

## “LIFE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SHIP”

### (I Corinthians 4:1)

*“Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.”*

Claire Booth Luce once wrote, “Every great man’s life can be summarized in one sentence.”

Jesus had already said, “Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant” (Matthew 20:26-27). There is the life of any great man, summarized in a single sentence. Claire Booth Luce completed her statement with these words: “The life of every great man can be summarized in a single sentence — and it is always a sentence that has an active verb at the heart of it.”

If you should look back over your own life — as objectively as possible — what sentence would you write to summarize your life? What would your *active verb* be? The active verb of every Christian should be, “serving.” According to Jesus, the overwhelming concept of every Christian throughout this age is that of a *servant* (see Matthew 25:14-30, where a departing landlord called his *servants* together before he departed on a long trip to a distant land, and gave them the goods they were to use in *servicing him* throughout the time of his absence).

In this study, I hope to profile a servant — to show what a servant looks like from God’s point of view. The text will be comprised of one brief but staggering verse. The context of this verse constitutes one of the greatest explorations of servanthood found anywhere in Scripture. Our text is I Corinthians 4:1, but before we explore it, let’s briefly analyze the passage that supplies the context of this verse. The larger context is I Corinthians 3:4-4:5, an entire chapter of Scripture. Let me outline the context, moving freely in the passage to create an order of treatment.

I. The Complete Realism of a Servant — 3:4-8. A servant realistically recognizes that he is “nothing.” He is free to admit this because of who he is in Christ. He is Somebody’s “everything”; therefore, he can easily concede to be earth’s “nothing.”

II. The Crucial Role of a Servant — 4:1. This study will deal with this verse.

III. The Constant Requirement of a Servant — 4:2. Because he is a steward as well as a servant, he must be “faithful.”

IV. The Consistent Resources of a Servant — 3:21-23. “All things” belong to the servant.

V. The Current Review of a Servant, 4:3-5. Christian servants constantly pass in review before the *saints’* judgment, *society’s* judgment, *self* judgment, and the *Saviour’s* judgment.

VI. The Coming Reckoning of the Servant, 3:9-15. Every Christian servant will be appraised for approval at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

VII. The Compassionate Reward of the Servant, 4:5. *We* think that Jesus is “picking us to pieces” to see if He can find something to *condemn* in us, but He is actually examining us to see if He can find anything in us to *commend*.

These premises underlie the text: (1) *All* believers are *servants* and *ministers*. (2) *Each* is to have his *own God-given ministry*. (3) By *command*, there is to be *one ministry* commonly done by *all* believer/servants. Matthew 28:19 commands all believers to “turn people into disciples,” and no servant should engage in any ministry that does not accomplish that.

In this study, we will seek to discover the *crucial role* of the servant/minister. Paul said, “Let a man so account of *us* (major emphasis), as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.” How do you want people to think of you? Some people want to be thought of as powerful, some as wise, some as wealthy, some as successful, etc. How do you want people to think of you? Here, Paul tells us how a Christian should want people to think of him. “Let a man esteem us this way,” or “let a man think of us this way.” The verb “esteem” or “think” (“account” in the KJV) is in the present imperative, so it says that this is the way we should want people to think of us *all the time, and that our lifestyle should command this evaluation*. Stand warned, dear friend, because this verse contains a tough ethic for a Christian to pursue.

There is a double profile of a Christian in this verse. Christians are *ministers of Christ* and *stewards of the mysteries of God*. The word translated “ministers” might better be translated *slaves* (as we shall see), so the two key words are conveniently “s” words. Christians are to be thought of as *slaves* and *stewards*. *Slaves of Christ*, so their entire tenure and kind of slavery is to be determined by Christ Himself and by their relationship with Him. *Stewards of the mysteries of God*, so their entire stewardship is a stewardship of *truth*; indeed, of the “deep things” of His Word.

The word “stewards” means “*managers*,” or overseers, or caretakers, or trustees — and the estate to be managed is that of *God’s truth*. God should be able to “turn His back” on you and have no worries at all about the management of His truth! The position of a steward is a position of trust. No wonder, then, that verse two says that “it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.” Every Christian will give an account of how he heard, received, managed, taught, and propagated God’s truth. Did I not say that this verse contains a tough ethic for a Christian to pursue?

I want to call your particular attention to just one word in this verse, the word translated “ministers.” This word is a giant word with a giant history. The Greek term is *huperetes*. This Greek word is a compound word; that is, it is a large word that is created by combining two smaller words. *Huper* is a preposition which means “under” or “underneath.” The remainder of the word is the word for *an oarsman on a boat*, a person with his hands locked to the oars, and he rows, either independently or in cadence with someone else. So this word means “an *under-*

*oarsman,*” or “an *under-rower.*” “Let a man so think of you,” Paul says, “as an under-rower who belongs to Christ.” The city of Corinth was a large city of about 600,00 in that day. It was located on a narrow strip of land (called an “isthmus”) which connected northern (mainland) Greece with the Peloponesian Peninsula of southern Greece. A modern counterpart is the Isthmus of Panama, which connects North America and South America. So Corinth was a maritime city. There were sailors everywhere, because the city was on a main east-west trade route. Ships and goods were transported by tramway across that narrow strip of land to prevent the long and sometimes dangerous trip through the Mediterranean Sea around the Peninsula.

Anyone who has ever visited Athens, Greece, probably saw more history than he realized. To look in any direction from Athens, Greece, is to look at the inception of western civilization. If you stood on Mars’ Hill, from which Paul preached when he was in Athens (Acts 17), you could look in a westerly direction, and see the setting sun shimmering like silver or gold on a bay of water. It is called the Bay of Salamis. You are a part of western civilization today instead of Oriental civilization because of a naval battle that was fought in the Bay of Salamis. The battle was fought between the navies of Greece and Persia. This battle forms a part of the background to the Biblical book of Esther. The naval firepower of the Persians seemed to be much greater than the naval firepower of the Greeks — and yet the Greeks won the battle, and their victory secured western civilization. The Greek navy seemed to be tiny and ill-equipped compared to the Persian navy. But they used a strategy that the Persians did not anticipate.

The Persian ships were long, wide, flat, and heavy. Each side of the ship had only one set of oars and oar locks running nearly the entire length of the ship. The ships were not easy to maneuver in the water because they were so large and cumbersome. The Greeks, on the other hand, created a ship that was very narrow, very tall, very streamlined, and very light in the water. Instead of *one* set of oars on each side of these ships, the Greeks installed three tiers of oars and oar locks on each side of the ship. There was a tier of short oars at the bottom of the ship, a tier of intermediate-length oars on the middle level, and a row of long oars at the upper level. All of the oars reached to the same depth in the water, and they were so spaced that, if they were rowed in cadence, maximum speed could be quickly attained by the ship. Because of the three tiers of oars, these tall and fast ships were called *triremes*. They could be maneuvered very rapidly in the water and skimmed fast over the sea. The Greeks tapered the front of each of these ships into a sharp point, and then they covered the point with sharp metal (like a sharp, cutting knife). This strange procedure was a significant part of their strategy in defeating the Persian navy in the Battle of the Bay of Salamis.

When the Persians confidently sailed in formation into the Bay of Salamis, the Greeks shocked them by charging their ships nose-to-nose. Each Greek ship moved rapidly toward the nose of its chosen Persian counterpart. It appeared that they were stupidly going to ram the Persian ships. At the last minute, each Greek ship veered to the right, cutting right down the side of the Persian warship. As they sped down the side of the Persian ship, the higher oars sank into the water at a sharp downward angle and propelled the boats forward at close range with the Persian ships. The sharp metal point, the “knife” at the front of the ship, did the work it was designed to do. It sheered off all the oars on that side of the Persian ship, leaving it to turn slowly in a circle. Then the Greek ship quickly maneuvered to the other side of the Persian ship

and repeated the act on the other side. Now the Persian ship had no oars, and was dead in the water. The Persians were helpless and at the mercy of the Greeks, who then took deliberate steps to secure a victory against the powerful Persian fleet. This victory proved to be one of the most significant military victories in world history.

The word Paul used in I Corinthians 4:1, the word translated “ministers” in your English Bible, is the word for that galley slave down in the lowest part of the ship. He was known as an *huperetes*, or an “under-rower.” So what is a Christian to be like? How is he to think of himself? *As a slave who lives constantly at the bottom of the ship!* So God did not save you to make you happy, or healthy, or rich. God saved you to place you in a slave’s position at the bottom of the ship. Why? Is He trying to abuse or mistreat you? Not at all! He places you in this position because the personification of greatness in His Economy is that of servanthood.

The oarsman was captured outside the ship, brought aboard the ship, installed in one seat, locked into place by a metal lock around his ankle, and might remain there for the rest of his life! He would likely sit in that seat until death. His total life was under someone else’s control, and his total endowment came from some else! I repeat, he will likely never leave the ship alive. Once he was seated, he was a dead man on furlough. Are you thinking carefully? Have you ever seen anything resembling this in your church? Usually, the church is operated by the same standards that prevail in the world. Clout, competition, comparison, human intelligence — these are the standards by which the church is operated — and these standards are the governing standards of the world. What does it mean to be an *huperetes*, an “under-rower” at the bottom of the ship?

## I. A MATTER OF CADENCE

To be an “under-rower” in Paul’s day was a matter of *cadence*, and so should it also be for a Christian. You see, there was a cadence captain who stood in a place at the front of the ship’s hold, a place that was visible to all of the galley slaves. If you have seen any of the great Olympic rowing races, you have seen the counterpart to this person in the shell (the boat), calling out the oarsmen’s cadence which keeps them rowing together.

The galley slave had only one assignment. He was to *keep his eyes on that captain*, listen for his orders, and row in cadence with those orders. He was just to follow the cadence of the captain’s orders, and everything else would take care of itself. The same is true in the Christian life. Robert Browning said, “He who keeps one thing in view makes all other things serve.” In those words, he defined the galley slave’s vocation — to keep the Captain in view, obey his orders, and make all other things serve. Someone said, “When Jesus Christ is Lord, nothing else *can* be; when He is not Lord, *anything* else can be.” The decision to allow Jesus Christ to be Lord greatly solidifies and simplifies life. It resolves the frustration which someone called “The Mixed Management Syndrome.”

In her great book entitled God’s Joyful Surprises, Sue Monk Kidd wrote: “One night in February when the wind whistled around the house, I walked into my daughter Ann’s room and came upon her idly pushing the inflated, plastic clown she had received at Christmas. It was one

of those punching toys that always returns upright to its rounded base, no matter how far over it is pushed. I watched the clown flop back when Ann poked it, then roll up on its base, which had remained stationary on the floor due to some kind of grounded center. *A grounded center!* That was what I needed. A center that remained still when the rest of me shifted. Something in that toy kept it balanced from the center out, so that whichever way it fell, it came up again. So it was always kept upright, or restored to upright when it fell. That's what I needed to be whole, and to help me meet the varying demands of each day, while living intimately with God as well. What does it mean to have 'a Christ-centered life?' Could it mean more than we have realized? Through a toy clown, I was helped to understand what it meant to have Christ as the center of my life."

The galley slave on board a Greek ship was like any other kind of slave. He had no will of his own, no rights of his own, no property of his own, and no schedule of his own. He didn't even know where the ship was going! He might not even know when it had arrived! It was not his responsibility to check on the other oarsmen, or even on himself. He had only one commission — to watch and obey the cadence captain. He rowed to the "captain's beat." Christian, the Bible says that "the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord." It is also true that the *stops* of a good man are *orchestrated* by the Lord, and the *stumbleings* of a good man are *overcome* by the Lord, and the *schedule* of a good man is *overseen* (and *overruled*, if necessary) by the Lord. The Lord orders everything; our assignment is to watch Him and obey Him! *The Christian life is simply a rhythm determined by a Captain.*

What if the members, or organs, or cells of my body (or yours) acted like many members of the Body of Christ act? My body goes by a rhythm, a cadence. The heart beats by a cadence, the lungs breathe by a cadence, I follow the reasonable cadence of a regular schedule, etc. The Christian is to go by a cadence, by a rhythm, by a beat that originates in his Captain, Who is high and lifted up, and is to be kept in plain view.

## II. A MATTER OF COOPERATION

To be an under-rower on a Greek ship was a matter of *cooperation*, and so should it also be for a Christian. There were at least 150 oars on each side of the ship, with 50 at each level. If the ship was going to be mobile and swift as designed and desired, the oarsmen had to row "in sync." Their common focus on the captain and following of his commands guaranteed that they would row together. In the same manner, one of the key words of the New Testament for Christians is the word, "together." If even one oarsman failed to row in cooperation with the others, the efficiency of the ship could be destroyed, and battles, wars, and lives could be lost, not to mention the ship itself. Unless the whole crew won, no one won.

The concept of cooperation is very familiar in the sports world and in the business world (and perhaps by default, in the domestic world). Every coach knows that he may have a group of all-stars on his team, but unless he can bring them to work together as a team, they will not win.

In 1999, the San Antonio Spurs won the NBA basketball championship. They had a star player who had won almost all the honors that were available on a basketball court in the NBA.

His name was David Robinson, and he was clearly established in a super-star status with the Spurs. However, though he had amassed many individual honors, his team could not win an NBA championship. However, two years ago, the Spurs signed Tim Duncan, an All-American for Wake Forest University, when he graduated from college. This created a problem on the Spurs, because both Robinson and Duncan are seven feet tall — and they both are superstars. It was evident that the Spurs had an even bigger (forgive the pun) problem now — how to get two seven-foot superstars to play together, not to mention the necessity to play with the other team members. Not to worry! David Robinson, a devout Christian, subdued his individual talents, status and statistics to the welfare of the team. His scoring average dropped to about half of what it had been previously. He deliberately deferred to the talented Duncan, and accepted something of a supportive role on the team he had led from the beginning of his NBA career. This move on Robinson's part was probably to be commended more than his ability and success as an NBA player. His subordinate position was surely far more difficult than the attainment of the other honors! And because he did it, the Spurs brought home their first NBA championship! David Robinson was able to see that individual records may be fine for the history books, but what matters far more is the performance and success of the entire team.

C. S. Lewis combined the two ideas of *cadence* and *cooperation* when he wrote this great paragraph in his great book, The Problem of Pain: “Every player must by all means touch the ball and then immediately pass it on. To be found with it in your hands is a fault: to cling to it, death. But when it flies to and fro among the players too swift for eye to follow, and the great master Himself leads the revelry . . . then indeed the eternal dance ‘makes heaven drowsy with the harmony.’ All pains and pleasures we have known on earth are early initiations in the movement of that dance . . . As we draw nearer to its uncreated rhythm, pain and pleasure sink almost out of sight. There is joy in the dance, but it does not exist for the sake of joy.” Read this paragraph again, meditating on each part. Note in particular the phrase, “. . . and the great master himself leads the revelry.” When He calls the cadence and the players cooperate with Him and with each other, victory is in sight.

No one likes a selfish performer, but when people get involved in cooperative performance, it becomes contagious. Each performer is lifted, supported and encouraged by the selfless contribution of all of the others — and the team performs at a much higher level. This is why most good coaches — and most good leaders — speak so often in the first-person plural. “*We* need. . .” “*Our* effort. . .” “*Our* goal . . .” Each member assumes responsibility for the team performance and for the team product. Each member shares the glory — and accepts the blame. The sound of the individual instrument is blended with all the others, making a symphony instead of a cacophony (a mix of discordant sounds).

Mary Beth Jones wrote, “Once Jesus began His public ministry, He wasted no time in forming a team. Even the Son of God knew that He could not change the world alone.” Though His team had several strong-minded and different individuals on it, He built them into a cooperating team, a team on which these strong-minded individuals agreed to agree.

With three levels of oarsmen and 150 oars, it was necessary that the oars cut into the water simultaneously — stroke after stroke, mile after mile, battle after battle. The same thing is

true in the Christian life. It is clearly a matter of cooperation.

### III. A MATTER OF COMMITMENT

To be an “under-rower” on a Greek ship was a matter of *commitment*, and so should it be for a Christian today. Even the galley slave’s commitment was determined by the captain he was assigned to follow and by the government which owned him. Even so, a Christian’s very commitment is not to be determined by himself. That would be a total violation of the Lordship of Christ. His commitment is to be determined by the decisive decree of his Captain and Owner. Every Christian should know that he is not his own, that he has been bought and paid for at a fearful price, and that he is to glorify the One who bought and owns him.

It has been said that “when you resign yourself to mediocrity, your resignation is accepted.” A boy came home from school one day with a black eye. His mother demanded, “Who gave you that?” He retorted, “Mom, nobody *gives* you one of these; you have to *fight for it!*” Will you resign yourself to mediocrity, or make the commitment that will enable you to fight through to victory?

A father arrived home from work one evening. His young son bounced up into his lap and hugged him. The father asked, “Have you been a good boy today?” “No,” the boy answered. Then have you been a *bad* boy today?” Again the answer was, “No.” “Well, if you haven’t been a good boy and you haven’t been a bad boy, what *have* you been?” “Oh, just comfortable,” was the boy’s smug reply. Many Christians are actually not very “bad,” but neither are they solidly committed to the assigned task. If you observed them regularly, you would have to say that they are smugly comfortable. However, in the New Testament, a Christian’s “comfort” is miraculously supplied by the “Comforter” while at the battlefield. Commitment is far more to be desired than comfort. To be an under-rower aboard “the good ship Zion” requires commitment.

### IV. A MATTER OF CONTINUATION

To be an “under-rower” on a Greek ship was a matter of *continuation*, and so should it be for a Christian today. An “under-rower” often did not come out of the ship alive. When the “under-rowers” on a Greek ship came out, it was because they were carried out — dead. Their vocation was a “one-way trip.”

No Christian you know is a literal slave today, chained to a seat, owned by another, and forced to live in a slave’s confinement. But the same goals are to be applied in a modified way. Christians are not “bought slaves” only; they are also “bondslaves.” “Bondslaves” have been purchased and set free, and then they have bound themselves over voluntarily to the master who bought them. If they are free, only a commitment that has persistence at the heart of it will keep them faithful. And this is the precise nature of the Christian life — it calls for “a commitment that has persistence at the heart of it.” A poet promoted persistence with these words:

“One word won’t tell folks who you are — You’ve got to keep on talking;

One step won't take you very far — You've got to keep on walking;

One inch won't make you very tall — You've got to keep on growing;

One trip to church won't tell you all — You've got to keep on going.”

I have an evangelist friend whose life's motto and motive are expressed in the two words, “Plough On.” He wrote a “poem” which expresses it. The poem says, “Plough on, plough on, plough on, plough on, plough on . . .” It has a lot of stanzas, but you've gotten the point. Being an “under-rower” for Christ requires continuation or persistence.

## V. A MATTER OF CONDESCENSION

Finally, to be an “under-rower” for Christ is a matter of *condescension*. Humility is a top priority for a successful “under-rower.” The “under-rower” on a Greek ship received no honor whatsoever; only the Captain was visible to the outside world.

Remember that the “under-rower” was near the bottom of a narrow ship. With 150 oarsmen, someone surely would get seasick on a voyage or during a fight at sea. When he “heaved,” his product would fall to the lowest place on the ship. So the “under-rower” might be covered with the refuse of someone else's sickness. So his position was a humble one, even if he did not concur with his assignment. He may get *callouses*, but he got no *credit*. He may get *fatigue*, but he got no *flowers*.

Now the punch line of the message. All that an “under-rower” did had one purpose to it: He moved the oars and the ship at the command and cadence of another — *so that others could reach their destination!* This is, indeed, a demanding ethic. Anders Nygren said, “There is no tree that bears fruit for its own use; the sun does not shine for itself. It is only man and the devil that in everything seek their own.”

Simone Weil said that two great forces rule the universe: *gravity* and *grace*. Gravity causes one body to attract other bodies so that it continually enlarges by absorbing more and more of the universe into itself. This same force operates in human beings. We too want to expand, to acquire, to swell in significance. Grace is the only exception to that rule. Grace begins in a heart whose only ground for blessing others is its own desire to do so. The whole focus of the gracious person is on others, not on himself.

Charles Plumb was a United States Navy jet pilot in Vietnam. After 75 combat missions, his plane was destroyed by a surface-to-air missile. Plumb ejected and parachuted into enemy hands. He was captured and spent six years in a communist Vietnamese prison. He survived the ordeal and now lectures on lessons learned from that experience.

One day, when Plumb and his wife were sitting in a restaurant, a man at another table came up and said, “You're Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!” “How in the world did you know that?” asked Plumb. “I packed your parachute,” the man replied. Plumb gasped in surprise and gratitude. The man



pumped his hand and said, “I guess it worked!” Plumb assured him, “It sure did. If your chute hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Plumb couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about that man. Plumb says, “I kept wondering what he had looked like in a Navy uniform: a white hat, a bib in the back, and bell-bottom trousers. I wonder how many times I might have seen him and not even said ‘Good morning, how are you?’ or anything, because, you see, I was a fighter pilot and he was just a sailor.” Plumb thought of the many hours the sailor had spent at a long wooden table in the bowels of the ship, carefully weaving the shrouds and folding the silks of each chute, holding in his hand each time the fate of someone he didn’t know and might never see.

Who packed your parachute – out of sight, and unsung? Whose parachute are you packing – out of sight, and unsung? Remember that God “sees” and “rewards” those who don’t court human applause as much as they simply seek His approval. *And someone may be in desperate need today of the parachute you packed!*

Let me conclude this study with two verses which travel in close proximity in Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians. Note that these verses were written by the Apostle *Paul*. Paul was at least a third-generation Christian (possibly a *fourth*-generation believer—Jesus to Peter to Barnabas through the Day of Pentecost to Saul/Paul). The first sentence is a small part of II Corinthians 12:19, which says, “We do all things, dearly beloved, for ***your*** edifying” (the word in heavy italicized print bears major emphasis in the Greek text—a loud shout on the page). And in the next chapter (II Corinthians 13:9), Paul wrote, “This we wish, even ***your*** perfection” (again, the word in heavy italicized print bears major emphasis in the Greek text). Here is the secret of the servant-ministry that originated with Jesus, was imparted to His disciples through an intensive disciple-making process, spread through the early church, and “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6)! And it would do the same thing today! But first, an army of bond-slaves of Christ must volunteer for “life at the bottom of the ship.” *It takes exceptional courage and commitment and personal poise to be willing to be **little** so that **somebody else** can be **big**.* But remember that God said, “A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation: I the Lord will hasten it in his time” (Isaiah 60:22).