



COMMENTARIES ON “1 CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 4

St. Paul begins chapter four by stating the only standard by which he and Apollos - and, really, all Christians, should be considered: that they are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God (4:1). Most Christians have a basic understanding of being Christ’s servant, faithfully following His call to discipleship, but what does it mean to be a steward of the mysteries of God? Bishops and priests are stewards of the mysteries of God, of course, because it is through them that God gives to us His grace through such mysteries as baptism and Holy Communion. While that is certainly the context in which St. Paul is speaking, by extension being a steward also means more than being an “administrator:” it means being faithful to God in handling that which they have been given. And this is important because it relates to all Orthodox Christians: faithful Orthodox Christians participate in the holy mysteries, and therefore we are all stewards of that which we have been given by God.

A problem St. Paul is addressing is that the Corinthians Christians are judging his stewardship: many of them are saying that he is an inadequate steward of the mysteries of God, and therefore they reject him and follow another. In response, St. Paul says that he is unconcerned not only with their opinion, or even the opinion of a human court, but even his own opinion - he is concerned only with the judgment of the Lord (4:3-4). Humans should refuse to be judgmental, because we are unable to see into another person’s heart. Only God can do this, and therefore He will ultimately be the one to give true praise (or, conversely, offer true condemnation) (4:5).

St. Paul notes that his discussion about Apollos himself was not about any rivalry the Corinthians may believe exists, but rather is simply intended so that the Corinthians Christians can learn from their example (4:6). By looking at St. Paul and Apollos’ united work, as well as to the writings of the Old Testament about humility (which he refers to as “what is written”), the Corinthians Christians learn that they should not be pridefully claim to follow one teacher or another.

The apostle points out that the Corinthians have little room for boasting, because the riches in Christ that they’ve received were given to them (rather than taken or earned) (4:7). He then uses sarcasm to reinforce his point. To listen to the Corinthians, St. Paul argues, one would think that they were kings who ruled over everything without the apostles’ help. In fact, he goes one, he wishes that they were kings, because then perhaps the apostles would reign with them, instead of being displayed for God’s sake as condemned men and fools (4:8-10)! How mighty the Corinthians must be, because while the apostles and teachers were dishonored fools, the Corinthians must be wise and distinguished (4:10)!

St. John Chrysostom teaches that St. Paul uses such sarcasm for two powerful reasons:

Arguments like these, which appeal to our sense of shame, have two advantages. On the one hand, they cut deeper than open invective would ever do. On the other hand, they cause the person reprimanded to bear that deeper wound with greater patience.

In contrast to the high opinion that the Corinthians have of themselves, the apostles live what would seem to non-Christians to be decidedly inglorious lives: they are poor, they work hard to support themselves, and they bless and entreat those who mistreat them (4:11-13).

He writes these things, not to hurt the Corinthians, but instead as the warning of a father to his children: imitate apostolic humility, rather than pursuing worldly pride and division (4:14-16). Ambrosiaster explains:

Paul wants them to be imitators of him in these things, so that just as he has endured many hardships from unbelievers for their salvation and is still doing so as long as he preaches the free gift of God's grace day and night, so they too ought to remain in his faith and doctrine and not accept the evil teachings of false apostles.

To help the Corinthians in following his example, St. Paul is sending St. Timothy to them (4:17). St. Timothy, the apostle's loyal friend and companion, would be able to not only pass on St. Paul's teachings, but also to communicate to the Corinthians the way in which the apostle lives (as well as demonstrate such Christian faithfulness and decorum in his own life).

Despite what some of the Corinthians claim, St. Paul intends to revisit the church in Corinth (4:18, 19). When he comes, he will see whether the lives of his critics measures up to their claims about themselves, because the kingdom of God is found not in mere words but in the power of the transformed Christian life (4:20). The Corinthians therefore have a choice: do they want St. Paul to visit them with "a rod," meaning that he will excommunicate those who continue to tear apart the Corinthian church, or do they want him to come in a spirit of unity with them (4:21)?

According to St. John Chrysostom, St. Paul's concluding question is equally applicable to modern Christians:

Paul leaves it up to the Corinthians to decide how he should come to them. We too have a choice. Either we can fall into hell, or we can obtain the kingdom. But if you say that you are willing to do the right thing but are not able, you are mistaken. All that means is that you are not willing strongly enough.