



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

1 Corinthians

“The Judgment That Counts”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are continuing our studies in 1 Corinthians, and we’re in chapter 4 this morning. We’re beginning the chapter, and we’re going to look at verses 1 through 5 of 1 Corinthians 4.

“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 may 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 both 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.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word, and bless our time of studying it together. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do pray your blessings upon us this morning. We’ve read a text of Scripture that applies to all of us. Help us to understand the application. Help us to not only understand that, but see you in all of this, and learn more about you, and about your way, and about your grace. And build us up in the faith through our time together. This is a great time for us; a very important time, and we begin by giving you thanks for it, because it is a great privilege.

As Mark has reminded us, we live in a nation that has been greatly blessed. In fact, I don’t think there has been a nation as blessed as this nation, materially, politically. We have freedoms and we have enjoyed prosperity in an unparalleled way. And so as the Lord’s Day falls on Independence Day, on this Fourth of July, we reflect upon your blessings to this land in particular, and the great privileges you’ve given to us; the great opportunities you’ve given to us. We thank you for that.

We take it for granted so often, but we should not, and we should give you praise daily for the good things you’ve given us, the prosperity and the opportunities. Particularly the spiritual opportunities that we have to meet together in freedom, and to meet together outside of these walls and pray, and study, and fellowship with each other without fear of penalty. That’s a privilege; that’s a blessing. Help us to appreciate that, but Father, help us to act upon it, too.

We have been blessed in so many ways, but the temptation is always to, as I say, take it for granted, and then spend it on ourselves to enjoy our freedoms and our prosperity in a selfish way. Help us to use all of that to your honor and glory. We are citizens of a great nation, and we ask your blessings upon this nation. Bless this land. Bless our government.

We pray for our President, that you would give him wisdom and protection, and that for everyone in power in every branch of government and every level of government. And we pray that you would bless us, as I say, but help us also to remember, more importantly, we are citizens of heaven, and we have a great responsibility, a final responsibility to you, to our triune God, to the King of kings.

And so we pray that you would make us men and women who are first and foremost men and women who proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and live it. We pray in that regard for these young men who are abroad. We pray you would bless them and their mission trip; that they would be healthy, and strong, and vigorous, and bold, and that you’d give a clear presentation of the gospel through them, and give the people there clear and precise teaching from your Word.

May it be a time of blessing for everyone; for them, and for the people to whom they minister. But we pray that for ourselves in this hour, that you’d guide us in our thinking and build us up in the faith. Guide our minds. May the Spirit of God open our hearts to receive the ministry that’s given, and may it be clear as well. We pray, Lord, for our material needs; we have many.

You’ve blessed us abundantly, as I’ve said, in this land, but there are many of us who are suffering affliction, either physically or economically or emotionally. You know our needs, Father. We have a list of them in our bulletin, but beyond that, you know every need and every concern that we have. And the great confidence that we have is that you not only know it; it’s part of your plan for us, and you will use it in the lives of your people, those who put their faith in Christ. You will use it to our good.

So I pray, Father, that you would help those who are in difficulty physically, or whatever the condition may be, to rest in that assurance that you are reliable. You are faithful, and you will use every circumstance of life for our good. I pray that you would enable them to rest in the promises, and see your hand of blessing at the right time and the right season of their life.

And those of us who are not going through any particular trial at this time, I pray that you would bless us with thankfulness and appreciation for who you are, what you’ve done, what you’re doing, and what you will yet do. We give you praise and thanks for all that we have in Christ, and pray your blessings upon us now as we continue our worship and continue a time of study. May it be rich for us, and may it be honoring to you; and we pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] In the ruins of ancient Corinth, some interesting buildings have been preserved, but one of the most interesting features of the city is in the old marketplace, at the end of a boulevard. It’s a large stone platform. On it is the word, both in Greek and English, *bēma*. It’s the judgment seat. Paul was brought before it and judged there by the Roman governor Gallio; Luke records that in Acts 18. He uses that word in 2 Corinthians 5:10 when he describes the judgment seat of Christ.

He says we all must appear before the *bēma* of Christ and be recompensed for our deeds. I think that that probably seems strange to many Christians, that we will have a day of judgment when we give an account of ourselves. But strange as that may seem, that is what Paul teaches. He teaches that in 2 Corinthians 5, and he teaches it here in our text, in 1 Corinthians 4. When Christ comes, he says, he will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness. He will reveal men’s motives as well as their deeds.

Judgment is coming, and it will be perfect, so Paul says do not go on passing judgment. That’s what Christians do very often. That’s what they do in the church; they pass judgment. They make judgments about elders, and teachers, and about fellow

believers. That’s what they were doing in the church of Corinth. The Christians were passing judgment. The church was in fact divided over these various judgments.

They were divided over who was the best leader, who was the best teacher, and people were passing judgments on those who didn’t follow their particular teacher or leader. And Paul, of course, has been correcting that in the book so far. He has explained that their divisions were only hurting themselves. By choosing one teacher over another, they were depriving themselves of the blessings of having all the teachers that God had given to them.

He’d given a variety of teachers, a variety of ministries, and they were all for them. They didn’t need to discriminate as they were doing. But they were doing that; they were judging. Now, the problem in Corinth was not that they were evaluating other teachers, they were forming opinions, or that they’d even made judgments. We need to do that. We need to be discerning about the teaching that we get and the people who give it.

The problem in Corinth was that their standard of judgment was not correct. It wasn’t the Bible; it was the world. They had a false idea of what a spiritual leader is, and so their judgment about such things was all wrong. Paul now corrects that. He tells them to stop being self-appointed judges. The true judge is coming. He will do that. He will make the perfect judgment. That’s Paul’s instruction to them.

But first, he corrects their standard for judging leaders in the church. That’s where he begins the chapter. He tells them what a leader or minister is. He’s a servant. And what God requires of a servant is not results, but faithfulness. He writes, “Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ.” Now, he’s speaking of himself, and Apollos, and Peter, those mentioned in the previous passage, but it’s really broader than that, and it includes all other genuine ministers in the church.

Whether a person is an elder or a deacon, a teacher or an evangelist, whatever, he is first of all a servant. That’s not new. Paul said that earlier in 3:5. He and Apollos were servants. But he repeats it here, and he repeats it because it needed repeating. It’s not what we think of when we think of a leader, is it? We have ideas when we think of a leader; ideas of grandeur, of charisma, of power, of a man on a white horse.

What we rarely think of is accountability, service, suffering; the Corinthians didn’t. That wasn’t their idea of a leader, and the result was they were clamoring for the wrong thing, dividing into factions for the wrong reasons, criticizing good men, and damaging the

church. They were thinking according to a worldly standard. So Paul sets them straight on what a true leader is, and what they should desire in their ministers. They’re to be servants.

Paul uses two different words to state that. Both are different from the word that he used back in chapter 3. There, it was *diakonos*, and we get our word deacon from that. It’s used of a person who waited on tables. Now, here the word in “servants of Christ” means literally “under-rower”, and it was originally used of a man who rowed in the lower part of a large ship, a *trireme*, which was a ship that had three rows of oars, and he was on the bottom of that.

It doesn’t reflect the idea of glory; it reflects, actually, the idea of labor and subordination. Under-rowers were not heads of parties. They’re not what we think of when we think of a great leader. They, in fact, were not the person that would lead. They were under the direction of another. Paul, the apostle, and Apollos, the preacher, were not stars. They were servants – servants of the people, to be sure – servants of those in Corinth, but more importantly, servants of Christ.

That’s really the focus here. They, and for that matter, all ministers of the gospel, have allegiance to Christ, and only by serving him can they properly serve the church. The specific service that Paul has in mind here is indicated in the next description he gives. He says they were stewards of the mysteries of God. A steward was usually a household slave who was entrusted by the master of the house with certain duties.

Sometimes he was the one who managed the house. Sometimes a rich landowner would give the steward the task of supervising the entire estate, so he was responsible for many things. He had a very responsible position, and the steward was accountable to the master. The apostle was like that. Christ had entrusted him with the mysteries, which is divine revelation. That’s a word that Paul uses elsewhere: the mysteries that he had.

It’s not what we sometimes think of as something mysterious, or mystical. Mysteries are simply truth that is inaccessible to human reason. It’s truth that we could never arrive at in our own ability, through our own thinking, through our own investigation. It is that which is revealed by God. It must be made known by him, and he has done that. He has revealed his truth through the apostles and the prophets, and it is contained in the Bible, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

Paul received it from God. He was entrusted with the revelation of God. He was a steward of that revelation. Now, that tells us not only a lot about the apostle, but it tells us a lot about the responsibilities of a minister of the gospel, or the man in the pulpit. He is, first

of all, a steward, or a manager of the doctrines of the Word of God. This is the primary responsibility of a minister in the church of Jesus Christ.

He is to be a teacher of Scripture; to explain the Bible, so that Christians understand the doctrines of the Word of God, and can think biblically. Think like Christians; have the right standard in order to make the right judgment. It’s only as we understand Scripture, and can apply it to our daily lives, to our relationships, and the problems that we face, only in that way can we live a stable and productive life.

We need the Word of God for that reason. It is our standard for life and conduct. The church needs the knowledge of God’s Word, and the wisdom that comes from it. Giving that, explaining the Scriptures, is the teacher or the preacher’s principle responsibility, but to do that requires the same thing that was required of a steward, and that is faithfulness. The slave that managed an estate was largely unsupervised.

Many of these rich, wealthy landowners would appoint him to do that, to manage the estate so that they could then be free to leave and do other things. So what the owner of the estate looked for in a servant was trustworthiness, so that he could leave; so that he could know that in his absence, his property and his affairs would be managed well, and he could carry on with his life.

Well, it’s the same for the servants of God. Paul says in verse 2, “it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.” God doesn’t require eloquence or charm of his stewards, his ministers. He doesn’t expect ingenuity and fundraising, or establishing programs in the church. He requires faithfulness to his Word. The Lord will build the church. We have responsibilities as his servants.

But I can assure you of this: God will not build his church apart from the ministry of his Word. Now, something may go up in place of that, and people can establish all kinds of programs, and will expand the population within that building, and even the size of that structure. But to build the church that Christ builds, that comes through the teaching of his Word, and that’s what he looks for in his ministers. He looks for faithfulness in them.

As I say, the Lord will build his church, and he does it through his Word. Now, having said all that, there’s nothing wrong with being eloquent. There’s nothing wrong with being articulate. And there’s nothing virtuous about being dull or unclear. We want someone who is clear, and can explain the Word of God in eloquence and charm. It can be very helpful in that. Those are blessings; those are virtues.

All of that’s good, but what is essential – and that’s what I’m explaining here, that’s what Paul is setting forth here – what is essential in a minister, a leader, so to speak, in the church, is faithfulness. Faithfulness to the truth of God’s Word – speaking it clearly, and teaching it without compromise; and Paul was the great example of doing that. He spoke of this in Acts 20, when he said his final farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus.

He reviewed for them his life. He was faithful to God’s Word in his conduct. No one could point to any personal failure in him. He didn’t covet anyone’s possessions, or take anything from them. He was faithful in teaching God’s truth. He said, “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house.”

In fact, he said, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.” Now, that’s a very interesting statement by the apostle. “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable.” Why would he say that? Do preachers sometimes shrink from declaring the truth of God? They certainly do. It’s very easy to fall into the temptation of declining to declare the truth of God, because the fact is, Christians sometimes do not like what they hear from the Word of God.

It may be an exhortation that they don’t want to hear, or an admonition they don’t want to hear, or maybe a doctrine of Scripture that they’ve not yet come to terms with. They might be offended. They might leave. And so the minister is very cautious of that, and sometimes shrinks from doing and saying what he should.

Some years ago someone gave me a tape of a sermon that had been delivered by a popular minister in this area who has a large church. He’s an excellent teacher, and the sermon was on Romans 9. And so many preachers avoid Romans 9, and he didn’t. He preached it, and he preached it very clearly, all about election, and predestination, and God being the potter, and we being the clay.

It’s not of him who runs or him who wills, but it’s God who has mercy. I listened to that and enjoyed it very much, and some months later met him and we visited, and I asked him about that sermon. I said, “You did a very good job on Romans 9. What was the response that you got?” He said, “Oh, people got up and left all through that sermon.” Well, that happens, but he stuck with truth; he preached it.

So preachers are tempted to play it safe and keep their congregations happy, but Paul said he didn’t. He was faithful to God’s Word even when it put him at risk; that’s being trustworthy. Well, speaking of Romans 9, and predestination, and the sovereignty of

God, John Calvin did the same thing. After his last sermon, he had to be carried from the pulpit to his bed, and from there, he said his farewell to the ministers of Geneva, who all crowded into his home.

And it was very much like the apostle Paul’s farewell to those Ephesian elders. He reviewed his ministry for them. He said that he lived through what he called “marvelous conflicts.” People mocked him; they shot at him while he walked through the streets of Geneva; they set their dogs on him. At one point they expelled him from the city. That was early in his ministry. He went off to Strasbourg and ministered to the French expatriates there.

He had a wonderful ministry there, enjoyed it very much, but when the city of Geneva declined into chaos, they came and begged him to come back and preach the Word, and he did so. Wanted to stay in Strasbourg, but he came back to Geneva. He didn’t rule the city of Geneva; he ministered there. His ministry wasn’t flawless. He wasn’t flawless, and he admitted that to those ministers.

He said that he made mistakes, but that he preached as faithfully as possible, and never knowingly twisted the Scriptures. He said, “When I have been tempted to subtlety, I have withstood the temptation, and always studied simplicity.” I like that statement. He studied simplicity. Well, that’s the kind of ministry that Paul had, and the kind of ministry that he advocates here in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians.

One that gave the gospel of the cross simply, and not in superiority of speech or wisdom – he didn’t try to wow people with philosophical speculations that would only cloud the issue, but perhaps impress people with him. No, he didn’t do that, and Calvin didn’t do that. Calvin didn’t try to overwhelm people with his knowledge. He kept things straightforward, clear, and complete.

He taught the whole range of the Bible and its doctrines, and you can get his commentaries today, Old Testament and New Testament. They fill shelves of your library, and they’re still very helpful. And that kind of preaching eventually transformed Geneva from a rough town to the model city of Europe, and it is what will transform our lives as well – only that. The Word of God is what God uses to sanctify us.

Well, what’s clear from this is to be faithful to the gospel, a person cannot worry about public opinion, or shrink from the truth. Christians cannot do that. You and I cannot do that. And Paul did not do that. He said, “To me, it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court.” So having given to them the standard for

correctly evaluating things, he now cautions them against being critical, being judgmental, putting him or others on trial in their court.

Now, there are people who were doing that. There were people in that fractured church of Corinth who were critical of Paul. They didn’t like his style of teaching, or they didn’t like his doctrine. You can be sure there were many of them that didn’t like his doctrine, just as people today don’t like the doctrines that the apostle Paul expounded for us, so they criticized him.

Paul’s statement here didn’t mean that he wasn’t hurt by their criticism; just that he wasn’t influenced by it. Nor does he mean that he was insensitive to valid concerns that were expressed by the congregation. He wasn’t autocratic in his decisions. Leaders are servants, not dictators. They are responsive to the people. They are able to evaluate and judge their concerns correctly, and respond to them correctly, and Paul did that. He was responsive to the people.

But Paul didn’t answer to the Corinthians; not ultimately. They hadn’t made him an apostle. They hadn’t sent him out, or given him his mission, or given him the doctrines that he was to preach. Christ had done that. Christ was his master, so Paul had to be faithful to him, regardless of the criticism that he got from them. Where criticism contradicted truth, criticism had to be ignored.

I don’t think anybody should ignore criticism, and it’s a difficult thing for any of us to experience, no doubt. We don’t like to be criticized, but we need to be criticized at times. We need to have evaluation, and we need to be sensitive to it, and we need to listen to it; it may be very helpful. But as I say, where criticism contradicts the truth, then it must be ignored, and Paul took this to its logical conclusion.

He said, “I do not even examine myself.” Now, he didn’t mean by that that there was no place for soul-searching and for self-examination. At the end of 2 Corinthians, he tells the Corinthians, “Examine yourselves,” so he didn’t mean that. In fact, in the next verse here, in verse 4, he gives the results of his own self-examination. He wrote, “I am conscious of nothing against myself,” so he examined himself; he did some soul-searching.

He’s not saying we shouldn’t do that, but having done that, he could say, “I find nothing against myself,” which is a little surprising. What does he mean by that? Well, not that he didn’t have any sin in his life; we know that he did. He tells us all over the New Testament that he was a sinner, and the chief of sinners. In Romans 7 he tells us how continually frustrated he was by the flesh, by the sin that’s in him.

By that principle of sin that kept him from doing what he knew that he should do, and provoked him to do the things that he knew he shouldn’t do. In other words, he faced the struggle we all face, and it’s a daily struggle that we face. So Paul isn’t denying any of that. What he’s referring to here when he says, “I am conscious of nothing against myself,” is his ministry. That’s what the Corinthians were criticizing.

They were criticizing him as a minister. They were criticizing his ministry, and what he is saying here is their criticism wasn’t valid. He was conscious of nothing against himself; he was faithful. Even so, that was of no ultimate significance to the apostle Paul, because none of us is really capable of giving a disinterested, unbiased evaluation of ourselves. We might be too confident of our achievements, or we may be too doubtful of them.

We may be too easy on ourselves; we may be too hard on ourselves. So while Paul can say, “I am conscious of nothing against myself,” he also qualifies that judgment by saying, “Yet I am not by this acquitted.” In other words, I may have missed something in my ministry. I may have missed something in my evaluation of things, or I may be self-deceived about some things. I don’t think I am, he’s saying, but that’s possible.

That’s why introspection is a little dangerous, and can be very dangerous, because it can be self-defeating. The result of it may discourage us beyond reason, or it may inflate us beyond reality. So really, ultimately, our own opinion is unimportant. It’s Christ’s judgment that counts. Our responsibility is to get on with the job of serving him, and we do that by being faithful to the Word of God.

I say our responsibility because this is true of all of us. Paul is not setting up some clergy-laity distinction in the church, as though there are the ordained, there are the initiated, and the uninitiated. There are leaders in the church, elders, and deacons, and teachers, who have the high responsibility of shepherding the sheep, and feeding them the Word of God; guiding them and protecting them spiritually. But they are not the elite.

The New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers. We all have gifts, and later on in chapters 12, 13, and 14, Paul develops that; that’s one of the major sections of this great book. We all have a gift. We all have a ministry. We are to be involved in that. We all have responsibilities in the church, and we all have responsibilities outside the church. There’s never a time when we’re free of our responsibilities.

Whether it’s in the church, or in the home, or in the marketplace, or wherever we are in life, we are responsible to our Lord to live a correct life. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul gives

the qualifications for elders. They are to be, among other things, respectable, hospitable, and not addicted to wine. Well, the corollary to that, the result of that, is not well, believers who are not elders can be disreputable, inhospitable, and drunkards.

Almost everything that is required of an elder is required of all Christians. All of us are servants of Christ, and all of us must live before him, and live an uncompromising life. But certainly if that is what is required of all of us, then it is required even more of those who are leaders in the church; those with higher responsibilities. With greater responsibility comes greater accountability, and those are the men that Paul is really focusing on here.

So anyone who’s lusting for leadership should understand what leadership really is. It’s not about power, it’s not about prestige, it’s all about service – lowly service, humble service. And chiefly here, it is about teaching God’s Word with purity, and teaching all of it, regardless of the fallout. And that’s what we should expect from every teacher in this church. That’s what you should expect from every man who stands in this pulpit.

But ultimately, the verdict on a person’s ministry and life – your life as well as mine – is given by the Lord, not men. He is our judge. That’s what Paul says here. “But the one who examines me is the Lord,” and from that he draws a conclusion about their behavior – the behavior of the Corinthians – and about what we can expect from the judge when he comes, because the judgment of Christ is the only judgment that counts.

That’s what Paul tells the Corinthians, in effect, and what he’s telling them is because of that, because the judge is coming, they’re to stop judging. They’re to stop being everyone’s critic. “Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time” – that is, the time in which our Lord comes, when he will give the definitive judgment. Why is that? Well, because of what we’ve said; because we are not capable of judging correctly.

Not completely – our knowledge is incomplete. If we can’t judge ourselves, and Paul indicates that about himself, then we’re surely incompetent to judge others. Our minds are limited and fallible. We can be convinced that we know the facts about a matter, that we know what happened, we know the reasons for it, we know the motives behind it. We can be thoroughly convinced about that when we really don’t know things at all; we really don’t have the whole story.

Now again, this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t judge anything. Back in 2:15, Paul said that “He who is spiritual appraises all things” – that is, he evaluates a matter, or a person, correctly. We need to judge teaching correctly and reject error. In order to reject error we

have to know the truth, and we have to evaluate what is taught, what’s said, according to the Word of God. When we find a brother or a sister in sin, we need to confront that person.

Convict that person with the Word of God, and then seek to restore them. Well, that involves evaluation; that involves judgment of a kind. The church always needs people who can do that; who can analyze an issue, or evaluate a person, and make sound judgments. We need that; and of course, having said that, the person who has been confronted and judged in that sense needs to respond to it.

But that is judgment that is based on the Scriptures; that’s dealing with an objective situation, and analyzing it according to the objective Word of God. What Paul is telling the Corinthians to stop doing is being judgmental, being critical and condemning, being censorious, and doing so based on a false standard – doing so based on insufficient knowledge. So Paul tells them to wait until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts.

God is omniscient. We are not. He knows everything – everything – every detail, every fact. Everything there is to know, he knows it. He knows where every atom in the universe is. He sees in the dark; we don’t. He knows the end from the beginning; we don’t. We are in no position to judge a person’s potential or progress. Some people fail early, or they start late, and as a result of that, we may want to cut them off, dismiss them, not give them a second opportunity, not be patient with them.

I’m very thankful that this church has been very patient with me over the years. But sometimes people aren’t; those Corinthians evidently weren’t. This problem brings to mind situations that aren’t very common, about failing early and needing some guidance and help, and some patience along the way. There are examples of that in the Word of God. One example that stands out in this regard was in regard to Paul’s experience, and that was with John Mark, who failed very early in his Christian life, and in the Christian ministry.

You remember the account of it in the book of Acts, in chapters 13 and 15, how they start off on a missionary journey, the first missionary journey, he and Barnabas, and they took Mark with them. And they make it to Cyprus – it’s the very first stage of the ministry, and it’s not very difficult, at least from what Luke records. But it’s after that that Mark says, “I’ve had enough,” and he abandons the mission and goes home.

Well, when it’s time for the second missionary journey, Barnabas wants to take Mark along. Paul says, “No, he’s not ready for it.” And I think Paul made the right decision there; that it was no doubt a hard decision for him, and a difficult disagreement between him and Barnabas. But the fact is, Mark needed some more time to grow up before taking on that responsibility, so he wasn’t allowed to go on that trip.

But Paul had not given up on Mark. And we know that because at the end of his life, when he was in prison in Rome, he wrote to Timothy to bring Mark to him, because, as he says, he was useful to him in the ministry. He had not given up on that young man, and Mark was very useful to the end of his days. We don’t know enough about people and God’s plan for them to be impatient with them and write them off.

At the same time, we don’t know their hearts. We might be impressed with a teacher who has a wide breadth of knowledge and is a good communicator, but his heart’s corrupt. It’s full of pride, or covetousness. Some people are quick to preach or quick to teach because they like to be in front of people. Well, there may be a person who is less gifted – doesn’t have quite the personal presence of some others – who struggles, but who serves, because his heart is pure.

We don’t know what’s going on the inside. And here’s a fellow who doesn’t have quite the gift, but he loves the Lord, and he wants to use his time well for him. We can’t see those things either; God does. So we need to leave those judgments to him, and someday, he’ll make everything plain. He will bring everything out into the light. Now, that’s a little disconcerting, as you think about it, what he says here; “who will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness.”

Well, that’s very much what Paul was talking about back in chapter 3, if you’ll remember, when he speaks about that trial by fire. All of our works will be tested. Our lives will someday be evaluated, and what’s worthy, what’s worthwhile, what’s of eternal value like gold will be preserved, and what isn’t will be burned up, like wood and hay. Well, that is, I say, disconcerting, a little troublesome; to think that some things are going to go up in smoke.

Some things are going to be seen as not being valuable. But it’s also encouraging, in fact, even amazing, because Paul, what he emphasizes here is not penalty, but reward; not shame, but honor. He writes, “And then” – after this evaluation, after the hidden things are brought out – “then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” Each man’s praise – that’s what he focuses upon.

That’s really amazing when you think about it. Don Carson, who’s written a very helpful commentary on this early part of the book of 1 Corinthians, commented on this statement. He wrote, “How wonderful. The king of the universe, the sovereign who has endured our endless rebellion, and sought us out at the cost of his Son’s death, climaxes our redemption by praising us.”

And then he makes the observation that, at least in regard to judging our efforts to serve him, the Lord is more generous than many of the self-appointed judges in churches. Now, that’s true. God is full of grace and kindness, and he will reward our efforts far beyond what they deserve. But then, that’s his nature; that’s the kind of God that he is. He does far more beyond all that we ask or think, as Paul put it in Ephesians 3:20.

Or he does exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think – or we deserve. Well, that’s our God. That’s how he deals with us, and that’s how we need to deal with others. We need to be careful in our judgments, and generous in our relationships. We need to make our judgments according to the truth of God’s Word, not according to personal preferences.

A day is coming when he will examine the way we dealt with our brothers and sisters in Christ. He will evaluate the way we deal with all people, those in the church and those outside the church. Fortunately, all our sins have been covered with the blood of Christ and forgiven. This is the *bēma* of Christ that Paul is speaking of here; this is the judgment seat of Christ for his people, and it will be a judgment for recompense, not for punishment.

We’ve escaped that. Our substitute underwent that in our place, and so we look forward to a day of evaluation, and praise, and God’s gifts. But there is a judgment coming that will be very different from that; there is a judgment of punishment coming, the great white throne judgment, and it is for all unbelievers, and there’ll be no grace there. No grace; just cold but fair justice.

But there’s a way of escape, and that is through Jesus Christ, who died for sinners. So if you’re here without him, we invite you to believe in him. The moment you do, you are forgiven, and you are forgiven for all eternity. May God help you to look to him, to see your need, and trust in him, and then live for him. May God give all of us the desire to do that; to serve him in all of the ways that we can do that, knowing that the day is coming when he’s going to examine us.

He will certainly come back. It may be soon – sooner than we think – so we’re to look to him, and look forward to him, because it’s a day of reward, and it’s a day, if we serve him faithfully, where we will hear personal praise from the almighty God. What a blessing that will be. God help us to look forward to that, and help us to serve him faithfully in the meantime. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for the promises of your Word. We come to this text and we’re reminded that your Son is coming back, and he’s going to bring to light the things that are hidden in the darkness. Help us to live in the darkness the way we live in the light. Help us to be honest, forthright, and helpful. We look to you for that, because really, Lord, every good thing we do is ultimately a work of your grace.

We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. We are to be obedient to you, knowing that it is you who is at work in us, both to will and to do according to his good pleasure. You’re the one that enables us to do that. You’re the one that enables us to live faithfully. And then you reward us for it; that’s your grace. We give you praise and thanks for that. We give you –