

## I CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 4 SOURCES OF IDENTITY

LIVING WORD, PCF, 19 MARCH 2000

### INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 gives Paul's views on how we should view ourselves, using himself and other leaders as a comparison (verses 1-13), giving us a role model to follow, and presenting the ultimate test for us to know whether we've got it right!

Structure :

- 1-2 Paul's view of leaders
- 3-5 Three judgements - which one counts?
- 6-13 What is our self-image like? Realistic?
- 14-17 Paul suggests a role model
- 18-21 The ultimate test of who we are - but would we pass?

### REVISION OF LAST WEEK'S HOMEWORK

What links I Corinthians 4:1-2 with a Roman galley? (pictures of Olympia, trireme)

### PAUL'S VIEW OF LEADERS (1-2)

Answer to homework - Paul uses two Greek words to describe himself and Apollos :

#### *hyperetai*

- not usual word translated "servant" = *doulos* (slave) or *diakonos* (minister)
- under-rowers in a Roman galley, rowed in lower bank of oars on a large ship - power-house, locked in, no escape, total commitment
- also used of hired hands, especially those who did manual labour

#### *oikonomos*

- steward, responsible for oversight of master's household, authorised to act as deputy, acting in master's place
- to the master he is a slave, to other slaves he is an overseer
- required to be "trustworthy" - why? Because the steward was not supervised!

Paul says people should view their leaders like this, not as rivals or competing, but totally committed to the ship, and acting in the master's place, accountable to him.

- don't compare - this is foolish (see II Corinthians 10:12)

### EXERCISE : HOW DO WE SEE OURSELVES?

Before going further, try this 3-part exercise (separate sheet with 3 circles).

- In top-left circle, write 3 words you'd use to describe yourself
- Then in top-right circle, write 3 words a friend might use to describe you
- Lastly, in the bottom circle, write 3 words God would use to describe you

Question : Which description is right? Who knows you best?

Paul's answer is in verses 3-5

### **THREE JUDGEMENTS - WHICH IS RIGHT? (3-5)**

1. Paul says he's not bothered about what other people think about him - this is a "Very Small Thing" - not worth worrying about. He uses the phrase "at the day of man" - today it's man's turn to have his say, but it doesn't count as an eternal final verdict, just a temporary opinion.
2. He also knows that the verdict of his own conscience is not reliable or relevant. As far as he knows, his conscience is clear, but he can't depend on this. he knows he can't be acquitted by his own conscience (Greek *dedikaiomai* = justified, legal word for absolved of all guilt, declared not guilty) - we may think we're OK, but are we??
3. Only one judgement counts - the Lord's - the only accurate opinion

Note that all these are *anakrino* - remember chapter 2? The preliminary verdict before the final judgement and sentence are given. These are today's opinions (present tense in Greek) - not the final verdict.

The Lord's final verdict (this time using *krino*) will be given when he comes (Greek is future tense). Then there will be no appeal. See II Corinthians 5:9, Hebrews 9:27 and Revelation 20:11-13.

His future judgement will :

- **expose** things now hidden - "bring to light" :
  - see John 1:9, John 3:19-21, Psalm 139:11-12)
- **disclose** the purposes of the heart - our inner motives and intentions, which only he knows :
  - see I Samuel 16:7, Proverbs 21:2, Romans 2:15-16

On that day, we'll each hear the final sentence from God :

- e.g. Matthew 25:14-30, either "Well done, good and faithful servant ... enter into the joy of your master...", or "You wicked and lazy servant ... cast him away into the outer darkness..."
- or Matthew 25:31-46, either "Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...", or "Depart from me you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels..."

Jesus is coming - are we ready? If he came tonight, what would his judgement be?

### **SELF-IMAGE GROUND RULES (6-13)**

Paul now moves on to help his readers understand themselves. He gives them his own ground rules for self-image in verses 6-7 :

- Verse 6 - Learn from me and Apollos the "Not beyond what is written" - this appears to be a quote or catch-phrase (preceded by "the" indicating a recognised saying). Everything is to be based on Scripture. See for example the Westminster Confession (1646) :
  - *All books of the Old and New Testaments are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life ... The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.*
- Verse 6 - so that none of you may be "puffed up" - Greek is *phusioo* (onomatopoeic?) = inflated (like a balloon?!) = conceited, arrogant. Used elsewhere in I Corinthians, e.g. 4:18, 5:2. Do we have an inflated sense of ourselves? (See Philippians 2:3)
- Verse 6 - don't favour one against another - God has no favourites (Deuteronomy 10:17). This is one of Paul's repeated key themes - no partiality (see Romans 2:11, Galatians 2:6, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25) - why?
- Verse 7 - remember that everything we have is a gift of God's grace, so we can't boast (see Jeremiah 9:23-24). Calvin said *"The true basis of Christian humility is, on the one hand not to be self-satisfied, for we know that we have no good in ourselves at all; and on the other hand, if God has implanted any good in us, to be for that reason all the more indebted to his grace."*

Then he turns to irony - how do they think of themselves? Verse 8 - as fat, rich kings!! ("Filled" = stuffed with food, sated, unable to eat any more)  
Completely self-satisfied.

But Paul disagrees with their assessment - sounds like Jesus in Revelation 3:17.

Do we have a right view of our condition, or are we deluded into thinking we're OK?

Paul had no illusions about who he was (verses 9-13) :

- God has exhibited us apostles last of all like men sentenced to death ... a spectacle to the world. He uses two images : condemned criminals brought before the crowd, and doomed gladiators in the arena.
- We are fools, weak, no reputation, hungry, thirsty, poor, buffeted, homeless, reviled, persecuted, slandered ...
- The refuse and off-scourings - what's scraped off the dish before it's washed - "the scum of the earth"

But what was his response to this treatment?

- We work hard, we bless, we endure, we try to conciliate

How do we see ourselves? As basically OK, or in desperate need of God's grace?  
And how do we respond to hardship and opposition? Like Paul??

## WHY IS PAUL SAYING THIS? (14-17)

V14 - Not to shame them, but to admonish them (*nouthesis*) - because he loves them dearly like a father.

V15 - They have countless (i.e. too many) "guides" = *paidagogos* = slaves who escorted the master's children to school - they may care, but no real relationship. But Paul has begotten them (*gennaō* = the father's role in procreation - Paul conceived the church at Corinth) - he is their father, with a deep committed relationship of love.

V16 - On the basis of this relationship, he urges them to be like him - "like father like son" - "Imitate me"

Is this dangerous egotism? Was he impertinent, or a control freak?

No - his qualification was that he also imitates Christ (see I Corinthians 11:1), so we are safe following Paul.

Greek *mimētes* = mimic, close copying, sound like me, look like me, do what I do, say what I say, think like I think.

The mime artist retains his own identity (the real Rory Bremner), but is such a good copy that we're unable to tell the difference!

A good model for discipleship??

Paul says everyone else does this in the other churches (v17) - see also Galatians 4:12, Philippians 3:17, I Thess 1:6, II Thess 3:7).

EXERCISE (in pairs)

Discuss together (10 minutes) :

- Who is your role model?
- What do you know about Paul that you would like to copy?
- Which one of your characteristics would you **least like** anyone to copy?
- What one thing would you **most want** someone else to copy from you?

## THE ULTIMATE TEST (18-21)

Paul warns the Corinthian church - I'm coming to check you out! He plans to test his critics, to see whether they are *all talk*, or whether they are *demonstrating the power of God*. What would he find here????!!

V20 - The kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power.

- The kingdom of God (DH definition) = *wherever the rule & reign of God is recognised and submitted to*
  - The most frequent subject in the teaching of Jesus, but rare in the rest of the NT - except in I Corinthians
- Not talk = *logos* = theory, reasoning
- But power = *dunamis* = miraculous, supernatural, abundant strength & might - an explosion of the supernatural

If God is our king and we submit to his rule, we won't just talk a lot, but supernatural things will happen!!

How about us??!

## **SUMMARY**

This chapter is about sources of our sense of identity.

Where is my identity based?

- Whose opinion or judgement? Other people, my own conscience, or God's view?
- Do I see myself as basically OK, or in desperate need of God's grace?
- Am I copying someone who is copying Christ? Or making my own way?
- And the final test - all talk but no power???

## **HOMEWORK**

Think about Paul's test for the presence of the kingdom of God. How much of your Christianity is just talk, and how much of it really reflects the power of God at work in and through you? If you need to change the balance, how can you do this? Do you need help from the Holy Spirit?

[music - "More love, more power..." ??]

Read chapters 5&6

Janet's homework - see I Corinthians 6:19.

- Think of some words to describe a temple
- Do you treat your body like a "temple of the Holy Spirit"?