

## "DEALING WITH THOSE WHO ARE ALWAYS RIGHT!"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
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I Corinthians 4:1-13

Many years ago Colonel Low, a professor at St. Joseph's College in Bardstown, Kentucky, was fired by the trustees of the college because he wrote a pamphlet advocating a railroad to the west coast. The trustees knew that anyone who wrote about the possibility of a train going across the country was crazy, so they fired him on the ground of insanity. They were so sure they were right! How do you deal with people who are so right?

What about people who are so sure they are right they put you down? A cowboy, riding on the range, saw two buffalo, went up to one of them and said, "You are the ugliest, dirtiest, smelliest animal I have ever seen." The buffalo said to the other buffalo, "I thought out here we were never supposed to hear a discouraging word!" How do you deal with people who put you down? I appreciate the student who handled such people by refusing to be put down. He wrote the following letter to the admissions officer of a college: "I am in receipt of your rejection of my application. As much as I would like to accommodate you, I find I cannot accept it. I have already received four rejections from other colleges and this number is, in fact, over my limit. Therefore, I must reject your rejection, and as much as this might inconvenience you, I expect to appear for classes on September 18."

I also like the supposedly true story of two umpires in the Texas League. During the first game of a double-header one afternoon, they were mercilessly abused by the local crowd. The umpires were pelted with profanity, beer cans and half-eaten hot dogs. After the intermission between games, no one could find where the umpires were. After a quick search, both were found sitting in the grandstand. They said, "It seems that you folks can see better from up here than we can down there right next to the bases, so we decided to call the second game from here in the stands." That is one way to deal with those who know they are so right: if you can't beat them, join them!

How do you best deal with those who are always right? Our passage for this sermon is Paul's letter to the Corinthians, specifically the fourth chapter, but we need the first three chapters to establish the context.

Paul organized the church in Corinth and then continued on his missionary work. He was probably in Ephesus when he learned that things were not well in the Corinthian church, so he wrote letters. The scholars feel he wrote four letters which are now contained in I and II Corinthians. I Corinthians is the second letter he wrote; the other three are found in II Corinthians, out of order.

The first four chapters of I Corinthians deal with the condition of the church, and we see that it was split into factions, attaching themselves to missionaries and teachers who worked with them. Some claimed to follow Apollos; some claimed to follow Paul. All of them thought they were right, so sure they were right that they were intolerant, hostile and arrogant.

Paul attacked their pride. He discredited their so-called wisdom. In 1:20, he wrote, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" 2:2 and 5, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified . . . that your faith might not rest in human wisdom, but in the power of God."

Then he asked pointedly in 4:7 (Good News Version), "Who made you superior to others?" There is the crux. Those who are so sure they are right, who made you superior? A couple had been married 20 years. They had arguments, but this was the first time the husband really lost his cool, and he shouted, "You're right! You're always right! In 20 years, you've never been wrong!" The wife wrote of the incident, "At that moment my world collapsed. I was stunned into silence, and I tried hard to understand what he meant . . . I came to terms with myself. I had to admit that being right . . . could be very wrong."

The superior and the self-righteous were constantly under attack by Jesus, and Paul continued the battle. In 1:26-29, Paul reminded them of their origins. How we forget our origins quickly! Most of the Corinthian Christians were slaves, outcasts, the poor. Paul wrote, "Consider your call: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." The Corinthians had forgotten their origins, forgotten God's work in their lives, and now were so right they felt they could judge, fight one another, destroy unity and set themselves up as the ones who are so right.

Paul reminded them who they were by asking in 4:7, "What have you that you did not receive?" There is the bottom line. You who are so right, you who are so superior, you who feel you are so much better and wiser than others, where would you be without grace, without the gifts of God? Where you were born, the color of your skin, your ancestry, your innate abilities, the training and motivating you received as a child, were not your doing, but were gifts, the grace of God. Paul concluded in 4:7, "Why then do you boast?"

Paul pleaded for humility from the Corinthians. Paul pleaded for unity. See yourself from the proper perspective: a person blessed by God. See yourself in proper relation with others: needing one another, not arrogant or intolerant, but supportive and loving, at home, in church. 1:10, "I appeal to you," Paul pleads, "by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment."

But, what happens when there is dissension? Having diagnosed the problem, how did Paul then deal with it? How did he deal with those who are always right? In practical terms, not everyone with whom we relate, at home, in church, at work, in the neighborhood, are spirit filled, humble Christians, living their lives in gratitude for the grace of God! So, on a day-to-day basis, how do you relate with them?

Paul is very practical. In chapter 4 he, in very personal terms, described his own approach. He considered himself answerable, accountable only to God. Isn't that freeing? Liberating? Let me explain. Paul said he is the servant of Christ. 4:2-4 (Good News Version), "The one thing required of such a servant is that he be faithful to his master. Now, I am not at all concerned about being judged by you or by any human standard; I don't even pass judgment on myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not prove that I am really innocent. The Lord is the one who passes judgment on me." Paul refused to accept the judgment of others. He refused to accept judgment based on human standards. He even refused to accept his own judgment of himself, which is often the most severe of all--the attempt to please oneself. Paul dealt with those who are always right by rejecting their judgment, and considered himself answerable, accountable, only to God.

I see one of my tasks as a minister is to expand the vision, to help the church be a church far better and bigger than it can see. In Manteca Church the Lord sent us a Director of Music. Kayla Snyder, who was director of music in the Campbell Church when Clif Droke was minister, moved to Manteca with her husband, Syd, who joined a firm there. The Manteca Church was paying the chancel choir director \$75 per month, and the children's choir director \$50 per month. We had two choirs totaling some 45 people. Imagine the Board meetings we had when I proposed to hire Kayla at \$600 per month and gradually increase it to \$1,000 per month and have her develop a music ministry. Such a struggle we had. "We're a small church," they cried. "Where will we get the money?" We had a strong, vocal minority, but the Manteca people are great people; they did not become personal or vindictive in their opposition. They didn't leave the church. They were not small people, but they did resist! But the Music Director and I had a vision. I had been a minister in Palo Alto. I knew what a music ministry could be. I knew what it would do for the lives of children, youth and adults. I knew that it would not hurt, but enhance the Christian education program. There need be no conflict; in fact, they go hand in hand. When the music program has been strong in this church, so has the Sunday School and youth. When the Sunday School and youth programs have been weak, so has the music program. Hand in hand they go. So, I would not give in to the judgments of a strong minority in the Manteca Church. Soon the families with youth and children caught the vision. They saw their children in musicals. We bought a four-octave set of handbells. I'm sure heads are still shaking in bewilderment. In 1 and 1/2 years' time, we had four vocal choirs and two handbell choirs with 120 persons involved.

I would not give in and accept the judgment of the strong faction in the congregation. I knew they could do a better job of praising God. I knew their spirits, their souls, needed more than a repetition of what they had always done. I knew their souls needed more than mediocrity, their individual souls and the soul of the church. I knew they needed to soar, to fly, to do greater deeds than ever imagined. That is one of my tasks as minister. That's the kind of ministers you've got, for Glenn also is a dreamer. I push! I believe in pushing! I believe in stretching! I believe in opening to the Spirit of God, like a bud blossoming into a flower. I believe in being answerable, accountable, only to God. We listen, of course, to the opposition. We listen to those who are so sure they are right, as I am sure I am right! We all learn from one another. But, we are not answerable. I am not answerable to you. You are not answerable to me. We are answerable only to God. When you deal with those who are always right, place your ultimate loyalty in God, lay your deeds on God's altar, place your life before the judgment seat of God and no one else.

Then, because we are free from the opinions of others, free from their power (people can't put you down if you do not accept their judgment, if you give their opinions no power!), then we can deal with others in the spirit of the beatitudes. Paul wrote in 4:12 and 13, "When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we try to conciliate." Or, as the Good News Version states it, "When we are insulted, we answer back with kind words."

The prayer of a little girl sums it up, "Dear God, make all the bad people good, and all the good people nice."

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