



I had a good experience last Sunday, someone had me on about something that they thought they heard me say, and fair enough too. I showed a picture of High St with Alice's video standing proudly surrounded by a mass of vacant lots that used to be buildings. They thought that I had said a word that starts with B and rhymes with rugged.

Fortunately for me I hadn't, but listen to this from 1 Corinthians 4

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. ²Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. ³But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. ⁴I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

So we are never to judge our leaders, are we supposed to park our own wisdom and discernment and just be obedient little clones. If we are not to judge people then how are we to select our leaders in the first place?

⁶I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," [uh?] so that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another. ⁷For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? [ok but how does that relate to what you just said?]

⁸Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!

[this man does very good sarcasm]

⁹For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. ¹⁰We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, ¹²and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

[he's really angry]

[can you hear the sermon on the mount in there? Compare it with Matthew 5 sometime]

¹⁴I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers.

[did his anger flow from their abuse of his love?]

Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me.

[huge call, would you say that to someone that you were mentoring?]

¹⁷For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church. [just in case you forgot] ¹⁸But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. [you are brave when I am not around] ¹⁹But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power. ²¹What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? (NRSV)

In January it seemed like a good idea to do Corinthians as a series, I have been less sure this week and the odd inappropriate Anglo Saxon expression has come to mind to articulate those feelings. But it's been my experience that you can learn a lot from difficult scriptures, and let's be frank a lot of it is. Peter himself said that Paul can be hard to understand, and that should be a great comfort to us who are trying to make sense of his writings 2000 years later.

Let's take that first bit

- Christian leaders are to be thought of as servants and trustworthy stewards, not gurus like they had been doing.
- Human judgment of our leaders has its limits.
- Judgment of ourselves is also limited by our self-awareness.
- However, we will all ultimately be judged truly by the Lord

A servant was like the poor guy at the bottom of the galley who was rowing his heart out, but you could not see him. It was a very low menial position occupied by a very expendable slave, quite unlike the exalted position that the Corinthians were trying to give the particular leaders that they were championing.

By contrast the steward was quite a senior person. The steward had a great deal more responsibility, they might be the ship's captain or run the master's estate for him. However, their responsibility that they had to be faithful with was to their master, not to the other servants.

So God's call is to take the low road not the high road, preachers, pastors, worship leaders, healers, whatever are not called to promote themselves. Further, they are not there to scratch the backs of other believers as happened in Greek society, their primary accountability is to God.

Paul goes on to say that he does not really care what they think of him, and he does not really put that much stock in his own self-assessment either. God's judgement is the only judgment that is really worth that much. This isn't a fob off because he talks about our true motives being exposed to the light at judgment. I don't know about you, but that is a scary prospect.

The version of me that is my most vulnerable self, laid bare, with all my needs and self-deceptions exposed. Yuk! The realisation that you can see things about me that I can't, and then the stuff that neither you nor I can see that is known only to God. All on the table in daylight.

In counselling and relationship therapy there is a tool called the Johari window, that sounds all Indian or new age but it was actually designed by two guys called Joe and Harry, who had a sense of humour.

Look at this diagram.

	Known to Self	Not known to self
Known to others	OPEN	BLIND SPOT
Not known to others	HIDDEN	UNKNOWN

The Johari Window (Luft, 1969).

Some of us share a lot about what is going on for us so we make ourselves known to others, that's the vertical axis. Your old pastor Rob was like this, he really put himself out there so his hidden self was quite small. But the idea is not necessarily to put yourself out there completely because in doing so you can cast your pearls before swine, and it's painful to do that. I recall sharing a personal story in a sermon and someone came straight up to me afterwards and told me that I was over spiritualising my experience – no I wasn't, that comment stung.

Some of us are particularly open to and receptive to feedback so we have a smaller blind spot, that's the horizontal axis. I have a very good youth pastor mate who finds critical feedback excruciating, because she takes all criticism personally. Like with how much of yourself that you put out to the world, being utterly open to feedback is unhealthy, as the ability to give helpful critique is in my judgment quite rare. If you can find a friend or two who will gently tell you the truth, then nurture those relationships, such people are gold.

There is a lot more that could be said about the Johari window, if you are interested in it talk to Elizabeth.

The task of Christian believers and in particular Christian leaders is to grow in self-awareness, and in an understanding of how we are perceived. A larger open self will enable us to be more effective in our relationships, better able to care for ourselves and for others. We are working towards judgment when our hidden selves, known to us but not to others, and our blind selves known to others but not to us, along with our unknown selves, what is known only to God – will be laid bare. This is why, as Paul says here, all judgments of people are essentially provisional until that day.

Some examples of why this is so, I realised a while back that I have been a Christian for 31 years and have had a leadership role for 26 of those years, which is a bit unusual. Now some might look at this and say that perhaps I am ambitious, or desperate for significance. But I have come to realise that for a lost boy who ended up in church without family I have a very strong need to belong, and out of that need have gravitated towards leadership roles. Coming to that self-understanding and being out of leadership roles for a while has been quite freeing, I am not driven to be a pastor in the way that I used to be. That's not as bad as ambition is it? Something that I could not see is now in the light and can be addressed.

Another friend of mine from Wellington days was incredibly anxious about her children's safety, she went on all their school trips and camps, led children's church and monitored them 24/7. It used to exasperate me because it seemed like her kids were growing up in cotton wool. But she was sexually abused as a child and could not stand the thought that that might happen to one of her kids. When I heard that I still disagreed with her parenting, but I had a lot more empathy for her and her motivations.

We need to be very careful in judging each other because there are motives and needs and patterns that we cannot see, and the person may not be aware of either. This passage needs to be read alongside a whole lot of others that talk about how we are to judge each other, the very next chapter is about strongly addressing sexual sin within the congregation. We do still need to judge but we need to be circumspect about it, don't assume the worst motives. What might look like ambition might be the need to belong.

One of the classic criticisms of pastors is that they are controlling, that it's their way or the highway. He, he's really autocratic and he will let you do something and then tell you every step of the way exactly how he wants it done. Little Hitler! He just does not know how to delegate!

Maybe some pastors just like being bossy but most of these controlling behaviours flow from insecurities. People will come up to you and slag off the children's programme or rip into the worship, and if you think they might be right or you are a bit intimidated by them the first instinct is to go fix it. I don't want the complainer to be unhappy; I don't want them to leave. People will blame me if they do, and they will. The secure thing response is to gently send them off to talk to the person that they have the issue with, but I understand those feelings and have empathy for pastors in that position.

Do you?

Careful how you judge.

And then Paul starts to get stuck in in verses 6 and 7

⁶ I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

Your judgement is off because all you are interested in is what is cool, following the cool teachers and not the dorky ones. If you judged rightly by scripture, you would not get all arrogant because you follow one teacher and not another. If you or a teacher that you really admire is particularly gifted, well good, those gifts came from God anyway so where's the boast. It's like a kid skiting that they got a better Christmas present than another kid, so what, does not make them a better kid, they just have cooler toys. God's Spirit gives us our gifts, they are not works of ourselves so that no one should boast. A good gift says something about the donor and nothing about the recipient.

And then Paul really gets stuck in

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! ⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. ¹⁰ We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, ¹² and we grow weary from the work of our

own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

The picture here is of the conquering Roman general marching back to Rome in triumph. At the back of the parade are the conquered chieftains and kings who will be executed, and behind them are the lions' next meal. If the Corinthians see themselves as kings, then the apostles feel like these displayed condemned prisoners heading to the Colosseum. Corinth was deluded.

To the Corinthians Paul says get over yourselves. You've heard the sayings that we will reign with Christ (see Revelation 20 and 22) but you think that you are already there. You think that you are living the full bodied resurrection now, today, but that's in the future. Yes we are heading towards a glorious future in which Jesus will reign supreme and every hurt will be healed, and all things made new. But we are not there yet. The Kingdom is breaking in but its fullness is still some ways off. So every disease will not be healed, sin and its accompanying pain will be constants of the human condition until that day. That is the Christian hope, the second coming of Jesus who will heal our world and our very selves. We are like a ship that has left port and we know what the destination is, but we are not there yet, we are still at sea. Both the Corinthians and us.

Why is Paul so angry with them? Read on

¹⁴ I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶ I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church. ¹⁸ But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. ⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power. ²¹ What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? (NRSV)

The sarcasm and the anger come from spurned love, he cares for them and they have wandered off the track and blended their faith with paganism. Paul's fatherly heart pokes through the cracks in the concrete like a stubborn weed.

One of my old youth leaders who I spent a lot of time with and love a great deal, now reads the atheist Richard Dworkins rather than Paul and is living with his girlfriend. I grieve his loss from the kingdom and hope that it is not permanent. I get how Paul feels, and I am sure that many of you do too for people that you love.

And he finishes with the thought that it does not matter if you talk a good and clever game, but how you play the game. Is there genuine spiritual power as befits the kingdom of God? Do we see spiritual gifts made manifest? People being saved and discipled? Living humble moral lives characterised by repentance and growth. That was the example that Paul was calling them to imitate and follow. Those are the results of the Spirit's work, not clever arguments or following the coolest of the cool teachers. Over time, good theology and practice will produce good spiritual fruit.

A final story to ponder. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the biggest church in New Zealand was the Queen St AOG in Auckland. They rode the wave of the charismatic renewal and had over 5000 people going along. It all came crashing down when it came out that their Lead Pastor was having an extra marital affair. Perhaps predictably, 80% of the congregation ran for the exits.

I heard one of their pastors talking about the experience. He described the years of heady growth when they seemed to be able to do no wrong, everything worked and more and more people flocked to them. Subtly they

grew arrogant, as if it the ministry success and growth was their doing and not God's. Inevitably that led to them seeing themselves as quite special and the rest of the church as good triers, but second fifteen really. The focus became let's do bigger and better.

When the trial came and everybody fled, it turned out that their house was built upon sand rather than rock. Their ministry was a mile wide and an inch deep, and it had been for several years before their leader was exposed. Big numbers can cover a multitude of sins.

We need to look more deeply than the surface. It does not follow that there is inevitably something wrong with a church with 100 people attending, like this one.

I will conclude with a wee summary. In chapters 1-4 Paul addresses how the Corinthians should combat division, factions and promote unity, he gives four ways

1. Understand that we are all humbly equal before God, losers every last one of us.
2. Church leaders deserve respect and support, but should not be put up on pedestals.
3. Judge by God's revealed wisdom and the presence of real spiritual fruit, not coolness or cleverness
4. Understand that God grows his people and equips them for service; the leader's role is secondary.

Stones – quite beautiful and quite hard. If I threw it at you and hit you, it would sting, but it would still be beautiful. Our judgments can be like that too. The musicians are going to play for us as we reflect on this reality, we may have been the critic, the criticised or likely both. While they play I invite you to come up and take a stone for yourself, to be a reminder to pull your punches and/or to pray for those who have hurt you.