

LESSON 12 • AUGUST 20, 2023

JUDGMENT IN THE KINGDOM

Lesson Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

Focus Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:1-6, 17-21

Key Verse: 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 commendation from God. 1 Corinthians 4:5 (NRSV)

1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-6, 17-21 (NRSV)

1 Corinthians 4:1-6

- 1 Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.
- 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. I do not even judge myself.
- 4 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 commendation from God.
- 6 I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another.

17-21

- 17 For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church.
- 18 But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have

become arrogant.

19 But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power.

20 For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power.

21 What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-6, 17-21 (KJV)

1 Corinthians 4:1-6

1 Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

2 Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.

3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self.

4 For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.

5 Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

6 And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another.

17-21

17 For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church.

18 Now some are puffed up, as though I would not come to you.

19 But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will, and will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power.

20 For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.

21 What will ye? shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?

KEY TERMS

- **Allegiance** – Loyalty or devotion, as to a person, event, movement, and so forth.
- **Humility** – In this context, humility is a descriptor that is used in reference to those who live in a posture of deference and total submission to God (see Romans 12:1).

INTRODUCTION

Everybody benefits when unity and harmony exist within the church as well as groups with whom we might be affiliated. Church leaders, however, must be mindful of the fact that, because the church is comprised of believers at varying stages of spiritual maturity, it should not be envisioned as a believers' utopia. The book of 1 Corinthians provides graphic portrayals of dysfunctions that arise when spiritual immaturity in the church is manifested in misplaced honor and allegiance. In this case, the style and presentation of the preachers took precedence over the content of their messages. Consequently, one's chosen preacher became more important than Jesus Christ and the gospel.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

The apostle Paul founded the church at Corinth before he moved on to Ephesus. The church was physically located in Corinth, a thriving port city with a truly diverse population. After Paul's departure, the membership strayed from the gospel

with the introduction of competing ideas that fostered the creation of factions or cliques. Quarreling, human arrogance, and worldly wisdom created disruptive fighting among the members. Paul determined the behavior to be infantile, with exhibitions of childish behavior (1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:1). His harshest criticism was the lack of spiritual growth that was being exemplified. The congregation still needed to be fed “milk” instead of more substantive spiritual food (1 Corinthians 3:2).

Contrary to common beliefs, the book of 1 Corinthians was not the apostle Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. Actually, Paul had written a previous letter to this congregation. That letter addressed issues related to sexual immorality. Paul received information that indicated the letter was not understood. So, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, a second letter. This letter was intended to clear up misunderstandings about the first letter and to deal with other divisive problems, including cliques or divisions among the membership, confusing doctrines, as well as snobbery or arrogance.

The Role of the Apostles, 1 Corinthians 4:1-6

At the heart of the cliques and divisions was the members’ aligning themselves in accordance with their preferred apostle. For example, some expressed allegiance to Paul, some to Apollos, some to Peter, and so forth. Paul patiently explained some basics that would have been clearly understood as a result of being led by the Holy Spirit. All apostles are servants of Jesus Christ to whom God has revealed his plan of salvation and his purposes. They have been entrusted with the responsibility

of proclaiming and preserving “the mysteries” which God has revealed to them. All are the same in God’s sight and his plan for humankind.

Judging one apostle against another apostle is foolish and an encroachment on Jesus’ authorities! Paul understands that he is being judged, but he is unaffected by it. He considers Jesus to be the master and the only qualified judge. He will bring judgment in his own time. Furthermore he “will bring light to the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes (motives) of the heart” (1 Corinthians 4:5b).

Paul Addresses Church Discipline, 1 Corinthians 4:17-21

Before addressing discipline, Paul urged the church to return to the original gospel messages they had heard and to imitate him (4:16). He could make this request because God was his example, and he was noted for walking closely with God, spending time in God’s Word, and praying. Surely, these habits were manifested in Paul’s behavior and the manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s presence.

Paul also informed the church that he had sent Timothy to Corinth to remind them of his “ways in Christ” (v. 17). Timothy would also see this letter from Paul was received, read, and implemented. He would later report the congregation’s reactions to Paul. Paul is obviously aware that some who had challenged his authorities and his teachings might not easily relinquish whatever influence or power they had acquired among the congregants. So, he vowed to return to Corinth, and to be prepared to confront those who arrogantly insisted on usurping the powers of God’s chosen leaders. Although he

preferred to arrive with a spirit of love and gentleness, Paul warned that he would exercise his authorities to confront, rebuke, and discipline members who insisted on living in ways that contradict Jesus' teachings.

SANKOFA

With his teachings on the role of church leaders in general, but particularly those who were admired by the congregation at Corinth, Paul introduced the concept of *Servant-Leadership*. He asserted that Apollos and he, as well as other leaders, were servants with responsibilities assigned by God. Servant-leadership in the church focuses on ways to prepare disciples for services that build up and enhance the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12). Keeping Christ at the head, the leader, ensures the entire church are is served and challenged to become more Christ-like.

Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) is credited with being the founder of the modern-day servant-leadership movement. However, Jesus first defined and demonstrated the concept: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...just as the son of man did not come to be served..." (Matthew 20:26-28). He embodied the concept as he washed the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-17).

Around the turn of the twentieth century, two African American men, who were former slaves, exemplified servant-leadership in ways that positively served and impacted black communities nationwide. They recognized a growing need for life insurance among black families. Black families, at that time, were typically impoverished, and they suffered

from inadequate medical care as well as racial injustices and other inequalities. These conditions, along with poor life expectancies, presented unacceptable risks for white insurers. Yet, the same conditions intensified the life insurance needs among black families.

Both men, John Merrick of Durham, North Carolina, and Alonzo Herndon of Atlanta, Georgia, became successful entrepreneurs through various ventures, including barbering. Barbering was perceived to be the easiest way for African American men, at that time, to become entrepreneurs. However, Merrick and Durham are most renowned for their servant-leadership that resulted in their later becoming powerful entrepreneurs in the insurance industry. Their services impacted black communities in at least two significant ways: (1) they provided low-cost life insurance for people who could not otherwise purchase insurance, and (2) they created thousands of jobs for other African Americans and empowered them. Their legacies live on with their companies, North Carolina Mutual and Atlanta Life Insurance Companies, still serving their communities and creating employment opportunities for many in the 21st century.

CASE STUDY

Barrington Irving, a young African American male, presents an excellent case study on how to rise above obstacles. He makes an exemplary case that should inspire many. Education, personal determination, challenging work, vision, and passionate pursuit of dreams as well as serving others are all components of Barrington's successes. As a young

man, Barrington rejected allegiance to discouraging messages that typically counsel youth on the basis of race, economic status, family history, gender, and so forth. He was raised in Miami, Florida's inner city. Crime, poverty, and failing schools were pervasive. Despite all of the potentially insurmountable barriers, Barrington is renowned for having become the youngest person and the only African American to ever fly solo around the world. Astonishingly, he also built the plane. His giftedness and use of his gifts are also highlighted by his graduating *magna cum laude* from an aeronautical science program. Having achieved all of this before age 28, Barrington also demonstrates servant leadership as he founded an educational nonprofit, Experience Aviation, to serve others. His goal with the non-profit organization, according to Barrington, is to boost the numbers of youth in aviation and other S.T.E.M. (Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math) careers.

LIFE APPLICATION

The apostle Paul may appear to have been speaking to preachers only. However, his message is to all Christian leaders. As Paul wrote in Romans 12:5, "So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." Being Christlike requires us to emulate Jesus Christ in everything we do. We are not to emulate the world in our leadership roles! Jesus Christ is our example, and he came as a servant. Our mission is, therefore, to serve and invest in the lives of each other as well as others. Jesus Christ is the head. We are to respect, but never deify human leaders.

QUESTIONS

1. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, how would you rate yourself as a servant-leader?
2. What messages will you take away from this lesson regarding tendencies to judge or criticize the pastor or others for their service?
3. How might you use this lesson to prepare for dispute resolutions within your church or elsewhere?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Song: "I Surrender All" (*AME Hymnal* #251)

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, you have blessed us again by giving us deeper insights into kingdom living, and we thank you. We thank you for all the gifts you have blessed us with, for helping us to understand the purposes for our gifts, and for helping us to appreciate our interdependence. Please forgive us for past judgments and criticisms and bless us to serve with clean, joyful hearts. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

August 21-August 27

Monday Isaiah 6:1-8 (Earth Is Full of God's Glory)

Tuesday Acts 17:22-31 (In Him We Have Our Being)

Wednesday Micah 4:1-7 (Many Will Go to God's House)

Thursday Hebrews 7:11-25 (Jesus Is Able to Save Forever)

Friday Isaiah 26:12-21 (Awake and Sing for Joy!)

Saturday 1 Corinthians 15:1-14 (The Most Important Message)

Sunday 1 Corinthians 15:15-28 (The First Fruits of the Dead)