master.

Not the other servants.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Every believer is a steward in God's household: we own nothing, we manage everything for Him, and we will answer to Him alone.

XXIV. THE CORINTHIANS AND THE APOSTLES

In verses 8–13, Paul sets two pictures side by side.

How the Corinthians Saw Themselves

- Full and satisfied.
- Rich.
- Already reigning like kings.
- Wise in Christ.
- Strong.
- Honored.

How the Apostles Actually Lived

- Hungry and thirsty.
- In rags.
- Brutally treated.
- Homeless.
- Working with their hands.
- Cursed, persecuted, and slandered.
- Treated like the garbage of the world.

Key Truth

The Corinthians were living as if the crown had already come.

The apostles were living under the cross.

In this age, the path of Christ runs through the cross before it reaches the crown.

XXV. WHAT 1 CORINTHIANS 4 TEACHES ABOUT JUDGMENT

Human Judgment Is Limited

Other people cannot see the heart.

Self-Judgment Is Limited

Even a clear conscience does not prove innocence.

The Lord Is the Judge

“It is the Lord who judges me.”

Judgment Waits for His Coming

“Judge nothing before the appointed time.”

Nothing Will Be Hidden

He will bring hidden things to light and expose the motives of the heart.

Faithful Servants Will Be Praised

“Each will receive their praise from God.”

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Because the Lord will judge, we can stop living for human approval and start living for His.

XXVI. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR PERSONAL STUDY

Question 1

What is a steward, and why does Paul use that word?

A steward was a household manager trusted with what belonged to his master.

Paul uses the word to show that leaders do not own the gospel or the church.

They manage God's things for Him.

Question 2

What is the one thing required of a steward?

Faithfulness.

God does not require His servants to be impressive.

He requires them to be trustworthy.

Question 3

Why did Paul say it mattered very little if the Corinthians judged him?

Their judgment was not the final judgment.

Only the Lord's judgment counts.

Paul was not proud; he was simply living for God's approval.

Question 4

Why isn't a clear conscience enough to prove innocence?

Our conscience can be mistaken.

We may have sins and blind spots we cannot see.

Only the Lord sees perfectly.

Question 5

Does verse 5 mean Christians should never judge anything?

No.

In the next chapter, Paul tells the church to deal with open sin.

Verse 5 means we must not pass final judgment on other servants' hidden motives and the worth of their ministry.

That belongs to the Lord when He comes.

Question 6

What does “not go beyond what is written” mean?

It most likely means not to go beyond what Scripture teaches.

The Corinthians were going beyond Scripture by exalting human leaders and becoming proud.

Question 7

How does verse 7 destroy pride?

It reminds us that everything we have was received from God.

If it was a gift, we cannot boast as if we earned it.

Question 8

Why does Paul use irony in verse 8?

The Corinthians acted as if they were already kings.

Paul's irony exposes how foolish their pride was.

The apostles were still suffering, and the kingdom had not yet fully come.

Question 9

What picture does Paul use in verse 9?

A Roman victory parade, where captives condemned to die marched at the very end.

The apostles were treated like those captives, a spectacle to the world and to angels.

Question 10

How did the apostles respond to mistreatment?

When cursed, they blessed.

When persecuted, they endured.

When slandered, they answered kindly.

They followed the example and teaching of Jesus.

Question 11

What is the difference between a guardian and a father?

A guardian supervised and corrected a child for a time.

A father gave life and had a lasting, loving bond.

Many taught the Corinthians, but Paul brought them to life through the gospel.

Question 12

What should 1 Corinthians 4 change about the way Christians live today?

1 Corinthians 4 should cause believers to live:

- As faithful stewards of what God has given them.
- For God's approval rather than human praise.
- Thankful instead of proud.
- Willing to suffer for Christ.
- Blessing those who mistreat them.

- Following godly examples and becoming one for others.
- Showing God's power, not just talking about it.
- Humble and teachable when corrected.

XXVII. PERSONAL APPLICATION

1 Corinthians 4 asks several important questions.

Am I a Faithful Steward?

What has God entrusted to me, and am I managing it for Him?

Whose Approval Am I Living For?

People's applause, or the Lord's?

Do I Judge Other Believers' Hearts?

Am I leaving that to the Lord?

What Do I Have That I Did Not Receive?

Is my heart full of pride or full of thanks?

Am I Willing to Look Foolish for Christ?

Or do I want the world's honor?

How Do I Respond When I Am Mistreated?

With cursing or with blessing?

Who Is Following My Example?

Is my life worth imitating?

Is My Faith Mostly Talk?

Or is God's power changing my life?

How Do I Respond to Correction?

With pride, or with a humble heart?

XXVIII. A CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“The Steward Answers Only to the Master”

A steward lives under many eyes.

The other servants watch him.

People outside the house talk about him.

He even judges himself.

But none of those voices decides his future.

Only the master does.

This is how every believer should live.

People will praise us.

People will criticize us.

We will sometimes think too highly of ourselves.

We will sometimes think too little of ourselves.

But one day the Master will come.

He will bring hidden things to light.

He will see our motives.

And He will give His own verdict.

This creates a powerful principle.

We are free from living for people's approval.

And we are bound to live for His.

Principle:

Live faithfully today for the only verdict that will matter forever.

XXIX. FINAL APPLICATION

1 Corinthians Chapter 4 was written to a church that thought it had arrived.

They felt rich.

They felt wise.

They felt strong.

They felt like kings.

And they sat as judges over the servants God had sent them.

Paul answered them with three pictures.

A steward, who must be faithful and answers only to his master.

A captive at the end of a parade, who is treated as nothing by the world.

A father, who loves his children enough to warn them.

1 Corinthians 4 therefore reminds us:

Never forget that you are a steward, not an owner.

Never forget that everything you have was received.

Never forget that the crown comes after the cross.

Never mistake talk for power.

The church does not need more people who think they have arrived.

It needs:

Faithful stewards.

Humble hearts.

Servants willing to suffer.

And lives that show the power of God.

The same truth still calls us:

Tell people that God requires faithfulness.

Tell people that everything is a gift.

Tell people that following Christ may cost them the world's honor.

Tell people that the Lord will judge, and He will reward His faithful servants.

And until He comes:

Be faithful.

Be thankful.

Bless those who curse you.

Live by the power of God.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for trusting us as stewards in Your household.

Thank You for the gospel, the great mystery You have revealed in Christ.

Thank You that You do not ask us to be famous, but to be faithful.

Thank You that You alone are our Judge, and that the One who judges us is the One who died for us.

Thank You that one day You will bring every hidden thing to light, and that Your faithful servants will receive praise from You.

Forgive us for living for the approval of people.

Forgive us for judging the hearts of others.

Forgive us for boasting about gifts we only received from You.

Forgive us for wanting the crown without the cross.

Make us faithful in little things and in great things.

Fill our hearts with thanks instead of pride.

Give us courage to be fools for Christ.

When we are cursed, help us bless.

When we are persecuted, help us endure.

When we are slandered, help us answer kindly.

Thank You for the spiritual fathers and mothers You have given us.

Make our lives examples worth following.

Let our faith be more than talk; let it show Your power.

When You correct us, give us humble hearts that respond quickly.

And on the day You come, may we be found faithful.

“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Key Verse

“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” — 1 Corinthians 4:2

Central Truth

God's servants are stewards who must prove faithful to Him, and since everything we have is received from God, the true mark of His people is not pride but humble, suffering faithfulness lived in His power.

1 Corinthians 4 in One Sentence

Paul reminds a proud church that its leaders are stewards judged only by the Lord, that every gift is received from God, that true servants of Christ walk the way of the cross, and that as their spiritual father he is coming to see whether their faith is mere talk or the real power of God.