

FIVE-DAY DEVOTIONAL

A Very Small Thing

Living faithfully beyond criticism, praise, and self-opinion

"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."

1 Corinthians 4:3

Based on 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

From the sermon preached 23 August 2026

DAY 1

The Steward's Standard

READ 1 Corinthians 4:1-2; Colossians 1:18

"Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." - 1 Corinthians 4:2

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Before Paul addressed the opinions surrounding his ministry, he established the identity that governed it. He was a minister of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God. Those words leave little room for self-importance. A minister is a servant. A steward is a manager entrusted with something that belongs to another. Paul did not own the message, the ministry, or the people. He was responsible to faithfully handle what Christ had placed in his care.

The same principle reaches far beyond the pulpit. Every believer is a steward. Your time belongs to God. Your abilities are gifts from God. Your family, influence, opportunities, health, resources, and testimony have all been placed into your hands for a season. Stewardship asks a different question from ambition. Ambition asks, "How much can I accomplish?" Stewardship asks, "What has my Master entrusted to me, and am I being faithful with it?"

Corinth had begun measuring servants by personality, eloquence, visibility, and popularity. Paul redirected their attention to the one measurement God had established: faithfulness. God does not require every steward to have the same assignment, the same audience, or the same visible result. He does require every steward to be faithful. The servant with a public ministry and the believer serving quietly at home answer to the same Lord. The size of the task may differ; the standard does not.

This frees us from two exhausting burdens. First, we do not have to become famous. Much of modern life trains us to equate visibility with value. We count followers, responses, invitations, and recognition. Yet heaven does not confuse a large platform with a faithful life. A person may be widely known and poorly prepared to meet the Lord. Another may be almost unknown and yet live every day beneath the smile of God.

Second, we do not have to manufacture results. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. We should work diligently, plan wisely, pray earnestly, and labour wholeheartedly. Still, the increase belongs to God. Our responsibility is obedience; His responsibility is the outcome. When we take ownership of results that belong to Him, pride rises when things grow and despair settles in when they do not.

Faithfulness is not passivity. It is steady obedience when the work is noticed and when it is overlooked. It is keeping your word, guarding your heart, doing the next right thing, and giving Christ the preeminence.

It is preparing when no one sees the study, praying when no one hears the burden, serving when no one offers thanks, and standing by Scripture when compromise would be easier.

John the Baptist expressed the heart of a faithful steward: "He must increase, but I must decrease." The goal is not to build a life that makes our name larger. It is to use everything entrusted to us to make Christ known. We do not need larger names; we need a larger view of Christ. When He becomes great in our eyes, faithfulness becomes more important than fame.

FOR TODAY

Identify one responsibility God has placed directly in your care. Do not compare its size with someone else's assignment. Ask what simple act of obedience faithfulness requires today, and do it before the day ends.

REFLECT

1. Where have I been measuring my life by visibility, recognition, or results rather than faithfulness?
2. What has Christ entrusted to me that needs renewed attention and obedience?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, everything I have belongs to You. Forgive me for seeking recognition or trying to control results that belong in Your hands. Help me to be faithful with the people, opportunities, gifts, and responsibilities You have entrusted to me. May You increase, and may my life point others to You. Amen.

DAY 2

When Others Appraise You

READ 1 Corinthians 4:3; Galatians 1:10; 1 Samuel 16:7

"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment." - 1 Corinthians 4:3

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Paul knew the Corinthians were examining him, comparing him with other preachers, and forming conclusions about his value. He did not pretend their opinions did not exist. He simply placed them in their proper proportion: they were "a very small thing." Human appraisal was real, but it was not ultimate.

If you serve God, people will form opinions about you. If you lead, they will evaluate your leadership. If you teach, they will evaluate your words. If you raise children, make a difficult decision, or take a biblical stand, someone will decide what they think about it. You cannot prevent people from forming opinions. You can decide whether those opinions will control your obedience.

Human judgment must remain small because human knowledge is incomplete. People may see one action without understanding the motive. They may hear one sentence without knowing the conversation around it. They may see a decision without knowing the months of prayer, counsel, and careful thought that preceded it. They see the sermon but not the study, the opportunity but not the sacrifice, and the visible result but not the private burden.

Our age makes premature judgment especially easy. A short clip, a photograph, or a headline can become the entire case in the courtroom of public opinion. A verdict is delivered before the evidence has been examined. Yet Scripture reminds us that man looks on the outward appearance while the Lord looks on the heart. Men possess fragments; God possesses the whole truth.

Human appraisal is also inconsistent. The crowd that praises today may criticise tomorrow. The people who cried "Hosanna" as Jesus entered Jerusalem were soon replaced by voices crying, "Let him be crucified." At Lystra, people first attempted to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods; soon afterward, Paul was stoned and dragged outside the city. Human opinion rises and falls with emotion, rumour, preference, and circumstance.

If your identity rests on approval, criticism will feel like destruction. If your direction depends upon applause, you will continually adjust your convictions to keep the crowd. A weather vane changes with every wind, but a compass continues to point in the proper direction. God has not called us to be weather vanes moved by public opinion. He has given us the compass of His Word.

Calling human judgment "a very small thing" does not mean becoming proud, defensive, or unteachable. Godly correction is a gift. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." When someone approaches you biblically and honestly, listen. Compare the words with Scripture. If the correction is true, receive it and change. If it contains some truth, receive that portion. If it is false, place it before the Lord and continue faithfully.

The offence must remain in the truth, not in our attitude. We should not become harsh merely because criticism is inevitable. We should be humble enough to receive correction and settled enough not to be controlled by every opinion. People's words may deserve consideration, but only God's Word deserves control.

FOR TODAY

When criticism reaches you today, pause before defending yourself or surrendering to discouragement. Ask: Is it biblical? Is it informed? Is there truth I should receive? Then let Scripture - not emotion - determine your response.

REFLECT

1. Whose opinion has recently had too much influence over my peace, confidence, or obedience?
2. Do I respond to correction with humility while refusing to be governed by incomplete or unbiblical judgments?

PRAYER

Father, keep me tender enough to receive truthful correction and steadfast enough not to be ruled by human opinion. Give me humility without insecurity and conviction without harshness. Let Your Word govern my direction, and help me remain faithful when others misunderstand me. Amen.

DAY 3

The Subtle Danger of Praise

READ John 12:42-43; John 3:30; Colossians 1:18

"For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." - John 12:43

DEVOTIONAL

Criticism announces itself as an enemy, but flattery often enters disguised as a friend. That is why praise may be more spiritually dangerous than criticism. Harsh words can discourage a servant, but flattering words can corrupt one. Criticism may send us to prayer; praise may persuade us that we no longer need to pray. Criticism may humble us; praise may intoxicate us.

In John 12, some of the chief rulers believed on Christ, yet they would not confess Him because they feared the Pharisees. Scripture exposes the deeper problem: "they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." Their desire for approval became stronger than their willingness to identify with Jesus. They did not merely hear praise or appreciate encouragement. They loved it, and that love controlled them.

There is nothing wrong with sincere encouragement. We should thank faithful servants, strengthen weary believers, and acknowledge work done well. The danger begins when the heart starts craving recognition. An appetite for applause is never satisfied for long. Yesterday's compliment must be repeated today. A larger audience is needed tomorrow. Soon, decisions are no longer shaped by truth and faithfulness but by whatever preserves attention.

Popularity is a subtle test because it feels like success. A person who would never compromise under a threat may slowly bend to retain an audience. A preacher may avoid a necessary truth because it could reduce approval. A believer may soften a conviction to remain accepted. A servant may begin choosing visible work over hidden work because visible work brings recognition.

Praise also tempts us to take ownership of what God produced. Yet every ability, opportunity, and measure of fruit comes from Him. Paul planted. Apollos watered. God gave the increase. If God uses us, gratitude should deepen and humility should grow. The appropriate response is not false modesty; it is honest worship: "Lord, thank You for allowing me to serve. The strength, opportunity, and fruit are Yours."

The cure for loving the praise of men is not learning to despise people. It is learning to prize the approval of God. Paul could make human praise small because divine approval was large. John the Baptist could decrease because Christ was increasing. When Jesus has the preeminence, compliments no longer need to become our identity. We can receive encouragement gratefully, return glory to God, and continue the work without building a throne from applause.

This is especially important in a world built around visibility. Followers, views, and engagement can become quiet measurements of worth. But a platform is not the same as a calling, and attention is not the same as spiritual influence. Our calling is not to gather people around who we are. It is to point them toward Jesus Christ. We are not called to become influencers for personal glory; we are called to influence souls through the Gospel.

Ask the Lord to show you whether praise changes your pace or your priorities. Do you become restless when someone else receives recognition? Do you choose tasks partly because people will notice? Do you feel neglected when faithful service passes without thanks? These reactions do not mean you should stop serving. They are invitations to purify your motive and give Christ His rightful place.

Receive encouragement, but do not live upon it. Appreciate kind words, but do not require them. Let praise pass through your hands to the One who gave the gift, opened the door, and supplied the strength. Personal glory must become nothing so that Jesus Christ may remain everything.

FOR TODAY

The next time someone praises you, receive the encouragement graciously and deliberately return the glory to God in prayer. Then choose one useful act of service that is unlikely to be noticed by anyone else.

REFLECT

1. Does recognition affect which responsibilities I pursue or how faithfully I continue?
2. Am I genuinely content for Christ to increase even when that means I decrease?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, guard my heart from the love of praise. Thank You for every encouragement, but do not let applause become my master. Purify my motives, teach me to serve when no one notices, and receive all the glory for anything good You accomplish through my life. Amen.

DAY 4

Do Not Trust Your Own Verdict

READ 1 Corinthians 4:3-4; Psalm 139:23-24; Romans 5:1

*"Yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified." -
1 Corinthians 4:3-4*

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Paul refused to be controlled by the Corinthians' judgment, but he did not replace their opinion with his own. "I judge not mine own self," he wrote. That was not a rejection of honest self-examination. Scripture commands believers to examine themselves. It was a refusal to make his own assessment the final verdict.

Healthy self-examination places the heart beneath the light of Scripture. It asks honest questions: Is my conduct consistent with God's Word? Are my motives pleasing to Him? Is there unconfessed sin in my life? Have I wronged someone? Am I fulfilling my responsibilities? Am I seeking the glory of Christ or the advancement of myself? The prayer of Psalm 139 should remain familiar: "Search me, O God, and know my heart."

A believer who never examines himself will eventually deceive himself. Yet self-examination must be different from self-obsession. The purpose is not to stare endlessly at our failures or strengths. It is to invite God to reveal what must be confessed, corrected, or strengthened, and then respond in obedience.

Paul's conscience was clear, but he knew a clear conscience did not prove perfection. Our hearts are capable of making sin appear respectable. Pride can be renamed confidence. Stubbornness can be called conviction. Bitterness can be presented as discernment. Laziness can be described as waiting upon God. Ambition can be baptised as vision. "All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes: but the LORD weigheth the spirits."

Conscience is like a warning light on the dashboard of a vehicle. It should never be ignored, but it is not omniscient. A warning light can fail, and a conscience can be misinformed, hardened, or overly sensitive. It must be trained by Scripture, kept tender through obedience, and submitted to the Spirit of God.

Paul then stated, "yet am I not hereby justified." He was not justified because others approved of him, and he was not justified because he approved of himself. Justification rests entirely in Jesus Christ: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day. Salvation is not found in public approval, religious performance, or self-confidence. It is found in Christ alone.

That truth protects us from pride, but it also protects us from constant self-condemnation. Some people rehearse every failure, magnify every weakness, and assume every criticism must be true. Because they feel inadequate, they conclude they are unusable. Yet feelings are no more qualified to occupy the throne than public opinion.

When our heart condemns us because we have sinned, the answer is confession and cleansing. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." But sometimes the heart condemns us because we are tired, wounded, discouraged, or comparing ourselves with someone else. In those moments, remember: "God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things."

Paul would not allow praise to exalt him, criticism to crush him, or his own feelings to define him. He examined himself without enthroning himself. We should do the same. Let Scripture expose sin, let grace lead you to confession, and let your identity remain rooted in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

FOR TODAY

Pray Psalm 139:23-24 slowly. Write down one matter the Lord brings to light. If it is sin, confess it specifically and take the needed corrective step. If it is false self-condemnation, answer it with a clear promise from Scripture.

REFLECT

1. Have I renamed any sinful attitude so that it appears acceptable in my own eyes?
2. Am I living under biblical conviction that leads to confession, or vague condemnation that keeps me from useful service?

PRAYER

Search me, O God, and know my heart. Expose what I excuse, cleanse what I confess, and correct what is out of step with Your Word. Keep me from pride and from needless self-condemnation. Thank You that my standing before You rests in Jesus Christ and His finished work. Amen.

DAY 5

The Only Verdict That Lasts

READ 1 Corinthians 4:4-5; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 12:1-2

"But he that judgeth me is the Lord." - 1 Corinthians 4:4

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Paul's peace did not come from believing that judgment was unimportant. It came from knowing who possessed the final authority. The Corinthians could form opinions about him. Paul could form an opinion about himself. But only Jesus Christ knew him completely and could render the final verdict concerning his stewardship.

The Lord had called Paul, commissioned him, equipped him, and sustained him. The Lord knew every visible action and every hidden motive. This did not eliminate biblical accountability, church discipline, or discernment. Scripture allows us to evaluate visible doctrine and conduct by the Word of God. But we cannot perfectly see the counsels of another person's heart. The Lord can.

First Corinthians 4:5 says He "will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts." That truth should convict us. We cannot hide hypocrisy beneath a polished appearance. People may applaud the sermon while God sees a desire for personal recognition. They may admire the gift while God knows it was given to be noticed. They may praise the ministry while God sees a heart seeking its own glory.

The same truth should comfort us. God sees every act of faithfulness that others overlook. He sees the prayer no one heard, the sacrifice no one recognized, the tears no one noticed, and the preparation no one understood. He sees the faithful parent, the quiet servant, the unknown preacher, the unseen giver, and the unnoticed worker. Your service may be hidden from men, but it is never hidden from God.

Paul looked ahead to the coming of the Lord. Every believer will appear before the judgment seat of Christ. This judgment does not determine salvation; salvation is settled by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the examination of Christian service. "So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." On that day, follower counts, titles, invitations, applause, and public recognition will not determine the reward. Faithfulness to Christ will matter.

This future accounting brings present life into focus. A runner who continually turns his head toward the crowd will eventually lose his stride. He cannot run well while watching the spectators. Hebrews 12 tells us to run with patience the race set before us, "looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith." Stop measuring your progress by someone else's lane. Stop allowing applause to push you beyond God's will. Stop allowing criticism to pull you away from God's work. Look unto Jesus.

Paul did not live for the praise of men because he anticipated the praise of God. First Corinthians 4:5 concludes, "and then shall every man have praise of God." The goal is not to hear a crowd applaud. It is to hear the Master say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." Human opinion becomes small when divine approval becomes large. Criticism loses power when Christ has the preeminence. Praise loses its intoxication when all glory belongs to God.

Keep your eyes upon Christ. Keep your hands upon the work. Keep your heart humble before God. The Lord does not require you to be famous, celebrated, universally accepted, or constantly praised. He requires you to be faithful. Results belong to Him. The final verdict belongs to Him. The proper praise will come from Him.

Let criticism be a very small thing. Let praise be a very small thing. Let your personal opinion remain submitted to Scripture. Let personal glory become nothing. Let Jesus Christ remain everything. Then you can be "stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord," knowing that your labour is not in vain in Him.

FOR TODAY

Choose one area where watching the crowd has disrupted your stride. Turn your attention back to Christ and faithfully complete the next responsibility He has placed before you - whether anyone notices or not.

REFLECT

1. What would change in my decisions if I lived today with the judgment seat of Christ clearly in view?
2. Is there any faithful, hidden work I have been tempted to abandon because it receives little recognition?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You alone know me completely and judge righteously. Keep the day of accounting before my heart without fear, pride, or pretence. Help me run my race looking unto You. May I be faithful in public and in private, and may all praise return to You. Amen.