The Nature of True Apostleship

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

Key Verse: 4:20 “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.

In chapter 3 Paul admonishes the believers in the Corinth Church how to be united in Christ and how to be good workers by showing two illustrations: First, they should be good farmers who work together. As Paul sowed the seed and Apollos watered it, so too must they work together in God’s field. Second, they must be wise builders who build a house of God on the foundation which is Jesus Christ. Each has his or her own gifts and talents and so they must work together to build up the work of God. In chapter 4 since their division was caused by their preference of leadership, Paul teaches them what the nature of true leadership is. Who is the true leader and apostle of Christ Jesus?

First, a leader should be a faithful servant. (1-2) Look at verses 1-2. “***This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those who entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.***” In these verses Paul describes himself as a servant of Christ. Here a servant (*hyperetas*), in etymological meaning, is a slave who rows a boat. Why did Paul pick this word for himself? He meant that he is a humble servant who has nothing to boast about himself. His purpose and aim were only to please his master Jesus. He said that he was the one who was entrusted with the mysteries of God, which indicates the message of the cross, the good news of salvation.

What is a requirement for a servant who carries the mystery of God? It is faithfulness. Look at verse 2 again. For those who have been given a trust, faithfulness is required. Who are faithful servants in Bible history? In the Old Testament Joseph and Moses are good examples. Joseph was faithful to anyone anywhere. He was faithful because he feared God. Moses was faithful to God’s calling and to deliver his people out of Egypt. In the New Testament Paul is a faithful servant, isn’t he? He suffered much to deliver the message of the cross. What made Paul faithful as an apostle of Christ? Paul was faithful because he had Jesus Christ in his heart. Jesus was the foundation of his faithfulness. What does it mean that he had Jesus Christ in his heart? First, he had confidence in the message of the cross (Ro 1:16-17, 1 Co 1:18). Second, he remembered the grace of God (Ro 1:5, 1Co 15:9,10). Third, he had resurrection faith (1 Co 15:20-58). He was faithful because he believed the heavenly reward from Jesus Christ (Php 3:13,14). John said in Revelation 2:10, “*Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you a crown of life*.” Polycarp was the disciple of John the Apostle. He was also the bishop of Smyrna. He was arrested because he did not worship the emperor. He was threatened to deny Jesus. But he did not deny Jesus even to the point of death. Are you a faithful servant of the Lord today? How can you prove your faithfulness?

Second, a true leader is a God-fearing servant. (3-5) Leaders in this world eat and work for people’s popularity. So, in order to keep their popularity, they often cheat and lie and do so against their conscience. But Paul said in verse 4. “***My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.***” In his first letter to his spiritual son Timothy, Paul said about the qualification of a leader in this, “*This goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*” (1 Ti 1:5) Paul said that his clear conscience is good enough before people, but not enough before God who judges him. Paul feared God who judges, especially who judges the motives of his heart. In verse 5 Paul said to the Corinthians not to judge others because God himself will judge others when he comes again. The Lord Jesus will expose all things hidden and concealed, and he will judge the motives of our heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God. (5) As Paul said in Romans 12:19, he asked Christians to leave a room for God to judge others.

Those who fear God believe that God is the true judge. Even though they are mistreated or misunderstood, they do not judge others, but bring all to God in prayer. They do not confront against people, but struggle with God. Moses was a good example when his people rebelled against him. A true spiritual leader does not please his people, but please God alone. Even though he may not become popular to his people, he lives before God with a clear conscience.

Third, a true leader perseveres (6-13) People have a tendency to brag about their knowledge when they learn something new. Based on this knowledge and experience they judge others. Paul knew the immaturity of the believers in Corinth Church who judged others and were divided by their preference. In verses 6-8 Paul rebukes them to be humble and be content with what God gave them. When we remember the grace of God, we become humble and thankful for what God has given us. In verses 9-13 Paul reminds them of how he and the gospel workers persevered. Look at verse 9. “***For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in that arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings***.” Paul compared Christians to those who were sent into the arena where lions or gladiators were waiting. They became a spectacle of entertainment and objects of ridicule. They became fools for Christ. Look at verse 11. They became hungry and thirsty while they lived for Christ. They were brutally mistreated and became homeless. (12) They were cursed, persecuted, and slandered. They became the scum of the earth and the garbage of the world. (13) According to these verses it is normal for Christians to be hated by this world. Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12, “*In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*.” It is not strange if you are hated and persecuted by the unbelievers when you live as Christians today. However, a true leader should stand firm like Moses. Moses endured persecution and all hardships in all situations. In order to deliver his people out of Egypt, he became a fool and ridiculed before Pharaoh. He stood firm even in front of the Red Sea while his people were terrifying from the roaring waves. As Paul said, when he was persecuted, he endured it.

Fourth, a true leader must be a father of his people. (14-17) After becoming Christian and joining in the ecclesia, they start a relationship with their mentor or spiritual leader. I was also introduced to my Bible teacher called ‘shepherd’ right after being born again. In our ministry we call this ‘shepherd and sheep’ relationship. This ‘shepherd and sheep’ relationship comes from Jesus who became a good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. (Jn 10:11) This relationship is established not for any human benefit or interest, but for salvation of a soul. Paul was a shepherd for the believers in the church. He preached the message of the cross as a matter of life and death because he knew that it would save their souls. Paul was more than a shepherd for them. He became their father. Look at verses 14-15. “***I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.***” Today because of many irresponsible and ungodly fathers, the image of father was largely damaged. But it was not from the beginning. Father is the symbol of protection, provision, and guidance for his family as a good shepherd does for his sheep. Paul was a good father for Timothy. Paul called him as my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. (17) Timothy followed Paul like his father. He followed Paul’s example so that people could see the image of Paul in Timothy. Such a love and trust relationship is an example for all those who follow Jesus Christ. So, Paul encouraged the believers in the church to imitate him. (16)

There is a difference between a guardian and a father. A guardian takes care of children as a duty while a father does so with love. There are many leaders and teachers in the world, but not many fathers for children. All things become business-oriented. Let us pray that God may raise many father-like leaders, teachers, and pastors in this country. Pray for me not to be a guardian, but a father for God’s people in this ministry.

Fifth, a true leader must be spiritual (18-21) Pastors or any spiritual leader must have spiritual insight to see all things from God’s point of view. At that time some arrogant people said many destructive words which caused division among the believers. They thought that Paul would not come again. As their shepherd and father, Paul would visit them again to see if they were doing right. Paul would not consider what they were talking, but which spiritual power was going on (19). In verse 20 Paul said that **the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power**. People speak what they store up in their mind. Their mind is governed by their spirit. Some speak from the Holy Spirit while others speak from the evil spirit. Paul has spiritual insight to see which spirit is working in the church. Paul wanted to cast out the evil spirit from the church which destroys the unity of the believers. Like Paul, spiritual leaders must be spiritually awakened to tell the work of the Holy Spirit and to fight against the evil spirit. So, he should be always prayerful and careful as an overseer of souls.

Jesus sensed the work of Satan among his followers. Jesus saw how Satan entered the heart of Judas Iscariot and how Judas betrayed him later. Jesus wanted to protect his remaining disciples from the evil spirits. He gently rebuked Judas to repent and turn to him. He also predicted Judas’ betrayal in advance so that his disciples could not fall into temptation. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane to obey the Father’s will. He fought a fierce spiritual battle against the power of darkness. Through his prayer he overcame the world and took the cross. On the cross he also had spiritual battle through prayer. His spiritual battle for salvation continued even to the point of death. This is because the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but a matter of power.

Paul said that we are God’s holy temple which the Holy Spirit dwells (3:16). In church we have the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we bear fruits of the Holy Spirit. Satan hates this. Satan tries to destroy the temple of God by tempting the believers in trials and temptation. Paul said, “*If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred*.” (3:17) So, let us pray that God may fill this house with the Holy Spirit so that the power of the Holy Spirit may cast out the evil spirits from this temple. Amen! Paul said that the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power. Amen!