

Following Through

Purpose

To explore what it means to serve responsibly in the community of faith



The Scripture for this lesson is 1 Corinthians 4:1-13. 1 Corinthians 4:1-13

Listen

1 Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. 2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. 3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. 4 I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

6 I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. 7 For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! 9 For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. 10 We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. 11 To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, 12 and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; 13 when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

Key Verse: *Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. (1 Corinthians 4:1)*



Look

As I write this lesson, it is the opening day of the spring training season for major league baseball. My favorite team, the Pittsburgh Pirates, tied the New York Yankees. Spring training is the time of year when baseball teams get back to basics. They work on the mechanics of batting, throwing, and fielding. The game of baseball cannot be played successfully without mastering these basic skills.

This is true of baseball played at all levels. When my son Andrew was younger, I coached his manager-pitch team. One of the things that we coaches worked on with the kids was their follow-through. Follow-through is the completion of a motion, as in the swinging of a bat or the throwing of a ball. It is that part of the motion after the ball is hit or the ball is thrown. A player cannot be a good batter or pitcher without having the proper follow-through.

Our lesson today is about following through. Following through on responsibility is a major part of living life successfully. In the game of life, follow-through is the execution of a plan that was implemented with a decision and is being adhered to with commitment. When it comes to our faith, the follow-through is living out the faith promises that were made at our baptism.



Live

Trustworthy Helpers of Christ

Paul began our Bible Lesson with a very interesting statement: "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Corinthians 4:1). What this tells us is that Paul was conscious of his image and how people perceived him and his mission. He took the initiative here as he tried to shape that image by telling people how they should think of him and his ministry. Paul apparently felt compelled to define himself positively as a servant of Christ and a steward of God's mysteries rather than as the leader of a faction.

As the people of God, we should not underestimate how important defining our ministry is. I believe that we need to tell people how they should think about what we are doing in our ministry. For instance, did you know that The Book of Discipline (304) requires United Methodist clergy to meet nine qualifications of "faith, life, and practice"? Furthermore, there are three-dozen specific responsibilities and duties that define the ministerial work of United Methodist elders and local pastors (340).

Similarly, when persons are received into membership in The United Methodist Church, they profess their faith in terms of the Apostles' Creed. In addition, The Book of Discipline (217) stipulates that they promise to maintain faithfully seven vows, among which is to "faithfully participate" in the ministries of the local church "by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, and their service."¹ Unless we explain ourselves, we should not

assume that people will understand what we are doing and what we are trying to accomplish. One thing I have learned in over twenty years of church work is how vitally important communication is. People are free to disagree with us and to form opinions about us, but that in no way relieves us of the responsibility to explain the hows and whys of what we are doing.

Paul explained the responsibilities of church leaders by telling the Corinthians that they should think of him and his coworkers as “servants of Christ” (1 Corinthians 4:1). Servants are, first of all, helpers. Christians can thus be thought of as Christ’s helpers in spreading the faith.

A marvelous story I remember from my seminary days tells of an angel who saw Jesus ascending to heaven and asked him, “Where have you been?” Jesus answered, “I’ve been on earth.” The angel asked, “For how long?” Jesus said, “Thirty-three years.” The angel asked, “How did it go?” Jesus responded, “They crucified me.” The angel said, “But you must have had a wide influence.” Jesus said, “I had eleven parishioners.”

The angel asked, “What do you think will become of your work?” Jesus answered, “I left it in the hands of my friends.” The angel asked, “What if they fail?” Jesus contemplated that possibility for a moment, then responded, “I have no other plans.”

Christ truly is counting on us to be his helpers in spreading the good news that he brought into the world. In the Great Commission, Jesus told his disciples to go and “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). We are the heirs to that command.

In addition to being “servants of Christ,” Christian leaders are to be “stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Corinthians 4:1). In the Bible, a steward was the manager of a household. This was a very responsible position; the steward was the overseer of the property, servants, and business affairs of an owner. The New Testament teaches us that Christian leaders have responsibility for stewardship of the faith. In the parable of the talents, Jesus said that we need to be good stewards of the gifts God has given us and that we will be judged on how we manage those gifts (Matthew 25:14-30). In the Letter to Titus, a bishop is defined as “God’s steward” (1:7, RSV). Bishops are expected to be “blameless” (1:6) and to demonstrate holy character as they manage the household of God. They are also expected to know, preach, and defend “sound doctrine” (1:7-9). First Peter 4:10 teaches that all Christians should be stewards of the “manifold grace of God,” serving one another with whatever gifts God has given us.

To be a steward of the mysteries of God is life’s highest calling. We dare not take that responsibility lightly; we must, as Paul wrote, “be found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:2).

In what ways are you helping Christ in the work of building the kingdom of God on earth? How do you see yourself as a steward of God’s mysteries?

Getting Back to Basics

In 1 Corinthians 4:3, Paul addressed the issue of human opinion. He told the Corinthians that he was not overly concerned about their opinion or judgment of him. That was because the only judgment that counts is that of God. Again we see Paul modeling strong leadership for the church. To serve responsibly in the community of faith is to be concerned with the judgment of God, not the judgment

of humans. This requires real strength of character. So many church leaders today seem to make their decisions based on informal opinion polls. Paul reminds us that when all is said and done, the only judgment that counts is the judgment of the Lord. Only when he judges us will all that is hidden come to light and the purposes of our hearts be disclosed. We read in Romans 8:27 that it is God “who searches the [human] heart” and that “the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” We need the Spirit of God to show us what our true inclinations are. We need God whether we know it or not, and the Spirit helps us to see this truth. Only as we are in relationship with God can we know true peace. As Augustine wrote in his great prayer to God, “You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”²

In 1 Corinthians 4:6-8, Paul got to the heart of the problem he was addressing. When the Corinthians divided themselves into cliques and attached themselves to a particular preacher, they were going “beyond what is written” (4:6). Paul called the Corinthians to get back to the basics. In a community of faith whose loyalty is first and always to Jesus Christ, being prideful or “puffed up in favor of one against another” (1 Corinthians 4:6) is out of play. If Christians divide into cliques and factions, how are they different from any other social group? According to Paul, Christians are supposed to be different because they are one in Christ.

Paul’s frustration with these people is readily transparent. He said, in effect, “What more do you want?” The Corinthians had already received faith in Christ alone, which is the greatest gift and treasure anyone can receive. Paul told them that they were rich! They had everything they could ever need. Sadly, it was not enough.

We do not know what it was that these Corinthians wanted or what they felt they were lacking. Paul used himself and the other apostles as examples of how Christians should think of themselves with humility. They, like all Christians, possessed certain gifts. But they knew these gifts were theirs only through the grace of God. Since such gifts are a free gift of the Spirit, there is no basis for boasting. There is, however, much for which to be grateful.

It has been said that the secret to being happy is being content with what we have. The Corinthians had a lot to be happy about; in fact, they had everything they could possibly want. They just needed to start appreciating what they had.

What gifts do you have that you do not fully appreciate?

Blessed Are the Responsible Disciples

Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 4:8-13 can be quite sobering for persons who are immature in their understanding of the faith. Immature Christians often seek a theology of glory and personal blessing, absent the suffering of the cross. Paul made a couple of points clear here. First of all, he and the other apostles had not sought to “become a spectacle to the world” (1 Corinthians 4:8). Yet Paul knew that their trials and tribulations were part and parcel of bearing faithful witness to Jesus Christ in the world.

There are two sides to a mature faith. Yes, there is the gospel of glory and blessing. There is the indescribable wonder and mystery of eternal life. There is the “joy unspeakable” that the experience of God in Christ can bring us.³ But on the other hand, there can be—and often is—suffering, ridicule, and persecution. To admit this is not to seek suffering; it is merely to speak the truth about our faith. This is why

Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matthew 5:11).

Some Christians are reluctant to accept humility and powerlessness for the sake of Christ. But that is what we are called to do. Jesus told those who wanted to follow him that they must "deny themselves and take up their cross daily" (Luke 9:23). This is what tradition tells us happened to the eleven original apostles. Andrew, Peter, and Simon were crucified; Bartholomew was flayed alive; James the son of Zebedee was beheaded; James the son of Alphaeus was beaten to death; Thomas was run through with a lance; Matthias was stoned; Matthew was killed by a sword; Thaddeus was shot dead with arrows; and Philip was hanged.⁴ Only John the son of Zebedee is said to have died a natural death and even he, according to some accounts, is said to have been thrown into a pot of boiling oil.

The lives of the apostles are evidence that bearing witness to Christ may entail a heavy cost. The message here is that the mature Christian continues to bear that witness anyway. God's call to leadership requires that we follow through on our responsibilities, no matter what. One cannot be a mature Christian and be fainthearted. It is the follow-through on our responsibilities as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries that makes mature Christians different from other persons in the world.

In what ways do you see Christians today picking up their crosses and following Jesus? How are you doing this in your life?

Eternal God, you have blessed us in so many ways. May your Spirit help us always to live responsibly in the community of faith, so that we may be servants of Christ and good stewards of your mysteries. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

¹ See also the additional responsibilities outlined in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004* (Copyright © 2004 by The United Methodist Publishing House); 218–221. Used by permission.

² From *Confessions*, by Augustine; translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin Books, 1961); page 21.

³ From "Joy Unspeakable," by Barney E. Warren.⁴Source: eSermons.com, 9/2/04.