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God's Shepherds are Merely His Servants

4: 1-5

God's shepherds are merely His servants DIG: Although faithfulness is required of a leader, how did some of the Corinthian believers view Paul? How did Paul deal with their suspicion? What is the difference between a "clear conscience" and "being innocent?"

REFLECT: What qualities do you think most believers look for in a leader? What is a steward? Why is it important that stewards be faithful? What believer do you admire for putting their faith on the line? What is the key test for God's shepherds?

We serve an audience of One, and His is the only evaluation that counts.

Paul was not finished. **The Corinthians'** theological misunderstanding of the Good News and the Church, including the role of **their shepherds** had been addressed. But at the heart of much of this, was the attitude of many toward **Paul himself**. **They** were not simply *for* **Apollos** or **Peter** . . . **they** were decidedly anti-**Paul**. This presented **Paul** with a genuine dilemma. On the one hand, **he** needed to reassert **his** apostolic authority by means of **his gospel** (see the commentary on **Romans, to see link click [As - Paul's Gospel](#)**), which had brought **them** to faith. That wasn't optional. On the other hand, **he** must reestablish all that without blunting the force of **his** determination to show **the servant** role of an **apostle**.

This paragraph brings together two items from the preceding argument: **the apostles** as **servants** (see **At - Only God Makes Things Grow**) and the coming judgment (see **Au - God is the Master Builder**). At the same time **Paul** picks up the language of **evaluating** from what preceded that (see **Aq - The Maturity of the Spiritual Believer: By illumination**) and makes it clear what one may have only suspected up to now, namely that **the Corinthians** were, in fact, passing **judgment** on **the apostle himself**.¹⁰⁶

A Matter of Trust (4:1-2): So, you should regard us as the Messiah's

servants (Greek: *huperetes*, literally meaning *under rowers*). The type of **servant** that **Paul** first humbly called **himself** was that of a galley slave, the lowliest and most dreaded type of slavery known throughout the Roman empire (**4:1a**). Galley slaves were handed over to the bowels of the ship, chained there to oars, and assigned the shameful duty of rowing to the relentless cadence set by their overseer. That’s how **Paul** viewed **himself** – not as a “super **apostle**,” not as the author second only to **Luke** for the sheer volume of **his** inspired writings in the B’rit Chadashah, not as the founder of many churches, not as **the apostle to the Gentiles**, but as a slave . . . the lowest of slaves.¹⁰⁷



This was not a new topic; rather, the **us** refers back to **3:21-22**, pointing to **Paul, Apollos, Peter** and by extension all other **co-workers (3:9a)**. Yes, **Paul, Apollos and Peter** did “belong” to **the Corinthians**; but that needed to be understood in the light of **Paul’s** earlier declaration that **they** first “belong” to **God (3:9b)**. It’s as if **Paul** was saying, “This is how you ought to regard **us**, as **servants of ADONAI**,” with **a servant’s heart**.¹⁰⁸

Now the metaphor changes from galley slaves to a **steward** (Greek: *oikonomos*, meaning *the manager of a household, often a slave*) who has been **entrusted** with managing **a household**. You might remember the Egyptian **Potiphar**, Pharaoh’s chief executioner, who placed **Joseph** in exactly this kind of a position over **his household**. **Potiphar’s** job required **him** to be away from home for extended periods of time, so **he entrusted** the oversight of **his household to Joseph**.¹⁰⁹ **Potiphar was well pleased with Joseph, and put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned (Genesis**

39:4). Now the one thing that is asked of a steward is that he be found trustworthy (4:2) and Joseph was certainly that (see the commentary on Genesis [Ji](#) - Potiphar’s Wife said: Come to Bed with Me! But Joseph Ran Out of the House).

However, **Paul** wasn’t merely **entrusted** with the oversight of someone’s home. **His** responsibility was much greater. **God entrusted Paul** with **the mysteries** (Greek: *mysteria*) **of the kingdom of Heaven** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ [Er](#) - That Same Day He Spoke To Them In Parables**). A mystery in the B’rit Chadashah is that which was hidden and can now be known only by divine revelation. As **a steward of God’s mysteries (4:1b)**, a Messianic rabbi or pastor is to take **God’s** revealed Word and **teach/preach** it to **God’s household - holding nothing back**. **Paul** could tell the **Ephesian** elders: **You know that I held back nothing that could be helpful to you, and that I taught you both in public and from house to house, declaring with utmost seriousness the same message to Jews and Greeks . . . for I did not shrink from proclaiming to you the whole plan of God (Acts 20:20-21 and 27). All Scripture is God-breathed and is valuable for teaching the truth, convicting of sin, correcting faults and training in right living (Second Timothy 3:16)**. The reason so many believers have spiritual malnutrition is that too many **teachers** serve an unbalanced diet of biblical truth. What they **teach** may be scriptural, but they do not **teach the whole plan of God**. **Paul** saw **his stewardship** as a sacred **trust** and accountable only to **ADONAI**.

How to Handle Criticism (4:3-5): And it matters very little to me how I am evaluated by you or by any human court (4:3a). The reference to **any human court** contrasts with the final **judgment** of unbelievers (see the commentary on **Revelation [Fo](#) - The Great White Throne Judgment**), and shows that this is a general warning that all humans cannot and do not make the final decision. Now, a caring **shepherd** should not be insensitive to the feelings, needs, and opinions of others. A sincere word of appreciation is encouraging. A word of helpful criticism can be needed and even a blessing. But no **shepherd** can remain faithful to **his** calling if **he** lets **his** congregation, or **any human court**, decide how true **his** motives are. Because their knowledge and understanding of the facts are imperfect, their criticisms and compliments are imperfect. In humility and love, **God’s shepherd** must not allow **himself** to care about other people’s evaluations of **his** ministry.¹¹⁰

In fact, Paul said: **I don’t even evaluate myself (4:3b)**. Nor must **he** allow

himself to care about **his** own **evaluation** of **his** ministry. All of us are naturally inclined to build ourselves up in our own minds. We all look into rose-colored mirrors. Even when we put ourselves down, especially in front of others, we often are simply appealing for recognition and flattery. The mature **shepherd** does not **trust his** own judgment in such things any more than **he trusts** the judgment of others. **He** agrees with **Paul** that his own **evaluation** may be as unreliable as that of anyone else.

Paul knew of no serious **sin** or deficiency in **his** own life, saying: **I am not aware of anything against me.** In other words, “With regard to my **stewardship**, my conscience is clear.” **But this does not make me innocent. He** knew **he** could be wrong. **He** once regarded **himself** as **blameless according to the Torah** and therefore **righteous (Philippians 3:6)**, but soon learned how terribly wrong **he** was. We are not justified by our own good opinion of ourselves, because our opinions may not be justified! As someone once said, “A good conscience is like a soft pillow, but it may be a pillow of self-**deception.**”¹¹¹

But **Paul’s** evaluation of **his** own **stewardship** was irrelevant to **him** because **the One who is evaluating me is the Lord (4:4).** Only **His evaluation** counts. **Paul** had long followed the counsel **he** had given to **Timothy**, “**Do all you can to present yourself to God as someone worthy of His approval**” (**Second Timothy 2:15**). **He** was not concerned about presenting **himself** to others for **approval**, or even to **himself** for **approval**, but only to **his Lord. God’s servants** have an audience of **One! So then, “You must stop judging me!”** Apparently, many in the **Apollos** and **Peter** “fan clubs” were calling **Paul’s** authority as **an apostle** into question. On the one hand, **Paul** didn’t lay out the specifics of the problem in detail, but on the other hand, **he** didn’t need to. **He** declared: **Don’t pronounce judgment prematurely, before the Lord, the Master of the household, comes** (see the commentary on **Isaiah Kg - The Second Coming of Jesus Christ**).

Consequently, **Paul** leaves the **evaluation** of **his** successes and failures up to **God**, and **he** reminds **the Corinthians** that **Yeshua** will test **their good works** at **the bema seat of Messiah** (see **Au - God is the Master Builder**). **For He will bring to light what is now hidden in darkness; He will expose the motives of people’s hearts; and then each will receive from God whatever praise He deserves (4:5).** Believers are never judged, **for there is no longer condemnation awaiting those who are in union with Messiah Yeshua (Romans 8:1).** Who will receive much and who will receive little only **God** knows.

But once the **wood, hay and straw** are burned away, the **gold, silver, and precious stones** will remain to be eternally rewarded.¹¹²

The application of this paragraph to the contemporary Messianic synagogue or church seems self-evident. On the one hand, it is a word to those who are forever **evaluating** their **shepherds**, and who, in any case, tend to do so on the wrong grounds. **Corinth** is not the only congregation that ever became disillusioned with its **shepherd** because he lacked enough “charisma.” But **God’s** Word tells us that faithfulness is what is required by **God’s servants**. On the other hand, although not intended so by **Paul**, by implication it is also a word to those **shepherds**, that **they** recognize **themselves** as “under **trust**.” **Their trustworthiness** is ultimately going to be tested by **ADONAI Himself**, on the grounds of **their** being faithful to **the trust itself, the Good News**. In that hour, none of one’s self-**evaluations** as to one’s worth in the Kingdom is going to count for anything, only the faithfulness to **the gospel itself**.¹¹³