

Scumbags for Jesus

I Corinthians 4:1-21

March 16, 2025

Have you ever been called a scumbag? Have you ever called someone else a scumbag? Not to their face of course, always behind their backs. Coworkers, family members, neighbors, referees, opponents, politicians, pastors. Paul actually refers to someone in today's Scripture as the scum of the earth. To find out who, please open your Bibles to I Corinthians 4.

Over the last few weeks we've been working our way through I Corinthians and today we come to the 4th chapter. So far we've learned that Jesus is the power and wisdom of God and He is the key factor in bringing unity for believers. We also learned about having a complete change of mind through the work of the Holy Spirit and we talked about planting and building for God. All of those are on our Youtube Channel, AntiochCBC.

If you are able, please stand as we read I Cor 4. 1 So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. 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 till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

In this opening paragraph of this fourth chapter, Paul is speaking a bit to his role as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Although today we see him as a preeminent leader of the early church, planting congregations throughout the Mediterranean and writing nearly half of the New Testament, Paul calls himself and his co-laborers servants. The word actually means under rowers. Say under rower. If you saw the movie Ben Hur, you might remember the galley slaves who rowed the Roman ships forward. Each of them was chained fast to prevent escape or mutiny and they rowed in unison to move the ship along even as they rammed into enemy ships. It was a horrid way to live and die. That's where blisters were made and wills were broken. In some ships there were actually three layers of rowers each on top of the other. The manure and everything else from the upper level drained down to the rowers beneath and this term was used to describe the rowers on the very bottom. Say yuck. Those who rowed on the bottom were the most menial and most despised. They were the lowest of the low. And that's the term Paul uses to describe himself. Under rower.

Even so, he has been entrusted with the deep secret things of God. What things? Theological truths that were hidden from former generations now revealed

through Jesus and His Holy Spirit to His followers. Paul's work was to row these truths forward- to spread them throughout the world so that all might know who Jesus is and what He has done. At times he rammed them into the Jewish ships of tradition and at other times he rammed them into the pagan beliefs he encountered around the Mediterranean. He had a special calling. He had been given a trust with these deep things.

Say trust. A trust is something given to someone for safe keeping. To administer. It may be a large sum of money held in trust by a trustee who is to manage it for maximum return. It may be a house or a farm or even a business. And it is the duty of the one who receives the trust to administer it well. Trustees aren't the owners, just the managers. Which reminds us of Jesus' parable of the talents. In this case, Paul was the trustee entrusted with the most valuable asset of all, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And his responsibility, like that of every other trustee was to administer it well. To prove faithful, worthy of his appointment. And Paul indicates in this passage that he has acted faithfully in sharing this trust from God with the Corinthians.

Harold Martin has said that it is much more important to be faithful than to be popular. We all want to be popular. We like to be liked on FB and in real life. But God forbid we become popular at the expense of our faithfulness! Paul puts his case for faithfulness in the hands of God Himself. He believes he has been a responsible trustee but ultimately God will be his judge. As He will surely be ours as well!

We have each been given the same trust that Paul had received! We have the Gospel of Jesus. The question is, how faithful are we administering it? How good a trustee are we being? Remember that the steward who buried his trust in the ground was cursed by the one who entrusted it to him. If we don't share the Gospel, we are frittering away the trust God has placed in our care. In addition to the good news of Jesus, He's also entrusted each of us with certain gifts and talents to be used in His kingdom for His glory. Once again, it behooves us to use them wisely for Him.

For there will be a time of accountability, Paul reminds us. For him as well as for all of us. In vs 4, he says his conscience is clear, but that's not the final word. God has the final word. Many of us have resisted sharing the Gospel so much that our consciences no longer convict us of not doing so. It's been so long since we used the gifts God has entrusted to us that it doesn't even bother us anymore to let them go unused. Just because our conscience doesn't convict us doesn't mean we're innocent. Even though Jiminy Cricket foolishly advised to let your conscience be your guide, a believer should be guided by the Word of God and by the Holy Spirit of God. Ask God to prick your conscience about any matter in which you may have disobeyed the Father. Ask Him to convict your heart that you might confess, repent, and do the will of God.

For He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the **motives** of men's hearts, Paul promises. Say motives. We don't even understand our own motives sometimes, much less those of others. Why do we do the things we do? We may truly believe we're doing it for God's glory when we're really doing it for our own. Or out of fear or out of anything other than love, devotion, and obedience to Jesus. Jer 17:9-10 reminds us, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? 10 "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind..." At the Judgment seat of Christ, which we talked about in chapter 3, God will expose not just our deeds, but our motives behind those deeds and make them all clear and plain.

In the meantime, that we might receive a good judgment then, we should examine ourselves regularly now. We should judge ourselves just as Paul was doing, but we also need to realize our judgement is not the final say. Some hardened criminals don't feel guilty. They've either ignored their conscience or it was never trained and sharpened by the Holy Spirit so that their disobedience doesn't bother them. Or gossip. Or pornography. Ask God to make you sensitive to Him, to make you aware and responsive. As David writes in Psalm 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is **any** wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Vs 6 "Now, brothers, 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 take pride in one man over against another. 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?" Paul is warning these Corinthians, and us, not to put stock in men's opinions. Stick to the Word of God! We are warned in Revelation not to add to or take away from God's Word and even well-meaning Christians can be guilty of that. It's often these add-ons that people latch onto and elevate certain teachers or leaders. Paul is telling these young Corinthian Christians, "Don't divide over me and Apollos but unite around the holy Scriptures." Stick to the Scriptures!

Vs 8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings — and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that **we** might be kings with you! 9 For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. 10 We are fools for Christ, but you are **so wise** in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored!

Paul is being a bit sarcastic with these young believers who think they're all that. They had become a snobbish clique and sometimes we do the same. Looking down

on those not in our group, not in our church. He's encouraging them and us to realize that they and we too are galley slaves of the same Master on the same ship. Although they think they are so wise and powerful, they are equal servants of Christ together.

Paul says they're the ones at the end of the procession. And that wasn't a good thing, not like Santa at the end of the Christmas parade. When a Roman general returned home after winning a battle, he led his victorious army down main street in a triumphant parade showing off the loot they had seized. At the very end of the parade were the prisoners they had captured who would go into the colosseum, the arena, to fight the gladiators, the lions, and the tigers. Having been beaten and tortured and starved, they were quite a spectacle which the crowd laughed at and made fun of. Sometimes it feels like we're near the end of time's parade and the crowd sometimes laughs at obedient Christians. At the ones who sincerely try to follow Jesus. A spectacle to be made fun of. If you ever feel that way, take heart. You're in very good company with the Apostle Paul.

And then Paul gives us a glimpse of what his life is really like. Vs 11, "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. 12 We work hard with our own hands." Not exactly the best advertisement for Christianity, much less for Christian leadership. We have it so good today in these United States. But our brothers and sisters in other places are enduring hunger and thirst, are in rags and are being treated brutally. Some are homeless, refugees. May God have mercy and may we also have mercy. And generosity to reach out and help. To do what we can to alleviate their suffering and misery instead of, like these proud Corinthians, thinking we're better than them and above all that. The Faithlife Study Bible says suffering is a hallmark of Christian ministry. The Greeks including some of these Corinthians considered physical labor beneath their dignity fit only for slaves. So when Paul mentioned working with his own hands, he's saying, "Welcome to the ship, fellow servant, grab an oar!"

He also helps us understand how to respond when we are mistreated because of Christ. Vs 12, When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 13 when we are slandered, we answer kindly." Or do we? Or do we only talk and sing about it? Last week at Calvary CBC we sang a song, The Jesus Way which basically echoes these verses. But I stopped singing at one point. Not because I didn't know the song, but because I don't always do this. I don't always answer kindly when slandered. I often fight back. I don't always bless when I'm cursed, I sometimes snap back. It's easy to sing and it's easy to say until we have to actually live it. It is the Jesus way and Paul had learned to live it, but it wasn't easy for him either. It's not natural to return good for evil. Your assignment this week is to live this out! To bless when you are cursed. To love when you are hated. To answer kindly when you're yelled at.

Vs 13 Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. And there it is. Say scum. I'd like to see inside your heads right now to see what comes to mind when I say that word. Stagnant pond water? That stinkin mass in the Tupperware that's been in the fridge a several months? The word can be translated filth, offscouring, or the dregs scraped from a dirty dish, a garbage pot or a chamber pot. Who wants to be that? Who wants to be scum? We want to be the first. The flower of the morning. The first cup of coffee. The brightest and bestest. No, Paul says, for Jesus Christ, he has become a scumbag. Looked down on, mistreated, abused. He calls himself the scum of the earth. A galley slave under all those on top, just rowing Jesus' boat forward, the church. The next time someone calls you a scumbag, thank them for putting you into such good company with Paul and the other Apostles. It's an elite group. The cluster of the scummies. The fellowship of the froth. The ship of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Once we get past our own pride and realize who life is really about, it's amazing how much peace and focus we can have. You're not worried or distracted about what people think of you, call you, or even how they treat you. This is about Jesus. But as long as we, like the Corinthians, think we're all that, we miss the mark. But when we are willing to be scumbags for Jesus, it's a bullseye every time.

Because of time, skip to vs 18 Some of you have become arrogant (Amp adds conceited and pretentious), as if I were not coming to you. 19 But I **will** come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I **will** find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what **power** they have. 20 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. 21 What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

When we were in the car as kids and we'd get to fighting in the backseat, dad would say, "Don't make me come back there! Don't make me stop this car." That always did it. In the verses we skipped, Paul promises to send Timothy to get these Corinthians straightened out until he himself can come. He doesn't want to be the heavy, but he will if he has to. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power! All these immature Corinthians were bragging about themselves and their favorite teachers. Stop talking about it and live it out, Paul says! Put your faith where your mouth is! That's good advice!!

We can talk all we want. We can boast and brag about what great Christians we are. We can talk about how much money we give or how many good works we do. But is the power of God at work in us and through us? Is He changing us to become more like Him? So that we bless when we're cursed? So that we love when we're hated? So that we give and share and care? If so, He's able to use us to row His kingdom forward. Let us scumbags put our hands to the oar with Paul and row away!