

"A very small thing."

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The life of the Apostle Paul contained many remarkable happenings. Again and again moments of crisis and exercise had to be faced by him, so much so that, considering his life as revealed in his own Epistles, and in the Acts of the Apostles one might be tempted to think that from start to finish it was one succession of great things.

Such an impression, however, would be hardly correct. In 1 Corinthians 4, we have him face to face with a peculiarly trying difficulty that seems to have dogged his footsteps through the whole period of his apostolic service: yet he dismisses it as "a very small thing."

The difficulty itself was one that many of the Lord's servants have to face to-day, and almost invariably we are tempted to treat it as a very great thing; for naturally there is hardly anything that touches us to the quick more easily than criticism, and hardly anything that we cling to more tenaciously than our reputations.

The position at Corinth was a grave one when the first Epistle was written. Amongst other evils partisanship ran high, and criticism of the Apostle himself and other servants of Christ was rampant. The leaders of the parties in the assembly there were apparently local men, or Judaizing teachers from outside, since 1 Corinthians 4: 6 would indicate that in using his own name, and that of Apollos. Paul was transferring to themselves what really belonged to others. With true Christian delicacy he thus avoided actually naming the men who were becoming the leaders of the different schools in that assembly, and he desired the Corinthians, as he says, to "learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another." And then just as they flattered the local gifts and held inflated or "puffed up" views as to their relative importance, so they looked down upon a gift from elsewhere with the disposition to criticise it, and even to flout apostolic authority.

These things were indeed grave enough as regards their effect upon the Corinthian assembly; yet when the Apostle considered their criticism and judgment of himself he dismissed it as "a very small thing" (verse 3).

Let us briefly examine the passage, with the prayerful desire that thereby we, too, may be helped to more largely share the holy elevation of the Apostle's spirit.

Verse 1 sets forth the true character of the apostles and their fellow-workers. They were not "men of renown" in an intellectual sphere, who would surround themselves with admiring auditors and followers. Their word was rather "Let no man glory in men" (1 Cor. 3: 21), and as to themselves they were but "ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." The word here translated "ministers" is the one which means an official servant, one with authority derived from a master.

Verse 2 emphasises the great qualification necessary in a steward. He must be faithful to the one from whom his place and authority are derived. His supreme achievement is to please his master and serve his interests, regardless of whether or not he pleases others in so doing.

In verse 3 the Apostle, who was indeed a faithful steward of God's mysteries, boldly faces his critics. "With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you or of man's judgment" — or as it literally is, "of man's day" as noted in the margin. In 1 Corinthians 3: 13 he had told us that "every

man's work shall be made; manifest: for the day shall declare it." Here we have THE DAY when God's opinion shall be heard. This is MAN'S DAY when men insist upon making their opinion heard, and it is wholly unfavourable to the Apostle and all like-minded with him. The opinion of "man's day" was a very small thing with Paul. He uses emphatic terms. The New Translation renders it, "*It is the very smallest matter.*"

But was it not more serious that the Apostle should be judged of the Corinthians also? The New Translation renders the word "judged" by "examined," with a footnote to the effect that the Greek word "does not signify 'judgment' but the preliminary examination, at which the accused has to answer and give an account of himself." Then, should not a saint, even an Apostle, be deeply concerned if thus examined by his fellow-believers?

"But for me it is the very smallest matter that I be examined of you" (N.T.) — "of YOU": who were these? Well, sad to say, they were saints to whom it had to be said. "I . . . could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal" (1 Cor. 3: 1). They were *carnal* believers, and the judgment and criticism of a carnal believer approximates far too closely to that of "man's day" to be of any real worth. It all left the Apostle quite unmoved in his own judgment. As the succeeding verses show, he was not even ruffled in his spirit by it. Not a trace of annoyance marks his words.

Before going on to the succeeding verses, we digress for a moment to refer to a counterbalancing consideration.

Let no one deduce from what we have just referred to that any servant of Christ, however instructed or devoted, is to consider himself above all criticism, and refuse in any way to listen to remonstrance. The very opposite. The opinion of a carnal, worldly-minded believer is evidently of little or no value, but that of a godly and matured believer may well be highly esteemed. In Galatians 2: 2, the Apostle Paul himself furnishes us with an example of this. He was the Apostle to the Gentiles, and received his Gospel and: instructions how to preach it by direct revelation from the Lord: yet he was not above conferring privately with those who were reputed spiritual men in Jerusalem, lest, as he says, "by any means I should run, or had run in vain."

Evidently, therefore, the servant of Christ does well when in humility of mind he considers others as better than himself, takes counsel of them, carefully considers their spiritual judgment, or even listens to and weighs their criticisms. Yet even so he must not in the last resort be guided by their opinions but by the Word of God. The passage, Acts 21: 18-30, furnishes us with a warning as to this.

Resuming our chapter we find in verse 4 the secret of the Apostle's superiority to mere human judgment. He tells us at the end of verse 3 that he was not even occupied in judging or examining himself. He did not mean us to understand by this that he was not concerned to walk in self-judgment, but rather that he made no attempt even in his own mind to examine and appraise his own life and conduct. The fact was that he could say, "I am conscious of nothing in myself" — as the opening of verse 4 more correctly reads — "Yet am I not hereby justified; but He that judgeth me is the Lord." Here we find the great fact that lifted Paul far above the fear of human opinion. He walked so habitually in the light of the judgment seat of Christ that no other judgment seat had any terrors for him.

This passage, then, speaks of judgment in a fourfold way.

1. The judgment of "man's day," i.e., of the popular opinion of the world.
2. The judgment of saints who are in a carnal condition, which is of not much more weight than that of man's day.

3. The judgment which a servant of God may form of himself. This is by no means infallible, though he who forms it may most earnestly endeavour to assume a detached and impartial frame of mind when conducting the investigation, and be conscious of nothing in himself contrary to the Master whom he serves. The fact that **he is** not conscious of anything *wrong* does not prove that he is *right*.

4. The judgment of the Lord Himself. Here we reach perfection and finality.

Verse 5 of our chapter opens with a word of instruction in view of these things: "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come." When tempted to express strong opinions in regard to each other, or to lay down the law with emphasis in regard to things concerning other people's lives and service which are not a matter of revelation but rather of spiritual judgment, let us remember that in doing so we are "before the time." "The time" will be when the Lord comes, for when He comes He "both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the heart."

How searching are these words! There are *hidden things of darkness* on the one hand; and if we now undertake to sit on the judgment seat we pronounce our opinion without knowing all the facts of the case and with no power to enforce their production. There are, on the other hand, the counsels of *heart* — the counsels of the inmost heart of him whom we are inclined to criticise, those secret springs and motives which we cannot see, AND — never let it be forgotten — the secret springs and motives of our own hearts: *of him who is the criticiser in the case*.

When the time comes, a proper investigation into the life and service of every saint will be conducted. The Lord will conduct it, and in His presence every hidden thing and counsel will come to light. Judgment when it is pronounced will be arrived at in the light of every factor which bears upon the case, "and then," says the closing line of verse 5, "shall every man have praise of God"; or as the New Translation renders it, "and then shall each have [his] praise from God": the thought being, not that every man shall somehow or other be praised in that day; but that each who is awarded praise at all will get his praise *from* GOD.

The Corinthians undertook to criticize Paul and censure him. Conversely they approved other leaders and lavished praise upon those that they favoured as the centres of their schools of opinion. Such party circles would soon become small mutual admiration societies as they still do to-day. How pitifully small the whole thing was, *and is!* Carnal believers belauding to the skies other believers, possibly more carnal than themselves!

The Apostle sets before us "the day." He speaks of "the time" coming, with the Lord on the judgment seat; of His presence before whom nothing is hid; and of "praise from God" as being the only praise that is worth while. And do not our hearts say "Amen" to this?

Two very important principles that are most wholesome in their practical workings stand out clearly in all this:-

1. They who are tempted to criticise and censure must remember that they do not know *all* the factors of the case, nor the motives of hearts — certainly not in the heart of him whom they criticise, and but imperfectly in their own hearts — hence it is wiser to offer counsel than to pronounce judgment.

2. He who is criticised may be conscious of no wrong thing in himself or in his ways; yet he must remember that this is no infallible criterion of the justness of his course. The Lord will judge him in that day; and meanwhile let him cultivate a spirit of humility in the presence of others.

Lastly, let it be again emphasised that what we have been saying above does not apply to matters in regard to which we have God's will revealed in the Scriptures, but only to matters which are left to the exercise and spiritual judgment of the individual saint or servant of God. In regard to all that Scripture says we have nothing to do but to OBEY.