

Stewardship (1 Corinthians 4:1,2)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the vital role of stewardship in the Christian life, highlighting the responsibilities, qualifications, and the importance of faithfulness in serving God and others.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:1

Topics: "Faithfulness", "Stewardship"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the vital role of stewardship in the life of every believer, highlighting that stewards are responsible for representing their Master and meeting the needs of others. He explains that stewardship requires faithfulness, a deep understanding of both the needs of people and the resources available to meet those needs, which comes through personal experience and training. Sparks encourages believers to recognize their calling as stewards, reminding them that their experiences are not just for personal growth but to enrich and support others. He underscores that faithfulness, rather than eloquence or special gifts, is the key qualification for a steward, as exemplified by the Apostle Paul. Ultimately, the sermon calls believers to actively engage in their stewardship, sharing the blessings they have received with those around them.

Transcript

"Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful." (1 Corinthians 4:1,2)

A steward is a man who, on the one hand, stands in a living relationship to all that his lord has and, on the other hand, has an equally close relationship to all those who look to his lord for the supply of their needs. So that the steward is a very responsible person.

The Steward's Responsibility

The steward is responsible for the reputation of his master. What the world knows of that master will very largely accord with the steward's character and behaviour. What the world or the household receives of good and enrichment will depend upon him. The apostle Paul spoke of himself as a steward, as one who had been entrusted with such a task; but it is impressive to note that he applies the term to the believers in the Corinthian Church also. We can quite readily understand and appreciate that Paul should be a steward, but when, he so addresses the members of the Corinthian assembly, bringing them all in, that shows that the designation can be applied to very ordinary believers. We cannot, therefore, evade the

issue by saying: Well, that applies to special people like Paul. It clearly applies also to the Corinthians and ourselves, pressing the point that men should be able to regard us and take account of us as stewards for God.

This speaks of something more than merely having a standing as believers. We might perhaps think that the world must take account of us as Christians; they will do that in any case if we make a profession of faith in Christ, but this divine thought takes us much further. It brings us out into a place of specific and definite responsibility in two connections: firstly to the Lord, binding up the Lord's interest with us in an active way; secondly, in a like practical way, to men. We are stewards, standing in a place between, and with a responsibility in two directions.

The Lord's people need to be reminded from time to time that there is a tremendous responsibility resting upon everyone who is related to Him, because that relationship ought never to be a passive one. It is not just that the matter begins and ends with our claiming to be members of a family. Membership of the household of faith is but one phase of truth, of the teaching of God's Word. Believers are called by a variety of designations which do not counter one another, being so many aspects of a whole, and not mutually exclusive. For instance, in the case of earthly relationships, for one to be a member of the family would preclude one from being the steward of the household, but with the spiritual relationship it is not so. We have to keep the family relationship in its place, recognising that it brings its own obligations, but at the same time we must appreciate that we are given the position of steward, with its special responsibilities. This holds good for us all. It is God's thought for every believer that he should be a steward. This leads us to several important considerations.

The Steward's Qualifications

A fact which should be very helpful to us is that all the Lord's dealings with us are with the design of making us the kind of stewards which we ought to be. A steward has to be qualified for his task. He must be a man of certain definite characteristics. The fulfilment of his stewardship will demand experience. He cannot step into a spiritual stewardship at will. There has to be a real preparation, a real development and a real endowment for such an office. If you read carefully the connection in Paul's mind between the stewardship and its fulfilment, you will see that the connection is a very practical and active one. He was conscious of the need of special enablement, special gifts, special qualifications, and for such equipment he recognised the need for special experiences. Stewardship is a matter of training, and deep training at that.

In order to make us able stewards, the Lord takes us into many different kinds of experiences, some of them extraordinary and unusual; such a variety of experiences as come to none but His own people. No one else goes through quite the same training, for they do not need it. Other people in the world may go through certain sufferings which are similar; they may know the difficulty of poverty, the difficulty of maintaining their position in the world; outwardly there may be a similarity, but inwardly there are elements associated with the experiences of believers which are peculiar. With the believer there comes a challenge which others do not know and demands to be faced which do not come to those who are not believers. Simply because we are the Lord's servants we have to pass through discipline and face enemies; all this is permitted by the Lord who is seeking to train us.

(1) An Experimental Knowledge of Need

To what end is this? We have already shown that what governs the Lord in His dealings with us, His mysterious and strange dealings, His unique permissions, is His design of making us stewards. These things are meant because the steward must learn to know the needs of the people to whom he is to minister. He must enter into the nature of men's needs. The man of God is not just an official; he is not someone taken out of a crowd and put into office with a daily task which can be learned by studying a manual. He has to have a vital relationship with the whole position, and he must have a living and experimental knowledge of the nature of the needs of those whom he serves. Between him and the people to whom he is to minister his Master's riches, there must be a sympathy of heart. He must know the variety of their needs, for what must be given to one would be quite unsuitable for another. He has to find, as a physician finds, that no two cases are exactly alike, because no two temperaments are exactly alike. A dozen people may have the same complaint, but it may be needful to treat each one differently because of the different temperamental factors in each case. Just as the physician takes not only the complaint but the individual into account, so it is with the steward. He must be a man with a heart understanding.

The Lord deals with us in order that we may be able to minister in an apt way. His stewards are to be men of understanding, so dealing with each individual as to elicit the exclamation: 'That just fits me! That touches my case! That steward must know by experience what it is like!' The Lord always knows, and He would take us through such experiences as will communicate this kind of knowledge to us, so that we may be capable dispensers of His goodness. The Lord's way of training us is to take us through things first, for who knows better how to help than the one who has already passed through the same suffering?

(2) An Experimental Knowledge of the Resources

Further, the steward has not only to understand the nature of the need to be met, but he must also have a knowledge of the resources from which he is to meet it. He must know the quality of that which is at his command, the nature of it and the values that are in it. Here again, we can never know the values of the things of God unless we have gone through experiences in which we have put them to the test and proved them. No one really knows the value of divine things who has not proved their power in his own life.

The stewardship of the gospel is something more than a New Testament system of truth concerning God's grace. It is something more than a formula of certain truths such as forgiveness of sins, justification by faith, and all the other doctrines of the evangel. The stewardship of the gospel implies that its power has become wrought into the very being of the steward, and that the steward is himself rejoicing in the good of it. Such a steward can come out of the treasure house and meet the household and those beyond, saying: 'I have something here of tremendous value; I am rejoicing in it myself; I know it, and I can assure you that this is not the result of my studies and gleaning from others, but comes from an up-to-date enjoyment of its benefits.'

What is true of the gospel is true of the many-sided mysteries of God. That is another stewardship of which Paul speaks (Colossians 1.25). You and I are led into the mysteries of God, into the depths, to discover those secrets and to come out with the treasures of darkness. We may for a time feel that all seems death and desolation, with poverty and starvation reigning over us, but to come out with treasures from such dark experiences constitutes a man a true steward of God's mysteries. Stewards are men and women who have been through the dark and there discovered divine treasures which they are afterwards able to pass on.

(3) Faithfulness

How much have you to dispense? Are you sure that you are dispensing what you have? The Lord did not lead you through that trial, through that strange experience, just for your own sake. He has not dealt with you as He has in order that you should be shut up to yourself, to enjoy the result alone. He has done what He has to constitute you a steward. If we will only allow that fact to govern us in the days of difficulty and trial, it will help us through. We should hold fast to the fact that the trial is meant to provide enrichment for others and an increase of equipment and qualification for the work of stewardship. There are so many who have a measure of spiritual wealth and are not making it available to others. They have a knowledge of the Lord which has come through experience, and if only they would get alongside of others, they could impart to them some of the blessing and enrichment which they have first received.

Ask the Lord to release you into your stewardship within your measure. I am not thinking of an official, organised service which is artificial and demands of you what you do not have to give, but of the possibility of living contacts which God will give you with others. Children of God may cross your path in dire need, and may all the time be looking for the person who can help them. They may have been crying to the Lord to meet their need, and you may be the one through whom God can answer their prayers. If they cross your path and you only talk about all sorts of ordinary things, then they will pass on their way unmet and you will have failed in your stewardship. How sad if the chosen steward has disappointed those who had cried to the Lord, yes, and disappointed the Lord also!

"It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4.2). He must be faithful, though not necessarily eloquent, intellectual, with a strong personality or any such special gifts. I believe that the greatest virtue in the eyes of God is faithfulness; it embraces everything. Faithfulness is something which is after God's own heart. Look at Paul the steward: "Demas forsook me... all forsook me" (2 Timothy 4.10 and 16) and marvel at his steadfastness. He was left practically alone. He had more enemies than ever. Even some of his former friends seem now to have become enemies. But there is no thought, no suggestion, of giving up. His word is: "faithful unto death". This steward was faithful. It was not that his life was being vindicated up to the hilt. No, in some ways he seemed to be dying as a lonely man. But - as a true steward - he was found faithful.

What enrichment, however, has come to us all because of that faithfulness! All through the centuries men have been profiting from Paul's faithful stewardship through many and deep discouragements. His work still goes on. It is typical of faithful stewardship that the steward may be called away but his stewardship goes on. Faithfulness is always rewarded beyond men's wildest dreams. We must not be downcast, if for the moment our faithfulness involves us in an appearance of apparent failure. Our business is to be good and faithful stewards.

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