

‘Those Entrusted With The Mystery Of God.’

A local policeman had just finished his shift one cold November evening and was at home with his wife. ‘You just won’t believe what happened this evening, in all my years on the force I’ve never seen anything like it.’ His wife asked, ‘what happened?’ He told her that ‘he came across two guys down by the canal drinking battery acid and eating fireworks!’ His wife asked him, ‘what did you do with them?’ He replied, ‘Oh that was easy, I charged one and let the other off.’

I want to talk to you today about those who are entrusted with the mystery of God. And it’s my prayer that we will all be charged with sharing this mystery with those around us.

Paul had heard through Chloe’s household that the Christians in Corinth were quarrelling among themselves. Some were following Paul, some were following Apollos, some were following Peter and some were following Christ. And as a result of this, the church in Corinth were deeply divided. And so, as we’re about to read, he’s going to deal with the problem of elevating one man over another. He’s going to tell us today that anyone who preaches or teaches God’s Word, will be judged by what they preach or teach.

1 Corinthians 4:1 ‘This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.’ While the Corinthians were being tempted to elevate one man over another, Paul tells them to rather consider them as ‘servants and stewards,’ as some translations have it.

You see, we often hold people high above others, we often think that some members are more important than others. Some think the elders are more important than the preacher or the preacher is more important than the other members. But Paul says no, instead lifting people above others, we should remind ourselves that we’re all servants of Christ, we’re all ministers of Christ.

There was a woman who walked into a place of worship one day looking for the minister. When she asked a man where the minister was, he told her, ‘she’s in the bathroom cleaning’. The woman said ‘no, I don’t want to speak to the cleaner, I want to speak to the minister.’ ‘Oh’ the man said, ‘sorry, you’ll find him doing the garden at the back’. The woman said, ‘no, I don’t want to speak to the gardener, I want to speak to the minister.’ And with that, someone said to her, ‘madame, were all ministers here, which one do you want to speak to?’

The Message translation says this 1 Corinthians 4:1 ‘Don’t imagine us leaders to be something we aren’t. We are servants of Christ, not his masters.’ Paul, Apollos, Peter, you and me are all servants of Christ, we’re all ministers of Christ regardless of the roles we play within the church.

Notice Paul says that a minister, a servant of God is a ‘steward of the mysteries of God.’ That word ‘steward’ basically means ‘one who manages or one who is an administrator’. But what exactly are we managing? What exactly are we administrators of? Paul says we’re managing the mysteries of God, we’re administrators of the mysteries of God. And what are the mysteries of God that God has revealed?

Romans 16:25-26 ‘Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith.’

Loved ones, the mystery of God is none other than the Gospel message itself. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 ‘Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.’

The mystery of God is simply the good news, that Jesus died for our sins, was buried but rose again. And we’ve all got the responsibility of not only in sharing that good news with others but to manage it. And how do we go about managing the Gospel message? We manage that message by guarding the purity of truth from human wisdom, people’s opinions, and our personal convictions. 1 Timothy 6:20 ‘Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge.’

Now let me share with you an interesting side point here concerning the relationship between preachers and elders.

The elders are to shepherd, manage and feed the flock but the preacher is only to manage the Word of God. That's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:6 '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.'

In other words, when the church finds a preacher who manages the Word of God properly, then they have found a tool to feed the flock. When you think about it, we go out of our way to manage our money, we may even entrust an accountant to help us deal with our money. But how much more important is it to employ someone who is trustworthy with the Word of God?

1 Corinthians 4:2 'Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.' We're all servants of Christ and we've all got the responsibility of sharing the Gospel with others. But those who make a living from preaching the Gospel and sharing God's Word with others must not only be trustworthy, they must be faithful. That word 'faithful', means someone who can be trusted.

Now it's no secret that Funmi and I are moving on sometime next year and you may well decide that you want to employ another evangelist. And if you do decide to employ someone else, how do you know they can be trusted? Well, whenever we hear anyone preach or teach, we all have the responsibility to determine whether the preacher is trustworthy.

In other words, is what he's preaching in line with what the Scriptures teach? Does he constantly encourage people to read their Bibles for themselves or does he ask people to trust his opinions? Is he asking people to trust him or trust what the Bible says? Is he trying to take over as leader and manage the flock himself?

Now remember Paul is still focusing on the division in the Corinthian church and when he says those who have been given a trust must be faithful. He's asking, are those who are called upon to share the Gospel with others in control of their own lives? Are they doing what they are supposed to be doing? Are they doing what God called them to do?

Yes, Paul is referring to his and Apollo's ministry as preachers but this applies to all of us because we're all called to serve. It doesn't matter if you clean the toilets or take care of the garden. It doesn't matter if you teach in the Bible study or feed the homeless.

There was a man who was the chairman of a very large shipping company. One day at a meeting a woman came in to confront him and asked, 'exactly who are you and what do you do?' Without batting an eye, the man said, 'I am your chairman. Of course, you know the duties of a chairman don't you, that's someone who is roughly the equivalent of parsley on a platter of fish.' You see, we're all called to serve and no one's service is more important than anyone else's.

Paul continues and says in 1 Corinthians 4:3 'I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself.' Now that word 'judge', can mean to examine closely, to question, or to interrogate. But here Paul uses a different Greek word for 'judge' which means to determine, or to resolve. Paul is saying that his actions are on trial by the standard of God's Word, not man's. He's saying people can say whatever they want about him, he doesn't care because he can't even examine himself.

In other words, if anyone is going to judge what he preaches, then the judging must be done by the standard of God's Word. You see loved ones, peaching isn't a popularity contest, sharing God's Word isn't a way of winning people over to your views or opinions. It's not about trying to please people but trying to please God.

1 Corinthians 4:4 'My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent'. Now let's be honest here, we all like to be liked, don't we? As a preacher, I hope that people like what I have to say, I hope that they are encouraged by what I have to say. But Paul says, he doesn't care what people think about his ministry.

A woman approached a preacher one day and said, 'there must be something wrong with your preaching and the work you do here in the church'. She said, 'you've been preaching for two years and we've only had one baptism.' The preacher looked at the woman and said with tears in his eyes, 'I know, but God knows I'm trying my best.'

You see loved ones, I believe we can all feel like that at times, especially preachers. We're out there sharing the Gospel with others and we think nothing much is happening.

The point is, we can listen to what others are saying or we can be faithful in what God has called us to be and do. Paul says, **'my conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.'** Paul more than anybody understood that a clear conscience doesn't justify a man in the eyes of God. Remember before Paul became a Christian he did many things with a clear conscience thinking that it was good.

Acts 26:9 'I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.' **1 Timothy 1:13 'Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.'**

In other words, he believes he has been faithful in sharing God's Word and he's not aware of anything that would disqualify him from being a good minister to them. He basically saying, **'he's just using the gifts that God gave him to share the Gospel and he's using them to the best of his ability'**.

The great evangelist D. L. Moody was preaching one day and after he was finished someone came to him and said, 'You made eleven grammatical mistakes in your message tonight.' Moody looked at the person and said, **'I'm sure you're right. My education is limited. I wish I could have had more, but I'm simply using the grammar I have to serve the Lord.'**

We all have different talents and gifts from the Lord and all we can do, is do the best we can with what we have been given. If you've shared the Gospel with others but they haven't responded to that message, then don't go beating yourself up. You've done what you were supposed to do, it's God who does the converting. Let me encourage you to continue to be faithful in sharing that message with others and don't lose sight about what this whole thing is about.

1 Corinthians 4:4 'My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.' Paul's says if anyone judges him without using the Word of God, then their conclusions are faulty. Now as a preacher, I may examine myself and come to the conclusion that I'm a pretty good guy. However, my sincerity and conscience means nothing in light of God's true judgments.

It's the Lord Jesus who is judging Paul and not just Paul but all of us. It doesn't matter what others think about us, what matters is what does the Lord thinks about us. It doesn't matter what people think we are doing or not doing, all that matters is what God knows what we're doing.

Let me ask you, **are you more concerned about pleasing people than you are about pleasing God?** Jesus Himself said in **John 5:30 'By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.'**

When you serve God, **are you trying to win the praise of people? When God looks at you, does He see you being faithful in sharing that Gospel message? Does God think you're doing the best you can with the talents and gifts He has given you so that others may hear the good news?** If you are being faithful and doing your best, then I've got good news for you, Paul says you will be judged worthy of praise.

1 Corinthians 4:5 '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.'

Paul says there is only one person we should be trying to please and that person is God. Listen you know what's going on in your heart and you know what your motives are in your service to the Lord. But in all of this, the only person we should be trying to please is God. And if we're only out to please God, then who cares what other people think.

Notice how Paul makes a very clear distinction between judging men's hearts and making righteous judgments. In other words, you can judge me all you want with your human philosophies and with your opinions, but if you're not using God's standard to judge me, then your judgements are worthless. If you're going to judge what I preach or teach, then use God's Word as your standard.

Now remember Paul is still dealing with the problem he spoke about back in **1 Corinthians 1:12**, where he writes, **'One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'**

He's saying just because the Corinthian Christians may not be preachers like, Paul, Apollos or Cephas, that doesn't make them less of a Christian than they are. People in the religious world, often think of their churches leaders and their preachers and they lift them up higher than any other member within those churches. But when we start to think like that and reason like that, when we lift some people up above others, that's the world's way of thinking, it's not the spiritual way of thinking.

Paul says that God sees into the heart of man and when He comes at the appointed time, He will make the right judgments of all humanity. You see loved ones, there are times we forget that Jesus is among us and we forget He sees everything. In **Revelation 2** we see a picture of Jesus walking in and through His churches. And when Jesus writes a love letter to the church in Thyatira, He tells them that He sees all the good things the church has been doing but He also sees all the bad things they have been doing.

He warns those who tolerate the false teaching of a woman named Jezebel and says in **Revelation 2:23** 'I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds'. Notice what Jesus says here, he's not disciplining them just for the church in Thyatira's benefit but for all the churches benefits. Jesus, the One who sees everything, is the One who searches our hearts and minds. Jesus, the light of the world, lights up the dark places and it sees down into the very heart of everyone.

It was **Abraham Lincoln** who famously quoted the words, 'you can fool some of the people all the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time'. What Lincoln says is true, but there is a deeper truth that we must accept. **Galatians 6:7-8** 'Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.' You see loved ones, we can deceive many people and even ourselves at times, but we cannot fool or deceive God. God knows our mind's innermost thoughts and feelings and He knows our heart's desires.

A woman and her husband interrupted their holiday to go to the dentist. The woman said, 'I want a tooth pulled, and I don't want anaesthetic because I'm in a big hurry. Just extract the tooth as quickly as possible, and we'll be on our way.' The dentist was quite impressed and said, 'you're certainly a courageous woman, which tooth is it?' The woman turned to her husband and said, 'show him your tooth, dear.'

I guess we're all very good at pointing to others and encouraging them to sort their sin problems out. But the question is, **are we just as good at examining ourselves?** Most of us if we have a health problem will quickly go to the doctors for an examination. Imagine someone goes to the doctor for a routine check-up and the doctor has to break the bad news and inform them they have cancer. **Why does the doctor tell us that?** Because they love us enough to tell us we have cancer.

Now granted the doctor might make alterations to the X-Ray so that the cancer spots don't show on it, **but would that change our condition? Would it change the truth to alter the X-Ray?** We all know that a good doctor wouldn't do that and neither would a good God. And if having a routine check-up is important for our physical health, **how much more important is having a routine spiritual check-up?**

Psalms 139:23-24 'Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.'

When was the last time you went to God for a spiritual check-up? When was the last time you asked God to perform spiritual heart surgery on you? When was the last time you asked God to remove anything from your life which shouldn't be there?

If we are honest with ourselves and allow God to work in our lives, He will lead us to eternal life. Paul says if our hearts are right and are our motives are pure, then we will receive our praise from God. Because on Judgment Day Jesus is either going to say us, **Matthew 25:23** 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' Or He is simply going to say, 'well!'