

The Responsibility of Stewards

*“Let a man so
account of us, as of
the ministers of
Christ, and
stewards of the
mysteries of God.”*
—*I Corinthians 4:1*

In our opening Scripture, the Apostle Paul directs our attention to the important responsibilities that God’s people have when providing the glorious message of the Gospel to others. In this text the word “ministers” is a translation of a Greek word meaning: a subordinate. These ministers are described as being “of Christ,” that is, subservient to Christ. Paul includes a second responsibility the Lord’s people have, using the word “stewards,” which in the Greek text denotes one appointed as servant manager of a household. Paul emphasizes that as stewards, God’s people have a responsibility for “the mysteries of God.”

In the verse following our opening Scripture, Paul adds to the importance of this Christian responsibility, saying, “Moreover it is required in stewards,

that a man be found faithful.” (I Cor. 4:2) While this ministry belonged specially to Jesus and his chosen Apostles, it belongs also to each follower of Christ who has the anointing and commission spoken of in Isaiah 61:1,2, and who thus has the consequent responsibilities of these sacred trusts found in the Bible.

The above verses read, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn.”

The consecrated children of God are both “ministers [subordinates] of Christ” and “stewards [servant managers] of the mysteries of God.” They are also stewards of all the talents, abilities, time, and energies that they have dedicated to the divine service. Thus, this stewardship is a very special one. The positive elements of righteous character and the recognized obligations to activity are specially implied in the responsibility of being a Christian steward. By way of example to us, the faithful apostles bore witness not only to the things they heard and saw; but, additionally, to the instructions they received through the Holy Spirit. They were, therefore, faithful stewards of the Lord.

When the apostle emphasizes that the servants of Christ and of God are stewards, it adds a further dimension and meaning to the task which has been set before them. Stewardship suggests a deeper sense of responsibility. Spiritual stewards are thus

considered as servant managers or overseers of divine things. In fact, Christian stewardship pertains to the ministering forth and revealing of long-kept secrets stored in the Scriptures until the due time for “the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began.”—Rom. 16:25

Overseers of the Truth

Being stewards of the secrets of God is more fully explained by Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus. “If indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.”—Eph. 3:2-5, *New American Standard Bible*

Faithfulness in carrying out the duties of an overseer is stressed by Paul in his epistle to the brethren at Corinth. “It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.” (I Cor. 4:2) He then adds: “Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.”—vs. 5

We have all been richly blessed by Paul’s ministry and his revealing to us the wonderful mysteries of God. His responsibility as overseer of these sacred secrets, and the privilege he had to reveal them to the Lord’s people, is suggested in his letter

to the church at Colosse. He testifies, “I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God; Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: ... which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”—Col. 1:25-27

Mystery of the Ages

The most profound mystery of the ages reveals God’s plan to extend an invitation to consecrated believers of his Word to become a member of the body, or bride, of Christ. (I Cor. 12:12-14,27; II Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:2,9) This faithful class, developed since the Day of Pentecost, when complete, will share with our Lord in the grand work of uplifting fallen mankind from the penalty of death. (I Cor. 15:21,22; Rev. 21:1-5) In reference to this symbolic bride of Christ, Paul explains, “This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.”—Eph. 5:32, *NASB*

Christian Forbearance

As followers of Christ, our stewardship also includes the development into the character likeness of our Master. One such vital quality we must develop, and which is especially necessary as we go about our daily activities in the troubled world we presently live in, is that of forbearance. Christian forbearance must be tailored after God’s high standard. Like God, our exercise of forbearance toward others does not mean that we condone sins they may commit. We realize, however, as God does, that all of man’s current experience with sin, suffering, and death will one day yield the positive results he

intends. Thus we should properly forbear much in the way of wrong deeds, unkind words, ridicule, and criticism directed toward us. As Paul said, “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”—Col. 3:13

Paul also spoke about his life as a Christian and the many trials he endured. “Even to this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace; And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it.”—I Cor. 4:11,12

The Greek word translated “suffer” in the above passage means “forbear.” Paul is saying, “being persecuted, we forbear”—we tolerate, we restrain ourselves from retaliating, we put up with, these trials. Paul could do this because he knew that persecution as well as the hunger, thirst, buffeting, reviling, as well as the other kinds of trials and besetments, were all necessary experiences for him as a steward of God in order to be fully developed as a member of the sympathetic “royal priesthood,” which will teach mankind in Christ’s coming kingdom.—I Pet. 2:9; Rev. 20:6

The apostles bore witness not only by the display of qualities such as forbearance and the other noble Christian attributes, but, additionally, to the instruction which they received through the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit; and so, they were faithful stewards of all that was revealed to them. (Eph. 1:12-14) Thus we learn that the entire body of Christ is called, not to self-complacent ease, but to diligent and enterprising activity in the divine service.

Using Our Talents

Each one who possesses a talent or gift becomes a steward of the same. The Lord will require each steward to give an account—be found faithful—to the trust given them. Faithful stewards of the Lord will be on the lookout for everything that represents the Master’s interests, and will be as careful of these as they would be of their own. Indeed, as the scripture states: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”—Rev. 2:10

All must be faithful with what they have been entrusted as their stewardship. Those who are using their talents to the fullest capacity are especially pleasing to the Lord. This emphasizes the need of full, complete loyalty and heart devotion, by a proper and diligent use of our gifts in harmony with the divine purpose and methods. One person might be a good writer; another a good speaker; another good at exhortation; a few may be good at several things. The lesson is that faithfulness is required of all in the use of the specific talents they possess.—Rom. 12:6-8

The Lord will not count us faithful if we make little or no effort to use our talents or abilities. It is important to consider whether our course of service, day by day, is approved of God. Our desire should be to use, fully and promptly, yet as wisely as possible, our time, talents, means, influence—everything put into our hands to use—as the Lord’s example and Word directs. (Eccles. 9:10) In doing so, we are to also willingly follow his leading and direction in the use of these things.

Paul's Faithfulness

Paul was a faithful steward, ever seeking new and greater opportunities to spend and be spent in the Lord's service. Those who receive the Truth in the love of it will to the best of their ability and judgment show it to others at whatever the cost may be. It is important that all the consecrated may more fully realize themselves as the Lord's stewards, appointed to use beneficially his goods. If, on the other hand, we are unfaithful, can we expect him who knows the heart to entrust to our care the true riches of his glory and kingdom?—Ps. 139:23; Jer. 17:10; Luke 16:11

Parable of the Talents

The parable of the talents illustrates what is necessary to be faithful servants. (Matt. 25:14-30) As we recall the parable, only to his servants did the Lord give the talents. Only his servants had the responsibility of using the talents given them, and only they were reckoned with and held responsible. At the present time, only the consecrated children of God are his servants, but to these, their stewardship includes all the talents that they have dedicated to him. As stewards of God, we have nothing of our own, nothing with which we may do as we please; for, says the Apostle, "What hast thou that thou didst not receive?"—I Cor. 4:7

In endeavoring to view ourselves as God views us it is important to remember that not merely large abilities, large opportunities of time and circumstance, or command of great means, are noted by the Lord. Just as important are the small things; these are not overlooked by him. Let us

keep in mind the Lord's teaching that one who gives even a "cup of cold water" to a fellow disciple "shall in no wise lose his reward." (Matt. 10:42) We recall also that the poor woman's two mites, or coins, were esteemed more highly than the larger offerings of the rich, because she had "cast in all the living that she had." (Luke 21:1-4) When we thus perceive that the Lord is judging according to the thoughts and intents of the heart, the humblest saint can see ample opportunities to exercise faithful stewardship.

Our Body Members

The various members that make up the body of Christ come from different age groups, backgrounds, and experience levels. This calls to mind the statements of the Apostle Paul as found in I Corinthians chapter 12. "Those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary." (vs. 22) How true this is! In this illustration, the larger proportion of Christ's body members are often such; and yet their place in the body is just as necessary as those of the more notable members. "If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole body were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body?"—vss. 17-19

What a blessed thought to all those who recognize themselves as members of the body of Christ, that they each have a place and responsibility in the body to which God himself has wisely appointed them. It may now seem to be a humble place, but it

is nevertheless an important, a necessary place. Faithfulness in filling that place as a dedicated steward approved of God will result, by and by, in exaltation to kingdom glory.—Matt. 25:21

Faithful stewards in the Lord's vineyard continue to strive daily to work quietly and lovingly, doing with their might what their hands, heads, and hearts find to do to the honor of him whose name they bear. (Eccles. 9:10) How we should praise God and our dear Lord Jesus for all the wonderful grace they bestow upon us, and for the teaching, training, and discipline that is provided us as we desire to be faithful stewards of what has been given to us by divine providence.

Stewards of Our Character

Faithful stewardship also means committing to a way of life guided by Jesus' teachings and example. This involves both personal transformation and actively sharing the message of the Gospel with those around us. (Rom. 12:2; I Cor. 9:16) We must study the teachings of Jesus, observe his actions throughout his life, and seek to understand his ways. Following Jesus requires a commitment to live according to his commandments and perfect example. This we must do even when it requires sacrifice, suffering for righteousness' sake, or denying ourselves comfort and personal preferences. (I Pet. 2:5; Matt. 5:10-12; 16:24) It also requires having an active prayer life, reading and studying the Scriptures, and spending time in God's presence to deepen our understanding of his abiding love and will for us.

Witnesses of the Gospel

“This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end [of this age] come.” (Matt. 24:14) In the coming age of the Messianic kingdom, the fruitage of this witness will appear. The same testimony also serves the further ordained purpose of gathering out of the world those individuals, scattered here and there, to be associated with Christ in the great work of the kingdom, that of restoring all things and blessing “all the families of the earth.” —Matt. 6:10; Acts 3:20,21; Gen. 22:18; 12:3

In the case of our Lord Jesus, he was not only “holy, harmless undefiled and separate from sinners,” but he also gave witness of the Gospel by going about “doing good” to all those with whom he came in contact. —Heb. 7:26; Acts 10:38

A steward, therefore, is not a person of merely a harmless character, or one who is content to carefully keep to himself the talents that have been entrusted to his care, so that the Lord may find his goods just as he left them. Rather, faithful stewards are those who make a diligent, daily effort to use their one, or many, talents in the Master’s service. Thus, at the time of reckoning, the Lord will not just find his goods as he left them, but see a valuable increase, giving evidence of the zeal of Christ, and of faithfulness as ministers and stewards of the mysteries of God.—I Cor. 4:1,2 ■