

Judgment in the Kingdom

Devotional Reading: [Isaiah 41:1–14](#)

Background Scripture: [1 Corinthians 4:1–21](#)

1 Corinthians 4:1–6, 17–21

¹ This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. 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 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.

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.

¹⁷ For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every

church.

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Key Text

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.

—1 Corinthians 4:5

The Righteous Reign of God

Unit 3: God's Eternal Reign

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify why Paul sent Timothy to Corinth.
2. Compare and contrast the issue of judgment in this week's lesson with last week's lesson and [1 Corinthians 5](#).
3. Recruit an accountability partner for the mutual purpose of avoid-

ing being “puffed up.”

Lesson Outline

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A. A Difficult Calling

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Apollos Uh-*pahl*-us.

Colossians Kuh-*losh*-unz.

Corinth Kor-*inth*.

Corinthians Ko-*rin*-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Introduction

A. “You’re Not the Boss of Me”

No one likes to be bossed around. We like to get our own way. We like to get credit for good outcomes. And we especially like others to do what we tell them. For some people, “You’re not the boss of me” has become a catchphrase, expressing their resistance to authority.

But a personal desire to be independent is paradoxical for Christians. As followers of Jesus, we are to submit to the Lord Jesus, who died and rose for us; to God the Father, who sent his Son for us; and to the Holy Spirit, who directs and empowers us. Christians do have a boss, the boss of bosses, the King of kings. We also have leaders in the church to whom we are to submit ([Hebrews 13:17](#)). At the same time, those leaders set an example of humility ([1 Corinthians 11:1](#); [Philippians 3:17](#); compare [John 13:12–17](#)) that we emulate as we submit to one another in the church (see [1 Corinthians 16:15–16](#); [Ephesians 5:21](#)). We are to submit to the world’s governing authorities ([Romans 13:5](#)) even as we reject the world’s principles ([2 Corinthians 10:3–4](#); [Colossians 2:20–23](#)).

An individual Christian may have a mistaken, distorted view of what it means to follow and submit to Jesus. We rely on the understanding and correction of others to help us overcome our mistakes and distortions. At the same time that the Lord is the ultimate judge of any human, we are called by our Lord to help one another overcome our misunderstandings and failings—and identifying such issues involves judgment ([Matthew 12:33](#); [1 Corinthians 5](#); etc.). Our text today brings this paradox into focus. Paul writes to a church with a host of problems.

B. Lesson Context

The apostle Paul planted the church in the city of Corinth while on his second missionary journey of AD 52–54 ([Acts 18:1–8](#)). Indeed, he spent the majority of that time with this one church ([18:11](#)). But after Paul left town for Ephesus and locations farther east ([18:18–23](#)), problems in the Corinthian church became known to him.

The problems in Corinth had become many and serious. They included factionalism ([1 Corinthians 1:10–17](#); [3:1–9](#)), gross sexual immorality ([5:1–13](#); [6:12–20](#)), lawsuits between believers ([6:1–11](#)), misunderstandings about marriage and singleness ([7:1–16](#), [25–40](#)), divisions over foods ([8:1–13](#); [10:14–33](#)), selfish behavior in the worship assembly ([11:2–22](#)), improper understanding and exercise of spiritual gifts ([12:1–31](#); [14:1–25](#)), a focus on self-glory to the exclusion of love ([13:1–13](#)), and false views of resurrection ([15:1–58](#)).

Paul spoke directly, eloquently, and with authority on these issues, leaving no doubt regarding the way forward on each one. As he did, a common thread that ran through all the Corinthians' problems could be seen. The solution to that poisonous thread is the subject of today's lesson.

I. Faithful Servants ([1 Corinthians 4:1–6](#))

The immediate foreword to today's text establishes how the message of the gospel runs counter to what people generally understand as wisdom ([1 Corinthians 3:18–20](#)). And since Christian leaders are to take no personal credit for their message or their success, there is no place for factionalism in the church ([3:21–23](#)). Thus, as [1 Corinthians 4](#) opens,

Paul has come full circle regarding his opening salvo addressing such “I follow” divisions (see [1:10–17](#)).

A. Divine Trust (vv. 1–2)

1. This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.

Paul’s difficult life as an apostle seems to have been hard for the believers in Corinth to comprehend ([2 Corinthians 6:3–10](#); [11:22–33](#)). They did not regard him as a fluent public speaker. Although they considered his letters to them to be “weighty and forceful,” his physical presence was “unimpressive” and his speech was “nothing” ([10:10](#)). But in light of the gospel, how should they have regarded Paul?

Paul answers this unstated question with two phrases. First, we notice the phrase *servants of Christ* to be similar to the wording of [Acts 26:16](#), where Paul (as Saul) received his apostolic commission from Jesus himself.

Second, the phrase *those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed* challenges Paul’s audience to recognize the sacredness of his task (see also [1 Corinthians 3:5](#); [9:17](#); compare [Galatians 2:7](#); [Colossians 1:25](#)). To be entrusted with something is to be a steward, which is how the underlying Greek word is translated in [1 Peter 4:10](#). A steward manages the possessions of another (compare [Luke 12:42](#); [16:1–12](#)). When Paul went on to write his letter to the Romans a few years later, he explained that his gospel preaching was “in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known” ([Romans 16:25–26](#)).

One could say much about the importance of someone like the apostle Paul. But Paul saw his role as lowly. That lowly role must be

respected, though, for it is lowly service that imitates Christ himself.

2. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Jesus told stories about masters leaving servants in charge of wealth while the master was away ([Matthew 24:45–51](#); [25:14–30](#); [Luke 19:11–27](#)). As Paul penned this letter more than two decades after Jesus' resurrection, such teaching almost certainly undergirds Paul's statement. His faithfulness to his stewardship role should have been a model for the Corinthians.

What Do You Think?

What new steps will you take to be a faithful steward of the gospel message?

Digging Deeper

How does [1 Peter 4:1–11](#) inform the actions and attitudes of such stewards of the gospel message?

To Be Entrusted

I once received a phone call from a man who was going to spend the summer helping with mission work overseas. The reason for the call was that he needed someone to leave his car with for the summer. We had a large driveway, so I said, "Sure, we'll be glad to help."

Visual for [Lesson 12](#). *Allow one minute for silent personal reflection on this truth after discussing the commentary associated with verse 5.*

Soon he and his wife arrived at our house. He tossed me the keys and said, “Feel free to drive my car while we’re gone”—and the car was a shiny new Lincoln Continental! It was quite a contrast with my own car, a worn-out Ford Fiesta.

I did drive the Lincoln several times that summer, but I was very careful how I drove it and where I parked it. I wouldn’t let my kids eat in the back seat. I was more careful with my friends’ car than I would have been if I had owned it myself. I felt a keen responsibility to be a faithful steward and take good care of property that belonged to someone else.

What level of care should we give to things that belong to God, which he has entrusted to us?

—D. F.

B. Clear Conscience (vv. 3–5)

3–4. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

Paul recognized that he was indeed being wrongly *judged* by some or many in the Corinthian church. But he was committed to living only to please *the Lord*. Paul needed no one else’s approval. He didn’t even trust his self-evaluation!

Older translations of this verse include the phrase “I know nothing by myself” (*KJV*). In this sense, Paul was speaking of his conscience and was acknowledging that nothing was bothering his *conscience* regarding the issue of being judged.

But having a clear conscience didn’t mean that Paul was therefore automatically without fault before God. And so he said, *that does not make me innocent*. After all, there are evil people whose consciences don’t bother them at all when they do wrong. Such people “have given themselves over” to their evil actions ([Ephesians 4:19](#)) because they have a conscience “seared as with a hot iron” ([1 Timothy 4:2](#)). Paul was confident that the Lord knew his heart and actions better than Paul himself or the Corinthians did.

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.

The phrase *judge nothing* may seem to conflict with the judgment that [1 Corinthians 5:9–13](#) prescribes. The key is context. *Judge nothing* in the context at hand refers to things that can't be seen, such as the things *hidden in darkness* and *the motives of the heart*—whether Paul's or anyone else's. By contrast, the case in chapter [5](#) involves an obvious and flagrant sin that was visible to all. To fail to exercise proper judgment in that case would be to allow a cancerous sin to grow in the church.

Again Paul echoed the teaching of Jesus, who spoke of the judgment at his return as revealing (*will expose*) what had been hidden before ([Matthew 25:31–46](#); [Luke 12:2–3](#)). As all of humanity is assembled before God in judgment when Christ returns, all will hear and know the rightness of his judgment ([Psalm 9:8](#); [Acts 17:31](#)). So Paul entrusted himself entirely to God's evaluation.

C. Leaders' Examples (v. 6)

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.

Paul proceeded to explain further his responsibility to trust God's judgment alone. The intent was to provoke his readers to ponder their own trust in that regard. As they did so, they would refrain from judging the motives not only of apostles such as Paul but also of other leaders such as *Apollos* (see [Acts 18:24–19:1](#)). Members of the church had taken sides as to who they followed, exalting their favorites as something like heroes ([1 Corinthians 1:10–17](#)). But when the Corinthians exalted their favorite leaders, they were in fact exalting themselves. The Corinthians

were acting as if their choices were better and that approval in this regard was important. In this they were being *puffed up* with pride *over against the other*.

The issue of pride was central to the other problems that the Corinthian church was experiencing. Such pride inevitably produces conflict, as each proud person tries to rise above all others. The conflict at Corinth may have seemed as if it were about the popularity of preachers, but in fact it was about the pride of church members. Ironically, when pride is behind an attempt to rise above others, the result is the opposite. In that case, “destruction” and “a fall” are unavoidable ([Proverbs 16:18](#)).

What Do You Think?

How can a church congregation oppose prideful attitudes through their love for one another (see [Romans 12:9–21](#))?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to avoid a prideful attitude that will eventually lead to destruction (see [Proverbs 16:18](#))?

II. Faithful Correction

([1 Corinthians 4:17–21](#))

In the intervening verses of [1 Corinthians 4:7–16](#) (not in today’s lesson), Paul addressed the Corinthians with sharp sarcasm and exaggerated language. He pointed out that they exalted themselves while disparaging Paul and the others who brought them the Christian message. While the Corinthians imagined themselves to be wise and strong, Paul was living in lowliness and suffering, reflecting the attitude of Christ. As

Paul finished this section, he changed his tone, addressing his readers as a father speaks to his children (4:14–16). He wanted what was best for them. Like obedient children, they were to follow his example.

A. Timothy's Instructive Example (v. 17)

17. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

Paul could not be at Corinth personally to set things straight; his letters were substitutes for his personal presence. He sent these letters with trusted associates, who could listen, observe, explain, encourage, and then report back to Paul. For this letter, Paul *sent* Timothy as his representative.

Timothy is referred to by name 25 times in the New Testament. His name is most familiar to us by means of the two letters Paul wrote to him, namely those we call 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy. Those letters reveal that the relationship between them was that of mentor and protégé. The phrase *my son whom I love* is to be taken not in a physical, biological sense, but in a spiritual sense (see Acts 16:1; 1 Timothy 1:2). Paul speaks of Timothy's faithfulness not just to commend him as reliable but to put him forward as an example of Christlikeness, like Paul himself.

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to prepare to be a mentor to a spiritual "child" regarding his or her spiritual growth and formation?

Digging Deeper

How does Paul's relationship with Timothy (see 2 Timothy 3:10–4:8;

etc.) help inform this mentoring relationship?

B. Paul's Stern Warning (vv. 18–21)

18. Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you.

The word translated *arrogant* is also translated “puffed up,” an issue of pride (compare [1 Corinthians 4:6](#) [above], [19](#) [below]; [5:2](#); [8:1](#); [13:4](#)). Every Christian should be committed not to live with pride but to be filled with edification: the building up of one another’s faith for a true life of witness to the reign of God ([10:23](#); [14:3–5](#), [12](#), [17](#), [26](#)).

In their puffed-up state, some of the Corinthians believed that Paul, whom they perceived as “timid” and “unimpressive” ([2 Corinthians 10:1](#), [10](#)), would not return. Thus they would have free reign to do as they pleased. This assumption was not merely a denial of Paul’s strength but of Christ’s. Would their Lord forever let them rebel against his rule of humility and justice? Would there be no consequences? Paul could bring warning and correction under the Lord’s direction, but eventually the moment comes when all stand before the Lord to give an account (see [5:10](#)).

What Do You Think?

How is the judgment that a person might receive different from or similar to the consequences that a person might receive for their actions?

Digging Deeper

What Scriptures come to mind regarding temporary and eternal consequences?

The Smartest Guy in the World?

When I graduated from high school in 1973, I thought I was just about the smartest guy in the world. Anticipating college, I told myself, *When I get to that college, I'm going to teach them a thing or two!* But when I graduated from college four years later, I realized that I was not as smart as I thought I was. Over the course of those four years, it gradually dawned on me that for every new thing I learned, there were dozens or hundreds of other things I didn't know.

Since those days in college, I have gone on to earn three more degrees, each experience more humbling than the one before. I have come to realize that although a person's growth in knowledge is important, how that knowledge—real or claimed—is wielded is no less vital. As Paul will say a bit later in his letter, “Knowledge puffs up while love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1).

In what ways can you ensure that your self-image of “I know better” gives way to “I am no better”?

—R. L. N.

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.

Timothy's visit and Paul's letter were but the first steps in Paul's plan to correct the problems in the Corinthian church. Paul himself planned to visit. Yet even with the confidence that Paul had—both in his calling as an apostle and in the necessity of this plan—he deferred ultimately to *the Lord*. His plan would come to pass only if God allowed it, only if it was in accord with God's will (compare James 4:13–15).

Paul was aware that in this situation he could end up being as arro-

gant as his opponents, but he avoided being so. So the confrontation to come would not be a test of who had the most persuasive words, but of who had the legitimate *power*. When Paul confronts his opponents with the triumph of Christ's resurrection and the truth of his present and eternal rule, will they be as *arrogant* then as they were in Paul's absence? Will their power rival that of the risen Christ? When we see the real issue, we know the answer to the question.

20. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.

Human talk cannot compete with the *power of the kingdom of God*. This power does not operate as does the world's power, which derives from human talk. Kingdom power is expressed in the resurrection of Jesus, who surrendered to death for the sake of his unworthy people. Kingdom power comes through the Holy Spirit ([Romans 15:13](#)). And that power was the antidote to the pride that infected the Corinthian church.

21. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?

The Corinthian Christians faced a choice. If they would acknowledge their pride and its inconsistency with the gospel, Paul could *come to* them expressing fully the love of Christ that they shared. Such a visit would be in a spirit of the meekness, or gentleness, that should characterize Jesus' followers ([Matthew 5:5](#)). It is an attitude that does not assert its own supposed rights, privileges, or entitlements.

But if Paul's opponents persisted in the path they were on, he would have to come *with a rod of discipline*. This is a stark metaphor (compare [Revelation 2:27](#)). When contrasted with a visit *in love*, a visit with a rod refers to retributive correction. Taken together, these possibilities imply three possible outcomes:

1. The Corinthians would have successfully corrected their attitudes

and actions before Paul's return visit.

2. Paul himself would successfully correct those attitudes and actions when he returned.
3. Paul would be unsuccessful in correcting those attitudes and actions when he returned, resulting in his disfellowshipping the rebels (compare [1 Corinthians 5](#); [1 Timothy 1:20](#)).

Which of the three possible outcomes would come to pass was up to the Corinthians. As we say, the ball was in their court.

Unlike many New Testament letters, we have a glimpse of how the readers of [1 Corinthians](#) responded to the letter. In another letter to the church, Paul mentioned that he did not want to make another painful visit ([2 Corinthians 2:1](#)). It appeared that when Paul visited the church, as he said in our text he would, he was met with considerable resistance, perhaps even hostility.

But that experience was not the end of the story. As time went on and as other influences came to bear, many in the church repented of their behavior ([2 Corinthians 2:5–11](#)). As Paul wrote [2 Corinthians](#), he reflected on the pain of their relationship but also on the joy he had that the Corinthian Christians were indeed still growing and maturing in their faith and expressing it with greater consistency. The love of Christ, even if expressed with a corrective “rod,” bore fruit in greater humility and love.

What Do You Think?

How should believers decide whether a situation should be addressed through a corrective “rod” or with a “gentle spirit”?

Digging Deeper

What steps can believers take to restore a relationship after a neces-

Conclusion

A. A Difficult Calling

Paul's language toward the Corinthians is sharply and appropriately judgmental. This helps us understand why Paul wrote as he did, helping us understand what it means to live in God's kingdom.

God is our ultimate judge. But God calls us into a kingdom in which his subjects, answering only to him, nevertheless humbly and lovingly nurture one another toward greater Christlikeness. This happens even as we acknowledge our own weaknesses and submit to those who help us to grow. It is a calling that is as difficult as it is rewarding.

B. Prayer

God, we come to you in repentance of the arrogance that we all have been guilty of at times. May we abandon our focus on our supposed entitlements and focus instead on the entitlements Jesus voluntarily gave up so that we might live with him eternally. In his name we pray. Amen!

C. Thought to Remember

With God as our judge, the church lives in humble fellowship.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Open class by asking learners to call out as many answers as possible to this question: “What’s the first word that comes to your mind when I say the word *judge*?” Write their responses on the board. After one minute, evaluate responses by drawing a circle beside the responses that have a negative connotation and a star beside the ones that have a positive connotation.

Divide the class into pairs to discuss the following questions: 1—Give an example of a time when a judgment passed was accurate or helpful. 2—Give an example of a time when a judgment passed was incorrect or hurtful.

Transition to the Bible study by saying, “This is not the first time that we’ve discussed passing judgment; it was central to the last class discussion. Let’s learn about what Paul says on this topic.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into small groups. Ask each group to read [1 Corinthians 4:1–6, 17–21](#) and answer the following questions: 1—What is Paul’s stance on passing judgment? 2—When does Paul say that passing judgment is wrong, and for what reason(s)? 3—In what situation does Paul say that passing judgment is the right thing to do, and for what reason(s)? After five minutes, have the groups share their responses with the whole class.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Judging Paul’s Faithfulness” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

Distribute a sheet of paper with the following headers to each group: *The Corinthian Situation / Paul’s Teaching / Scripture Reference*. Ask each group to reread [1 Corinthians 4:1–6, 17–21](#) and make a list under the first heading to answer the question, “What was the Corinthian situation that prompted Paul to write this?” Groups should then make a list under the second heading, summarizing Paul’s teaching regarding passing judgment. Finally, under the third column, groups are to list the Scripture references that support their findings in the first two columns. After 10 minutes, have groups present their findings with the whole class.

Option. Start a discussion comparing and contrasting this week’s lesson with last week’s lesson on [Romans 14:10–23](#). Ask the class how each Scripture teaches believers about passing judgment.

Option 2. Distribute copies of the “The Lord, Our Judge” activity from the activity page. Have learners work in small groups to complete as indicated.

Into Life

Discuss the following questions as a whole class: 1—Why is humility not held in high regard today? 2—Give an example of a time when humility received a poor response from others. 3—How does living with humility keep a person from passing judgment on others?

Distribute a sheet of paper to each learner and ask them to write a personal response to this prompt that you will write on the board:

When am I “puffed up” with pride and a judgmental spirit?

After one minute, invite volunteers to talk about how sharing their responses with a trusted friend would help them develop an attitude of humility. (*Note:* Remind learners that they don’t have to disclose their responses at this time. Rather, learners should focus on how accountability can help shape their attitudes in this regard.)

Close class by challenging learners to write down the name of a friend (or two) who could be an accountability partner for the mutual purpose of developing humility instead of pride. End with a prayer asking God to give each learner courage to speak with their accountability partner regarding humility.