1 Corinthians 4.1-5 Dec 11 2016

As you are looking up 1 cor 4 : A word about Advent.

Advent is an important season because we are called to take inventory of our lives in the light of these two comings. Jesus **has come** to save us and be our Lord. He will come again, in glory that all the world will see, to **judge** the world. Advent calls us to take time us consider: How do those truths change what I do and think? How might they change my priorities?

This discipline of evaluating our lives in the light of Jesus coming is crucial for our spiritual health —because we are thinking of very specifically about how the nearness of Jesus shapes our lives.

This reading from Corinthians was chosen for the 3rd Sun of Advent because in it we see how Paul’s life is shaped very directly by Jesus’ future coming in glory to **judge** him. His purpose is that **we** might learn from how shapes our life as well.

So lets look briefly at the profound effect this has on Paul’s life.

Right away in verse 1 we see that it shapes **Paul’s identity:**

Look at verse 1: *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*

Paul says two things about his identity. He is a **servant** of Christ. The word for servant Under rower—a slave who rowed on the bottom tier of a ship on the bottom tier constantly following direction of the captain. There is a deep humility about this position: he belongs to Christ first of all and his life is all about doing what Jesus commands him to do. He gladly takes this identity because of the one he serves.

He is also a **steward** of the mysteries of God. In Paul’s time a steward was an educated slave who had the job of distributing money and goods on behalf of owner of farm or master of extended household. So Paul says he is entrusted with the job of distributing the mysteries of God.

What are the mysteries of God? For Paul it is the Gospel that he preaches. In the NT the mystery of God is not a puzzle that still has to be figured out. It is a plan of salvation that has been long hidden but is now revealed. Throughout the OT there were promises that God would deliver his people and save them. They did not know how this would happen. But in Jesus that hidden plan has become completely open. It is clearly shown to the person who hears someone speak about Jesus who died on a cross for the forgiveness of sins and rose again in power.

And so Paul is saying that like a steward he has been entrusted with that treasure of the Good News of Jesus now revealed. He is all about giving this revelation to other people in the right way.

And that is why he says in verse 2 *It is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.* In other words they must give it away in the exact way that it was given to them. Unscrupulous stewards in Paul’s time would skim some of the wealth they distributed. Being trustworthy means giving the whole gospel away, not just parts of it. It means being completely clear about the revelation of Jesus and not distorting it.

And this is the job description and role of every pastor in every church in the world. Dr. Bruce Winter (expert on 1 Corinthians and trainer of pastors) reckons that when a pastor comes to a new church he should always preach on this passage as their first sermon. That is because pastors and churches are often confused as to their primary role. Is it administrator, chair of meetings, inspiring leader, counsellor, fund-raiser, service leader? But Paul is clear here that a pastor should first of all be servant of Christ and take care of the treasure of the Gospel. Like a trustworthy steward he must be completely faithful to the revelation of Jesus.

Not only true for pastors: This has implications for every person in the church who hears the Gospel—that is why Paul urges his hearers in v. to be imitators of him. He is saying Each of us who believe are stewards as well. The nature of the treasure is that it is not ours to keep. WE must be trustworthy in giving it away. In our families, at work or school with colleagues, as we serve in church, in our friendships—it is central part of our identity.

The church in Corinth had to learn this because the qualities they wanted to see in Paul were very different. They were very proud of the spiritual gifts they had. They were attracted to people who were great public speakers and impressive teachers even if they were preaching another Gospel.

And so Paul really didn’t make the grade: At the beginning of chapter 2 he says when I first came to you I was:

* Not eloquent
* Not speaking with superior wisdom
* I Came in weakness and with much trembling
* My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words,

Now if Paul was applying to any church in Vancouver in Canada and put that in his cover letter, what would be the chance of him being hired? Many churches would want nothing to do with him.

But that in all this deficiency there was a demonstration of God’s power by the Holy Spirit because he faithfully preached Jesus and him crucified. God changed hearts and minds and lives by Paul’s preaching not because how clever, eloquent and impressive he was but because he faithfully revealed the mysteries of God. The Holy Spirit did his mighty work through God’s word not because of Paul’s talent but because of he was a trustworthy steward

There is a great encouragement for us in Paul’s teaching. We often feel like we are not qualified to speak about the Gospel. We are not out-going enough or wise enough or eloquent enough or confident enough. Paul destroys that argument here and the one thing that qualifies you is that you have received the treasure of Jesus (that you know it is you read God’s word) and that you be faithful in giving it away.

Here is where the Lord’s judgment comes into it. In Corinth, Paul was criticized for not meeting people’s expectations. The Corinthians compared him very unfavorably to the impressive wisdom teachers. He was criticized and personally attacked and his credentials as a legitimate apostle was being questioned. [Satan Accuser of brothers/sisters]

He was in a difficult situation—must have been tempted adjust the message a bit to make it more acceptable. But he tells us he stood firm.

Verse 3 Says *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court (literally* ***human day*** *contrast The Day of the Lord 3.11) . I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against my self, but I am not hereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.*

Paul is saying that the judgments of the Corinthians or any other person mean very little in comparison to the Lord judging him.

He is not saying that ministers shouldn’t be accountable in what they teach and how they live—Paul is clear in his letters that they should be: ch 9.15 *woe to me if I don’t preach the gospel,* .1 Thess 5: 21 *Test everything, hold to that which is good* But Paul is talking about being condemned and personally attacked because he himself did not measure up to their own expectations. He was criticized because His Gospel was not dressed up enough. And so what he said and how he said it was Not nearly as impressive or relevant as it should be. [It seems that Paul was also tempted to judge self in this way—He May have been saying to himself: you’re not good enough, you’ve failed, what you have said will not be received, you’re useless]

Paul is saying that he is not accountable to **them in this way**. He is in everything accountable to Jesus Christ first. It is the Lord who judges me. I will face the one who gave me the job of steward. And I am his servant now above everything: And that is what strengthened him to stand firm. That is what gave him courage in the face of opposition. He was much more concerned with Jesus judgment then human judgment.

This speaks to us because we live in a minority position. The gospel we are entrusted with is an offence to the majority of our society as it was in Paul’s day. The message of Christmas is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in order to save us by dying on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins. The implication is that all of humanity is sinful and spiritually lost—We desperately need Jesus because he alone can save us. There is great pressure to hide that Gospel or change it to make it (and us) more popular. That pressure comes even from within the church.

But Paul says that we are accountable first of all to the one who makes us stewards. Jesus has entrusted us with his treasure and we are to be faithful to that work and to him.

What Paul is doing here is he is drawing the attention of all the Corinthians including those who are attacking him to Jesus the Judge. He is my Judge-- he is yours as well. Remember as you think and speak and set your priorities that you will stand before Jesus who sees into the hearts of people. If this doesn’t make a person evaluate their lives, nothing will. That is why Advent naturally moves us to self-examination.

Our passage concludes with an emphasis on praise in v. 5.

Therefore he said *do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every one will receive their* ***commendation*** *from God.*

Here Paul is saying that humans are completely wrong in thinking they can condemn a person. People are all able to hide their thoughts and their intentions from one another--we get quite good at it. And we cannot see these things in others. But the nature of judgment is that Jesus has the authority to bring light to things hidden in darkness.

Darkness is neutral here. It means everything that people kept hidden the good thoughts and intentions along with the bad. The private prayers and the unseen ministries that are so vital in a church as well as the grudges and complaints. Jesus will disclose it all. We will see at that time what was worthy of praise in our lives and what was not—and he will deal with it all rightly. This is the judgment that all Christians face even as they know they are secure in heaven. There is a good and holy awe and respect that comes from this—that brings wisdom—it is what Psalm 111 means when he said the

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;

And wonderfully Every one will receive their commendation from God. Literally the Greek says each will receive their **praise** from God. Isn’t that extraordinary the God who is worthy of all praise and worship will praise us for the things we were faithful in.

We don’t know for sure what that praise looks like or sounds like but it will be in the nature of the judgment that Jesus speaks of in Matt 25 parable of talents. It is to hear God say: Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make your ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord.

These are the words we should live for. Each of us ought to have the strong ambition to live our lives so that we will one day hear God praise us in this way on the Day of Judgment. This is how judgment wonderfully shapes our lives.

This is why Christians longed for that day of judgment and often said Come quickly Lord Jesus.

*Almighty God unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify they holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*