



# CHARIS-MATTERS

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## STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

### Text

First Corinthians 4:1-5

### Topic

Paul presents two powerful illustrations of serving Jesus:  
The Overseer of the household and the Under Rower of the boat

### Title

*"Row, Row, Row His Boat"*

## Introduction

What's the greatest movie of all time? I could make a strong argument for *Ben Hur*. Winner of eleven Academy Awards, including Best Picture in 1959, it has everything Hollywood can offer in terms of action, adventure, and special effects.

(By the way: No one died filming the famous chariot race).

The movie also has something mainstream movies don't have. It has a solid witness of the life-changing power of a relationship with Jesus Christ. I was surprised to learn that the full title of the Lew Wallace novel that inspired the movie is *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*.

Our interest in the movie this morning is that, if you've seen it, you remember the sequence where Ben Hur is an under rower on a Roman

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ship. The under rowers were the guys down in the bowels of the ship who rowed according to the beat of a drum.

In the first verse of our text the apostle Paul illustrates the ministry by comparing it to two occupations that the Corinthians were familiar with:

1 Corinthians 4:1 Let a man so consider us, as **servants** of Christ and **stewards** of the mysteries of God.

“Servants” and “stewards” are the two occupations. The word for “servants” isn’t the normal word but is, in fact, the word that identifies the under rowers on a ship.

If you want to understand ministry and life in the fellowship of believers, take a look at servants and stewards, at under rowers and overseers.

I’ll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Are Either An Under Rower Or You Are Being Under Rowed, and #2 You Are Either An Overseer Or You Are Being Overseen.

#1 You Are Either An Under Rower  
Or You Are Being Under Rowed  
(v1)

When traveling from Athens to Corinth - a distance of about 50 miles - you cross over on an Isthmus. It is a narrow 4 mile wide isthmus of land which links Central Greece with the Peloponnese as well as with the east parts of the Saronic Gulf.

It was called the Isthmus of Corinth and it featured an ingenious roadway called the *Diolkos*. Ships were literally dragged across the isthmus along this roadway. It solved the problem of sailing around Greece through extremely rough and dangerous seas.

The ships were dragged out of the water. They rested initially on wooden cylinders and were then transferred to a special wheeled vehicle. To reduce the weight of the ships they were unloaded and the unloaded commodities

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were taken by ordinary road to the other end of the Isthmus. At the other end on the Saronic Gulf they were lowered back into the sea, the cargo was loaded again, and the ships continued on their journey.

All this is background we need before reading the word “servants” in verse one. The Greek word Paul used for “servants” is *huperetes* which should be translated *under rowers*. The Corinthians would have understood this powerful word picture.

Some of the larger vessels dragged across were called *trireme* vessels. They had three decks of under rowers. They were seated on the three decks underneath the main deck and could not see where they were going or what was going on around them. The captain had a drum at his side and the drummer would beat out the strokes. “Boom,” then they would take a stroke. “Boom,” then another stroke. The only thing the under rowers listened for was the sound and speed of the beating of the captains' drum. They all rowed in unison so that the vessel would move in the direction and at the speed ordered by the captain.

“Let a man so consider us,” Paul wrote, “as under rowers of Christ.” Within the illustration there are two kinds of people: You’re either one of the under rowers or you’re on the ship being under rowed by them.

Let’s say you are an under rower. Your task is strenuous but simple. You listen for, then respond to, the directives of your Captain, Jesus Christ.

Let’s make a few observations based upon the work of under rowers.

- Under rowers are completely responsive to their Captain’s orders. They don’t set the direction; they don’t set the pace; they don’t make course corrections. We might say that they row by faith, not by sight. In the church, serving the Lord, we must have a sense of absolute submission to His directions and directives. We need to serve where He brings us, when He brings us there, and at the pace He has determined.
- Another observation we might make is that under rowers must maintain a unity amongst themselves. Those who are serving the Lord must do so

together, pulling together so to speak, in order for the church to move properly. We need to be shoulder-to-shoulder and exerting similar effort.

- Another observation is that no one ever really saw the under rowers while the ship was underway. All the attention was on the Captain. We must decrease so that folks see Jesus.

If you were not an under rower on one of these ships then you were being under rowed by them. How might we apply that to the church?

Well, for one thing, let's say a passenger was not pleased with the speed with which the boat was traveling. Would you blame it on the under rowers? No, you'd have to take it up with the Captain.

A church needs leaders who are godly men that follow the leading of the Lord. If that is what they are attempting to do, then the Lord is directing the church and they are merely following His orders. They're not the ones setting the pace or the course or choosing the ports. He is.

Let's say the ship was headed into a storm rather than trying to avoid it. Or you were ready to set foot in a particular port but the ship sailed on by it. Or you put into a port that was against your liking. Again these are all issues to take up with the Captain, not the under rowers.

The Christian life is not a luxury cruise during which all of our whims and wishes are granted. It's not about eating all the time and being entertained. It's more like a warship carrying soldiers than a passenger vessel.

The Lord will take you to the ports you need to experience, through the storms that will strengthen you, all at the pace He has determined.

The believers in Corinth had forgotten that Jesus was their Captain. They were trying to form cliques around certain men, like Paul or Apollos or Peter. But those three guys, and all true servants of the Lord, were under rowers all stroking at the same pace. If the Corinthians didn't want to under row they should at least learn to be content being under rowed by the Lord's men.

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While they were mulling over the illustration of the under rowers Paul hit them with another.

#2 You Are Either An Overseer  
Or You Are Being Overseen  
(v1-5)

Stewards were a common feature in Roman life. A “steward” was a devoted servant who was in charge of the master’s house and household. He was the administrator, the manager, the overseer, of the master’s property and people.

The ministry is like that, too.

1 Corinthians 4:1 Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

The particular stewardship Paul mentioned was “of the mysteries of God.” You know that a “mystery” is something previously unknown that is now revealed by God. Here Paul was using the term as a summary for the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its amazing depth and insight.

What follows is a description of life as a steward.

1 Corinthians 4:2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

I love this because it is doable. You may not have much in the way of talent or ability. Your gift-set might seem weak compared to others. But all of us can be “faithful” to what the Lord has given us to accomplish.

I like the phrase, “found faithful.” Often you can’t find the person you’re looking for! They’re ‘nowhere to be found’ when you need them the most.

Can you be “found” when it comes to ministry? Are you available to the Lord and therefore to His people? *You can be!* It’s doable.

1 Corinthians 4:3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court...

The Corinthians had a lot of opinions about Paul and Apollos and Peter and the way they each served the Lord. It mattered little to Paul. He considered it “a very small thing.” A true steward should not be influenced by the opinions of men. Paul performed his service as unto the Lord.

This wasn't arrogance on Paul's part; it was humility. It takes a lot of humility to continue to follow the Lord's leading when others are criticizing and passing judgment. It is always easier to please people. The court of human opinion can be devastating.

1 Corinthians 4:3 ... In fact, I do not even judge myself.

1 Corinthians 4:4 For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this...

Self-evaluation can be deceptive. We are either too easy or too hard on ourselves. So Paul said he didn't bother trying to “judge” himself, even though he knew of nothing that was a deficiency in his ministry.

Ever have a job evaluation you didn't agree with? If you have, you understand what Paul was talking about here. The evaluation is by nature subjective. The evaluator is almost certainly wrong about some things, and so are you!

The steward answers only to his master:

1 Corinthians 4:4 For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.

In the end, only the Lord Jesus Christ can accurately evaluate men for their motives and methods. His evaluation is spot-on.

Paul seemed always to be looking forward to standing before Jesus and having his service reviewed. It motivated him to think more about the praise of God than the praises of men.

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1 Corinthians 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.

The “hidden things of darkness” are probably those things we do when we think no one is watching or listening. The “counsels of the heart” are our motives. Even good works can have wrong motives. The Lord will sort out all of that and reward us accordingly.

In the church we are to “judge nothing before the time.” It doesn’t mean we ignore things like sin and disobedience. No, we must “judge” them and we’ll see an example of that in chapter five as Paul tells them to put out of the church a sexually immoral man.

It means that we are to quit passing judgment on one another’s service by ascribing wrong motives and suggesting wrong doing.

“Until the Lord comes” is a good everyday philosophy. The Lord could come at any moment. When He does I want to be serving Him as His steward.

If you are called upon to oversee some ministry then faithfulness is the main thing.

Beyond that you need to look past what men think of you and even what **you** think of you to your future evaluation by Jesus.

If you are not overseeing then you are being overseen. It is in our nature to rebel against oversight. If the person or persons overseeing you are godly and faithful then follow their lead. Don’t judge them or their motives.

If some of this sounds ‘negative’ it’s because the believers in Corinth were blowing it! They didn’t see themselves as being under rowed or overseen. Thus they were causing division and dissension within the church.

Within Paul’s correction are these marvelous illustrations to help keep us on task:

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- The church - our church - is like a ship. Jesus is the Captain.
- The church - our church - is like a household. Jesus is the Master.

It is wonderfully freeing to see ourselves as either under rowers or the under rowed; as overseers or those being overseen. The images are simple yet profound. They speak of the Lord's care for each of us individually and for all of us collectively.