

**1 Corinthians 4:2-5**  
**You Can't Judge Me! (And Neither Can I!)**  
**December 6, 2015**

*Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God. (NIV84)*

Do you care if other people judge you? Many of us would like to say that we don't—that we don't do the things that we do to receive approval from them—and that therefore we don't care if other people judge us.

But often people who say such things say them so often and so adamantly that one wonders: If you don't care if I judge you, why do you spend so much time and energy repeatedly trying to make me believe that you don't care? You doth protest too much.

And when people do judge us, we spend an inordinate amount of time and energy getting upset about their judgment, trying to change their judgment, and—if that fails—trying to discredit them and their judgment. All of that energy and angst would seem to indicate that we in fact do care quite a bit about how others judge us.

Even though there's no denying that it's an exhausting way to live. You have your head on a swivel, first looking to this individual and then to that individual and then to a third and fourth individual, hoping to satisfy all of them in order that they might judge you favorably. Constantly seeking the approval of and good judgment from others is not only an exhausting way to live, it's also futile. Because almost no matter what you do, no matter how many people judge you to have done it well, there will always be someone who judges you to have done it poorly, or even judges that you shouldn't have done it at all. Being obsessed with how everyone judges you is a recipe for irritation, frustration, and ulcers.

Now of course there are some who really don't appear to care at all how others judge them. The ease with which criticism and judgment seems to roll off their back makes one believe that they truly don't care if you judge them. They appear to truly believe that they are performing for an audience of one, for themselves, and that their only goal is to be able to look themselves in the mirror before they go to bed at night, and to be able to judge themselves to have done their best. If they can judge themselves and look at themselves favorably, then how you look at them and judge them really doesn't matter to them. Even as we might resent them a bit for their apparent indifference toward us, a part of us might also envy them—for their way seems to be a far more fulfilling—and far less exhausting way--to live.

In our reading, the Apostle Paul sounds like one of those people. He tells the Corinthians, *"I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court."* Paul had surely learned what any pastor (and really, any human) learns after a while—that trying to make everyone 100% happy not only fails to result in that, but it results in making yourself pretty close to 100% unhappy. And so it would seem that Paul is saying to the Corinthians, "I can't twist myself in knots trying to perfectly satisfy you all." (And that was particularly true when dealing with the Corinthians. They were a contentious and divisive bunch that tended to believe they knew best—and that for sure they knew better than Paul!)

More than that, Paul indicates that he has looked himself in the mirror and been comfortable with what he sees, for he says, *"My conscience is clear."* And that would seem to be enough to settle it, to not only allow Paul to lay his head on his pillow at night, but to also be finished with the topic for good.

A clear conscience. That's really what we want, isn't it? To not have to avert our eyes when we look at ourselves in the mirror? To be able to say, "I'm innocent, and therefore I've judged myself to be 'not guilty.'"

But that's not what Paul is saying here.

Yes, Paul cares very little how the Corinthians judge him—because he knows that in the end, their judgment won't matter any more than the judgment of sign-holding protesters outside a courtroom. But he also knows that in the end his clear conscience won't matter any more than the clear conscience of the criminal who stands unapologetically in a courtroom and declares his innocence—and believes it with his whole heart. What matters is not how you judge yourself, but how the person in the black robe seated on the bench judges you. What matters is how that "audience of one" views and judges you.

For Paul, and for us, that audience of one consists of the one who will come to judge the living and the dead at the time that has been appointed.

It's a strange thing that we spend more time than we ought thinking about how others view and judge us, but that we spend less time than we ought thinking about how God views and will judge us.

Instead of trying to fool and/or convince others, we ought to be figuring out how to convince God of our innocence. Instead of trying to clear our conscience, we ought to be trying to clear our record of sins.

I know the reason that we try those other things. It's because it's easier to convince others of our innocence than it is to convince God of it—the God who Paul says *"will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts."*

Deep down we know that we're not innocent. Deep down we know that even when we "do the right thing", the motives of our hearts are impure. Deep down we know that when we do something that isn't technically, demonstrably wrong, the darkness of heart from which it comes makes it wrong.

But doesn't a clear conscience about something mean that you're innocent? Maybe. Or maybe not. Maybe it just means that you've managed to even fool yourself about your actions and especially your motives. God said in Jeremiah, *"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"* (Jeremiah 17:9)

This is why we don't even trust our judgment of ourselves—because it may not be correct. The proverb puts it another way: *"All a man's ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart"* (Proverbs 21:2). This is why Paul says, *"My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent."*

No, we're not innocent. Far from it, in fact. And farther from it than even we ourselves know!

And yet when we are judged by the Lord, we will be judged innocent.

The reason for that is found in someone who was judged by a human court to be guilty. First, Jesus was judged by many in the court of public opinion to be guilty. Then he was judged more officially in the court of the Sanhedrin to be guilty. Then he was judged by Pontius Pilate to be guilty of...well, nothing really—but still guilty enough to be crucified!

While it was happening, Jesus recognized that the judgment of these human courts didn't actually determine his innocence or guilt. He said to Pontius Pilate, *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."* (John 19:11)

The judgment of God above was the one that mattered.

God had given pretty clear indication of his judgment of Jesus on a number of occasions. In addition to answering his prayers in the gospels, and in addition to giving him the power to heal, God the Father had also rendered a verdict on Jesus at his baptism, saying, *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* (Matthew 3:17) Some years later God the Judge repeated that verdict on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Understand, this wasn't just a case of someone who had had the good luck to draw their father as their judge—a father who would look the other way, or at least look past some minor infractions. No, Jesus really was innocent. Not only did he have a clear conscience, but he had a clear record—so clear that when he challenged his enemies once to prove him guilty of sin, they could not. Even God himself, that "audience of one" whom Jesus had to satisfy, had declared him to be innocent.

And yet when Jesus was crucified, the Lord judged him to be guilty—so guilty that the Lord himself administered the punishment for three awful hours. This wasn't because God had uncovered something about Jesus that had remained hidden from his enemies. It wasn't because, in the week between the Mount of Transfiguration and Good Friday, Jesus had sinned.

It was because he had taken on all of our sins. All that evidence that God would have used against you when he judged you—all that evidence was put into Jesus' file and counted against him.

So on the cross Jesus had to make restitution for every sin we had committed.

And when he was finished with that, he died. Then God judged him again.

Only this time God judged Jesus to be not guilty, raising him from the dead and freeing him from death's prison.

Because Jesus has done this, because Jesus has paid for and taken away your guilt, God will judge you not guilty as well!

So now that you know how the Lord will judge you when he returns, how that does that you affect you today? It will make you care deeply about how he judges you today. Because he is the audience of one for whom we are living today, and we want him to be "well-pleased" with our actions.

The way we do that is found in the first verse of our text: *“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”* When you faithfully care for the children or the spouse that God has entrusted to you, he judges you to be well-pleasing to him. When you faithfully use the abilities he has given you in order to serve others and when you fix your eyes on that audience of one, God sits as a delighted audience. When you make good use of the time that God has given you today—whether it is the time that you spent in public worship of him or the time you spend eating and drinking to his glory, God is as delighted in you as he was (and still is!) in his one and only Son. And listen to what will happen on Judgment Day! *“At that time each will receive his praise from God.”* God will publicly judge your deeds to be pleasing to him, and he will praise you for them!

So keep serving that audience of one! As you do so, others will sometimes sit in unjust judgment on you. So be it. You should care very little about that. Keep in mind what Paul said to the Galatians: *“Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God?...If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”* (Galatians 1:10) It is Christ’s approval that you are seeking to gain.

Sometimes you might be inclined to judge yourself because you feel that your conscience is clear. Be careful. Because while that’s a nice feeling to have, to focus on it too heavily might lead you to believe that how you feel about yourself is the most important thing. And that will be a difficult thing to deal with if you begin to judge yourself according to the sins of your past. But then look at yourself in the mirror and say to yourself, “You can’t judge me! God has already judged me—and he has declared me perfect through Jesus!” Amen.