

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

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[0 : 0 0] Our sermon text this morning is 1 Corinthians chapter 4, verses 1 through 5.

Let me invite you to turn there with me. That's page 953 in the Pew Bible, if you want to follow along there. If you're here this morning and you're new to Christianity, if you're new to the Bible, if you turn to page 953, you'll see that the big numbers there in the text are the chapters and the small numbers are the verses.

We're going to pick up chapter 4, verses 1 through 5. Let me read this for us. Apostle Paul writes, This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me, it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.

In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

[1 : 1 7] Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Then, each one will receive his commendation from God. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, you told us when you were here on earth that you are the light of the world.

We pray now as we turn to your word that you would shine your light into our hearts so that darkness might be dispelled, so that life might grow up, and so that we would know the freedom of knowing you and loving you.

Do this by your spirit, Lord, we pray. Amen. Amen. Ed Welch, in his book, When People Are Big and God Is Small, tells a story of when he was in high school.

Maybe you can relate to it. He's at the end of the year award ceremony, sitting in the high school auditorium. The whole student body is there, along with their parents, and the school is giving out all sorts of awards for achievement, and attendance, and all that sort of thing.

[2 : 4 0] Then they come to the big award for his class, one of the highest honors for his grade. Welch, sitting there in the seat, knew that he had a shot at winning, this award, and the presenter, the principal or someone like that, started describing the student who's receiving the award this year without mentioning their name, and the description, it turned out, sounded a lot like him.

But his heart started beating, and inside he was thinking, oh, please, don't be me. Don't be me. Don't call my name. I don't want to have to get up in front of everyone.

He's sitting there dreading the thought of hearing his name. And then, they announce the winner, and it turns out, it's not him.

Some other kid in the class. And immediately though, rather than sighing in relief, he describes how he sat in that auditorium, growing increasingly angry and upset.

deflated and embarrassed that he didn't get the award. And in this book, written obviously decades later, he reflects a little bit on what was going on in his heart back then.

[3 : 56] Why did he have such opposite reactions in that moment? And insightfully, he says, it's because his heart, and because our hearts, are so often controlled, by the approval, of other people.

What the Bible calls, in many places, the fear of man. You see, at first, he didn't want to win the award, because he was afraid, that other people, his classmates, would think he was some kind of nerd, for winning this academic award.

Or they'd make fun of how he looked, when he walked up on stage. But then after he didn't win, he was still being controlled, by other people's approval, by what others thought. Other kids knew, he was up for the award, and he lost.

They must think he's a total loser. And now everyone was all excited, for the other kid. And he wanted that approval. He wanted that accolade.

He wanted that commendation. Now maybe you can't relate, to that particular high school story. But my guess is that most of us, if not all of us, struggle with the same heart issue.

[5 : 07] That is, being controlled, being determined. Maybe even, at times, being enslaved, by the approval, by the judgment, of other people.

You come home, from the dinner party, or some other social gathering, and you can't stop thinking, of whether you talked too much, or said the wrong thing, or maybe didn't wear the right clothes.

And it eats you up, for the rest of the night. And you can't stop, obsessing over it. Or maybe you're constantly, looking over your shoulder at work.

Anxious about what your coworkers think, of the project you've been working on. Whether they think you've got, what it takes, to make it, in your office, or in your lab, or in your field.

You wonder what they're going to say, about you and your work, when you're not around. Or maybe it's just that, nagging, pervasive sense, that you're just not measuring up.

[6 : 13] You see the pictures online, of the birthday party, that your friend just threw, for their three year old. And it makes you feel, like a total, mom failure.

I mean, your kid's birthday party, didn't have pony rides. Your kid's birthday party, didn't have small batch, handcrafted gourmet ice cream, from a specialty shop, in Brooklyn.

Served in antique, green glass bowls, each one hung, with a little chalkboard, with each kid's name on it. I mean, your kids are probably, going to grow up to hate you.

But on a serious note, do you have that nagging sense, that you're just not measuring up?

That if people really saw you, what they'd see, is that you're just a failure. That someone else, would probably do a better job, whatever it is your job might be.

[7 : 16] Spouse, parent, employee, church member. In all these instances, at the heart level, are we not being controlled, hemmed in, determined, even devastated, by others' approval?

What other people are thinking of me? Is that not something, we all struggle with? And if you're still thinking, that this isn't a problem for you, reflect for a moment, about how you're doing, in say, evangelism.

How many of us Christians, could honestly say, that we don't wrestle, with what our friends, or neighbors would think of us, if we talk to them about Christ? Human approval, is something we all struggle with, we all wrestle, to some extent, with what people think of us, with others' opinions, with others' judgment of us, and we all wrestle, with the fact, that human approval, can control, what we feel, and think, and say, and do.

Whether it's sitting, in a high school auditorium, fuming, with anger, and resentment, or never taking the opportunity, to speak about Christ, with our friends, human approval, controls us.

But in the face, of this seemingly, universal problem, our text this morning, shows us, that there's a way, to be free.

[8 : 45] Did you notice, what Paul said, in verse three, look there again, but with me, Paul says, it's a very small thing, that I should be judged, by you, or by any human court.

In fact, I do not even judge myself. If you've been with us, over the past few weeks, you'll know that Paul wrote, this letter to a church, that was riddled, with divisions.

It seems the Christians, in Corinth, were splitting up, over which Christian teacher, was their favorite. They were treating them, like celebrities, and pitting them, against each other, based on their allegiance, to one leader, over the other.

I'm of Paul, I'm of Apollos, they were saying. And it seems that, that part of the standard, that they were using, to determine, which leader was best, were the standards, of ancient rhetoric, and oratory.

Because you see, flashy, verbal fireworks, drew a crowd. It drew a following, in the world of Corinth. They became celebrities. And though the men, and women Paul was writing to, had come to trust in Jesus, it seems they were still, clinging, to those worldly standards, and values, of what made someone, really great.

[9 : 57] Of what made someone, really worth, listening to. And it seems that, many of the Corinthians, had then judged, Paul's ministry, by these prevailing, rhetorical, oratorical, celebrity standards, of the day.

They judged him, by these standards, and they found him, wanting. Paul, didn't measure up. Now imagine for a moment, how you might respond, if you were Paul.

At first, perhaps a little angry, or hurt. I mean, you were the first one, to tell these people, about Jesus, in the first place. Right? But then maybe, you'd start to second guess, whether you'd made, some mistake, in how you handled things, and how you presented yourself, while you were there.

Maybe you could make another visit, to try to win, some of them over. Maybe you could try to show them, that you can be a little flashy too. Maybe you try to improve, their opinion of you. Try to win their favor.

But look at Paul's response, in verse three. It's a very small thing, that I should be judged by you. Or by any human court. He's not crushed. He's not second guessing himself.

[11 : 12] He's not worried, that he's an apostolic failure. He's not anxious, that he didn't keep their approval. Their judgment, he says, is a very small thing, to him. Now of course, you read verse three, for the first time, and it sounds like, an incredibly proud thing, to say, doesn't it?

It sounds like he's saying, look, I don't care what you think. It sounds like he's dismissing them, right, with the most, sophomoric, of retorts, ever spoken.

You can't judge me. But in fact, that's not the tone. And that's not, what Paul's saying here. Keep reading.

In fact, he says, I don't even judge myself. And he goes on to say, I'm not aware of anything, against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted. Do you see what Paul's saying here?

He's not doing, what you and I, almost instinctively do. When we feel, that our hearts are being controlled, by what other people think, or by their approval, how do we naturally, almost instinctively, try to get out of it?

[12 : 22] Well usually, by saying, that the only opinion, that really matters, isn't what you think of me, but what I think of me. I'm the only one, who can really say, whether I'm measuring up.

So instead of others, sitting in the judge's seat, we sit in judgment over ourselves. But the problem is, that move, doesn't really work.

Does it? I see this in my own life. When I say to myself, I'm so sick and tired, of living for others approval, it's only what I think, that really matters.

One of two things, always happens. I either live up, to my own standards, and then I become proud, and dismissive of others, and at times, pretty unsympathetic, to other shortcomings.

After all, I'm living up to my standards. Or, I don't live up, to my own standards, and I'm just as crushed, and dejected, as I was, when I lived, on the approval of others.

[13 : 34] You see, to make that move, that we all make, to say, I'll be my own judge, not you, doesn't get you, out of the cycle. You're on the same roller coaster, as when you lived, on the approval of others.

If you get it, you feel great for a while, but if you keep getting it, you feel proud, and above everybody else. But if you don't get it, you crash, and feel awful. That's how it is, with others approval. When others are your judge, but it's no different, when you live on the approval, of yourself.

When you get it, you become proud. When you lose it, you despair. But Paul, strikingly here, on the one hand says, your judgment, isn't ultimate for me.

But then in the next breath, he says, my judgment, isn't ultimate for me. He's found something, that has set him free, from the tyranny, both of the judgment of others, and of the judgment of self.

So what is it? I think for most of us today, his answer is pretty counterintuitive. Look at the end of verse four.

[14 : 47] For I'm not aware of anything against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted. And here it is. It's the Lord who judges me. Now what is Paul saying here?

What is this text showing us? It's showing us this, that you'll only be truly free, from the judgment of others, and self.

When you know that you're accountable, to a greater judge. You'll only be truly free, from the judgment of others, and self, when you know, that you're accountable, to a greater judge.

Only when someone weightier, comes into view, will the other voices, be displaced. A young cellist, giving her first collegiate recital, may be anxious to hear, what her friends think, or what her instructors think.

She may even be, her own toughest critic, but if a truly great cellist, walked into the room, if Yo-Yo Ma came in, sat in the front row, listened intently, to the whole performance, and approached her afterwards, wouldn't every other judgment, be, but a very small thing, in comparison.

[16 : 11] Of course. No one else, would have, that same authority, or that same ability, to judge, rightly, and justly, and truly.

And you see, when it comes, friends, to the world, and when it comes, to each of our lives, as a whole, there is one, who has the greatest authority, and has the greatest ability, to truly judge.

Paul says in verse one, that the Corinthians, should regard him, and other Christian teachers, and leaders, as servants of Christ, and stewards, that is household managers, of the mysteries, that is the richness, of the gospel, the mysteries of God.

In other words, he's saying, God is the one, who gave Paul his ministry, therefore God alone, has the ultimate authority, to judge Paul's work, and not the Corinthians. A household manager, a steward, in the ancient world, was accountable, at the end of the day, not to anyone, in the household, but to the owner, of the household, the one to whom, everything belonged.

Only the owner, had authority, to judge the steward's work, because it was all his, and indeed he did, have that authority. Like a steward, Paul had his ministry, from God, and so God, has the ultimate authority, to judge his ministry, but you know, even though we're not, apostles like Paul, the same is true, for each one of us.

[17 : 54] God is the creator, of all things, the giver, and owner, of everything that we see, every leaf, that falls from every tree, and every brick, of every building we make, all things come from him, and all things belong to him.

And as human beings, we're created, in God's image, as his image bearers, with the awesome dignity, to keep, and to tend, to steward, this world, and our lives, according to God's purposes, and God's plans, because everything, comes from him.

Because God has created the world, and us within it. And because of that, he has the authority, to judge. He is in the position, he has the right, to declare whether or not, something is in line, with the purpose, for which it was made.

So God has the authority, to judge above all else, but God also has the ability, to judge above all else. In verse five, Paul says, God will bring to light, the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose, the purposes of the heart.

Friends, God can see, what you and I cannot see. We are fallible judges, with limited knowledge, and limited perspective, but God is different.

[19 : 23] God knows every circumstance, every motivation, every desire, behind every act, you and I have, or will ever make.

Nothing escapes, his scrutiny. Down to the movement, of every subatomic, particle, and down, to the thought, and intention, of every human heart.

And of course, that makes God, the perfect judge, doesn't it? The utterly just judge, who can, and who will, render the most perfect, complete, verdict.

So how was Paul able to be free, from the judgment of others, and even the judgment, that he gave of his own self? Because he knew, he was accountable, to a greater judge, the Lord.

The one whose authority, and ability to judge, made every other judgment, a very small thing. But that creates, a bit of a problem, doesn't it?

[20 : 40] If all this is true of God, that we stand before him, as the one, who has the complete authority, and the ability, to judge us perfectly, and justly, how in the world, is that good news?

In fact, how is that not, at the end of the day, really, really, really, bad news? Yes, it liberates us, from a concern, of what others think, but it seems to put us, in an even worse position.

How does that not, take us out, of the proverbial, frying pan, only, to face, the fire? How could we stand, before such a judge?

One from whom, we cannot conceal, our flaws, or our sins, or our desires, like we can conceal them, from every other, human court.

If God were to take, a perfect account, of our lives, yes, it would silence, every other, merely human judgment, but what would it, replace it with?

[21 : 49] Something surely, more unbearable, if God is as perfect, and just, and exposing, as he must be, if he is the awesome creator, and sustainer, of all things.

But it's here, and maybe for the first time, perhaps only here, that we start to see, how Christianity, is such radically, good news.

You see, Paul is confident, in verse five, that he will receive, not condemnation, but commendation. That the verdict of God, the perfectly just, and holy judge, over his life, will be one, of approval.

That on the great day, of judgment, when God puts an end, to all evil, and all injustice, in this world, gone horribly wrong, when the world, stands before the bar, of its creator, and the gavel, will fall, Paul knows, that he'll be pronounced, innocent.

Innocent. How? Will it be, because Paul lived, such a good life? Will it be, because Paul, well he tried his best?

[23 : 16] No. He says to himself, look again at verse four, I'm not aware, of anything against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted. It's not Paul's record, and not his performance, and not because we tried, our best, that God will accept us.

None of that, could ever be good enough. No, something else, must be the ground, of his acquittal. He knows, that we have to be approved, not on the basis, of our own record, but on the record, of another.

And friends, this is exactly, what the gospel, what Christianity, is all about. that when we, had done, nothing, to deserve, God's commendation, and done everything, to deserve, God's condemnation, in love, God sent his son.

Jesus Christ, lived his whole, life on earth, under the favor, of the father's commendation. At Jesus's baptism, do you remember, the father's voice said, this is my son, in whom I am, well pleased.

And his life, lived that out. But in the end, Jesus gave that up, on the cross, and hanging there, he suffered the condemnation, that our sins deserve.

[24 : 45] My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He cried. Condemnation. He bore the sentence, for our sin, so that our verdict, could be reversed. And now, when anyone places, their trust, in the risen Lord, Jesus, immediately, their guilty sentence, is erased.

Because he bore that sentence. And they're credited, with Jesus's perfect, record, and they receive, the father's full, commendation. This is my son, this is my daughter, in whom I'm well pleased.

And now we see, the whole way to the bottom, don't we? Now we see, why Paul wasn't shaken, or controlled, by the judgment, or opinions, others had of him. Or that he even had of himself. He had the approval, of the greatest judge.

He had the verdict, of the highest court. He had the approval, of the eternal, Lord Jesus, who loved him, and gave himself for him. And friend, that's the only thing, that will free you.

It's the only thing, that will free you. Only when you see, that there's a greater judge, with whom we have to do. And only when you see, that Jesus is the only ground, of your approval.

[26 : 09] Then you'll be free. Free from the tyranny, of self approval, and free from the tyranny, of others approval. And when you get that, when you really get that, it'll change you.

Perhaps the first thing, you'll find, is suddenly being faithful, becomes sweeter, and more desirable to you, than being liked.

In verse two, Paul says that what really counts, for a steward, is that they're found faithful. That they do, what the owner of the household, has instructed them to do, and has entrusted them to do.

And when you see, friends, that the owner, of all things, has given up, his greatest treasure for you, and he's opened the storehouses, of his eternal grace, and mercy, and given you a seat, at his table, as a family member, you will find, that you want, to be faithful, to him.

And you'll want to obey him. And you'll want to do so, even though it might mean, losing some of the approval, of your peers. What would that loss, be in comparison, to what you already have in him?

[27 : 27] It'll make you want to be faithful. Another way, in which this will change you, is that you actually, become a person, who's more open, to correction, and rebuke. That might seem, a bit counterintuitive, at first.

How could, knowing I'm sort of, not ultimately susceptible, to the judgment of others, make me more open, to their correction? But think of it this way. Friend, if you live, on the approval of others, then don't you see, that any corrective word, or any rebuke, is going to totally, crush you.

You won't really, be able to receive, the correction well, because any rebuke, will feel like, you've had the wind, knocked out of your sails. They're taking from you, the one thing, that you absolutely, have to have.

And so you'll get defensive, and not really listen. Or you'll fall into self-loathing, and beat yourself up, and be paralyzed, to make any kind of change. But if you know, the approval of God in Christ, if you're secure in that, if you know that the Lord, is your ultimate judge, and he's accepted you in Christ, then correction, and rebuke, and criticism, won't and can't destroy, your sense of worth, and well-being.

You'll actually be glad, and open to receiving correction, because you'll want to get, as much help as you can, to become more, and more like Jesus, like the one, that God wants you to be like.

[28 : 58] Of course, rebukes are still going to sting, right? No one walks around saying, please, rebuke me. But, when they come, and we all need them, you'll be able to receive them, for your good.

You know, one of the primary ways, you can tell, that the gospel, hasn't really gone deep, into someone's heart, is if they aren't open, to loving correction, from a brother, or sister in Christ.

Let me mention one last way, this truth will change us. When you know, that your approval, comes from outside of yourself, that it comes from Christ, and it's not your own doing, it's going to create in you, a kind of character, that is gentle, and strong, at the same time.

Because on the one hand, what you have, is something you, don't deserve. And that will make you, a very gentle person, you see.

You won't be proud, or judgmental. You'll be humble, and you'll be understanding. After all, it's not your performance, that saves you, it's Christ's. But at the same time, because your approval in him, is utterly secure, it's going to make you, a strong person.

[30 : 21] You're not going to fear, ultimately, what other people think. You're not going to fear, correction or rebuke. You'll be able to hold, your convictions with confidence. You'll be able to be bold, when you need to be.

And the beauty of it all, is that you'll be able, to be both at once. There'll be strength, in your gentleness, and there will be gentleness, in your strength.

And friends, I don't know about you, but I think the world, needs a lot more people. Who are like that. And so, instead of worrying, what people think of you, after the social gathering, instead of being controlled, by the opinions, of your colleagues at work, instead of beating yourself up, over whether or not, you're an all-star parent, instead of all that, do you see, what you have, or what you can have, in Christ?

that you can live, in the freedom of knowing, that the one, true judge, has justified you. And that the verdict, has been spoken, in your favor, and that it cannot be revoked, and that no other judgment, can shake you.

Friends, do you have that? If you're in Christ, you do. And if you're not, you can come and receive it.

[31 : 49] Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we ask, that you, by your Holy Spirit, would take this truth, that our approval comes, not of our own performance, or our own merits, but comes because of what you've done for us.

Lord, would you take that beautiful truth, by your Spirit, and bury it deep in our hearts. And would you free us, Lord, from the way, in which we crave, and are controlled, by the approval of others.

And Lord Jesus, would you make us more, and more, people like yourself. Jesus, you were bold, and you were gentle, you were strong, and you were caring.

Oh Lord, make us your church, more, and more like that. Lord, not ultimately, for our sake, but for your sake, so that the world, might see and know, how beautiful you are, God.

We pray this, in your name Jesus. Amen. Thank you.