

JUDGES BEFORE WHOM WE STAND

"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord." I Corinthians 4:3-4.

Human nature was just the same in Corinth in the first century as it is in every city in the United States today. The Corinthian Christians were passing about their judgments upon one another and particularly upon their leaders in the church. Their church was honeycombed with the party spirit. Three great preachers --- Paul, Peter and Apollos -- were pitted against each other. Some liked Paul and thought he was the greatest; others thought Peter was the greatest; and still others were sure that the eloquent Apollos outranked them all. Each of these men was exalted unduly by those who swore by him, and each was unduly depreciated by the other two factions. But the three were themselves knit in closest friendship and fellowship, and considered themselves servants in common of the same Lord and fellow-workers at one task.

Paul urged the Corinthians not to think of Peter and Apollos and himself as leaders of sects or parties, but to think of them as servants of Christ. Paul thought of himself and his fellow-preachers as stewards of the secrets which God desired to reveal to His own people, that is, dispensers of truths long hidden but now revealed. He emphasized that the most important thing was for each of them to be faithful in his stewardship. The question of whether the Corinthians condemned or exonerated him was not of any significance so far as his actual condemnation or exoneration was concerned.

Exercising judgment on their leaders and preferring one to the other gave Paul an opportunity to say something about the different kinds of human judgment and appraisal in contrast with the final judgment of the Lord. Compared with that judgment, all human judgments are of little significance. Therefore, Paul said, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord."

Here Paul introduces us to four judges before whom we all stand:

I. Society.

All of the people who observe and watch our courses of action gradually form an opinion and make a judgment upon our character and conduct. Where we are known there is in circulation a general opinion of everyone of us. Perhaps few of us are aware of the way in which the mental photograph which the public has taken of us is passed from one person to another. No matter how narrow the stage of our lives may be, everyone of us creates some sort of an impression and leaves the accent of some kind of character behind him. Consequently, his fellowmen classify him by saying that he is this or that kind of a man.

Society is perhaps the tribunal before which we most often arraign ourselves. We ask, "What will people think? What will people say?" It is not wise to say, "I don't care what others think about me, and I am not going to pay any attention to what they think or say." Nevertheless, it is to be admitted

that the judgments of society are often mistaken or false. The opinions and judgments of society are not always based on the eternal distinctions between right and wrong. Society is governed by expediciencies rather than by principles. Society thinks more of etiquette than of ethics. It takes cognizance of crime, but not of sin. Moreover, society is not a competent tribunal because it can judge external behavior only. External behavior is not always a true index of a person's real self. All through the ages men have worn the mask of hypocrisy in order to deceive. They appear to be one thing, but in reality they are another. Shakespeare said, "Man may smile and smile, and be a villain." The world's judgment of the Pharisee was that he was a pattern of piety, because it noted his scrupulous observance of religious rites, his payment of tithes and his prayers on the corners of the streets. Judged by outward behavior, he was very religious, but his religion was all on the outside. It was all parade and show. He was a white sepulcher, but inwardly he was full of rottenness and uncleanness.

Society can only form its judgment upon external conduct, but there is an inner life which is the true index of a person. Because society knows nothing of the thoughts and intents of the heart, it is, therefore, an incompetent judge. In fact, to be blamed and denounced by society is no proof of wrong. The "noble army of martyrs" is just a large number of witnesses to the world's tragic misjudgments. Society slew the prophets and persecuted the apostles. It numbered the Son of God among the malefactors and crucified Him between two robbers.

To be praised by society is no proof of goodness. The world's praise may be dangerous. That is what Christ meant when He said, "Beware when all men speak well of you." Society often lauds a man whose wickedness is patent and monstrous. Society is not a competent judge because it rejected Christ and chose Barabas. Popular verdicts in one generation are often reversed in another. The world's estimate of a man is not reliable. It is too superficial to be accurate or valuable. A good name is desirable, but the man who tempers his thought and guides his action in order to secure the world's approval does not deserve a good name. The world's standard of conduct is easy to reach. But the reaching of that standard is not an indication of worthfulness.

There was a group of members in the church at Corinth who were bitterly opposed to Paul and highly critical of him. He told them very frankly that his fidelity as a steward of the mysteries of God was not to be tried by them. It mattered little to him whether they thought he was faithful or unfaithful. His responsibility was not to them, but to the Lord. They had not sent him, and he had no intention of letting them tell him what or how he was to preach. He was not their steward, but the Lord's. Therefore, the Lord was the One to decide whether or not he was faithful.

II. Friends.

The second estimate of a person is the one which is formed by his friends. It is better and more accurate than the judgment of society because it is based upon a fuller knowledge. The person who is seen by a friend may be quite different from the one whom the world sees. Frequently one remarks, "The man whom I know is very different from the one the world knows; people think they know him, but really he has some good qualities which others would never suspect that he has." Most people appear to be better and more generous to those who know them best than they do to men in general. The judgment of friends is often partial and prejudiced, and for that reason

it may not always be reliable. The judgment of friends is influenced and colored by love and cannot be taken as a test of one's character or a gauge of one's ability. It is a good thing if we have friends upon whom we can rely. Their opinion is more important than that of society. Lincoln was greatly maligned in his day by the judgment of the world, but he wrote to his closest friend, Joshua Speed, that he would like for those who knew him best to say that he always plucked a thorn and planted a rose where he thought a rose would grow.

III. Conscience.

The third estimate of a person is his own. It is broader than the estimate of society or of his friends, because it is based on a larger acquaintance with the subject. It is more accurate because it takes into consideration the unseen motive and the unuttered thought, as well as the outward action and the spoken word. It is the part of wisdom for a man to accept the proper standard and then demand of himself that he measure up to it. It is a tragic mistake for one to seek excuses for himself. This personal judgment is not unerring. The absolving by conscience is not infallible. This inward judge needs to be enlightened and corrected often.

Conscience is a "higher court" than society or friends. But conscience is not perfectly sensitive or absolutely true. Conscience has suffered in the general twist human nature has received through sin. In some it has been seared and silenced, but in all it has been dulled and blunted. Paul had a good conscience, and yet he refused to put his trust in the verdict of approval pronounced by it. He said, "I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing against myself." He might easily overlook some defects in himself and in his work. He knew that the natural tendency of every man was to judge himself too leniently and to put all of his actions in the most favorable light. Man has always had excuses to offer for his sins. Adam said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." Ever since mankind has followed his example in making excuses for sins. It is so easy for one to justify himself.

Following his election to the United States Senate, James A. Garfield said, "I have represented for many years a district in Congress whose approbation I greatly desired. But, though it may seem perhaps a little egotistical to say it, I yet desired still more the approbation of one person, and his name was Garfield. He is the only man I am compelled to sleep with, eat with, live with and die with; and if I could not have his approbation I should have had companionship." How true that is! Nothing compares with the "Well done" of a man's own conscience. Neither is there any scourge or punishment like the reproach of one's own conscience. It is a sad and terrible thing when in the straits of life a man's best self deserts him and goes over to the side of his enemies.

We must remember that Paul persecuted Christians and caused them to be put to death, and yet did it all in good conscience, thinking he was doing the will of God. But when he was brought into the presence of Christ, and when he stood before the cross of Christ, all he had to say of himself was that he was "the chief of sinners."

One's own verdict concerning himself is not altogether reliable because all men have an aversion to think ill of themselves and a tendency to think well of themselves. It is sometimes easier to see the mote in another's eye than it is to see the beam in one's own eye. We are often ignorant of our deepest motives and truest self. Who can understand his errors?

IV. Christ.

Paul said, "He that judgeth me is the Lord." Jealousy may influence the judgment of society, prejudice may color the judgment of friends, self-conceit or self-abasement may blind one to his own character, but the Lord is free from all of these. His judgment is impartial, accurate and reliable. Notice that the judgment of which Paul is here speaking is a present one. He did not say, "He that will judge me," but he said, "He that judgeth me," meaning at this very moment. His eye is fixed upon us, scrutinizing us and knowing us perfectly. To Him the very motives from which our actions flow are all transparent and legible. Whereas men see only the deed, He sees the very intention. Many a deed that looks noble may have been done from the most selfish and ignoble motives. He Who alone actually knows the human heart is qualified to judge it correctly. He not only knows all the good and the bad we have done, but also all that we are capable of doing. He will pronounce the correct judgment on our labors. It does not matter so much whether men praise or blame us so long as the Lord approves. His approval is more to be desired than the approval of society, friends and conscience. Let us join Paul in saying, "Wherefore we labor that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him."