

Main Idea: Living with the mindset of a steward will affect us in two practical areas, according to 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

- I. God has given us a special role (1-2).
 - A. We are servants.
 1. What I have has come from Him.
 2. What I have I am to use for Him.
 - B. We are stewards.
 1. Our Master is God, not man.
 2. Our motivation is faithfulness, not success.
- II. God has given us a special responsibility (3-5).
 - A. Our aim is not to please others (3a).
 - B. Our aim is not to please ourselves (3b-4a).
 - C. Our aim is to please the Lord (4b-5).
 1. Only God knows all events.
 2. Only God knows all motives.

Response: As a steward of God, I must...

1. Seek to please Him, not people.
2. Seek to be faithful, not successful.
3. Seek to finish well, not merely start well.

He could have pastored the largest church in Boston, but he turned it down. He certainly was a man of great promise. He entered college at the age of 16, a young man with brilliant potential, and eventually graduated valedictorian from Brown University. By the time he finished his seminary training, several appealing options beckoned him. He could teach at his alma mater--Brown University promised him a tempting tutor's appointment. He turned it down. Dr. Griffin invited him to share the pulpit of the biggest, richest church in Boston, but he did the "irrational" thing and declined the offer.

His life had been impacted by a thin book called *The Star of the East*, written by a chaplain of the British East India Company named Claude Buchanan. The book was the account of what the gospel had done for the heathen in the far east. As he read it, a seed was planted in his heart. No, Boston was not for him. Nor was Brown University. God had a greater plan for his life. Burma.

In the year 1813, at the age of 25, Adoniram Judson became America's first foreign missionary. For the next 37 years, he would labor in a land of spiritual darkness and face hostility, persecution, disease, imprisonment, and heartache. During that time, Adoniram's first wife, Ann, died of disease at the age of 37. A few years later, he remarried a woman named Sarah, yet her body eventually broke down under the physical hardships of Burma. In addition, Adoniram buried three of his children there as well.

After 37 years of toiling, at the age of 62, Adoniram Judson died of tuberculosis and was buried at sea, off the coast of the country he so loved. In the eyes of the world, what this talented scholar--this man who could have really "gone places"--what he left behind was not all that impressive: the Bible translated into Burman language, a handful of converts when compared with multitudes still in the darkness of Buddhism, and a story of great suffering and pain.

Why did Adoniram Judson go to Burma anyway? Some said he was a fool. Why did he turn down the offers of a life of ease in this country? Why was he willing to endure such hardship? The answer is because he saw himself as a steward of God.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

The fact is, according to the Bible, all of us who know Jesus Christ are all called to be stewards. The problem is that a lot of Christians have given little thought to this calling.

What does it mean practically to be a steward? It certainly does not mean we will all end up in Burma, but I am convinced that the concept of biblical stewardship has radical implications for our lives. Understanding what the Bible has to say about being a steward is one of the great keys to experiencing a fulfilling, vibrant Christian life.

Two weeks ago we investigated Romans 12:1-2 and learned that in light of God's mercy we should give our lives to God as living sacrifices. I exhorted each of us to do just that, to be living sacrifices for God in 2005. Last week we probed further what that means. We discovered from Romans 12:3-8 that living sacrifices are those who live with the perspective of grace (verses 3-5) and appropriate the provision of grace (verses 6-8), namely spiritual gifts. Every person who is in Christ has a spiritual resource, a "gift" from the Holy Spirit, that equips him or her to be able to minister in the Body of Christ.

But not everyone who has a spiritual gift uses that gift, or uses it consistently. Something else is needed, something God's Word addresses in the text before us, *the mindset of a steward*.

Just what is a steward? I checked the thesaurus and it offered only two synonyms: "park ranger" and "warden." That doesn't help much, does it? It does indicate that the biblical concept of "steward" is for the most part foreign to us.

The fact is this. We are called to be stewards. If you are a Christian you have a call upon your life. In the words of 1 Corinthians 6:19 you "are not your own," for you were "bought with a price." You belong to another, namely the living God. You are His steward.

What does that mean, and what difference will this truth make once we grasp it and live in light of it? We find the answer in 1 Corinthians 4. Let's read our text, verses 1-5.

"So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."

If we're going to live with a mindset of a steward we must get a handle on two specific matters, according to 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

I. God has given us a special role (1-2).

The Corinthians had lost sight of the role. The Corinthian church had been established by the apostle Paul (check out Acts 18), but by the time the apostle wrote the epistle we know as 1 Corinthians the church was full of turmoil.

Paul caught wind of the politicking that was going on in the church. Various church members were lining themselves up with their "favorite" leader. Notice 3:4, "For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere men?" The KJV says, "For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?"

Can't you just imagine the scene. The church was having a potluck dinner, and one fellow pipes up, "Isn't Apollos a great preacher? This church just isn't the same when he's not in the pulpit!" The next guy retorts, "Apollos? He's okay but he's certainly no

Peter! Now Peter, there's a great leader!" To which the person across the table, the studious type says, "Wait a minute. Apollos and Peter may be good speakers, but they don't have the content that Paul does. What a deep thinker Paul is! I just love to hear him teach." And on and on the babbling went.

It was to this boasting in men that Paul responded in chapter 3. He wrote in 3:21-23, "So then, no more boasting about men [KJV says, 'let no man glory in men']! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."

How should you respond when critics compare you to others, when they hound you, and even put you down? That's what was happening to Paul. Some of the very people he'd led to Christ, and disciplined, and invested his life in were now attacking him. So in chapter four, the apostle addressed the very important issue of roles.

How should we view people who are in leadership positions in ministry? For that matter, how should we view ourselves? Paul uses two images to clarify our role in verses 1-2.

A. We are servants. Paul states in verse 1, "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ [KJV 'Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ'] and as those entrusted with the secret things of God." The verb is an imperative, a command which means "to reckon, to consider." Paul pulled no punches with the Corinthians. Christian leaders are not celebrities. They are servants.

The word here translated "servants" [KJV "ministers"] is an important word. It's a compound Greek word which literally means "an under rower." It was used of slaves whose job it was to pull the oars in the bottom of the huge ships on the seas. It was the job of the captain on deck to decide where the ship was going. It was the under-rower's job to take it there.

Frankly, it was an unglamorous, even uncomfortable role to fill. But the under-rower had no choice in the matter. He was a slave. His job was to do the bidding of his master, to follow the orders of the captain. He had but one responsibility--to pull the oars. He did not decide which oars to pull. He did not decide where the ship would go. He merely poured his energy into pulling the oars. He was an under-rower.

Paul says to his critics: Consider us in this light--Apollos, Peter, me--we are all servants. Christ is the pilot. We are merely under-rowers.

What does it mean practically to say that we are servants, or under-rowers? There are two personal implications we can draw if we are servants.

1. What I have has come from Him.

Paul says clearly that we are servants or ministers "of Christ." Christ is our master. What we have is, in reality, not our own. It has all come from Him.

The apostle elaborates on this fundamental two chapters later in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. Let's take a second look at this pivotal text. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." The truth is, Christian friend, you belong to another. You belong to God. And all that you have not only belongs to Him, but in reality has come from Him.

In 1 Corinthians 4:7, Paul asks three questions which we ought to ponder regularly if we are serious about living as servants. "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

The galley slave didn't boast to his neighbor, "Hey, my oar is prettier than your oar!" Who cares? The purpose of the oar is not to bring attention to itself. Nor is the purpose of the under-rower to bring attention to himself. Nor is the purpose of the servant of Christ to bring attention to himself or herself. What I have has come from Him.

A second implication. One, what I have has come from Him.

2. *What I have I am to use for Him.*

What again is the role of the servant? It's to please his master, right? As Christians, our Master has given each of us different talents, different abilities, different opportunities. Why? Listen. What He has given us He expects us to use for Him.

Paul addresses this matter in Romans 14:7-8: "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."

Let that sink in for a moment. We are servants, under-rowers. Christ is the Pilot who decides where the ship goes. Our job is to pull the oars He has put in our hands. In ministry, it's not our job to complain about why we have the drab yellow oars and our Christian neighbor has the attractive red ones. It's not our role to complain about the rough, turbulent waters that smash against the ship. Frankly, Jesus says to us, "My servants, you have the oars I've given you. I've placed you in positions as Sunday School teachers, youth workers, pastors, missionaries, jail workers, parents, and so on. Now, pull on those oars, and I'll take My Church where I want it to go."

Never forget this. Jesus Christ is the Captain on the upper deck—the upper deck of the church, *His* church, the upper deck of life, *your* life and mine. We are servants.

Paul next uses a second image to clarify our role, the image we mentioned earlier.

B. We are stewards. Verse 1 concludes, "...And as those entrusted with the secret things of God." The phrase "those entrusted with" comes from one compound Greek word, *oikonomos*, a combination of the words for "house" and "manager." In other contexts the word refers to an administrator or manager of a household, to a person who has authority and responsibility for something.

The KJV uses the term "steward," stating, "Let a man so account of us, as...*stewards* of the mysteries of God." It's a great word, a descriptive word, for in Paul's day a steward was a servant, a manager of a household.

Don't miss this. In the social structure of the Roman Empire, a steward could be a slave or a freeman, yet in either case he functioned as an administrator, a manager of something. That something didn't belong to him, but to another. Thus, he possessed delegated authority. His master or boss had given him charge of the household or estate. As steward he controlled the staff. He purchased the supplies. Yet he was fully accountable to his master. If he was unfaithful, he was discharged at once.

In the Old Testament, we find an illustration. After Joseph's brothers betrayed him and sent him in chains to Egypt, a man named Potipher bought him as a slave. Due to God's hand of blessing and Joseph's faithful service, Potipher promoted Joseph and made him the chief steward of his household. Genesis 39:4 records, "Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar *put him in charge of his household*, and he *entrusted to his care* everything he owned."

That's what God does in the church as well. He takes people who were once slaves to sin, purchases them and calls them into His service. But He doesn't stop there. He entrusts His servants with a special privilege. He places in their care His resources. He

gives them the special assignment of using what is His to accomplish His purposes. He calls them *stewards*.

The truth is, whatever we have is not ours, but God's. We simply administer it all in his behalf.¹

E.g.—

What specifically does Paul say that God has entrusted to us? Verse 1 indicates we are entrusted “with the secret things of God” [KJV ‘the mysteries of God’]. There are some “hidden things,” things not known to the average person on the street, things the natural man doesn’t perceive (see 2:14). The secret things or mysteries of God are the hidden things known only to God and to those to whom God chooses to reveal them.

Deuteronomy 29:29 puts it this way, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”

As people who are in Christ, we are a privileged people. God has opened our minds so that we know something we once did not know. It’s called the gospel. It’s the message of the cross. God has revealed these “secret things” to the initiated, to us. He has entrusted to us things not known to others. That’s why I preach. That’s why you teach your class. That’s why you share the gospel with your neighbor. We are stewards of the mysteries of God.

What are the practical implications of being a steward of God? Here are two.

1. *Our Master is God, not man.*

Never forget this. These are God’s mysteries, not ours. We enjoy them, but we don’t own them. There’s no room for pride in the hearts of stewards. Our master is God.

Many years ago when I was considering the ministry, I remember my pastor talking with me about what it’s like to be a pastor. He said, “Realize this, Brad, as a pastor I must see myself as a servant of the Lord, not a servant of the people. If I view my role merely as a servant of the people, there will come a time when, in order to keep the people happy, I’ll neglect to do what may be unpopular in order to keep peace.”

As a steward, my master is God, not man. So is yours. Here’s a second implication.

2. *Our motivation is faithfulness, not success.*

Our success-oriented culture doesn’t understand this. Sadly, we struggle to “get it” in the contemporary church. The goal is faithfulness, not success.

What’s the standard by which God evaluates and judges His stewards? He gives us the answer in verse 2, “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust [KJV ‘it is required in stewards’] must prove faithful.” The verb is passive, “It is required.” God is the implied subject. And what is it that God requires of His stewards? Results? Production? Popularity? Eloquence? Success? That’s not the test by which He evaluates. This is. *Faithfulness*.

The fact is a steward may not please the others slaves in the household, but if he pleases his master, he is a good steward. Indeed, in order to please His master he will at times displease those around him who don’t share that aspiration.

God doesn’t expect us to be successful. He does call us to be faithful. A good word to substitute would be “trustworthy” (as in the NASB). Worthy of trust, worthy of the trust that God has placed in our care. We’re to be reliable, faithful to the gospel.

¹ see D. Jeremiah, 7

You see, the main issue in Corinth was not, “Is Paul popular?” Or, “Can Apollos preach better than Peter?” The main issue was, “Have Paul, Apollos, and Peter been faithful to the work God has given them to do?”

It's the same issue for us. Frankly, there are too many self-focused stewards in our day. You say, “How do you spot a self-focused steward?” It's the person who is absorbed with himself, with his rights, with his recognition. It's the person who is quick to criticize other stewards.

Brothers and sisters, God has given us a special role. We are His servants. We are His stewards. It's His ship, and our job is to pull the oars He has given us. It's His household and it's our assignment to take care of the resources He's entrusted to us.

I offer this exhortation. Make a decision today to accept that role. Don't be a complainer who says, "I wish I had blue oars like Bob does." And don't be a critic who says, "I don't like the beveled oar that Sally is using." God gave you the oar He wanted you to have. Indeed, the Lord has distributed the oars to each of us as He has seen fit.

If we're going to live with the mindset of a steward, there are two matters on which we must get a handle. One is our special role. Here's the other...

II. God has given us a special responsibility (3-5).

It's a threefold responsibility as explained by Paul in verses 3-5. To put it simply, there are three things we must do as stewards.

A. Our aim is not to please others (3a). Verse 3 begins, “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court...” [KJV "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment"] Count on it. If you choose to live for God, some people will love you and others will attack you.

In the verses that follow, Paul identifies three judgments we all must face as stewards: there's man's judgment, self-judgment, and God's judgment.² Or to put it another way, there are three kinds of pressure on stewards. The first is pressure from other people.

We notice quickly what Paul thought about trying to please others. In verse 3 he says what people thought of him was a small thing, something about which he cared “very little.” He didn't live his life trying to make others like him. That included church members, and even those outside the church in the civil arena (3). It really didn't matter to Paul what people thought of him.

You say, "Well that makes sense. What mattered to Paul was what he thought of himself, right?" Actually, *no*. Notice his admission at the end of verse 3, “Indeed, I do not even judge myself.” Which brings us to our second responsibility as stewards.

B. Our aim is not to please ourselves (3b-4a). There are people who will gladly say, "I don't care what people think of me. It's my life. I don't have to please you. As long as I'm pleased with myself, I'm okay." The problem is that last statement. The truth is I can be pleased with myself and not be okay.

How is that? Follow Paul's reasoning in verse 4, “My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.” Stop there. The KJV says it this way, "For I know nothing against myself, yet am I hereby not justified." Here's what Paul is saying, "I don't judge myself. It's not because I'm afraid to. In fact, I can say honestly that I know of no glaring, hidden sin in my life. But what difference does that make? The fact that my conscience is clear doesn't make me innocent."

² Observation by Barclay & Wiersbe

Why not? Because there is only one person with the qualifications to be judge. It wasn't Paul, and it's not us. Who is it? Verse 4 ends, "It is the Lord who judges me."

By the way, this isn't a contradiction of 2 Corinthians 13:5 where Paul exhorts the same Christians, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?" There is a place for self-examination, for self-judgment in the life of a Christian.

What's more, there are times when we are supposed to make judgments about each other. In 1 Corinthians 5:3, Paul says he "judged" the church member who was living in incest in Corinth, and told the church to excommunicate that man. The issue in 1 Corinthians 4 has to do with ultimate judgment. Yes, when it comes to living the Christian life now, we can benefit from the judgment of others and ourselves, but in the end, only one judgment matters. Which leads to our third responsibility.

C. Our aim is to please the Lord (4b-5). "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes..." Why should we make it our aim to please the Lord? Answer--Because He alone is qualified to judge. Why is He alone qualified to serve as judge? For two reasons highlighted in the second half of verse 5.

1. Only God knows all events.

Notice the text again to see what the Lord will do when He comes (5), "He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness." The day is coming when God will shine His spotlight on our lives, and the deeds previously obscure to all others will be made known.

Do you know why God alone is qualified to sit behind the judge's bench? It's because only God knows all events. Our knowledge is limited. His is infinite. There's a second reason, too.

2. Only God knows all motives.

Notice the next phrase (5), "And will expose the motives of men's hearts." ["And will make manifest the counsels of the hearts"] You see, even if we know the deeds people do, we don't know motives. We can't read hearts. But God can. And the day is coming when He will pull off the masks that hid our motives.

What will happen then? Verse 5 ends, "At that time each will receive his praise from God." The truth is there will be some pretty surprised people in that day. Some of the most applauded, recognized, in-the-spotlight ministers in this day will be quite embarrassed in that day. The tables will be turned. At the Lord's judgment, many unsung under-rowers will receive from God what men never gave them--praise. And it will be worth it all.

Paul began this section with a command, and ends with another command. He began with an appeal to Christians (1), "View your leaders as Christ's servants and stewards." He ends with a charge (5), "Stop judging God's servants (the tense indicates present activity). Wait till the Lord comes. He's got all the facts. He knows all the motives. You don't. He will give praise to those to whom it's due. Leave the judging up to Him."

It's obvious that this passage has special application for pastors, missionaries, and others whom God has entrusted with the Word of God. Yet don't miss that it also applies to every Christian. We are all ministers if we know Christ (2 Cor 3:6). If you are a Christian you are a steward. The question is, what kind of a steward are you? Do you take your stewardship seriously? You say, "What must I do if I want to be a good steward?"

Response: As a steward of God, I must...

1. Seek to please Him, not people.

John Wesley once wrote, "When the Possessor of heaven and earth brought you into being and placed you in this world, he placed you here not as an owner but as a steward--as such He entrusted you for a season with goods of various kinds--but the sold property of these still rests in him, nor can ever be alienated from him."³

As a steward, your obligation is not to please people, but God. Are you pleasing God with your life? Do you want to, more than anything else? Make that decision today.

2. Seek to be faithful, not successful.

The truth is that success is a by-product. Was the apostle James successful? Herod put him to death by the sword, Acts 12 tells us, when he was in his prime, before he had "done much" for the Lord. Was Adoniram Judson successful? A wealth of ability spent in 37 difficult years in Burma at the expense of two wives and three children. Was he successful? That's not the issue for a steward. Was he faithful? Yes. Are you?

Beloved, being successful is out of our control. Being faithful is not. God doesn't call His stewards to be successful. He calls us to be faithful. What are you doing with the oars that God has put in your hands?

To be faithful you must first of all be a *person of faith*. In order to become a steward of God, you must first receive the Son of God as your personal Lord and Savior. He came to earth as a faithful steward, doing His Father's will, and gave His life on the cross to pay sin's debt for sinners. He finished His work as a steward by defeating death and returning to heaven. Today He hears the cry of the sinner and grants salvation to all who place their faith in Him.

Are you a person of faith? To be faithful you must first place your faith in Christ. I invite you to do so today. I urge you to do so today—there is no other way.

Then, resolve to be a person of faith every day. Seek to be faithful, not successful. That's the passion of a steward of God.

3. Seek to finish well, not merely start well.

It's not a 100 meter dash we're running. The life of a steward is a marathon. May the Lord grant us the mindset of a steward.

³ D. Jeremiah, 7