

What I Am is Received

1 Corinthians 4:1-7 (NIV)

¹ This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. ³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. ⁷ 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?

There are portions of the Bible that I have a harder time preaching on. Our reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 4 is one of those, mostly because it's about how we judge our preachers. It's difficult to be the preacher who then instructs you from God's Word how you are supposed to judge preachers, namely me. But also I'm holding an additional pastoral call, which makes me very self-conscious that this sermon today may be construed as a passive aggressive way of sharing my own agenda under the guise of a sermon. So, having that disclaimer, let's do what I'm called to do - talk about what God's Word says to us today.

What makes for a good preacher? Is it his intellect? His turn of phrase? His delivery? His sincerity, authenticity? Is it his personability, whether or not you share common interests with him, could have a meal with him? Is it how much he shows me care in the way that I want to receive care? Is it his work in outreach, or the style of outreach that he teaches and promotes? Is it his counseling ability and availability? Is it his emphasis on youth, his connection with them? Is it his experience? His ability to do administration? Is it that he holds the same opinions and values and beliefs as me on all the issues?

Let's be honest and recognize that we judge a lot of things, and preachers are no exception. The Christians in Corinth in the first century AD judged their preachers too. The judgment was outspoken and strong enough that they were splitting into factions over preachers. One group said that they followed Paul. Another that they followed a preacher named Apollos. Others claimed loyalty to Cephas, the Apostle Peter. And another group claimed the trump card saying, "I follow Christ."

In this environment of division based on the judgment of preachers, Paul was course correcting the Corinthians. These four preachers were not divided; they preached the same message. They shared the revealed mysteries of what God had done for them, how God lived perfection for them, sacrificed his life in place of theirs, and through this message preached by Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Jesus himself, people have been called to belong to God, made to be sheep of his pasture, having the eternal rest of knowing that everything for our perfection and right standing with God had already been accomplished by him. All that these preachers like Paul and Apollos did was to plant that message, water it with repeated teaching, but it was God, only God, who made it grow, who caused them to believe, who brought them into belonging in the family of God.

So, Paul is not saying, "Don't judge preachers," but he is telling us how. "This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." (verses 1-2) While it might be nice if you get along with the pastor, if he's smart, outreach savvy, connects well with the youth, has experience, is a dynamic speaker, none of these matter if he is not faithful in serving you and others with the revealed mysteries of God, that he is faithful in conveying to you what God has done for you – that God has lived perfectly for you, died on the cross for you, and rose from the dead for you, all as your substitute, so that you know that you are loved, forgiven, purified, and given eternal life with God right now. This is what has been written for you.

And this is exactly why I still get nervous every Saturday night and every Sunday morning as I prepare to do what I am doing right now. Yes, part of it simply is the fear that comes with public speaking, but there's a different kind of fear that comes with the charge from God to rightly convey, explain, and apply God's Word to you, the very words that give the forgiveness of sins, that give someone eternal life with God. If I mess this up, will I set you on a path away from God, on a path to hell? This is no small matter, and I often wonder if I am up for this calling, can continue in it, let alone remain qualified for it because I'm a sinner. I do get things wrong. Why would I not mess up the most important thing?

As if he is thinking of the preacher judging himself and the people judging him, Paul continues: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the

Lord who judges me. 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.” (verses 3-5)

Why does Paul care very little about his hearers judging him? Because he knows that the judgment that truly matters is the judgment of God. His conscience is clear because as he reflects on his proclamation of what God has done for us, he concludes that he has faithfully served people by sharing with them the revealed mysteries of God. More importantly, his conscience is clear because he knows what God has done for him. Jesus came for Paul, lived perfectly for Paul, sacrificed his life to remove all Paul’s sins – all his inadequacies as a preacher, his life of hate and murderous threats that he carried out on Christians before becoming one. Paul knew what God had written in his Word about him - that he was loved, forgiven, covered with Jesus’ righteousness, his perfection, rescued from eternal condemnation in hell and is instead going to eternal paradise with God all because of what God had revealed to Paul as to what he had done for him. Everything Paul was was what he received from what God wrote about him.

What was written by God through people about Paul and what he did for Paul is also why I can stand up here before you week after week. It’s not because I have such great gifts that make me worthy of being a pastor, let alone your pastor; it’s because I have a God who has purified me, made me worthy by what he has done. I keep a picture of my baptism up here in the pulpit because it reminds me that God has washed all my sins away – all my sins of the past, all my sins right now, all my sins of the future. It reminds me that I am clothed in Jesus’ perfection. He has made me qualified by what I have received from him in what he has written about me. Then, before I open my mouth to you, I ask God that his Word would be proclaimed and not mine. Who I am is all what I have received from God, and that makes me worthy, that makes me faithful in proclaiming the revealed mysteries of God. God will judge me based on what I have received from him – his forgiveness, his perfection, his Word.

But this is not a sermon about just me; it’s also about you, as Paul wrote: “Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, ‘Do not go beyond what is written.’ Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. 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?” (verses 6-7)

Who are you? How do you judge yourself? As I talked about 2 weeks ago, our identity can be wrapped up in what we do and how well we do it. How many projects do I accomplish at work? How many things do I do for my kids? How high is my GPA? How many community service hours have I logged? What’s my completion percentage in my favorite game? In these ways, we make who we are something that is earned, something based on our merits and efforts. But that’s going beyond what God has written about us.

Who we are is not what we have earned or accomplished or worked for; who we are is what we have received. We didn’t earn our lives; they were given to us – by God through our parents. Our names were not earned, but they were given to us by our parents. So it is with our righteousness, being right with God. Our worthiness, our belonging, our perfection, our faith in God – these are all things that we have received from God, by what he did for us, what he has written about us in his Word. These received gifts are not earned but bought and paid for and given exclusively by God himself without charging us or demanding anything from us. All that we are that is good and valuable and worthy is received from God. We are to judge ourselves by what God has written about us, about what he has given us, about what we have received from him.

When we stay within what God has written about us, about our preachers, we see them differently. We don’t see them as ones who have earned the right to proclaim God’s Word, but we see them as what they have received from God, that they are only qualified to do this because God has purified them and clothed them with Jesus’ perfection just as we are. We also see ourselves differently, that not one of us here has earned a place with God or with this group of people, but that all the good that we are is what we received from God. He has purified us. He has clothed us with his perfection. He has made us worthy. This is what he has written about us. We do not go beyond this in judging ourselves and our preachers. We are what we have received from God, what he has written about us. Amen.