

4:1 *Servants of Christ*

Steward of the Mysteries.

Origen: There is a big difference between being a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God. Anyone who has read the Bible can be a servant of Christ, but to be a steward of the mysteries one must plumb their depths. Paul was acting as a steward of the mysteries when he commissioned Luke, for example, to write his Gospel, and when he sent Timothy ¹ to sort out the Ephesian church. I would even dare to say that in Corinth Paul acted like a servant of Christ, whereas in Ephesus he became a steward of the mysteries of God. ². Commentary on 1 Corinthians 2.18.10–16.³

Mysteries Not Given Indiscriminately.

Chrysostom: Paul honors the Corinthians by calling them servants and makes this even more precise when he adds the term stewards. For we should not give the mysteries of God indiscriminately to everyone, but only to those to whom they are due and to whom it is right that we should minister. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 10.5.⁵

4:2 *Stewards Must Be Trustworthy*

Trustworthy Stewards.

Origen: If Paul can say this of people like himself, Peter and Apollos, how much more will it be true of us? We ought to be on our guard to make sure that we are found to be trustworthy stewards. Commentary on 1 Corinthians 2.18.25–27.⁶

Entrusted by the Master.

Chrysostom: A steward's duty is to administer well the things that have been entrusted to him. The things of the master's are not the stewards but the reverse—what is his really belongs to his master. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 10.5.⁷

What You Have Is from God.

Ambrose: As you receive everything, call upon God for everything. What you have is from God. Always acknowledge that you are his debtor. On Theodosius 22.⁸

4:3 Human Judgment a Small Thing

His Reluctance to Judge Himself.

Chrysostom: Paul says this not to exalt himself but to humble others who were getting too full of themselves. Paul says that he would not even presume to judge himself, because he is not capable of making an adequate assessment. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 9.2.11

4:4 The Lord Judges

Not Acquitted.

Ignatius of Antioch: Through the wrongdoings of others I become a better disciple, but I am not thereby acquitted. Epistle to the Romans 5.13

Unaware of Anything Against Himself.

Origen: Paul knew that even if his heart was still prone to sin, his deeds were upright. Commentary on 1 Corinthians 2.18.49–51.14

Blaming Unreasonably.

Chrysostom: Paul may have committed certain sins without knowing that they are sins. His purpose here is not to say that he is blameless but to stop the mouths of those who were blaming him unreasonably. God is our judge, because only he knows for sure what is going on in our hearts. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 9.3.15

4:5 Commendation from God

What Reaches God's Ears.

Origen: Why does Paul mention only commendation from God and say nothing about condemnation? The reason seems to be that only that which is commendable will reach God's ears; the rest will be passed over in silence. I would even go so far as to say that it is God who receives the commendable things we have done, whereas the rest goes straight to the devil. Commentary on 1 Corinthians 2.18.106–12.17

God Knows Our Hearts.

Chrysostom: Paul is not talking here about those sins that we all recognize and confess as such. Rather he is speaking about preferring one person before another and making invidious comparisons of moral behaviors. Only God, who knows all our secret doings, can judge that sort of thing with accuracy. Only he knows what is more and what is less worthy of punishment. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 9.3.19

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4:6 Applied for Their Benefit

Applying Tact.

Chrysostom: As long as there was a need for expressions as harsh as these, Paul refrained from drawing up the curtain and went on arguing as if he himself were the person to whom they were addressed. But when the time came to be gentler, he tore the curtain away and revealed who the people were whom he had concealed under the names of Paul and Apollos. This was not hypocrisy but gentleness and tact. For if he had said openly that the men whom the Corinthians were attacking were saints, they might have taken it badly. But by first humbling himself he gained their attention and respect. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 9.1.1

4:7 Receiving a Gift

You Have Received.

Chrysostom: By showing that they have received all that they have from someone else, Paul points out the deficiencies of the Corinthians, which were not few in number. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 9.3–4.3

Boasting as If It Were Not a Gift.

Augustine: The people who boast imagine that they are justified by their own efforts, and therefore they glory in themselves, not in the Lord. Letter to Valentine.4

4:8 *Would that You Did Reign!*

The Reprimand.

Chrysostom: Arguments like these, which appeal to our sense of shame, have two advantages. On the one hand, they cut deeper than open invective would ever do. On the other hand, they cause the person reprimanded to bear that deeper wound with greater patience. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 12.4.5

4:9 *The Apostles Have Become a Spectacle*

A Spectacle.

Ambrose: Paul was worthy to be watched by angels as he strove to win the prize of Christ, as he struggled to establish the life of angels on earth and confound the wickedness of angels in heaven. For he wrestled with spiritual wickedness. Rightly did the world watch him, to follow his example. Episcopal Election at Vercellae 63.71.6

The Contrast with Pettiness.

Chrysostom: From the things by which he vilifies himself, Paul shows us how great he is. From the things that make the Corinthians proud he displays their littleness. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 12.6.7

4:10 *Fools for Christ's Sake*

Held in Disrepute.

Chrysostom: Paul said these things in order to provoke the Corinthians to consider that they should zealously seek to emulate the apostles in their dangers and their indignities, not in their honors and glories. For it is the former, not the latter, that the gospel requires. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 13.1.10

4:11 Physical Deprivations

The Constant Risk of the Athlete.

Chrysostom: Paul is talking about the present as much as about the past, because the Christian must always be living in this way, and not just occasionally. The wrestler may be crowned after a single victory, but if he then goes on to lose, he will not be crowned a second time. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 13.2.11

4:12 Suffering and Endurance

Suffering Without Anger.

Chrysostom: Paul is saying that the main point is not that he and his fellow apostles are suffering, for that is common to all. What is unique about them is that they are suffering without despair or anger. On the contrary, they are full of rejoicing, and they prove it by returning good for the evil they receive. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 13.2.12

4:13 Returning Good for Evil

Silence, Not Reproach.

Chrysostom: Christ commanded us to bear insults meekly, both so that we might grow in virtue ourselves and that we might put our adversaries to shame. 13 That effect is best produced not by reproach but by silence. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 13.2.14

4:14 Admonishing Them as Beloved Children

The Knife and the Pain.

Chrysostom: Not to speak against sins would have been impossible, since they would have remained uncorrected. To have left the wound untended after having spoken would have been harsh. Therefore Paul apologizes for being severe, because so far from destroying the effect of the knife it makes it sink in even deeper, while at the same time it looks toward soothing the pain of the wound. When a person is

told that these things are being said in love and not in reproach, he will be more open to receiving correction. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 13.3.2

4:15 Countless Guides, Only One Father

Distinguishing the True Father from Subsequent Guides.

Origen: The father is the one who has sown the seed of the gospel in their souls. The guides are those who have taken the child later on and helped him develop. Commentary on 1 Corinthians 2.21.9–11.3

The Love of a Father.

Chrysostom: Paul is not claiming any dignity here, but rather he is showing the depth of his love. Dignity belongs to the teacher, but love is the mark of the father. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 13.4.5

4:16 Urgings to Imitate Paul

Be Humble.

Origen: Paul is saying to the Corinthians: “Be humble as I am humble, suffer as I suffer. It is by your sufferings, not by your gifts, that you will be rated.” Commentary on 1 Corinthians 2.21.12–14.6

Imitate Christ.

Chrysostom: Paul’s real aim was that the Corinthians should imitate Christ. But because of their weakness, he presents himself as an intermediate model to follow. It is only because he imitates Christ that he exhorts the people to imitate him. Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 13.5.8