

A9 BIBLE STUDY: I CORINTHIANS #4

Scripture of Lesson: I Corinthians 4: 1~21

In this chapter apostle Paul continues to teach the Corinthian Christians about the ministry of Jesus, his calling into this ministry and how he had endured much hardship and suffering because of being a servant of God. And he exhorts them to emulate his example.

1. Ministry for Christ -- Paul's commission and suffering in it: v. 1~13

In v. 1 Paul commands the Christians to consider him and his fellow ministers of the gospel as “ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God [v.1].” He is referring to the special commission into God’s work, wherein he received special revelation into the mysteries of God’s truth. To Paul this claim and command were very natural because of the surety of his meeting with Jesus in person and the help of the Holy Spirit that came thenceforth to him as he labored faithfully in this holy ministry.

Apparently some Corinthian believers were critical of Paul [v. 3]. Paul apparently thought such criticisms were unmerited and was telling them that the only judgment for God’s ministers comes from God and not from subjects of his ministry. When the Lord returns, all works of God’s servants will be revealed and those who were faithful [v. 2] would be rewarded from God [v. 5].

While many so-called ministers and priests of God live in affluence and sumptuous luxury, the ministers of Christ in the early centuries lived mostly in poverty, homelessness and often subject to diverse dangers and persecutions as Paul describes:

We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now. [Rom 4: 10-13]

What is the honor and reward for enduring such hardships if he was a minister of God? He was trusting the promise of Jesus to His disciples:

Then Peter began to say to Him, “See, we have left all and followed You.” So Jesus answered and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life. [Mark 10: 28-30]

Discussion topic: How do we characterize today’s Christian ministry/ priesthood compared against Paul’s ministry of the first century? How has the ministry evolved over the centuries? Do you see the need to restore the ministry/priesthood to the first century example?

2. Follow my example: v. 14-21

As Paul was encouraging the Christians to emulate his example [v. 14], he was indirectly telling them that he himself was following the example of his Lord Jesus. These believers had spiritual births through his own labor. So in a sense he was their spiritual father [v. 15]. Yet some of them were puffed up, thinking they could not criticize and look down on Paul [v. 18]. Here, Paul is reminding them how they were born into the family of God through his labor of love for Christ while living as a homeless preacher, owning nothing and risking his life against numerous dangers and persecutions. So how unfitting and wrong it was for those believers to be puffed up towards the ministers of

Christ! Paul's tirade stops here and he encourages them to emulate his example of humility, devotion to the calling of God, and brave disconcern for the dangers and losses that might lie before them.

Today's Christian ministers and priests need to emulate the example of Christ and of apostles such as Paul. When the ministry goes corrupt, God's work is endangered and the Spirit's efforts become futile. It is time for all of us to examine our individual lives, homes, churches and communities to see where we stand before God, and to eliminate ungodly elements that pollute our lives, both spiritually and naturally. As Paul emphasizes towards the end of the chapter [v. 20], the kingdom of God is not in how people talk but in what God has been able to work in an individual or church. The Lord God is interested in every church and every Christian. The word of God is like a two-edged sword, which brings hurts and wounds when applied to sinful lives and societies.

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. [Heb 4: 12]

As apostle Paul lays down his discipline on the Corinthian church, God was critical of most of the seven churches in Revelation 1-3 while giving encouraging two churches undergoing persecution. Some of them had lost their first love and became lukewarm, some had allowed wrongful elements into the church and were tolerating them and some had compromised with a heretic element. Christian churches need to keep themselves subject to God's judgment daily and apply the Scriptures to their policies, actions and cultures so as to become joyful churches that bring joy and gladness to God's heart.

Discussion topics:

- 1. Share your experiences of being taught by the Holy Spirit of wrongs in your own life and how you were able to eliminate them to regain the true joy as King David did.*
- 2. When we have a complaint about a minister or priest, what is the best way to present the case or should we refrain from doing so?*