



## The steward

***Moreover it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.***

**(1 Corinthians 4:2)**

A steward is one who is employed by a wealthy man to manage his estate. It is his duty to collect the revenues, to pay those who are employed, and to keep the property in order. It is a position of trust, a position of honour. All his master's property is virtually in his hands, yet it is not his property but the master's. It is his place to deal with it just as if he were going to reap all the benefit for himself, and yet he must have entirely got rid of all desire that the benefit should be his. In a word, he identifies himself with his master; his master's interests are his own, and in maintaining them successfully he finds his pride and satisfaction.

The peculiar dignity of such a position is in the trust and confidence which his employer reposes in him. To turn it to his own advantage would be to forfeit the trust, and so, whatever might be his material gain, to lose his honour, which is the joy of his life. He cannot therefore think of being honoured by others, except so far as his honour stands in his master's honour; and especially to seek for honour and popularity among the tenants or employees of the estate might easily become very dangerous. All he can safely think of is standing high in his master's esteem. His master's approval atones for all the unpopularity he has to incur in the discharge of his duty; his master's disapproval would make the praise of others barren and distasteful to him. He is bound up in his master.

St Paul, following perhaps the suggestion of the Lord's own language, employs this image to illustrate the relations between God and the human soul. Every Christian is a steward. We must not limit the thought to apostles, or to clergymen. We make too much of the distinction known to the New Testament. The New Testament, it is true, distinguishes between the gifts of the one Spirit, but always maintains that every Christian has some gift or other from that one and the self-same Spirit.

And if there is a difference of function for ministers of the gospel, as compared with their fellow believers, that does not imply that they are stewards and the rest are not; it only implies that, all being stewards, they are entrusted with a special part of the Lord's property, while the rest are entrusted with other parts. Yes, we all, as Christians, are stewards, though to some of us comes a high and honourable trust, to others of us only a lowly and obscure one; though some of us are richly endowed with ten pounds, others of us are endowed with only one.

And I speak to you all as Christians. Ah! I know that some of you are not. But you might be and you ought to be. When I remember how often you have been reminded of the claim of your Lord; when I remember how often Christ crucified has been presented to your hearts; when I remember how powerfully the Spirit of God has again and again pleaded with you, until at times it has been all your stubborn will could do to resist the appeal and to stave off your surrender to Him — then I feel that you do not differ from real believers in this point, that they are stewards and you are not, but only in this, that they are faithful, and you are unfaithful stewards; yes, you are hiding the talent the Lord gave you in a napkin, and are meditating the excuse you will urge to Him for all your wasted opportunities.

I speak therefore to *all*, advisedly. Ministers of Christ, stewards of the mysteries of God, do you know it is required of a steward that he be found faithful? It is not required that he be found gifted, or powerful, or influential, or even successful, but indeed it is required that he be found faithful. Are

you faithful? Have you been in the past? No? O dishonest stewards, idle stewards, consider your ways! Let us together try to find out what is meant by this faithfulness, and then urge home upon our own hearts, *'Am I faithful?'* until, searched and tried and approved of by our Master, we may be strengthened for His use.

How we need such a searching! For the least unfaithfulness even in tiny things renders all our service vain. If we have faithfully invested the thousands, bearing a good interest, and are yet spending the petty cash on our own gratification and lust, a taint comes upon the larger sums, and the offering cannot be accepted. It is required that a steward be found faithful, that is faithful all through, faithful in that which is least as well as in that which is great: faithful at the outset, faithful as the years run, faithful unto death, faithful at the bar of the Master.

*The first point in faithfulness* is not to think that the property is ours, or may be rightly turned to our own uses. Look at this in the matter of the chief piece of our Lord's property which we have to administer. You all know what that is; it is the Great Mystery of Him, who was manifested in the flesh, the Mystery of Christ and of Christ Crucified. Every steward of God is called upon in his degree, according to opportunity, to set forth Christ to the world. Some of us try to do it in pulpits, some of us in private conversations, some of us in books and magazines, all of us in our walk and conversation. A main part of our stewardship is to communicate the things of our Saviour to the world. If we are to be faithful we must remember these are not our things; we may not turn them to our own account. We may not seek to commend ourselves in the matter. The very nature of the trust requires that we should lose sight of ourselves, just as a picture dealer, wishing to commend a picture, might hold it up to the light in such a way that he himself is hidden behind it. We have to commend our Saviour and His work; we have to exalt His dear name; and what care we have to take that we do not by any fussiness or self-importance, by any restless vanity or longing for distinction in the dispensing of this mystery, hide the Person of Our Lord!

Sometimes in presenting Him to the world we become aware of the way in which we are doing it, and we are mightily pleased; we are struck with our own learning and knowledge of the Scriptures; we are dazzled with our own eloquence and brilliance of argument; we are even excited by a sense of our own zeal and devotion. And then immediately we become unfaithful stewards; we are directing attention to ourselves and not to Him, we are seeking admiration for ourselves and not acceptance for our message.

Oh Christian, realize that your business is to make the light of Christ's truth shine in you. He is the light, you are the mirror and though the mirror must be kept scrupulously clean in order that it may reflect truly, yet it is not the mirror, but the Light, that people want; the mirror may amuse them, the Light saves them. Yes, make your light shine before men, but remember that it is *'that men may glorify'*, not you, but *'your Father which is in Heaven'*. Let it become a constant maxim with you, *the rising of self is the beginning of unfaithfulness*.

Now what applies to the Great Mystery which we have to dispense, applies equally to all the other things — certainly property of our Lord — with which we are entrusted. It applies to natural gifts, like intellectual power, it applies to worldly possessions, like money or estates; and it applies to the less tangible but still unmistakable gifts, like social advantages. All these things as gifts entrusted to us by our Lord, and used wholly for Him, are rich in blessing to ourselves and to the world; but any one of them, used for our own purposes, treated as our own property, and so stolen from Him, becomes a veritable curse, not only to the possessor, but even to the receiver of the stolen property. Just see how it works. Take, for instance, a brilliant intellect. As the owner of it becomes aware of his innate powers, he is sorely tempted to think, *'This is my peculiar possession; I may use it for my own exaltation'*. As that purpose grows in the mind he quite loses sight of the truth that this rare gift is the possession of Another and only entrusted to him. And so he falls; yes, he falls. And thus highly gifted minds and men of genius are too often found standing outside the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is much the same with rich people. Their property comes to them by their ability, skill, or industry, or perhaps it comes to them as an heirloom. Surely what is mine is mine, is the inward thought;

and with that evil thought comes the act of robbery, the steward uses his master's goods for himself. Thus it is hard for the rich to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

And so with the socially great; they use that rare opportunity for self-aggrandisement, forgetting that it is entirely their Lord's gift, and they stand convicted as manifest thieves.

Do you not see, all these things are as much trusts from the Master to His stewards, as, for example, the gift of preaching is? You have no more right to appropriate them for your own use than the preacher has to turn his talent of preaching to the service of his private gain or public estimation. Steward, are you daring to use your Lord's wealth so? Think, what manner of imprisonment can punish such a fraud? It is required in a steward, which you are, that he be found faithful.

*The second point of faithfulness* is to employ all that is put into your hands to the best advantage for the Lord's service. Sometimes a steward is not dishonest enough to use his master's property for his own advantage, but because he may not do that, he loses interest in it, and does not use it at all. It is owing to this well-known infirmity of stewards that so much of the Lord's property is at this moment lying idle.

Dear stewards of Christ, will you make an inquiry, will you take an inventory, will you go through the store-house just now, and ask 'Is all being used, absolutely all, and to the best advantage too'? Oh, what wealth is lying by unused! I do not mean only silver and gold, though it is sad to think how you are throwing that away in worthless investments when your Lord wants it for His work. I do not speak of that. But think of all the gifts of speech and of knowledge, all the gifts of sympathy and love, just the very things of which the Lord stands in need; and all idle! There are dark souls which might be at once enlightened by one true and faithful word from you. There are hearts hungry for sympathy, perishing for a warm spiritual love, which you could give. To think of all the unused gifts of the Master, and all the need of their use in the great city, in the countryside, in the regions beyond, it is like going out into the fields and seeing them fallow and covered with weeds, and then going into the barns and the farm buildings to see the seed rotting because it is not sown, the ploughshare and the harrow rusting because they are not used.

Are you waiting for the Lord's command to employ this property of His? Does not the question answer itself? If it is property of His, then the possession of it is the command to use it.

Do you think the reason of your inactivity is that your love is grown cold, and the fire of your zeal has burned low? May the Lord Himself awake the love within you, bring you to contrition of heart and devotion of spirit! Listen to this language of faithful stewards, speaking to unfaithful ones:

*'We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye have glory, but we have dishonour. Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted and have no certain dwelling-place; and we toil working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless ... we are made as the filth of the world, the off-scouring of all things'.*

(1 Corinthians 4:10-13)

What zeal! What devotion! In that spirit must every steward spend and be spent to the uttermost. And will not this wake you from your lethargy? It is not a matter of choice whether we will toil or no. It is at our peril that we refuse to launch forth at His word because we shrink from the toil of the deep — at our peril that we refuse to buckle on our armour and enter the field under His command because our heart quails before the foe.

Every inducement is at hand, honour and love, and duty; there is the promise of the reward, there is the penalty of unfaithfulness. May God's Holy Spirit so touch you that all hesitation, doubt, indifference may vanish! Can it be that you are standing idle because you are entrusted with so little? Do you say, if I had great gifts like others I would employ them? Is your vanity hurt because your gift is so very small? Now that might go for something if we were really owners of the property, but such an argument goes for nothing when we are only stewards, and shows indeed that you have been taking a wrong view of the position. To a steward it is of no moment whether

his trust is large or small. As the gain can in no case be his, as the goods are not to be used for his benefit, as the honour which comes in their employment all goes to his Lord, surely it does not come within his province to consider the question of much or little. With the Lord it rests to determine how much He shall entrust you with. It rests only with you to employ it all to the full. While it would indeed be shame, if we had large gifts, to employ only the smaller ones for Him, it is even more shame, if we have only small gifts, to refuse to use them at His word. See what you have, and if the inventory prove that the stock is small, use it the more diligently. Be glad in humble work. As one of His servants puts it:

*It is not mine to bear His heavy cross,  
Or suffer for His sake all pain and loss.  
It is not mine to walk through valleys dim,  
Or climb far mountain heights alone with Him.  
He hath no need of me in grand affairs,  
Where fields are lost, or crowns won unawares.  
Yet, Master, if I may make one pale flower  
Bloom brighter for Thy sake for one short hour:  
May speak one quiet word when all is still,  
Helping some fainting heart to bear Thy will:  
Or sing one high clear song on which may soar  
One glad soul heavenward, I ask no more.*

It is required in a steward that he be found faithful, using to the uttermost all his master's property that is entrusted to him.

*Then the third point in faithfulness* is to be rid as far as may be of men's opinions, whether good or bad, and to bear constantly in mind that you are accountable to your Lord and to Him alone. It is a great danger when we begin to reckon with human praise or censure. A Christian, like a steward, may be popular; then he has to quietly divert the popularity from himself to his Master. But it is far more likely that he will not be popular; then he has to find in his Master's smile enough to counterbalance the frowns of all the world.

There are things in which we desire rightly men's good opinion, and tremble rightly under their censure. To shake off all the wholesome restraints of our social life would be not serving God at all, but directly declining one of the ways by which His will reveals itself to us. But in the matter of our stewardship we cannot allow our conduct to be determined by men's approval or disapproval. We have to set aside public opinion not in order to listen to the dictates of our own desires, or of our own wilfulness, but in order to let our Master's desires and our Master's will have free play with us.

We are all of us constantly led to do things which the Lord does not approve, in order to win men's favour, and to hold back from our Lord's service in order to escape their ridicule or condemnation. *'It is required in a steward that he be found faithful'*, not to the world, but to his master. Look at Paul's attitude. *'With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you or of men's judgment'*. He sets aside almost brusquely the whole question of popularity. His object is not to justify himself or win his own approval. Not at all. Though his conscience does not accuse him of unfaithfulness, yet that gives him little satisfaction. All the time he abides in the sense of stewardship and is concerned only with the approval of the Lord. And the only way for us is to live and do our work without fear of men, vividly realizing that we are in the presence of the Lord to whom we shall give account. For, as Paul says,

*'He will come and bring to light the hidden things of darkness'*.

Yes, all the shameful ways in which we have been employing His wealth, all the prostituted talent and unhallowed affections of the heart, all the money squandered on our own selfish enjoyment, all the deliberate neglect of the gifts with which He entrusted us.

All this will be clear as the day. *'And make manifest the counsels of our hearts'*. Yes, apart from all judgments and misjudgments of men, apart from our own morbid self-condemnation, He will accurately weigh all our motives. He will know with what humble earnest purpose you sought to

use the gift which never attracted the notice of your fellow men. He will know with what sincere love you spoke the little word for Him which seemed utterly to fail. He will know with what silent agony of intercession you pleaded for His Kingdom to come in the secret chambers of your heart, when others marked you as a useless idler in the vineyard of the Lord. From how many humble lives will He bring forth hidden tendrils, watered with many tears and tended with many prayers, unknown to all except the soul and the Saviour; while many a loud and ostentatious ministry will be revealed in naked ugliness as a shameless form of self-seeking, a stewardship unfaithful, and all the more unfaithful because the Great Mystery itself has been employed by the steward merely to swell his importance, to gratify his pride, or to increase his possessions.

Evidently Paul lived constantly in presence of that day, *when 'each man shall have his praise of God'*. And if we would be kept faithful too, we must always look to the end. In the prospect of that unveiling, that exposure, of the secrets of the heart, shall we not remember that we are stewards, shall we not seek to be faithful, recognizing that all our gifts belong to our Lord, that we are bound to use them all for His service to the full, and that His approval is to be the only approval we desire, His censure the only censure we fear?

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