

PREFACE

As I have aged I have come to have a profound respect for the military in our country—especially since it became all-volunteer. In my youth, however, when I was in the service from late 1969 to 1973 (when one was not required to volunteer), I had a far different view of and attitude about the military—as reflected in one performance evaluation in the middle of my brief career.

1 Apr 1972, for Period 1 Oct 1971 to 1 Apr 1972:

Petty officer Lampel is a barely adequate instrumentalist. He has shown little or no professional progress as an instrumentalist or Petty Officer. Hobbies and outside interests taking precedence over his service responsibilities has created this situation. Petty Officer Lampel lacks initiative and must be constantly reminded to complete his assigned tasks. The Ratee takes little pride in his appearance and shows no effort on his part to improve. He is accepted in the unit but contributes nothing to good morale.

Ironically, this contrasted with the glowing, boiler plate from President Richard Nixon in his Certificate of Appreciation I received upon my (barely) Honorable Discharge in 1973, which reads in part,

I extend to you my personal thanks and the sincere appreciation of a grateful nation for your contribution of honorable service to our country. You have helped maintain the security of the nation during a critical time in its history with a devotion to duty and a spirit of sacrifice in keeping with the proud tradition of the military service.

Well, in all honesty, the *author* of my periodic evaluation had a better bead on my performance than my Commander-in-Chief in Washington. But that was in regard to the military. In matters discussed in the first five verses of Chapter Four, the evaluating roles are reversed. The apostle Paul makes the point that as a servant of Christ and “steward of the mysteries of God,” the individuals with which he interacted on a daily basis were *least* equipped to evaluate his “performance.” Only *his* “Commander-in-Chief” could do that.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

v3

As we will see later in this chapter, Paul has a reason beyond what we see on the surface for this discussion in vv3-5.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6.

But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you,

I don't often say this, but for the passage before us, the NASB is truly the best translation. First, along with the rest of our popular translations—except the NIV—Paul states that “it is a very small thing” that the members of the Corinthian church evaluate his ministry. To my ears the NIV is too dismissive: “I care very little...” That injects a snarkiness that I do not believe is there. The JFB commentary says that the Greek literally means, “it amounts to a very small matter.” “...not that I despise your [examining of me], but as compared with God's, it almost comes to nothing” (JFB).

Secondly, all the other popular translations use the word “judge” for the three times the Greek *anakrino* is used, whereas the NASB uses the more accurate “examine(d)”. It's not that “judged” is so utterly wrong, but it can be misleading.

anakrino = from <G303> (ana) and <G2919> (krino); properly **to scrutinize**, i.e. (by implication) **investigate, interrogate**, determine :- ask, question, discern, examine, judge, search; “This word does not so much refer to a verdict that has been handed down, as to the process of ‘examining’ that leads to the verdict” (Fee).

In Chapter Two the same word was translated “appraised” or “discerned.”

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually **appraised**. (1 Corinthians 2:14; emphasis added)

or by any human court;

This is literally, “man's day,” similar to when we might say, our “day in court.” But it also contrasts with v5, where Paul speaks of *The Day*, the day when

the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts

in fact, I do not even examine myself.

The apostle is not saying that he holds in contempt any opinions, criticism or praise, that might come from those in the flock. It is just that human evaluation from *any* quarter is worth little—including his own.

Now, we must keep this in context. This is not refuting his own counsel to Timothy regarding outward sin.

Read 1 Timothy 5:20-22.

Certainly matters of sin and rebellion are to be addressed, evaluated and judged. Christ's command still stands regarding that.

Read Matthew 18:15. (etc.)

But that is not what our text is talking about. Can any one of us know with certainty that the person next to us is being faithful to his or her calling? Can any one of us know the true condition of his or her heart? In fact, as Paul says, even we are not the best evaluator of ourselves.

v4

For I am conscious of nothing against myself,

In the self-examination of human beings we tend to gravitate to one extreme or the other. We either conclude, with Paul, that we can discover no fault in ourselves—as King David said in Psalm 19, “Who can discern his errors?” (Psalm 19:12a)—or we go to the other extreme, finding no good in ourselves and constantly berating ourselves over our failings

yet I am not by this acquitted; (justified)

What a pointed and eloquent qualifier Paul quickly adds! Human examination—even self-examination—in this regard is irrelevant. It is flawed. It is undependable. It is shaded by extraneous factors.

And, of course, we can’t help but extend this beyond our text. There is nothing in ourselves, nothing on this earth that acquits us before a righteous God. Our evaluation of ourselves in *all* things is not just irrelevant, but utterly futile. So where can we go for a right and true evaluation of our stewardship?

but the one who examines me is the Lord.

In v1 Paul establishes that he and his fellows are not servants of the church, but “servants of Christ.” Not only was Christ Jesus the only one *equipped* to evaluate their stewardship—the only one capable of reading their heart and intentions—but He was their immediate boss and supervisor. Christ Jesus was the only *appropriate* one to examine them.

v5

After laying the groundwork by using himself and Apollos—and, by extension, all the church leaders—as examples, Paul arrives at his reason for following this line. It is not difficult to read between the lines of this letter and conclude that in varying degrees many in the Corinthian congregation were being critical of the apostle who founded their church.

If they are choosing sides by favoring one leader over another, which was Paul’s opening issue—“each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ’”—then it only follows that they are being critical for one reason or another of those they do *not* prefer. In addition, the apostle spends a lot of ink in this letter defending himself. There has to be a reason that he felt that was necessary.

Later in this letter he will state it flat out.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-4. (etc.)

Here the word “examine,” in v3, is the same as in our text, the Greek *anakrino*; the only exception is the NIV with “sit in judgment.”

So there must surely be a little bit of the personal in the order for the Corinthians to “stop reaching a verdict before the appointed time” in v5.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:5.

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, passing judgment^{nasb}, pronounce judgment^{esv}, judge nothing^{niv, kjvs} = krino = properly to distinguish, i.e. decide (mentally or judicially); by implication to try, condemn, punish :- avenge, conclude, condemn, damn, decree, determine, esteem, go to (sue at the) law, ordain, call in question, sentence to, think.

And again, this is not a blanket statement about making no judgments about anything. Later he will expect them to be able to, among other things, judge disputes between brothers within the community (v6:5).

Gordon Fee: The kinds of “judgments” that must cease are those they are currently making about Paul and his ministry, judgments that reflect their lack of genuine eschatological perspective.

but wait until the Lord comes

As Paul stated at the end of v4, there is only one individual qualified to judge his ministry, and to examine the contents of his heart: the Lord. And there will come a day when the Lord will return to judge *everyone*. So he says they are to wait. And what will He—the Lord—do?

who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts;

This last is written in the form of “Semitic parallelism,” and Fee warns against over-analyzing it. Paul is employing poetical form to state the same thing two ways. That same thing is that only the Lord can dig beneath the surface, where humans cannot see; only He can illumine that which has been kept in darkness: “the motives of men’s hearts.”

and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

Here Paul puts a positive spin on the result of such end-time “illumination,” and revealing of the content of men’s hearts. We know that the opposite result will pertain for many.

APPLICATION

What lessons can we draw from this to apply to ourselves? Our text includes admonition and warning, as well as encouragement. Which portions of the text are which to the individual will be determined by his or her role in the body.

To the average parishioner,

- Stop comparing your ministers to others that may be more dynamic or “charismatic.” The Lord’s criterion will be whether or not his servants have been found trustworthy in their stewardship and ministering of His word. And we are to do the same: Are they faithful to God’s word? That is the only question.
- Don’t even try to evaluate intentions or the condition of your leaders’ hearts. You won’t be able to know anyway.
- The good news is that there is a judge who *will* know. If any of your leaders have been hiding their true intentions in the shadows, there will come a day when that is all revealed. So you don’t need to worry about it.

To the pastor and other church leaders,

- Your service is, first, to the Lord, and your responsibility is to be a faithful steward of His “mysteries”—His holy word.
- The evaluation, examining, and judging of you by others will inevitably come—but it means nothing in the scope of eternity. *Serve the Lord.*
- However, know that that same Lord will indeed examine and judge you—and His evaluation and verdict count. Everyone will be judged, but your level of trustworthiness will be held to a higher standard.

None of this means that we are to turn a blind eye—i.e., to *not* examine or judge—those leaders who are obviously not being faithful to their calling, who are operating in the flesh. We are to be on-guard against those false “prophets.”

Read 2 Peter 2:1-3.

And even those of us with pure motives must remember that one day we will stand before Christ’s seat of judgment to be called to account for our stewardship of His word.

Read James 3:1.