



Catalog No. 784

1 Corinthians 3:18–4:5

Sixth Message

Gary Vanderet

March 11, 1990

EVALUATING A MINISTER

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Vince Lombardi was one of the greatest football coaches of all time. He was a fanatic about basics, and always insisted that his teams execute the fundamentals of football. One scene in the movie of his life concerned the time when his team, the Green Bay Packers, lost to an inferior team. It was one thing to lose, but losing to an inferior team was inexcusable. Coach Lombardi called a practice the next morning. As the players gathered together he informed them that they were going back to the basics. Holding up a football for all to see, he yelled: “Gentlemen, this is a football!” That’s pretty basic stuff to men who had been playing football for 15 or 20 years.

In a real sense that is what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians. He is reminding Christians of a number of fundamental things that are essential for us to understand. There are a lot of things that one can do in a ministry. There are a lot of frills and programs that can be helpful at times, but if we don’t have the fundamentals down we will never have a lasting ministry; we will never accomplish what it is that God wants us to do.

The church at Corinth had tremendous potential. They were extremely gifted, but their ministry was being undermined by divisions, jealousy and selfish ambition. Paul is attempting to get them to see what their real problem is. Behind their superficial difficulty of division lay a love of human wisdom, a pride in the ability of man to solve his own problems. Thus in the first three chapters of this letter Paul’s main point has been to get the Corinthians to see the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of man. Failure to discern the difference can result in a believer building his life and ministry on “wood, hay and stubble,” rather than “gold, silver and precious stones,” says the apostle.

In the passage we will be looking at this morning Paul will help us to understand more clearly how we ought to view ministers, and what is their role and purpose in the church. He will, as it were, hold up a person and say, “This is a minister.” Remember last week we defined this word “minister” as anyone who serves in a position of leadership in the church. It not only describes those who serve as pastors, but others as well: Elders, Sunday School teachers, Home Fellowship leaders, Women’s Bible Study leaders, those who labor to build up the body of Christ. Thus it applies to many of us here this morning.

Three valuable perspectives about ministers are revealed in these verses. I think it is safe to say that these principles may be far different from what some of us have experienced in the past. Here is the first perspective. Chapter 3, verses 18-23:

I. A minister’s purpose is to be a resource—do not exalt them

Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before

God. For it is written: “He catches the wise in their craftiness”; and again, “The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.” So then, let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. (1 Cor 3:18-23 NASB)

This discussion on the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God now moves to its climax. Paul wants the Corinthians to know that what he has been saying is not just rhetoric but it lies at the heart of their problems of divisions.

This paragraph can be divided into two parts. In verses 18-20, Paul warns them not to be deceived by what appears to be wisdom but really is not; and in verses 21-23 he shows them the futility of boasting in powerful personalities as leaders. In doing so Paul turns their slogans around and reminds them that they do not belong to Apollos or Paul as they had been declaring, but rather it was Paul and Apollos and everything else that belonged to them.

“Do not be deceived,” says Paul. “Stop deceiving yourselves!” is a better translation. Many Corinthians saw themselves as wise in themselves—but self-deception is the common fate of men who fancy themselves in that light. Perhaps that is where some of you find yourselves this morning. After hearing the apostle Paul’s description of the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men these past few weeks, perhaps you have to conclude that you are following the wisdom of men; you are living your life based on your own efforts. All of us, unfortunately, lapse into this mode of living from time to time. If that describes your condition, let me remind you that Paul says you cannot advance from human to divine wisdom by becoming wiser. This passage tells us we must abandon the old wisdom in order to acquire the new.

Paul had painfully learned this insight in his own life. There was a time when he thought he was wise, when he depended on what man could do. He had prided himself on his ancestry, his morality, his zeal, his background as a Hebrew of Hebrews. But he learned that all those must be set aside (Phil. 3:6-9). The wisdom of this world cannot be improved upon or developed into the wisdom of God; it must be destroyed. That is how the world thinks, but Paul reminds us that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.” Those who are truly wise will adopt an attitude to people and to things which everyone else will call foolish. True wisdom is learning to evaluate everyone and everything according to the Word of God.

I have found this to be a liberating truth in my own life. For much of my life I got what I wanted by manipulating people and circumstances. That is how I got ahead in school. I figured out what the teacher wanted to hear and I concentrated on doing that. Naturally, that led to saying the right thing to the right person at the right time. This has been one of the major areas where God has been working in my life in recent years. Just last week I came face to face with a situ-

ation which I was tempted to manipulate, though I knew what God wanted me to do. I reasoned that I knew his will for the situation in question and I thought I would help him along a little and get things moving. But God rebuked me. He told me to be quiet, that he didn't need my help. His wisdom and the wisdom I was bringing to bear were mutually incompatible.

Paul's conclusion then is, "let no one boast in men." Do not base your thinking on the wisdom of men. Base it instead on the wisdom of God. Notice the apostle's words, "For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you." Notice that Paul turns their slogans around and tells the Corinthians they have it all wrong. They don't belong to Apollos or Paul; Paul and Apollos belong to them. Why do you seek to build your life on one man when the whole world belongs to you? Why would you try to divide yourselves between Paul and Apollos and Cephas and choose one of them? asks Paul. You can have them all! They are all yours: Paul's ministry, Apollos' ministry, Cephas' ministry. You can enjoy whatever value there is in each of their ministries. In fact, the whole world is open to you, says the apostle.

Many of us are accustomed to referring to a church as "Rev. So-and-so's church." Even pastors refer to a local church as "my" church. But Paul says it is just the opposite. It is the leaders who belong to the church. They are a resource to be used in whatever way God sees fit. That is all they are. In fact, Paul says everything is yours. The world is yours. God will lead you. Even death with its threat is already mastered; it is already yours. When you come to it, it will minister to you, not take from you. It will bring you into glory. The present and the future are all yours because you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God and, therefore, everything he owns is yours. All things belong to you because you belong to the One to whom all things belong. That is what Paul is saying.

Why be limited to the wisdom of men when you have at your disposal the wisdom and resources of God himself? When a body of believers grasps that truth, there are unlimited possibilities of ministry. We have the wisdom and the resources of God at our disposal, yet we make ourselves slaves of people and things when we were meant to be co-heirs with Christ of all things. When we grasp God's sovereignty and his Lordship in life, then we will begin to reign, not serve the created order.

William Barclay eloquently captures the apostle's point in his commentary:

In verse 22, as so often happens in his letters, the march of Paul's prose suddenly takes wings and becomes a lyric of passion and of poetry. The Corinthians are doing what is to Paul an inexplicable thing. They are seeking to give themselves over into the hands of some man. Paul tells them that, in point of fact, it is not they who belong to Paul but Paul belongs to them. This identification with some party is the acceptance of slavery by those who should be kings. In point of fact they are masters of all things, because they belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God. The man who gives his life, his strength, his energy, his heart to some little splinter of a party has surrendered everything to a petty thing, when he could have entered into possession of a fellowship and a love which is as wide as the universe. He has confined into narrow limits a life which should be limitless in its outlook.

A minister is a resource. Do not exalt him.

So the Corinthians had a wrong view of Paul and of Apollos. How should they have viewed them? Paul gives us two perspectives in the first five verses of chapter 4.

II. A minister's role is that of a servant—do not manipulate them

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. (4:1-5)

First, ministers are to be thought of as "servants." The word is different from the word used in 3:5. It is not the usual term for servant. The word means literally, "an under-rower." The Corinthians would understand that term. Corinth was the point at which the war galleys of the Roman Empire crossed through the isthmus that separated the Ionian Sea from the Aegean Sea. The rowers sat on the lowest deck of the war galleys, on single rows of benches on both sides of the ship. On a little deck raised up above them so that all could see him stood the captain of the ship. It was the rowers' task to row according to what he said. Their whole business was to obey his orders. They were "under-rowers."

Paul uses the same word to describe those who are teachers and shepherds in a church. We are "under-rowers of Christ." We row to the cadence of the coxswain. He determines both the speed and the direction. I don't know if you have ever had the opportunity to watch a college crew race, but it is a beautiful thing to behold. As the coxswain calls the cadence all the men row in unison, straining hard, but all working together. Paul says that is what it is like to serve the Lord. Each person puts in his or her individual effort, but everyone follows the cadence of the Lord. He is the One who determines the pace of a ministry. He is the One who determines the direction of a ministry. It is our responsibility to listen to and to follow.

That is how you ought to view us. We are not big-shots, lording it over you and ready to exhort you to submit to our leadership. We are brothers and sisters working together, listening intently to our Lord, following his cadence and direction. It is important to remember this as we think about our future as a church.

There is a second term used to describe a minister. In it we find our third perspective:

III. A minister's responsibility is that of a steward—do not judge them

The second word, "stewards," is fairly common in the New Testament. It refers to someone who managed another's estate. We might call a person in that position today a housekeeper or butler, someone who is responsible for providing the family with food and other necessities. We might also think of a steward or stewardess on an airplane. They are entrusted with certain valuable commodities (although this is open to debate!) that they are responsible to dispense. Ministers too are responsible in this way. They have been entrusted

with valuable commodities, what Paul calls the “mysteries of God,” that deposit of truth that contains the secrets of life.

We have already talked about these mysteries. These deep things of God are the truth about life, about God, about ourselves. We saw that these are undiscoverable by observation, but that God has revealed them to the apostles. Then, through the process of illumination and inspiration, these men spoke and wrote those mysteries, and they are recorded for us in the Bible. And they are available to be revealed by the Spirit to those who love God. Remember the Bible is not just religious information that is important only for narrow-minded people. It doesn't tell us how to conduct religious services, or what a minister ought to wear. The Bible reveals the lost secrets of our humanity, the answers to the questions that plague us: how to heal a hurting marriage, how to be a loving father, mother, son or daughter, how to live ethically in the dog-eat-dog world of the Silicon Valley.

That has tremendous implications for our ministries. We are responsible to dispense these remarkable truths to those in our ministries so that lives are changed. That is why we preach expositionally from the Scriptures, week after week after week. It is not our job to come up with something clever to say on Sundays. Apart from God's word we have nothing to say. He has revealed the secrets of the mysteries of life, and it is our job to share these so that people can live lives of beauty and grace.

The steward is not to exercise his own initiative or authority, but he is to be “faithful and trustworthy” in his responsibility of looking after his Master's affairs. The only true judge of his faithfulness is his Master, therefore Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to slip into judgmental attitudes, not to condemn or to praise ministers. Leave that to the Lord; he will do all the judging, says Paul. If a man deserves to be commended for his stewardship, then the Lord will indeed commend him. What matters, he says, is not what other people think, or even what he thinks of himself. (“I do not even examine myself. I cannot discern my own motives”). What matters is how the Lord evaluates him. He is responsible not to his fellows, but to his Lord.

The reason why we are not to judge another's life and ministry is given to us in verse 5. Any judgment that we can make is both “premature” (it is before the time) and it is “presumptuous” (because only God can see our heart).

I am constantly aware that there is coming a time when God is going to examine my entire life and ministry. I used to have a sense of dread when I thought of that day. I imagined myself standing before the judgment seat of Christ and seeing a giant movie screen come down and there, projected on that screen, would be my entire life for everyone to see—a “totally hidden video” of all my shameful thoughts and deeds. Then God would then rebuke me and I would walk away humiliated.

But that is not the picture Paul gives us here, nor is it the picture of the God who is revealed to us in Scripture. Rather, this will be a private evaluation. God will go through and point out to us his estimation of various events in our lives. No doubt we will be surprised at what we will hear. We might expect him to see some great thing we accomplished for his Kingdom, and we will be anticipating his praise, but he will say “No, you missed the whole point there. You were not concerned for my Kingdom; you were thinking about your own glory. You did that because you wanted so-and-so's recognition.” And there may be some incidents of shame and humiliation that we will not want the Lord to see, only to discover his encouragement

that it was then that we pleased him. We could not see any results at the time, but God will point all the fruit that came as a result. Paul assures us that then we will receive praise. It will not be a time of condemnation, but of commendation.

We need to point out that Paul is not saying we are not to judge the actions of others when they do wrong. People often take verses like this and use them to excuse their sin. But in the very next chapter Paul corrects the Corinthians because they did not judge the actions of a man who had sinned. The apostle is not saying that we should not judge actions. What he is warning against is judging motives. Don't assume that you have somebody figured out and you know why he is acting in a certain way. We cannot discern motives.

Years ago David Roper shared a story of an incident that happened to a friend of his that illustrates what Paul is saying. It seems a group of men decided to play a practical joke on a co-worker who was a young, single executive in an insurance firm in Dallas. It was customary for the president of the firm to give free turkeys to all the employees at Thanksgiving. This co-worker had laughed at the idea, since he was single and didn't have any desire to cook a turkey. His friends confiscated his turkey and replaced it with one made out of paper mache. The only parts of the real turkey were the neck and tail sticking out at either end. The day before the holiday the turkeys were handed out in a ceremony, and this man took his bogus bird and got on the bus to go home.

As he was sitting there, feeling a little self-conscious, a man got on the bus and sat next to him. They struck up a conversation, and it transpired that this man had been out of work for quite some time and things were pretty tight. His hopes for a Thanksgiving feast were slim. In fact, all he had was a few pounds of hamburger meat that he was taking home for a Thanksgiving meal for his family. Our friend had a brilliant idea. “I will give him the turkey,” he said to himself. Then he thought, “No, this might hurt his pride. I'll sell it to him.” So he asked the man if he would like to buy the turkey for whatever change he had on him. The man of course was delighted and appreciative of such generosity. Feeling a great sense of gratitude, they both went their separate ways. You can imagine this man's thoughts when he unwrapped the turkey. In fact, the young man, when he found out what his friends had done, rode that same bus home each day for several days looking for the man in order to make amends, but he never found him. To this day this defrauded individual probably looks back to this incident as a classic example of man's inhumanity to man. Yet the young man's motives were pure.

That is the point Paul is making. We must not judge before the time. We just don't have the necessary facts. We cannot accurately discern what is going on in other people's lives. We don't know the circumstances that cause them to act the way they do. We must withhold judgment until the time.

Ministers of Christ are resources; they are not to be exalted. They are servants; they are not to be manipulated. And they are stewards; therefore they are not to be judged.

It is my prayer that we will never forget these fundamental truths as we seek to build a lasting and effective ministry.

