

Stewardship of the Gospel (2 Corinthians 4:1-15)

Introduction

Last week we began our series on Stewardship and Jerry explained to us how a Stewardship is something that has **been entrusted to us**. Christian Stewardship in particular involves the **responsibility of God's work through the Church**. So, not only is this stewardship entrusted to believers by God, but it is also **something that we will have to give account for**, because as Jerry pointed out, the things that were entrusted to us were not ours in the first place. As we consider all the various stewardships that God has granted to us: Time, Money, Work, Speech, Relationships and Gifts it seems like most of us here **have a pretty good handle on these**. We at least understand what the Lord requires of us in those areas. However, it seems that very little thought is ever given to the stewardship that is most important of all. **This Stewardship perhaps more than others glorifies God in that it exalts the work of Christ**; it has the potential to: snatch people from the jaws of hell; reconcile men to God; transform lives; transform the world; bring us joy and increase our eternal reward. This... is the Stewardship of the Gospel.

I know it sounds strange to think of the Gospel in that way. So few of us have ever heard people speak of this Stewardship. Time,

Money, Work sure... We know it is important to use those well, but the Gospel is just so... **hard to use** let alone define what it means to use it well. I mean, aren't we supposed to Calvinists? Doesn't God just do his election thing and beam people up into Churches? And I know what you are thinking, "That's just ridiculous. I didn't get beamed up anywhere. I'm here because, Yes, God drew me but because... Someone else was a **faithful steward of the Gospel**."

I want to take this a step further. Why is it that you come to Church, attend 310, partake of ministries, enjoy fellowship, serve other people, pursue holiness, **engage in all the wonderful things** that it means to be a part of the Body? Yes, all these things are **commanded in Scripture** but for what purpose? As our Pastor John has often said these past few months, "The Church doesn't have a missions department, the Church is a mission." More specifically the **Church has taken up the great commission of proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins** in the name of Jesus (Luke 24:47). Jesus said that the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. Everything else that we engage in as believers is subservient to that mission and ultimately for the **purpose of undergirding our proclamation of the gospel with credibility and spiritual integrity**. Our other stewardships too, time, money, etc. ultimately thus become **subservient to our faithfulness to share the Gospel**.

Sometimes people wonder if this Stewardship is only given to the apostles. We know that Paul called himself a steward of the Gospel. Perhaps those who are gifted with evangelism or preaching or teaching should be included in the group of stewards. **But, surely not me?** There are a number of places where we could go to show that is not the case but perhaps the most striking is what Jesus said of himself. Jesus said that He was the light of the world and whoever believed in him would not walk in darkness (John 12:46). For us as believers we know what it is like to be freed from the darkness and gloom of our sin, the guilt it brings and our inability to overcome it. And yet when **Christ shines his light into our lives, that darkness is chased away** by the certainty we have that we are forgiven and can rest in His payment of our sins.

Again he says in John 9:5, “As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world.” What does He mean by as long as I am in the world? Who would continue to show the light? It is to us that he says, “**You are the light of the world.** A city on a hill cannot be hidden”. And again, “Let your light shine before men so that they may glorify your father in heaven. (Mat 5:14-16)” Having been made new in Christ, we have been made lights, ones that proclaim salvation in Christ, ones that cannot be hidden, and ones that do so before men, in order that they may glorify God. ***The moment we accepted Christ we were made stewards of the Gospel. The only***

thing in question is how faithful we will be in using that which has been entrusted to us.

Living in a darkened and sin-cursed world there lies the **possibility that we may fail to shine.** This is why in being entrusted with this Stewardship we ought to **carefully guard our exercise of it.** Paul proved to be an example of careful stewardship of the Gospel even in the midst of severe affliction, so we turn to our passage in 2 Corinthians 4:1-15 to draw out seven principles that must guide our Stewardship of the Gospel. **[READ the passage]**

1. Our stewardship can be exercised with Courage

¹*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.*

The Corinthian church had proven to be a difficult church for Paul to minister among. Along with a list of sinful practices they had fallen into, **they seemed also to not think much of Paul.** In fact despite his concern over them and his ministry amongst them, they thought that because he would not charge them for his ministry, that it was inferior to those who went about charging for theirs. This obviously caused Paul much heartache... especially because he chose to work hard so that he would not be a burden to the Corinthian Church.

Despite the difficulties that he faced he understood that this was **no excuse for him to behave badly by losing heart**. Have a look at verse 1. My mentor used to say when he would preach, if you see “Therefore” ask what it is “there for”? Here it seems that there are **three things** that Paul is considering as reasons **not to lose courage** as we exercise the stewardship of the gospel. Firstly, in 2 Cor. 2:16 he acknowledges that the message that we preach is **life to some and death to others**. Thus by the very nature of the message that we preach some will react as though what we had to say was as pungent as a corpse. Do not be shocked when people run away as fast as they can. Secondly, in 2 Cor. 3:7-17, Paul finds courage in the fact that the Gospel of Christ was far better than the Law of Moses. This was because it was enabled through the work of the Spirit, who transforms people through the preaching of the Gospel and makes them grow in righteousness. Instead of having to depend on a person’s ability to keep the law, **we know that Spirit has the ability to transform**. Thirdly, Paul found comfort in the Spirit’s work in his own life, who by transforming him into the likeness of Christ **brought credibility to the message that he preached**.

Over and over again Paul found courage in the fact that his faithfulness to be a **good steward was not dependent upon his ability**. Instead, Salvation is a work of the Spirit. All Paul had to be faithful **to do was to preach the gospel**. He refers to having received

this stewardship by the mercy of God. He personally understood the transforming power of the Gospel in the hardest of hearts. He had so much hatred for Christians that he had persecuted them and yet by the mercy of God he had been entrusted now with the same stewardship. He was a **living example** that even in the face of severe persecution that God had the power to **transform the persecutor**. I know how difficult it is to share the gospel, most times it is our fear of being able to say the right thing, answer all the questions or deal with whatever such encounters will bring up. But we can take courage in the fact that **the power of the Gospel does not lie in the one who brings it**.

Illustration - Thorpe

“George Whitfield was hounded by a group of detractors who called themselves the ‘Hell-fire Club’. When Whitfield would stand outside preaching this little group of guys would stand off on the side and mimic him. They didn’t believe a word of it. The ring leader was called Thorpe. One day Thorpe was mimicking Whitfield to his cronies, delivering his sermon with brilliant accuracy, perfectly imitating his tone and his facial expressions, when he himself was so pierced that he sat down and was converted on the spot.”

2. Our stewardship should affect our Conduct

²But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

The Corinthian Church had been swayed by false apostles who had resorted to changing the content of the Gospel in order to make the **message more palatable**. Besides that they also had resorted to manipulating the people that heard them so that they would more easily accept the message that they taught. Paul despite the success that these men had in turning the Corinthians away from him **understood the dangers associated with preaching a different Gospel**: that it was no Good news at all and that those who accepted it still stood under the wrath of God. He personally understood that it is **only God's word that brings life**.

Secondly, Paul **refused to bait people into accepting** His message. Paul understood that the truth was the only thing that could **activate a person's conscience** and that by correctly responding they would be saved. It's just that simple. Tricks or gimmicks are not necessary. We are further reminded that everything we **proclaim is done in the sight of God** and for that we will one day give account. So as we carry forth the Gospel our conduct ought to be guided by a desire to please God more so than

a desire to find favor in men's eyes. In other words we should not be so **overly concerned about people's reception of the Gospel that it would affect that which we proclaim**. Matthew 7:22 is a reminder that there will be many on judgment day, who were converts to a false gospel. Consider this excerpt from a book on effective soul winning:

“Lay your hand firmly on the subject's shoulder (or arm) and with a semi-commanding tone of voice, say to him: ‘Bow your head with me.’ Note: Do not look at him when you say this, bow your head first. Out of the corner of your eye you will see him hesitate at first. Then, as his resistance crumbles, his head will come down. Your hand on his shoulder will feel the relaxation and you will know when his heart yields. Bowing your head first, causes terrific psychological pressure.”

Our churches are filled with many people who have been converted by terrific psychological pressure. So many people are looking for love that we ought to be careful to ensure that **our love for others is always girded by the truth of the gospel**. We must acknowledge that the Gospel is **not deficient** in any way for the purpose of bringing people unto salvation. **You cannot win a crowd!** However, that is not an excuse for us to ignore everything that we learn at church that lends credibility to our sharing the gospel, but give the gospel the right priority.

3. Our Stewardship should make a Concession

³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

As much as Peter commands us to be ready to give reason for our faith we must acknowledge the fact that there are some people **we will never be able to reach**. I know the tendency there is for us to become discouraged when people do not respond. But we must remember that most People will not respond to the sharing of the Gospel because they **have been blinded by Satan**. Thus, consciences will remain unaffected by the truth we have to proclaim. Some people are simply content to serve their own desires as god and no amount of persuasion can change that. This is because Satan specifically blinds people's minds, so that they are **unable to accept the truth and attractiveness of the Gospel**. And they are not unfairly targeted: **Unbelief always precedes blindness**. All Satan is able to do is to further entrench people in their unbelief by numbing their senses to the reality of God.

The fact that Satan targets the mind serves to reinforce our **resolve in the Stewardship of the Gospel to proclaim the truth**. Yes we must be compassionate. Yes we must be prepared to give a reason for our faith. But we also must be prepared to acknowledge

that even if we had all of Scripture memorized, and had the answers to give to any question that an unbeliever could ask, that salvation is ultimately a work of God. Unbelievers will not be able to see the light no matter how hard we try. Too often we are petrified of not being able to answer the questions we may be asked when all that is **vital is a simple proclamation of the Gospel**. Let me encourage you by this: all who have been granted the stewardship of the Gospel already have the **knowledge that enables** us to be faithful in carrying it out. We simply proclaim what we have believed! I do not want to mislead anyone in saying that though. Continue to love and study the scripture, read good books, do whatever is necessary to gird your proclamation with integrity. Do not neglect doing the good that you already do, but do not assume you need to arrive at some level before you can share the gospel. God is more than **capable of filling in where our stuttering lips fail us**.

The Master Artist and the two art students

This can be likened to a Master Artist who tells his students to paint the Mona Lisa. He quickly adds, all I want you to do is try and draw her, and if you do I will be able to perfect it and make a Mona Lisa. So the first student happily starts drawing outlines. Some are better than the others and he keeps handing over knowing that the Master is able to make it perfect. While the other sits petrified at the

thought that what he has to complete is beyond his ability. Too petrified by his own lack he fails to complete the assignment.

4. Our Stewardship should be Christ-Exalting

⁵*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.*

As we have spent time covering the first 3 principles concerning our stewardship of the Gospel, I'm sure it has become clear that one of the primary concerns we have in effectively sharing the Gospel is that **we feel exposed in doing so**. "What will they think of me?" So, the temptation is there for us to do it in such a way that we can look good in sharing it. But as we have said before that it is not too far a step before what we proclaim is **compromised by such concerns**. Faced by similar a similar temptation Paul emphatically proclaims that there is no greater solution to an undue concern for ourselves than **to be exalting Christ as we carry out this stewardship**. Can I let you in on a secret that will forever change the way you evangelize? It is just this... the Christian loves to proclaim the gospel because **they want to worship God**. In that moment all else fades away. Every time we proclaim the gospel we are not simply nor primarily doing it because unbelievers need to hear the gospel, but because **the Gospel both contains and proclaims the glory of Christ**. In Christ

we see God's fullest expression of His mercy, holiness, justice, love and grace.

Instead of being overly concerned for what people may think of us, we can simply proclaim the **Excellencies of Christ** as we reflect upon his saving work upon our own lives and through that see blind eyes opened. For all the attacks that Paul had faced he chose not to defend himself but instead exalt Christ. In exalting Christ as Lord we proclaim:

- that he was **God in flesh**
- that He is **supreme** over all
- that He **rose from the dead and defeated** the powers of evil in doing so, thus giving us hope of resurrection;
- we epitomize the Christian message as **we become obedient** to His Lordship
- All of which adds up to a **public declaration of faith**.

So, convinced was Paul of Christ's sovereignty that **he obligated himself to the service of others** by the proclamation of the gospel. We simply can avoid many of the temptations and fears we face in being an effective Steward of the Gospel if we simply view this **stewardship as an expression of Christ's Lordship over us**. Yes we are to serve others through this stewardship but doing so in every way **for the Lord's sake**. As Calvin commented, "He who would preach Christ alone must of necessity forget self."

5. Our Stewardship follows our Conversion

⁶For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

Paul here proceeds to give some insight into what it is that had motivated him to preach the gospel, in spite of the adversity he had faced from the Corinthian church. He shows in verse 6 that it is because God had dispelled the darkness from his own heart by illuminating it with the gospel that **he wished to share that light with all he could**. As a Jew, Paul zealously persecuted Christians thinking that he was serving God. He strove to be obedient to the law so that he would be pleasing to God. But then it was on the Damascus road upon seeing the risen Christ that he fully came to understand that Jesus had taken on flesh and dwelt among us in order that He would meet God’s requirements of Holiness and Justice. Thus, Paul understood that the blood of goats and lambs was unable to take away sin, only the risen Christ could. As our Pastor John says there are only two religions in this world: that of divine accomplishment and that of human achievement. Only one of them satisfies God. Having seen such light he was responsible to share that light with all who still remained under God’s wrath.

Verse 6 parallels the creation account and shows us that the **God who created the universe and light itself is the one who takes it upon Himself to redeem mankind**. In doing so He makes a new creation. He **drives away the darkness of ignorance, guilt and fear** as He makes known Christ by flooding our hearts with the light of knowledge. Thus, we have become **observers of God’s sovereign power**. Everyone who believes has seen God’s ability to work first-hand and not only that they have been given the knowledge by which that transformation comes about **readily available to their mouths**.

One of the tragedies of the Christian life is that we do not view this message as the treasure that it is. We become too familiar with the blessings of being made new and being reconciled to God that **we fail to remember** just how profound it is that God shone light into our heart and pierced the darkness that clouded our souls. I remember what it was like when I first became a Christian, it was almost as though I was giddy with joy. I wanted to tell everyone. And I did... to my whole class at the same time. Boy did that end badly. So, eventually I became content to just live in this state, the others didn’t seem to want it anyway, so **I figured it would be ok to enjoy it for myself**. But it wasn’t long before my poor stewardship of the gospel began to **affect my walk**. Yes, this treasure resides within us: this gospel, the knowledge of the glory of God in Jesus Christ. But, it

is not ours to keep but rather **we have been made trustees of it. Stewards of the treasure**, in other words. We are not to be Gollum. Hunched over this “precious” that we have, totally unaware of how much that treasure has the ability to change the world, much like it could have in Middle-earth. We like Gollum risk unhealthy preoccupations with this treasure when we do not allow it to be used in a way that others can benefit.

Verse 7 reminds us that we are simply jars of clay. As much as we are trustees of the Gospel, we are reminded that **our limitations present no barrier to the purposes of God**. In fact whatever weaknesses we may have in being effective stewards allows all the more opportunity for **God’s power to be made in perfect in us**.

6. Our Stewardship requires that we be Cross-Carriers

⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Paul reminds us that those who would exercise the Stewardship of the Gospel will have to **count the cost of doing so**. Not only was His ministry to the Corinthians full of trials but wherever he sought to be faithful to preach the Gospel he was **forced to pay the price** of

his faithfulness. One of the greatest fears that any believer has when it comes to exercising this stewardship is the **suffering we know that comes along with it**. This should not surprise us: Jesus made it really clear that if they hated him they would hate us too. Scripture however makes it just as clear that this is not simply as a result of the world’s hatred that we must endure, but **God redeems it for His purposes**. James 1:2-3 reminds us that we can be joyful in the midst of trials **because it produces faithfulness**.

But we are never left alone through our trials. I know that some of you now are going through some really difficult trials. However what Paul experienced through his trials is an encouragement to us. Though afflicted in every way **God was sustaining Paul so that both his life and his spirit would be preserved**. So Paul was Hampered on every side yes... but without room to breathe no. At a loss... but not lost. We are persecuted by men... but never abandoned by God. Acts 16:16-40 reminds us of how Paul was delivered through an earthquake after exorcising a slave girl. **We are knocked to the ground... but never grounded**. Acts 14:19-20 reminds of how God miraculously preserved Paul when he was stoned and literally struck to the ground, dragged away to die and through the help of the church Paul was ready to go the next day! This is **not God’s power replacing our weakness, but God’s power being experienced in**

human weakness. Philippians 3:10 reminds us that participation in Christ's sufferings brings conformity to His death.

In verses 10 and 11 Paul reminds us that we in our suffering have the opportunity to present the risen Christ. Firstly by our sufferings we present that Christ too suffered on their behalf. And secondly, by our response to our suffering we are able **to present the power of the risen Christ in our lives.** Please, do not make the mistake of thinking that all suffering is a sign that God is displeased with you, for it is more likely an **opportunity for God to engage you.**

Suffering in this life is a constant reminder that **this is not our home.** We do not become believers with the promise of a better life now. In fact the more our lives are wracked by the pain of suffering and our **patient endurance thereof,** the more people will see in open display not only the suffering of Christ but also His resurrection life. Such a display is compelling.

Illustration - Joseph the Masai Warrior

One day Joseph, who was walking along one of these hot, dirty African roads, met someone who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with him. Then and there he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. The power of the Spirit began transforming his life; he was filled with such excitement and joy that the first thing he wanted to do was return to his own village and share that same Good News with the members of his local tribe.

Joseph began going from door-to-door, telling everyone he met about the Cross [suffering!] of Jesus and the salvation it offered, expecting to see their faces light up the way his had. To his amazement the villagers not only didn't care, they became violent. The men of the village seized him and held him to the ground while the women beat him with strands of barbed wire. He was dragged from the village and left to die alone in the bush.

Joseph somehow managed to crawl to a water hole, and there, after days of passing in and out of consciousness, found the strength to get up. He wondered about the hostile reception he had received from people he had known all his life. He decided he must have left something out or told the story of Jesus incorrectly. After rehearsing the message he had first heard, he decided to go back and share his faith once more.

Joseph limped into the circle of huts and began to proclaim Jesus. "He died for you, so that you might find forgiveness and come to know the living God" he pleaded. Again he was grabbed by the men of the village and held while the women beat him reopening wounds that had just begun to heal. Once more they dragged him unconscious from the village and left him to die.

To have survived the first beating was truly remarkable. To live through the second was a miracle. Again, days later, Joseph awoke in the wilderness, bruised, scarred—and determined to go back.

He returned to the small village and this time, they attacked him before he had a chance to open his mouth. As they flogged him for the third and probably the last time, he again spoke to them of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Before he passed out, the last thing he saw was that the women who were beating him began to weep.

This time he awoke in his own bed. The ones who had so severely beaten him were now trying to save his life and nurse him back to health. The entire village had come to Christ.

7. We are compelled by hope and for God's glory

¹³Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, ¹⁴knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Although suffering was a part and parcel of Paul's ministry, faith in God and in the Gospel cannot but lead to the proclamation of the Good news, the open declaration of truth. Paul makes a logical conclusion for those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ: we must also speak.

Faith is such an amazing thing. We seem to often misunderstand what application this can have in our lives. For every good thing that Adam and Eve had before the fall, walking around in the most perfect garden, having the best food, carrying the best bodies ever, we have the one thing that **Adam lacked in his pre-fall existence: certainty.**

We have certainty that will one day see the Lord. We have certainty that God has forgiven our sins. We have certainty that we will spend an eternity with Him. We have certainty that we will be raised from the dead. Adam's continued perfection was based on his

obedience to the command. **Our perfection is based on Christ's.** Since we believe... Let us also speak!

The purpose of our proclamation is clear in verse 15. Yes, it is for the believer, who as they see the gospel accepted by more and more people are given the opportunity to be thankful. **But primarily the reason for all of our proclamation is that God would be glorified.** All of human history is heading towards the moment when God will glorify His son, and every knee will bow. Let us join in with that purpose by proclaiming Jesus as Lord and being faithful stewards of the Gospel.

Conclusion

All of human history people have tried to figure out what God wants...

Jesus said that we are the light of the world, a city on a hill that could not be hidden. A light that was lit was not to be covered up. The reason we have been made lights is to ultimately bring glory to God, when men see our good works. Luke 6:45 reminds us *45The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*

What is in your heart?