SMITH FOR CHRIST

TEACHING THE WORD · LIVING IN THE LIGHT

†
4:2

DEEP DIVE

1 Corinthians

Chapter Four, Verses 1–21

Servants, Stewards, and Fools for Christ — how to regard God's servants, and what pride looks like beside the cross

NASB 1995 | VERSE BY VERSE | FOUR VOICES | WITH DIAGRAMS

Paul ends his answer to the Corinthian factions by telling them how to see their teachers — servants and stewards who answer to the Lord alone — and then holds up a mirror: kings in Corinth, condemned men in the arena, and a father who asks his children whether he should come with a rod or with gentleness. Read through four teachers — **David Guzik**, **R.C. Sproul**, **C.H. Spurgeon** and **Matthew Henry** — with the Greek behind Paul's key words.

THE PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 4:1–21

stewards · received · fools · father

THE METHOD

Verse by Verse

Color-coded by teacher

WHAT'S INSIDE

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Four movements from "servants of Christ" to "a rod, or … love"

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"For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power." — 1 Corinthians 4:20

SECTION I · THE PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 4:1–21

Servants, Stewards, and Fools for Christ — Faithful stewards answer to one Judge — and the apostles' road looks like loss to a church that thinks it already reigns

† How to Read This Study

This study walks 1 Corinthians 4 in 4 movements, in Paul's own order. Each movement opens with the full NASB 1995 text of those verses, marked with the Berean colors and shapes; then the Greek behind the key words; then the teachers, each in his own color — **David Guzik**, the pastor who walks the text verse by verse; **R.C. Sproul**, the theologian who presses every word for its doctrine; **C.H. Spurgeon**, the preacher who turns the doctrine into a call to the heart; and **Matthew Henry**, the Puritan commentator who gathers it into plain, practical counsel. The figures draw the argument so you can see where Paul is going. Read the Scripture first; then let each voice add its angle.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word
R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries
C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle
MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

HOW THIS STUDY IS MARKED
God — His character & actions
Command / instruction
Key repeated word
Sin / warning
Promise / blessing
Time / place / contrast

KEY VERSE · 1 CORINTHIANS 4:2

"In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy."

† Before the Passage

Chapter 4 is the last step of Paul's long answer to the report from Chloe's people that "there are quarrels among you" (1:11) — "I am of Paul," "I of Apollos," "I of Cephas," "I of Christ" (1:12). He has shown that the cross turns the world's wisdom upside down (1:18–31), that he came to Corinth "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling" (2:3), that the factions prove they are still "fleshly" (3:1–4), and that Paul and Apollos are only "servants through whom you believed" — God's field, God's building, God's temple (3:5–17). Chapter 3 ended: "So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you" (3:21).

Chapter 3 told the Corinthians how to see *themselves*; chapter 4 tells them how to see *Paul and Apollos*, and then turns the light back on the Corinthians' pride. Paul wrote from Ephesus (16:8), around A.D. 55, to a church he had planted on his second journey (Acts 18:1–11) — a church in a rich port city that prized eloquence, status and philosophy, and despised manual labor and any man who would not fight back.

The chapter's Old Testament roots are the ones Paul has already laid down. "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1:31) is Jeremiah 9:24, where the wise, the mighty and the rich are told not to boast — the very three things the Corinthians claim in 4:8–10 (filled, rich, prudent, strong). "Not to exceed what is written" (4:6) most likely points back to those Scriptures he has quoted (1:19, 31; 3:19–20). And the steward is an Old Testament figure before he is a New Testament one — Joseph over Potiphar's house, Eliakim over the palace (Isaiah 22:20–22).

Read the chapter in four movements. Servants and stewards answer to one Judge (vv. 1–5). The point of it all: do not go beyond what is written, for everything you have, you received (vv. 6–7). Then the sharpest irony in Paul's letters — the Corinthians already reigning, the apostles paraded last of all to die (vv. 8–13). Last, a father's warning: imitate me; Timothy is coming; so am I — with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness (vv. 14–21).

I
MOVEMENT

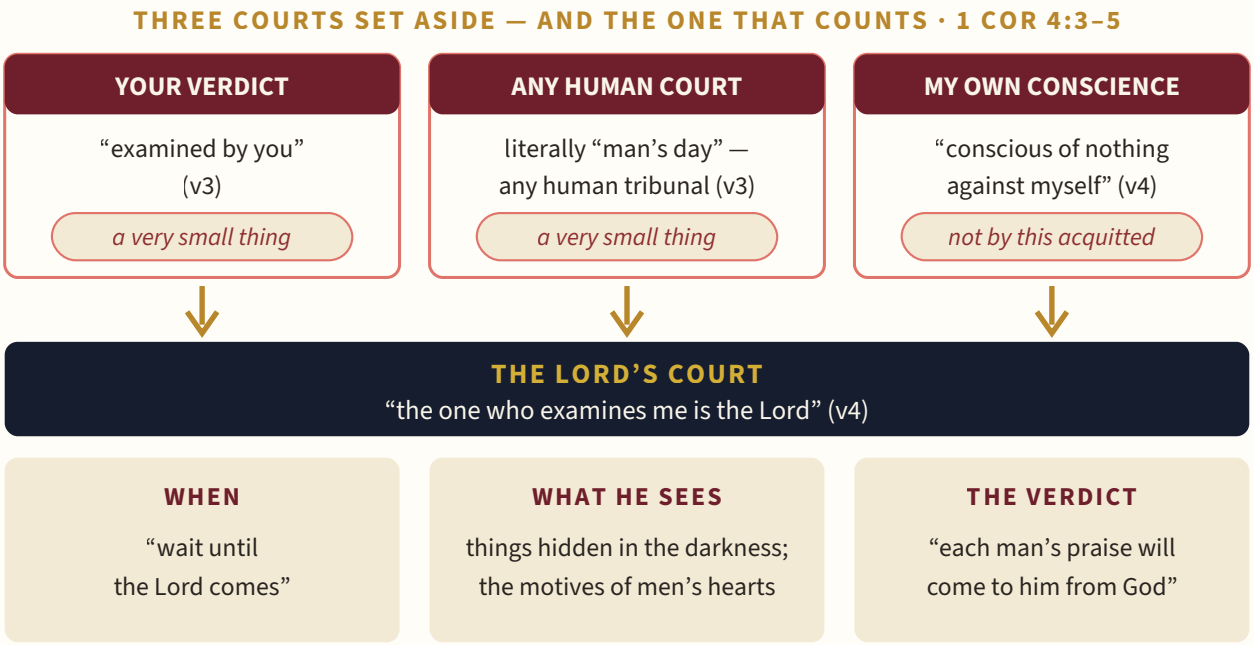
1 CORINTHIANS 4:1–5

Servants, Stewards, and One Judge

What is required is faithfulness — and the verdict waits for the Lord

> [1] *Let a man regard us in this manner, as* △ *servants of Christ* *and* △ *stewards of the mysteries of God*. [2] *In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one* ▤ *be found trustworthy*. [3] *But to me it is a very small thing that I may be* ⟲ *examined* *by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even* ⟲ *examine* *myself.* [4] *For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet* ◷ *I am not by this acquitted*; *but* △ *the one who examines me is the Lord*. [5] *Therefore* ▤ *do not go on passing judgment before the time*, *but* ◷ *wait until the Lord comes* *who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and* △ *disclose the motives of men's hearts*; *and then* ☆ *each man's praise will come to him from God*.
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 4:1–5

FIGURE · THREE COURTS AND THE ONE THAT COUNTS



Paul sets aside the Corinthians' verdict, every human court and even his own clear conscience — only the Lord's examination at His coming is final, and it ends in praise from God.

ὑπηρέτης · οἰκονόμος

HYPĒRETĒS · "SERVANT" · G5257 — OIKONOMOS · "STEWARD" · G3623

Two pictures, chosen with care. *Hypēretēs* is literally an "under-oarsman" — a rower on the lower bank of a galley — and came to mean any assistant who carries out a superior's orders (the officers of the Sanhedrin, John 18:3; John Mark as Paul's helper, Acts 13:5; "servants of the word," Luke 1:2). It is not *doulos* (G1401), the ordinary word for slave. *Oikonomos*, "house-law," is the household manager — often himself a slave or freedman — who held the keys, the money and the food for the whole household and gave account to the master (Luke 12:42; 16:1–8). Paul and Apollos manage "the mysteries of God" (*mystērion*, G3466): truth once hidden, now revealed in Christ. A steward owns nothing; the one thing required of him is that he be *pistos* (G4103), "trustworthy" (v. 2) — the same word Paul uses of Timothy in v. 17.

ἀνακρίνω

ANAKRINŌ · "EXAMINE" · G350

A courtroom word: to investigate, question, cross-examine before a verdict. Three times in verses 3–4 ("examined by you … I do not even examine myself … the one who examines me is the Lord") and ten times in 1 Corinthians (compare 2:14–15, "appraised"). Paul uses it nowhere else; the other six are in Luke–Acts, among them the Bereans "examining the Scriptures daily" (Acts 17:11). "Any human court" is literally "a human day" (*anthrōpinēs hēmeras*, G442 + G2250) — set against "the day" of the Lord (3:13). Verse 4's "I am conscious" is *synoida* (G4894), to know with oneself, the root of *syneidēsis* (G4893), conscience; "acquitted" is *dikaioō* (G1344), the great verb of justification. A clear conscience is not a verdict of righteousness. The KJV's "I know nothing by myself" uses "by" in its old sense, "against."

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik notes that Paul chose *hyperetas*, an "under-rower" on a galley, rather than the common word for a slave — not the lowest position, "but it is certainly not a prestigious position." He borrows Morgan's description: "one who acts under direction, and asks no questions." The steward was a slave to his master but a master to the other slaves, and he never owned what he managed. Faced with criticism of his style, Paul "could simply ask, 'Did I give you the truth?'" A clear conscience did not justify him: "Paul knew his righteousness came from Jesus." The Corinthians "act like judges at athletic events" — handing out trophies before the race is over. Guzik adds a caution: we can only say "he who judges me is the Lord" in Paul's full sense if we are apostles.

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

Sproul never preached 1 Corinthians 4, but two of his sermons press its two halves. On stewardship ("The Faithful Steward," Luke 12:35–48, 2014): "The steward did not own the house. He did not own any of the things that he was called to manage," and "We are stewards of the very air that we breathe because it all belongs to Him." On judging ("Judge Not," Luke 6:37–42, 2012) he insists Jesus did not abolish discernment — "There are times when we are to sit in judgment on our brothers" — but forbade the spirit in which "We become judgmental in our spirit, censorious of others." His alternative is the judgment of charity: "It is giving our neighbor the benefit of the doubt" — though "The judgment of charity cannot be the judgment of naïveté."

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

Spurgeon preached these verses twice in 1887. To his former students at the Pastors' College conference ("Stewards," No. 3350, on vv. 1–2) he said "a steward is a servant, and no more," and "Ministers are for churches, and not churches for minister." A steward takes his orders from the Master, guards what is entrusted to him, and gives account. In "Faithful Stewardship" (No. 2440, on v. 2) he widens the call to every believer and lifts a weight off anxious workers: "You are responsible, not for the result of what you do," but for doing it faithfully. And he warns that "he who is the servant of men cannot be the servant of God." The faithful steward waits for one verdict: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry counsels balance: "In our opinion of ministers, as well as all other things, we should be careful to avoid extremes." Apostles were not to be overvalued — "they were ministers, not masters; stewards, not lords" — nor undervalued, for they were stewards "of divine mysteries." A faithful servant "must look upon it as a very little thing (if his Lord approves him) what judgment men form of him," and "It is a comfort that men are not to be our final judges." Verse 5 does not forbid lawful judging of notorious facts; it forbids judging "the secret springs and principles" of others' actions — "to assume the seat of God." "Others do not lie open to our notice, but we lie all open to his."

II
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 4:6–7

What Do You Have That You Did Not Receive?

Not beyond what is written — three questions that pull pride up by the root

> 6 *Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.* 7 *For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 4:6–7

> *"Thus says the LORD, 'Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the LORD."*
>
> JEREMIAH 9:23–24

φυσιόω

PHYSIOŌ · "BECOME ARROGANT / PUFFED UP" · G5448

From *physa*, a pair of bellows: to blow up, inflate. Seven times in the New Testament — and six of them are in 1 Corinthians (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4; the seventh is Colossians 2:18). It is Corinth's signature sin: puffed up over teachers (4:6), against Paul (4:18–19), in the face of open immorality (5:2), by knowledge (8:1) — and the one thing love never is (13:4, "is not arrogant"). Verse 6 says they were puffed up "in behalf of one against the other": pride for my teacher is still pride, and it always has someone to be against.

διακρίνει · καυχᾶσαι

DIAKRINEI · "REGARDS AS SUPERIOR" · G1252 — KAUCHASAI · "BOAST" · G2744

Diakrinō is to separate thoroughly, to make a distinction (KJV: "who maketh thee to differ?"). The question is not "who thinks you are better?" but "who made you different at all?" — and the answer is God. Then the verb *lambanō* (G2983, "receive") three times in one verse. *Kauchaomai*, to boast or glory, is a Corinthian word: at least six times in this letter (1:29, 31 twice; 3:21; 4:7; 13:3) and again and again in 2 Corinthians 10–12. Paul never forbids boasting outright; he redirects it — "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1:31, from Jeremiah 9:24).

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik reads "not to think beyond what is written" as a call to keep our standards biblical. "Many people today evaluate a pastor or a minister on unbiblical standards" — "his humor, his entertainment value, his appearance, or his skill at marketing and sales." More broadly, "We must take our every cue from Scripture." On verse 7 he goes under the factions to the root: "the cliques weren't the problem as much as pride was the problem." Each of Paul's three questions leaves no reason for pride, and they should prompt our own: "do I truly give God the credit for my salvation? Do I live with a spirit of humble gratitude?" He recalls that Augustine used this verse against the Pelagians, because it teaches "there is nothing good in us except what we have received from God."

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

Sproul's sermon on Romans 3:27–31, "Boasting Excluded" (New Year's Day 2006), and his short broadcast "Where Is Boasting?" press the same logic as 4:7, though neither is on this chapter. "When Paul says, 'Where is boasting?' his answer is emphatic: 'It is excluded.'" "I have no merit to bring to Christ," he says, and he quotes 1 Corinthians 1:31 — "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." In the broadcast he turns it on election itself: to think "we're chosen because we were so eminently choosable" would be "supremely egotistical"; grace is "the end of egotism." "If my salvation rests completely on the grace of God, I have nothing of which to boast in myself."

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

Spurgeon preached verse 7 at least twice. In "Distinguishing Grace" (No. 262, 1859) he declares, "Pride is the inherent sin of man," and traces every difference between a believer and others — in providence, in grace, in restraint from sin, in perseverance — to God: "Grace has done it all," and the believer confesses, "I have nothing but what I have received." Seventeen years later, in "Pride Catechized and Condemned" (No. 1262, 1876), he says Paul questions pride "by the Socratic method." Birth, gifts, education, and above all faith and repentance are received; boasting robs God, for "every particle of praise we take for ourselves is so much stolen." Pride, he says, "is shallow and superficial" — and must be dug out by the root.

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry notices Paul's tact: he used his own name and Apollos' rather than the names of the faction leaders, "that hereby he might avoid what would provoke." The lesson: "We must call no man Master on earth," and "The word of God is the best rule by which to judge concerning men." Then the diagnosis: "Pride commonly lies at the bottom of these quarrels." On verse 7: "all that we have, or are, or do, that is good, is owing to the free and rich grace of God. Boasting is for ever excluded." "those who receive all should be proud of nothing," and "Due attention to our obligations to divine grace would cure us of arrogance and self-conceit."

III
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 4:8–13

Kings in Corinth, Fools for Christ

The sharpest irony in Paul's letters — a church already reigning, apostles paraded last to die

8 *You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish*
that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. 9 *For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles*
last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to
men. 10 *We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are*
distinguished, but we are without honor. 11 *To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly*
clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; 12 *and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are*
reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; 13 *when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have*
become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

1 CORINTHIANS 4:8–13

FIGURE · KINGS IN CORINTH, FOOLS FOR CHRIST

1 COR 4:8–13	"YOU" — THE CORINTHIANS as they saw themselves	"WE" — THE APOSTLES as God exhibited them
FULLNESS	already filled (v8)	hungry and thirsty (v11)
WEALTH	already become rich (v8)	poorly clothed; homeless (v11)
RANK	kings without us (v8)	last of all, condemned to death (v9)
WISDOM	prudent in Christ (v10)	fools for Christ's sake (v10)
STRENGTH	strong (v10)	weak (v10)
HONOR	distinguished (v10)	without honor (v10)

HOW THE APOSTLES ANSWER (vv12–13)

reviled → we bless · **persecuted → we endure** · **slandered → we try to conciliate**

and so "the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now" (v13)

Read each row across: everything the Corinthians claimed for themselves stands opposite what the apostles were actually living — and the bottom band shows how the apostles answered the abuse.

FIGURE · LAST IN THE PROCESSION

"GOD HAS EXHIBITED US APOSTLES LAST OF ALL" · 1 COR 4:9

THE GENERAL in his chariot — the victor → **HIS ARMY** marching in honor → **THE SPOILS** treasure on display → **LAST OF ALL** the condemned — to die (v9) → **THE ARENA** *theatron*

THE AUDIENCE: "A SPECTACLE TO THE WORLD, BOTH TO ANGELS AND TO MEN"

Guzik: a Roman triumph or the coliseum · Henry: the amphitheatre, where the condemned fought last

HOW CORINTH SAW IT

losers at the back of the parade — an embarrassment to a church of kings

HOW GOD MEANT IT

"God has exhibited us" — His servants on display, like their crucified Lord

Verse 9 pictures the apostles at the very back of a Roman parade or arena show — the men condemned to die — and Paul says God Himself put them there, in full view of the world, angels and men.

θέατρον · ἐπιθανάτιος

THEATRON · "SPECTACLE" · G2302 — EPITHANATIOS · "CONDEMNED TO DEATH" · G1935

Theatron — our "theater" — is the place of public show, and then the show itself. It appears only three times in the New Testament: twice of the great theater at Ephesus, where a mob dragged Paul's companions (Acts 19:29, 31), and here, where the apostles *are* the show. *Epithanatios* occurs only here: sentenced to die, "doomed to death" — the word for the condemned men sent into the arena at the end of the games. "Exhibited" (*apodeiknymi*, G584) is to put on display. God is the subject: "God has exhibited us."

μωροί · περικαθάρματα · περίψημα

MŌROI · "FOOLS" · G3474 — PERIKATHARMATA · "SCUM" · G4027 — PERIPSĒMA · "DREGS" · G4067

Mōros (our "moron") is the word of 1:18–27 — "the word of the cross is foolishness," "God has chosen the foolish things of the world." Here it lands on the apostles: "fools for Christ's sake." The last two words each occur only here. *Perikatharma* is what is left after a thorough cleaning — the sweepings; *peripsēma* is what is scraped or rubbed off — the KJV's "offscouring." Both words were also used in the Greek world of a despised person cast out as a scapegoat in time of plague, which is why Guzik and Henry hear a sacrificial echo. Verse 13's "try to conciliate" is *parakaleō* (G3870) — the same verb Paul uses in v. 16, "I exhort you." When slandered, they appeal.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik hears Paul's sarcasm — "You are already full! You are already rich!" — as a tool to shake proud people awake, not to mock them; he quotes Morgan: "He was laughing at them with holy laughter." Verse 9 pictures the coliseum or a Roman triumph, where the defeated captives came last and went on to die in the arena. The Greeks despised manual labor and thought a man "was a wimp if he didn't fight back when slandered" — and Paul did both. On "offscouring" he notes a Greek custom of casting worthless people into the sea in time of plague. Then he turns it on himself and us: "Who today would hire Paul as a pastor?" "We want the power without the cost. God help us to choose Paul's way, because it is really God's way."

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

In "Christ Crucified," his message on 1 Corinthians 1:17–25 and 2:1–16 at Ligonier's 2000 National Conference, Sproul names the temptation verses 8–13 expose: "I think the greatest threat to the church in our day is based in our profound desire to be acceptable to the secular culture." "We want to be accepted. Nobody wants to be considered a fool." The message of the cross looks weak and foolish, and so do its messengers. His prayer is the opposite of Corinth's pride: "Don't let me be a coward who runs when the world is hostile, when the world laughs, when the world considers me a fool." And his question is Paul's: "what would you rather be than a fool for Christ?"

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry admires "a very elegant gradation from sufficiency to wealth, and thence to royalty": "See how apt pride is to overrate benefits and overlook the benefactor." "Pride is a great prejudice to our improvement." For verse 9 he reaches for the Roman amphitheatre, where condemned criminals — *epithanatioi* — fought last of the day; yet God displayed His apostles for nobler ends: "Ours is hard work, but honourable; it is hazardous, but glorious." They were treated "as the very dirt of the world," "the common-sewer into which all the reproaches of the world were to be poured" — and so resembled their Master, who "had not where to lay his head." "God seeth not as man seeth."

IV
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 4:14–21

A Father, Not a Tutor

Imitate me, remember my ways — and choose: the rod or a spirit of gentleness

14 *I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.* 15 *For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus* ☆ *I became your father through the gospel.* 16 *Therefore I exhort you,* 📄 *be imitators of me.* 17 *For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.* 18 *Now some have become* 🔁 *arrogant, as though I were not coming to you.* 19 *But I will come to you soon,* △ *if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are* 🔁 *arrogant but their* 🔁 *power.* 20 *For* △ *the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.* 21 *What do you desire? Shall I come to you* ⚠ *with a rod, or with* ☆ *love and a spirit of gentleness?*

1 CORINTHIANS 4:14–21

FIGURE · TUTORS OR A FATHER

“YOU WOULD NOT HAVE MANY FATHERS” · 1 COR 4:14–21

COUNTLESS TUTORS (v15)	ONE FATHER “THROUGH THE GOSPEL” (v15)	
paidagōgos — the household slave	v14	admonishes “my beloved children”
who walked a boy to school	v15	“became your father through the gospel”
and watched his conduct	v16	“be imitators of me”
a guardian with real authority —	v17	sends Timothy, his “faithful child”
but never the boy’s father	vv18–19	comes himself, “if the Lord wills”
“countless” · KJV “ten thousand”	v20	tests power, not words

“WHAT DO YOU DESIRE?” (v21)

- **“with a rod”** — a father’s discipline, if pride stays
- **“love and a spirit of gentleness”** — what he would rather bring

A tutor supervises; a father begets, loves, models, sends and comes — and the chapter ends by leaving the Corinthians to choose which kind of visit they will get.

παιδαγωγός

PAIDAGŌGOS · "TUTOR" · G3807

Literally "boy-leader": the trusted household slave who walked a son to school and back, carried his things, watched his manners and disciplined him until he came of age. Only three times in the New Testament — here and Galatians 3:24–25, where the Law serves as the *paidagōgos* that leads to Christ. "Countless" is *myrioi* (G3463), ten thousands (KJV). Against them Paul sets *gennaō* (G1080), "I became your father," literally "I begot you" — the verb of birth. A tutor can be hired; a father cannot. Verse 14's "admonish" is *noutheteō* (G3560), "to put in mind" — warning that aims at the mind and heart, not at shame.

μιμηταί

MIMĒTAI · "IMITATORS" · G3402

Our "mimic." Six times in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1 ("just as I also am of Christ"), Ephesians 5:1 ("imitators of God"), 1 Thessalonians 1:6 and 2:14, Hebrews 6:12. In a world without a Bible in every home, the faith was learned by watching a life. Paul's "ways which are in Christ" (v. 17) are not his personality but his pattern — and Timothy is sent to "remind" them, because they had once seen it.

δύναμις · ῥάβδος · πραΰτης

DYNAMIS · "POWER" · G1411 — RHABDOS · "ROD" · G4464 — PRAŪTĒS · "GENTLENESS" · G4236

Dynamis is ability, might, the working power of God (1:18, 24; 2:4–5). Paul will not measure the boasters by their *logos* (G3056), their talk, but by their *dynamis* — whether God is actually at work in them (vv. 19–20). *Rhabdos* is a staff or rod — the shepherd's rod and the father's rod of correction (compare the shepherd's "rod" of Psalm 23:4). *Praūtēs* is meekness, strength under control — the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23) and Christ's own character (2 Corinthians 10:1). The choice in v. 21 is the Corinthians' to make.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik explains the tutor as a "paidagogoi," a guardian or "slave-guide" who escorted boys to school and supervised their conduct; he had real authority, but not a father's. He is careful in applying it: "Leading someone to Christ does not give you special authority over their life, but it does give you a special relationship." "Imitate me" would horrify the Corinthians — imitate a man who is hungry, beaten and despised? Paul's answer: "Not because of all these difficulties, but despite them, and often because of them, the glory and power of Jesus Christ shines through me." Timothy was Paul's "troubleshooter." And Paul threatens "to pop the bubble of these puffed-up gasbags," leaving them the choice of the shepherd's rod or gentleness — tough work that "only a great work by the Spirit can accomplish!"

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

Sproul's "Christ Crucified" (2000 National Conference) does not reach chapter 4, but it reads the passage verse 20 points back to (2:1–5), and he reads Paul's confession aloud: "I was with you in weakness, in fear and in much trembling." His theme is that the gospel the world calls foolish is, to those being saved, "the power of God" — "The power of God to turn the world upside down, the power of God to turn you upside down." That is the test Paul brings to Corinth: not who talks best, but where God's power is turning lives upside down.

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

A short Spurgeon piece filed on biblehub under 1 Corinthians 4:14–21 as “Spiritual Paternity” (no sermon number given) uses a picture from the plant world. Some ferns and aloes bear young plants on their leaves — “These little aloes are born alive,” “living things falling from the living parent.” That, he says, is “a good illustration of what a Christian should be”: a man who “leaves an influence for good behind him,” whose spiritual children are “our glory and joy.” It is the father of verse 15 rather than the tutor: not a supervisor of other men’s growth, but a living parent of new life.

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry hears “not with the gall of an enemy, but the bowels of a father.” “Reproofs that expose commonly do but exasperate”; “To expose to open shame is but the way to render shameless.” Paul was “the instrument of their new birth.” “Be ye followers of me” is limited by 11:1 — “Follow me as far as I follow Christ” — and “Ministers should so live that their people may take pattern from them.” Timothy will refresh their memory, because “Those who have had ever so good teaching are apt to forget.” “If the Lord will” teaches that “All our purposes must be formed with a dependence on Providence.” The rod is real, but “It is a happy temper in a minister to have the spirit of love and meekness predominant, and yet to maintain his just authority.”

V
THEME

CROSS-REFERENCES

The Passage in the Whole Bible

Stewards who give account, a Judge who sees the heart, and a Savior who blessed when reviled

> *“And the Lord said, ‘Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?’”*
>
> LUKE 12:42

> *“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”*
>
> 1 PETER 4:10

> *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 5:10

> *“John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.’”*
>
> JOHN 3:27

> *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves;"*
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7

> *"and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;"*
>
> 1 PETER 2:23

> *"My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you—"*
>
> GALATIANS 4:19

> *"Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ."*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 11:1

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

In "Faithful Stewardship" Spurgeon sends every steward forward to the day of account in Matthew 25 — the Master's "Well done, good and faithful servant" for the faithful, and for the unfaithful, "Punishment from the Lord's own hand."

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry ties the apostles' poverty (v. 11) to Christ, "who had not where to lay his head" (Luke 9:58), and their sufferings to Colossians 1:24 — they "fill up that which was behind" of His afflictions for His body, the church.

SECTION II · STUDY HELPS

At a Glance

Four voices, one chapter

Four teachers, one chapter. Guzik walks the text and its pictures; Sproul — who never preached this chapter — presses its doctrine from nearby sermons on stewardship, judging, boasting and the cross; Spurgeon turns 4:1–2, 4:7 and 4:15 into pleas to the heart; Henry gathers it into Puritan counsel for ministers and people. No Spurgeon sermon on vv. 8–13 was found for this study, so his column is empty there.

THE MOVEMENT	GUZIK · the text	SPROUL · the doctrine	SPURGEON · the heart	HENRY · the counsel
I · Stewards & the Judge	Under-rowers who report to one Master; "Did I give you the truth?"	The steward owns nothing; judge with charity, not censoriousness — but don't be naïve.	A steward is a servant and no more; responsible for faithfulness, not results.	Neither overvalue nor undervalue ministers; we lie all open to His notice.
II · What you received	Judge by Scripture, not by style; the root was pride, not cliques.	Boasting is excluded; grace is the end of egotism.	Pride catechized: every particle of praise we take is stolen.	Pride lies at the bottom of quarrels; those who receive all should be proud of nothing.
III · Kings & fools	Holy laughter; captives last in the triumph; power without the cost.	The church's great threat is wanting to be acceptable; rather be a fool for Christ.	— (no sermon on vv. 8–13 sourced)	Pride overrates benefits and overlooks the Benefactor; hazardous, but glorious.
IV · Father & rod	A special relationship, not authority; Christ's power shines through weakness.	The gospel's power turns lives upside down — the test is power, not talk.	Spiritual paternity: living things falling from the living parent.	The bowels of a father; follow me as far as I follow Christ.

1 CORINTHIANS 4:1–21 · A COMPARATIVE READING

† Key Insights to Carry

- **An under-rower, not a celebrity.** *Hypēretēs* pictures a man at an oar below deck, taking orders from the one above. The Corinthians were choosing teams of preachers; Paul says preachers are rowers, and the Ship belongs to Christ. THE GREEK
- **Faithful, not impressive.** The one thing required of a steward is that he be found trustworthy (v. 2). Spurgeon: "You are responsible, not for the result of what you do." SPURGEON
- **A clear conscience is not a verdict.** "I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted" (v. 4). Even my own opinion of myself is not the final court — the Lord is. THE TEXT
- **Don't hand out the trophies before the race is over.** Guzik: the Corinthians "act like judges at athletic events" — but the Lord will judge motives at His coming, and His last word for the faithful is praise (v. 5). GUZIK
- **The judgment of charity.** Sproul: Jesus does not abolish discernment, but He forbids the censorious spirit; give your neighbor "the benefit of the doubt" — without naïveté. SPROUL
- **Everything is received.** Three questions in v. 7 leave no room for boasting. Henry: "those who receive all should be proud of nothing." Spurgeon: "I have nothing but what I have received." HENRY
- **Puffed up is Corinth's word.** *Physioō*, to inflate like bellows, occurs seven times in the New Testament — six in 1 Corinthians. Love is the one thing that is never puffed up (13:4). THE GREEK
- **God put the apostles at the back of the parade.** "God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death" (v. 9). The arena was not an accident of ministry; it was God's display of His power in weak men. THE TEXT

- **Rather a fool for Christ.** Sproul: "Nobody wants to be considered a fool" — and that desire to be acceptable is the church's great threat. Paul chose the fool's side, with Christ. SPROUL
- **Many tutors, few fathers.** A tutor supervises; a father begets, loves, models and comes. Guzik: leading someone to Christ gives "a special relationship," not special authority. GUZIK

† Questions for the Table

1 **What has God put in my hands to manage for Him this week — and if He audited it today, would He find me trustworthy?**

A steward owns nothing; the one requirement is faithfulness, not results.

4:1-2; Luke 12:42

2 **Whose verdict do I live under — a judge, an ex, a family, the men on the yard, my own 3 a.m. voice? What does "the one who examines me is the Lord" do to it?**

Other courts are "a very small thing"; only the Lord's is final, and for His own it ends in praise.

4:3-5

3 **Who have I written off — or crowned — before the race is over? What would the judgment of charity look like toward him?**

Leave hidden motives to the Lord; give the benefit of the doubt without naïveté.

4:5; Luke 6:37

4 **Name one thing I have talked about as if I earned it — my sobriety, my gifts, my knowledge, my standing at church. Where did it come from?**

"What do you have that you did not receive?"

4:7; John 3:27

5 **Where am I trying to have the respect of the world and the power of God at the same time?**

Guzik: "We want the power without the cost." Paul was a fool for Christ's sake.

4:9-13; 1 Pet 2:23

6 **Who is my spiritual father — and whose father am I becoming? Could I honestly say to a younger man, "imitate me"?**

Not perfect, but following Christ: "just as I also am of Christ."

4:15-17; 11:1

1 Corinthians 4 strips ministry down to what God requires: faithful stewards who answer to one Judge, who know that everything they have was received, and who are willing to look like fools for Christ's sake. The kingdom of God is not talk; it is God's power in weak people. And the Father who disciplines would far rather come to us in love and a spirit of gentleness.

Teaching the Word. Living in the Light. — Smith For Christ

† Sources

Each teacher's section summarizes the pages below in our own words; short quotations are verbatim from them. Matthew Henry died in 1714 having reached Acts; his *Commentary* on 1 Corinthians was completed after his death by Simon Browne from his notes

and method, and is cited under his name as it is published. Henry's Commentary and C.H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) are in the public domain; Guzik and Sproul are summarized — consult each author's own work.

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