

**So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. <sup>2</sup> Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. <sup>3</sup> I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup> My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup> Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.** (NIV84)

Theme: I Follow Christ!

1. He gives faithful servants.
2. His judgment leads to praise.

John the Baptist was chosen by God to prepare the way for the Lord. Before Christ started his ministry, John the Baptist preached the gospel and he baptized many bringing them to faith. But he was beheaded by Herod. Later, Jesus entrusted the Apostles and others to prepare the people's hearts and minds for his coming. But they are all gone too. So today he entrusts his called workers—Pastors and teachers, to prepare the hearts and minds of his children for his coming. Each pastor will do this in his own unique way, using his gifts and abilities. And that causes us to have our favorites. Chances are, you have known a number of different pastors. I am the fifth pastor of Holy Cross. Perhaps you can remember all five. Or maybe you have come from other congregations and can remember the pastors there quite well. Which pastor was your favorite? Why?

We all have our favorites, but what are the reasons for having those favorites? Chances are they have nothing to do with the Word of God, which is the only thing that is important when it comes down to it. It doesn't matter who the Pastor is as long as the gospel is taught in its truth and purity. Then we can all say together, "I follow Christ!" For he gives us faithful servants and his judgment leads to praise.

When Paul wrote this letter the congregation in Corinth was divided. Divisions arose among the believers based on what Apostle or what pastor was their favorite. Paul talked about this in chapter one. **One**

**of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."** There were some in the congregation who had their favorites. Some liked Apollos, a wise Jew who grew up in Alexandria, and came to Corinth from Ephesus. Others liked Cephas. This is a reference to Peter, who was an Apostle to the Jews. And still others preferred Paul. He was an Apostle mainly to the Gentiles. For whatever reason some people liked one over the other. And it caused divisions in the congregation. Perhaps the same can be said of you. Now I'm not saying that there is any fighting in the congregation. Or that there is some sort of division. But I'm sure you have your favorites. More than likely you have said things against one in favor of one or another. You may not have said, "I follow Frey," or "I follow Kuske or Beidenbender" or "I follow Otto or Star or Schwepe or Brassow or whoever." But I have heard, "He was weird; I didn't like him; he rubbed people the wrong way." Or I have heard, "That is not how our old Pastor used to do it." Or "Perhaps you should do what Pastor so-and-so does with his congregation over there."

There was one group in Corinth that had it right. **I follow Christ.** That is really all that matters. But whenever you follow any faithful pastor, you really aren't following him, you are following Christ. Christ isn't divided. It's not Furno vs. Frey vs. whoever. They all work together for Christ. When the gospel is followed, Christ is followed. So whether you love the Pastor—whoever it is, or not—you're not following him, but Christ.

It doesn't matter who baptized you, who taught you the Word, or confirmed you. You don't belong to the Pastor, but to Christ. Paul makes that point right before our text begins. Then he goes on to say, **So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.** First and foremost Pastors are servants of Christ. They are chosen by Christ to serve him and do his will. They are also entrusted with the secret things of the God—the gospel. The gospel is something that we do not know by nature, but that which God must reveal to us. Pastors are stewards of the gospel—caretakers of the good news of salvation. That is their primary objective.

Paul goes on to describe the job of Pastors. **Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.** God expects ministers of the gospel to be faithful to the gospel. This means first and foremost teach God's Word in it's truth and purity. It means that they spread the message of Christ to those who do not know him. It means that they defend God's Word against all attacks, errors, or false practice. It means that what they practice conforms to the Word. It also means that they work hard. They strive to make to most of the opportunities presented to them to share the gospel so that the Holy Spirit may do his Work.

Our synod strives to make sure those who administer the gospel are faithful servants of the gospel. It starts way back in high school. The synod operates two prep schools—one, MLS, located right in our own backyard. They are specifically designed to begin training God's children for the gospel ministry. From there they move on to Martin Luther College in Minnesota. After four or five years at MLC many men and women are sent throughout the world to teach God's Word at a school. Those who desire to be pastors move on to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. On campus, they spend three years studying God's Word. In between their second and third years on campus they are sent to a congregation and serve as vicars. They get to sit at the feet of a veteran Pastor to learn how to be a shepherd of God's flock. At the same time they hone their preaching and teaching skills as best they can.

We as a congregation do our best to support these four schools. Part of our offerings go to help train God's children to become servants of Christ. We help train faithful ministers of the gospel. Another part of our offerings go to send missionaries to spread the gospel. Some go to places in the US where we are not. Others are sent throughout the world to spread the pure gospel to those who don't know Christ.

You can rest assured that every called worker in the WELS has had this same training. They are all taught the same thing. They attend years and years of school just to become a pastor or a teacher. And that is not counting the years many of them have spent at a Lutheran Grade School or an area Lutheran High School. Some Church bodies only require a few years of study outside of high school to become a pastor. Others lead God's people after paying a few bucks online to

become an ordained minister. But we make sure our called workers have received the training to be faithful to the Word of God. It's what we've been doing for generations. And they synod offers ample opportunities to further study. We want to enable our called workers to remain faithful to the gospel.

We do this because we know how important it is to teach the pure gospel. WELS pastors know the gospel. They know it well. And they treasure it. They have a deep desire to preach and teach it. They have a longing to share it with those who do not know it. This is what servants of Christ do. They are faithful to his Word. They are caretakers of his gospel mystery.

It doesn't matter if the Pastor is named Paul, or Apollos, or Peter, or Otto, or Seivert, or even Frey. They are all servants of Christ. It doesn't matter if you like their personality or not. They have all been trained to be faithful to the pure gospel. That is what is important. For you don't follow one of them, you follow Christ. And his judgment results in praise.

In the end Pastors do not answer to any human. They don't answer to the members of their congregation. They don't answer to the Church Council. They don't even answer to the district's or the synod's Praesidium. Ultimately they answer to Christ. That is whom they are worried about pleasing. On the Last Day they will have to give an account of their actions. God will judge what they did as ministers of the gospel. And God knows everything.

We don't know everything. We don't know thoughts. We don't know intentions. So we don't make judgments on what we don't know. It is best to reserve the ultimate judgment to God. I'm not saying that we can't judge what we do know. What we see and hear we can pass judgment on—on the basis of God's Word. If I, or anyone for that matter, says something contrary to God's Word, it is our duty to point out the folly. If someone does something against God's Word, our obligation is the same. And sadly, at times, that may be necessary. Although WELS pastors and teachers have been trained to be faithful, not all are faithful all the time, not all remain faithful. They are sinners just like everyone else. They make mistakes, their practice may not always confirm with God's Word. They may fall into temptation, they may turn lazy, the devil may get the best of them.

And when we see and know of these things, it is our duty to point out their sin to them.

We judge what we see and hear. But not what we do not know. Only God knows all things. Only God judges the secret and hidden things. And on the Last Day God will reveal all our thoughts, words, and actions. As Paul says in verse 5, **wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts.** All the secrets that you hold, God will make known. That embarrassing thing you did so many years ago—everyone will know. He will reveal that secret sin, that you have kept hidden from even your loved ones. That vice that you struggle with, God knows full well.

And he will expose the motives of men's hearts. Most sins that we commit aren't sinful actions, but they are from within. God will reveal every sinful thought that you have had. That time when you had hateful thoughts about someone who did you wrong. That time when came up with that evil plan to get even with those who angered you. But not just thoughts—also our sinful desires. All the times you have lusted after someone. All your covetous desires. That time you desired to steal something. Our sinful thoughts, desires, and thoughts. They are all known by God. And they will all be revealed on the Last Day.

Pretty scary isn't it? As the Psalmist says, **If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?** We couldn't stand. We can't stand before God. We are too guilty. Our own thoughts knock one leg out from under us. Our desires another. Our actions knock us on the floor. With nothing left to stand on, we kneel before God. And we confess our sins. And we await our judgment.

Yet, notice what Paul says happens after God judges and reveals our sins. **At that time each will receive his praise from God.** Why would God give us praise? We are nothing but sinners. But not in the eyes of God. We are pure and innocent, just like his Son. That is because God sent his Son, Jesus, to live a perfect life for us. And when he died on the cross he took away the guilt of all our sins, and gave us his perfect life. Even though we have done many horrible things in thought, word, and deed, God doesn't see them. He sees his

Son and his perfect life. So this judgment is nothing to be afraid of. For God ends up giving us praise.

This is the message that John the Baptist, Paul, Apollos, and Peter spread. This is the message that all your pastors have shared with you. The gospel predominates each and every sermon. Every Bible class contains the pure Word of God. Each Advent season they have prepared your hearts and minds for Christ's coming. They have assured you that there is no reason to be afraid of God's judgment. God has given you his faithful servants. And they assure of you of God's grace through which you have forgiveness and eternal life. They prepare the way for the Lord. They do this by pointing to Christ.

In a way we can legitimately say, "I follow Paul. I follow Apollos. I follow John the Baptist. I follow Luther. I my favorite Pastor." Why? Because they spread the true word. They share with me the gospel. They show me the one who leads God to praise us. The one who gives us life and death. The one who will return and give us life forever. I follow all of them because they point me to Christ. And I follow Christ. Amen.