

O you of little faith, (1 Cor 4:1-13; Mat 6 :30)

* As a start, we address a question to a hypothetical audience. Here is the question, “Isn’t it a wonderful message that God forgave our sins for Christ’s sake when we believed?, or Isn’t it a wonderful message that God in Christ Jesus will raise us from the dead and give us the new earth (2Pe 3:13), where we’ll live forever, where there will be no lack of anything?” (Rev 21:4). Soon we received an answer, “Yes, the good message is always good, we like it very much and we’ve believed that promises. However, if a minister blends the good news with his excessive beliefs and practices making God’s gift of love conditional, we don’t like it,” says the audience. “And, to be honest, we should say that the majority like those pastors who don’t preach about the contravention of the law of nature and reason, the values of individual freedom, the origins of life, the human sexuality, and so forth. These things have become norms and practices of our society since the Revolutionary War. If a church wants to be successful in its commission to bring people to Jesus, its pastors cannot neglect the societal values,” says the hypothetical audience.

* While thinking over the wide world’s remarks, friends find these ideas neither new nor unusual. They notice that the teaching and practice of the traditional creedal beliefs within modern and ancient societies always cause tension, if not hostility. What Christians experience today was also experienced in the past. For example, Jesus’ disciples and Paul’s converts often met opposition from their neighbors as soon as they tried to adapt to the teaching of righteousness to societal norms, (Luk 16:14; Act 19). Now, in order to make clear that the claims of the hypothetical audience are neither good nor beneficial for the people of little faith, the friends asked the Holy Spirit for further explanation. Here we pray, Dear Lord, strengthen your servants in faith and love that they would be found faithful and fruitful stewards in your household. Let your Spirit guide all of us on the way of your righteousness and understanding, and in the end, let us see your salvation in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

* Today we’ll center around the first epistle written by Paul to the church in Corinth. For a better understanding Paul’s address in 1 Cor 4:1-13, which is the text assigned for today, we need to specify the societal standards the citizens of Corinth. We like to know those standards because there was a common wish to bring them into conformity with the teaching of the apostle. It is interesting that the first century Corinth in certain ways seemed quite “American” in outlook. Once it was rebuilt and populated by veterans from Romans’ army. Soon Corinth became the popular city for merchants, manufacturers, tradesmen and freed slaves because of its advantageous location. Any trade moving through the 6 mile coast-to-coast strip of land also went through Corinth. The city turned into a mediterranean trade center where people made money in less than no time. It says that the power in Corinth came from money.

The excavations of the city disclosed many inscriptions in honor of benefactors who contributed to the local government to build public constructions, statues, sidewalks and so forth. Corinthians were also like Americans in terms of their religious pluralism. There were more than a dozen pagan temples belonging the Roman and Greek worshipers; there was a synagogue as well. Customary there were practiced all kinds of idolatries, prostitution, and black magic. In addition, like all Roman cities, Corinth supported the cult of the emperor. The historians imagine Corinth as a large “cultural melting pot” with a great diversity of wealth, religions, and moral standards.

* After identifying the societal standards in Corinth, we may easier understand the motivations and concerns of Christians whom Paul wrote the letter. In the beginning of our text, Paul called to attention the authenticity of his stewardship. He is a person whom the Lord entrusted his household, he said. No doubt, everybody in the feudal society was accustomed to a regulation prescribed for a servant. According to that standard, Paul identified the duty for a steward of Christ; he said that a steward has to be a faithful and reliable in the Lord’ house.

* At this moment we center our attention on pastors as stewards. Like some Corinthian Christians who tried to bring the societal standards in teaching and practice of the apostles, some contemporary Christians are all the same. Reflecting on this remark the Reformer Luther made a comment, *The Lord does not require that a pastor be so holy as to raise up the dead by his very shadow, or that he be as wise as all the prophets and apostles were. Neither does he ask that he be a spirited orator, a witty conversationalist, a good mixer, nor any of the many other points which nowadays are mentioned as essential qualities of a pastor. Of all these things the Lord says nothing. He wants only that His stewards administer the Word of God, preach the Gospel, bring forth the necessary spiritual food out of the rich treasury of God's mysteries, making use of the proper pastoral wisdom: that is the faithfulness which the Lord seeks in His servants.* We are sure that some Christians of that society would not like Luther for his radical beliefs, and they didn’t like Paul for the same reason. That is why they judged Luther and Paul behind their backs.

* We don’t know how Paul acquainted himself with that gossip. In fact he knew the matter but preferred to write generally on that subject. Here is what he says in (vv. 3,4). *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you, or by man’s judgment. Yes, I don’t judge my own self. For I know nothing against myself. Yet I am not justified by this, but he who judges me is the Lord.* The judgment pronounced against Paul became known from the context of his letter. Some members of that church might have judged him as far as he taught contrary to societal norms and practices regarding incest, fornication, communion relations,

marriage, betrothal, idol temples, and covering of heads, (1 Cor. 5:1; 6:12-20; 7; 8-10; 11). At this moment we want to draw a picture of a hypothetical church where Paul's opponents would be the stewards.

* As soon as the social reforms in the teaching of the apostle took place in that church, we receive the picture. Friends, if you can, imagine a pastor who no more rebukes the prevalent sins in a congregation. If you can, imagine a pastor who stops calling the sinners to repentance but taught freedom on the matter of sex apart of marriage, homosexuality and alcohol. If you can, imagine that at all times a pastor brings the sweet comfort of the Gospel to mind of persons who live openly in sin. If you can, imagine a pastor who instructs a congregation how to make money at God's expense. Now if you can imagine all these, you may receive a perfect picture of the unfaithful steward who deserves to be a pastor of a hypothetical audience.

* Going back to Paul, it seems he didn't care much about accusations as he said, *So for me, it is a minor matter that I am judged by you or by any human court*, rather the matter of great importance is to be a faithful steward in the house of the Lord. In the first place Paul pleased God, not flesh; he even rebuked Peter when Peter compromised the truth by joining the people who taught circumcision, (Gal 2:12-14).

* The more we learn about Paul's ministry, the more we admire his character; Paul was the great steward of the Church by the grace of the Lord Jesus. From his character we are taught two important things. First, to be a faithful steward means to stay away from compromising with the societal values, and it also means to stay away from tolerance of personal sin, and to stay away from the cessation of warfare with the spirit of this world. And second, the faithful steward ought to focus on his Master's deeds imitating him as a good shepherd of Jesus' flock, like Paul did. All records witness that Paul acted contrary to the common values of his society that liked the wealthy, strong, smart, bright, and good-looking. In the end of our text it confirms the distinction in values, *To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things*, (4:11-14).

Friends, be faithful to the Lord in all that we have received and have been entrusted,
by His grace, by His grace.

Amen