

What's more important to you: what other people think or what God thinks? Because there are many times, Christians, where the truth of God is unpopular. I'm not just talking generically out in society. Sometimes it makes us unpopular with our friends. Sometimes it makes us unpopular with our family. Sometimes it makes us unpopular with our neighbors. Are you willing to be faithful to God even when it hurts?

Because Paul in our epistle reading for today is talking about pastors being faithful. Because the Corinthians were divided among themselves. They were following individual men. Some were saying, "I follow Paul." Some were saying, "I follow Peter." Some were saying, "I follow Apollos." They had turned these men into celebrities, into something bigger than life. But unfortunately, many of them were rejecting Paul. "He's not very impressive," they said. "There's so many others who are so much better at what they do than he is." And because they were so focused on the individual man, they had turned it into a popularity contest. They had become focused on what other people thought.

And so Paul wants to fix this problem. And he says in verse 1 of our reading for today: "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." Now, focus on two of those words in that verse, on "servants" and on "stewards." Because that word "servant" literally means a "rower," one who rows an oar. Because ships in Paul's day more often got around by oars than they did by sails. And if the rowers within the boat weren't paying attention to what they were supposed to be doing, then the ship wasn't going to be going anywhere at all. At best, it would be spinning circles. But they had a job to do: to listen to the voice of their master, to listen to the one giving orders, so that the whole ship would work in unison. And the word itself also was applied to any kind of subordinate, any kind of assistant, somebody who had to follow orders, somebody who had to listen. They weren't supposed to listen to everybody, because then the job would never get done. But they had to listen to their master. And so, as servants of Christ, Paul says, pastors also were following his orders and not paying attention to everybody, but to what their master said.

And that other word, "stewards." A steward is somebody who takes care of somebody else's property, somebody who watches over the things of somebody else. And as Paul says in verse 2: "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful." They had to be faithful to their job. They had to do what they were sent to do. Because if a steward was doing something else, whatever he wanted to do, or if he was slacking off and not doing his job at all, he's a bad steward. He's not one you'd want to keep around. And likewise, Paul says, we are called to be stewards of God's mysteries, stewards of the properties of God. Pastors are called to be stewards of the Word, to watch over it and to take care of it. And stewards also of the sacraments, to watch over them. And it is his job, Paul says, to follow the orders of Christ.

This is why Paul then goes on to say in verse 3: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court." It doesn't matter what anybody else thinks. That's not the important thing. Pastors are called to do their job. They are given that responsibility from God. And Paul says, "I have that responsibility." And in fact he goes on to say, "I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted." It doesn't even matter what I think, he says. I'm not aware of anything that I've done wrong, but even that doesn't matter. What matters is that "it is the Lord who judges

me." Paul has to answer to God. He will have to give an answer, give an account of all that he has done when Christ returns. Because when Jesus comes back on the last day, he will judge if I have been faithful. When Jesus comes back, he will judge what was more important to me: what others thought or what God thinks. So it doesn't matter what's going on around him. He is given a responsibility that he must carry out.

Now, Christians, it is true Paul in this passage is talking mostly about pastors. Because pastors are given this responsibility from God and are a steward of the mysteries of God, steward of the things that belong to him. And pastors will be judged for it. In fact, as James chapter 3 tells us: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." Pastors face a tougher judgment on the last day, because they are not responsible just for themselves. If they teach something falsely and someone else is condemned as a result of that teaching, that will also be on their heads. And that is a very difficult thing that pastors are called to bear.

But everything that Paul has been saying, Christians, is true not just for pastors, because you also are stewards of God. As Peter tells us in 1 Peter chapter 4: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace." God has given each and every one of you a responsibility, a responsibility to care for one another, a responsibility to speak the truth. And God wants you to be faithful to that calling, whatever it may be.

But do you find that hard, Christians? That's why I asked the original question. What's more important to you? What others think or what God thinks? Because it's so easy for us to worry about what other people think of us, especially here in a small community. The reason why I think that's true is because we want to belong to the group. We want to belong to the bigger group around us. And if God tells us to do something or say something that's going to make us unpopular, that leads us to ask: "Well, if I do this or if I say this, are they going to reject me? Are they going to make me an outcast? Will I be an outcast even in my own family?" And unfortunately that's something that not many of us are willing to deal with.

Let me use some examples so that you understand what I mean here. God tells us very clearly to go out into all the world and to preach the Gospel to the whole creation, to tell everybody the good news of Jesus Christ. But do we find ourselves hesitating to tell our neighbors next door about Jesus? Because we wonder if they'll think that we're pushy or that we're nosy or just trying to get into their business. But Christians, in that way we have made what other people think more important than God.

God tells us very clearly that we should be in worship, that we should come to church and be here as part of this group. But do we find ourselves not saying anything to those who have stopped coming? "It's not my business," we say. "Or I'll just push them further away so they won't come back at all." But in this way, Christians, we have made what others think more important than God.

God also tells us very clearly that living together before marriage is a sin. But do we find ourselves not saying anything to our kids because we don't want to hurt the relationship? We want to not alienate them. We want to keep them around. But in this way, Christians, we have

made what other people think more important than God. I could give other examples, but the point is clear. It is all too easy for us to make what other people think the most important thing of all.

And the reason why we do this, Christians, is because so often we confuse being a Christian with being nice, with being a nice person. Because we hear Jesus tell us, "Love your enemies." And how often do we think that means that we should just be nice to them? We hear Jesus say, "Turn the other cheek." And how often do we think that that means that we should be nice and not cause any problems? We hear, "Be at peace with all men," and we think that that means be nice and don't hurt anybody's feelings. Being nice means that we are being everybody's friend. Being nice means that we are somebody that everybody likes. And we think that being a Christian means being nice. And wanting to be nice leads us to care most of all about what other people think.

But if that's true, Christians, if it's true that being a Christian means being nice, then how do you explain Jesus saying offensive things in John chapter 6? Where he says things that made people stop listening to him altogether? That doesn't seem very nice. If that's true, Christians, how do you explain Jesus calling the Canaanite woman a dog? Saying that "it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"? That doesn't seem nice either. And if that's true, Christians, how do you explain, most of all, Jesus taking a whip and driving the moneychangers out of the temple in fierce anger? That doesn't seem nice at all! No, Christians being a Christian is not about being nice. Being a Christian is about being faithful. It is about listening to what God has to say. It means caring about what God thinks above all else.

The reason for that, Christians, is because Jesus is our living King. Jesus has bought you with his own blood, paid for your sins by dying on the cross. And because of that, he is your Master. He is your King. And you belong to him. So don't worry about what others think. They're not your master. Worry about what God thinks. Because he is the one to whom you belong, and that's the only thing that matters. Sometimes that's going to hurt, that's true. Sometimes it will make us unpopular with our friends, with our family, with our community. That's okay. Because what matters is that Jesus is the one who is our Master. And God will reward us in the end. So listen to Jesus, Christians, and do what he wants you to do as faithful stewards of God's grace. And he will reward you on the last day.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have bought us with the blood of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to listen to him, so that we may follow after his voice in everything. In his name we pray. Amen.