

Stewards of Grace

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 7th of November 1999.

The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled Stewards of Grace and is from 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 1 to 21.

Father help us to understand this passage, help us to be alert and willing to live out its teaching in our lives for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We've recently had a state election where we've seen two very different models of leadership displayed by the major parties, haven't we? Mr. Kennett's leadership has been described as arrogant and it was centred around him.

But he was certainly an achiever. And like him or not, he has made a very significant contribution during his time as Premier of Victoria.

[1 : 13] Now Mr. Brack's leadership has been more open, consultative and accountable to the people. And it's this style of leadership, I think, that has enabled him and his party to govern this state over the next four years.

Now people have become tired of one style of leadership, Mr. Kennett's leadership, if you like, and so embraced a new style of leadership.

And I think that was something that the ad campaign went on about, a new style of leadership or something. And perhaps this is a factor that brought about the unexpected change of government in Victoria.

Well, I'm not here to make a political speech or to show you who my political leanings are or any of that. I'm just trying to compare and contrast leadership.

And with so many different styles of leadership around, I want to ask us, what is the question, what is a model of Christian leadership that we as Christians should strive for?

[2 : 11] Should it be a style of leadership that is autocratic or consultative? Or should it be something that is personality driven or that is a leadership that is a person centred one and so on?

And these were perhaps some of the problems that the Corinthian church faced. And as a result, created some rifts within that church. Now, the Apostle Paul seeks to correct this problem in the first few chapters of 1 Corinthians by telling them that they should not follow one or other of the Christian leaders that have visited the church of Corinth.

All that seeks to do is make Christian ministry person centred. But making Christian ministry person centred, though, is not what I would call Christian ministry.

It's only behaving as the world behaves. That is, it seeks to put someone above the other. And Paul seeks to correct the wrong notion of Christian leadership by getting the Corinthian church to see those Christian leaders that have visited them as, firstly, as verse 1 tells of this passage, servants of Christ.

And secondly, stewards of God's mysteries. Now, these Christians who have visited the Corinthian church are people that we know of in this passage.

[3 : 40] The Apostle Paul himself, who wrote this letter, Apollos and Cephas, who is better known as Peter. And these people who have visited the church are not people whom you serve, but are rather people who serve you.

And the word for servant literally means an under rower. That is, someone who is simply responding to a higher authority and doing his job.

And these people, Paul, Apollos and Cephas, came as servants of Jesus Christ, doing his will and serving his people, God's people.

In chapter 3 last week, I wasn't here, but you would have heard in verse 6 of chapter 3, Paul says, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

Now, the second word that is in this is that they are stewards. And that's a fairly common word in the New Testament. And it was a housekeeper or an overseer.

[4 : 50] It was often a slave. And that person was charged with providing the establishment of a large estate with food and all things necessary to keep that house running, I guess.

And this steward was responsible not to his fellows, to his fellow workers, but to his lord, the one who had given him the commission. And he wasn't expected to exercise his own initiative, still less his own personal authority.

He simply did his master's work and looked after his master's affairs. Now, I was trying to think of a good analogy. And I think the Brady Bunch, if you've ever watched that, is perhaps a good analogy. Alice, who is the housekeeper, she does the shopping, she runs the house, and she looks after all of those sorts of things. And that's the kind of notion I think we're trying to get at with the word stewards here.

And so Paul sees himself, as well as Apollos and Kephas, as servants of Christ and stewards, or perhaps caretakers, of God's mysteries.

[5 : 59] Now, what are God's mysteries? Put simply, Paul is referring to the gospel message that has been entrusted to him and the other Christians to impart to others. And the Christian gospel, of course, is the message of Jesus Christ, of how he came into the world, how he lived a life, how he died on the cross, rose from the dead, and that through him we have salvation and an inheritance in the kingdom of God.

Now, because Paul is a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God, he makes it very clear to these Corinthians that he is concerned, that he is unconcerned, I should say, about any judgment that they may make about him or any judgment that he may make about himself.

Why does he say this? Because in the end, there is only one true judge. And friends, that's not his conscience, as Walt Disney has tried to tell us through that movie Pinocchio years ago, which Jiminy Cricket said, always let your conscience be your guide.

He says it's not that. That's not his judge. For all people, our judge is the Lord, as verse 4 tells us. It is the Lord who judges me.

There is only one judge, and that judge is God. Often Christians get downhearted because someone has judged them to be wrong about something they have either said or done.

[7 : 36] And it's wrong for us to pronounce judgment on someone without all the evidence being out on the table. Now, I think it's right and proper to correct and even admonish someone who offers false teaching or heresy.

And it's also quite right to offer discipline on various matters pertaining to someone's Christian faith. But it's wrong to pronounce a final judgment on anyone.

That job is up to the Lord. And it's up to God, or to the Lord, because he knows everything about each and every one of us. Verse 5 says, tells us that he, God, will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Only God knows a person's heart. I don't know what any of you are thinking out there. Only God knows that, and he does know that. So he is the only one who has the right to judge.

Paul's warning here to the Corinthians ought also be a warning to us. We are to confront those who are sinning as well.

[8 : 56] We are to confront those who are sinning, as we shall see next week when we look at chapter 5. But we must not judge who is a better servant for Christ. And that's what the Corinthian Christians seem to be doing here with Apollos and Paul, as well as Kephas and perhaps any other parties which we're following.

It's also worth pointing out that when you do judge someone, you invariably consider yourself better than that person. And that's arrogant.

That's pure arrogance, I think. And sadly, I think that that is a trap that we as evangelical Christians invariably fall into, and one which we need to be wary of from time to time.

So this is a reminder then for all of us who are Christians, whether it's in paid Christian work, or whether it's out there in the secular world, or whatever we're doing as Christians. When exercising Christian leadership, we need to remember that we are servants of Jesus Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

That is the Christian gospel. We serve God by doing what he has asked each of us to do, and we proclaim the one true gospel. That is the gospel message that has been handed down to each of us

through the scriptures, through what we understand through the scriptures, and the teaching of the apostles.

[10 : 23] And the reason that we are faithful to God's word is that it is God who will judge us. So we are obedient to him, not to human beings.

Now in verses 6 to 7, Paul applies this teaching on Christian leadership to Apollos and himself for the benefit of these Corinthian Christians. And he sort of goes on to say that they are servants and stewards.

Let me read verses 6 and 7 again. I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, nothing beyond what is written, so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another.

For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? Paul has a deep concern for these Corinthian Christians.

And he wants to see that they themselves, that they have themselves firmly rooted in the Christian gospel that he and Apollos have passed on to them. Not one group following Apollos or one group following Paul, but being obedient to the gospel message that they have both proclaimed while in Corinth.

[11 : 47] You see, it is the message of the gospel that brings us salvation and into a relationship with God. And it's not the person who speaks the gospel.

It is the message of the gospel, not the person. Sure, there does need to be people to proclaim the gospel message and in a powerful way.

But they must retreat so that the gospel and the spirit of God is allowed to do its work. If they don't, the danger is that the speaker becomes the focus of the listener's belief.

Let me illustrate this for you. When I was young, which was last year, I grew up in a youth group that was a bit younger than go. And this youth group that I was in had around about 300 people in it. And on reflection, it was a person-driven youth group. The speaker, the leader, he was fantastic. He had some fantastic messages.

[12 : 52] And every week, he would bring us a great message and we loved to listen to it. Everyone always wanted to be in this person's group for either the games or the Bible studies because he was a charismatic kind of personality.

And when we went on camps, we all wanted to be in his room because he would have some great stories and jokes and, you know, we learnt how to live, I think.

And when he preached, the crowd swelled. This place would be full. And during those years, it was a boom time. It was great.

We thought, we were really doing well. This guy was fantastic. But when he left, so did a lot of the youth group. Now, if I had been the next youth leader there, I would have been terribly disheartened because the numbers of the youth group really died.

They went to below 100 in a very short time. I don't think it was anything that the next person did. It was just because of the personality of this person.

[14 : 06] Why the big change? It was because the people, that's youth group, were not firmly rooted in the Christian gospel. They were more interested in hearing the speaker, laughing at his great stories, and in a sense, idolizing him rather than focusing on the gospel message and letting it transform their lives.

And in a sense, this youth group had gone beyond what was written. We had put our trust into a person rather than the gospel message. And when he left, St. Peter's was left floundering.

And the new guy had a lot of pieces to pick up. And I think this is what Paul is saying here.

Put your trust in the gospel. Be obedient to the gospel. Apollos and myself are servants and stewards of that gospel.

And by being obedient to it, to the gospel, you will not argue over whom you should follow, whether it's Apollos, myself or any other person.

[15 : 19] Be obedient to the gospel. Now for anyone who is exercising Christian leadership, that is a key thing to consider. We all like to have people surround us.

And it builds us up. But it's far more important that we are serving people and building them up in a better understanding of the gospel message.

And that is done through teaching as well as through modelling, the modelling of our own Christian lives. We, as Christian leaders, are representatives of Christ.

We are servants of Christ. And we have nothing to offer that God hasn't given us. Sometimes we do think it is us, but we've got nothing to offer that God has given us.

All our gifts and our talents are given to us by God. And we ought to be helping people see their gifts and talents are given to them by the same God and getting people to recognise that.

[16:20] As well, we ought to be encouraging people to use their gifts for the service of God in whatever capacity they can.

Not boasting about their talents, but being servants and stewards of these gifts and talents that are within their grasp. And we don't want to compete against each other.

I'm not sure whether competition is really the right thing to have in Christian ministry. We need to learn to work together as the body of Christ, each part doing its bit to build up the body.

Now this morning we had a sermon from 1 Corinthians chapter 12 which is all about the body of Christ. I can only encourage you to get that tape to help you understand what it means to be part of the body of Christ.

It was an excellent sermon and it was easy to understand. So order it, listen to it and see what it means where you can place your part in the body of Christ.

[17:22] Now in the city of Corinth there was a boasting amongst the Christians. These Christian Corinthians were under the conviction that they were really a very successful, lively, mature, spiritual and effective church.

The Christians were satisfied with their spirituality, with their leadership and the general quality of their life together. And they had settled down in a way in the illusion that they had become the best that they could be.

In other words these people thought that they had arrived if you can put it in that sort of terminology. Now Paul goes on in verse 8 and he speaks ironically to draw out this particular point.

He says already you have all you want. Already you have become rich. Now there's a sense that what Paul says here is true.

You see when someone becomes a Christian they enter into God's blessings straight away don't they? They become if you like inheritors of heaven.

[18:40] They become inheritors of heaven. But the reality is that they are not in heaven are they? that's a glorious future that awaits God's people.

And Paul goes on to acknowledge that he too would love to share in that inheritance right here and now. He says I wish that you had become kings so that we might be kings with you.

He would love to be beyond all the persecution, the batterings, the depression and the sheer slog of being fools for Christ as verse 10 says. They may have arrived but he hasn't.

They reckon they are strong but he is all too aware of his weakness. They may boast on their reputations and respectability in worldly society but Paul is mocked and scorned by the world. Paul is a true servant of Christ and for his sake he has become, as verse 13 tells us, like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things to this very day.

[19:54] The NIV Bible says he has become the scum of the earth for the sake of the gospel. Paul knows that he has the inheritance of God's kingdom awaiting him but the unending glory of it, of heaven, is something that is in the future.

Right now though, there is joy in his ministry. He writes in Philippians about the joy that he gets from knowing of his Philippian brothers and sisters and there is also suffering in his ministry.

And friends, that is the nature of Christian ministry. That is the nature of what it means to be a Christian. There is joy and there is suffering. There are joyful times and there are tough times.

But there are so many people who are like these Corinthian Christians and no doubt there are some of you here tonight. People who put aside authentic Christian living to protect their own status, their own reputation and popularity in this world.

And that's wrong. all that seeks to do is make us more worldly and live for the here and now, idolizing our health, idolizing our money, idolizing the material possessions we have, idolizing education, whatever it might be.

[21:17] We get caught up with the here and now rather than awaiting the prize for all who serve God through the Lord Jesus Christ. One person writes on this particular passage that we are like kings and paupers.

He says Christians are at one and the same time both kings and paupers. That is, it is the authentic Christian experience to be wealthy in Christ and yet despised by the world.

we never reach our perfect bliss here. We shall not have perfect health. We shall not have instant guidance. We shall not be in constant beautiful contact with the Lord.

We are still human. We are still in the world. We are still mortal. We are still exposed to sin, the world, the flesh and the devil.

We must still wrestle and watch and pray. We shall still fall and fail. But he goes on and says, there is victory, there is power, there is healing, there is guidance, there is salvation.

[22 : 37] But we have not yet arrived. We live, if you like, in two worlds and there must therefore be tension. Paul describes the true situation in these terms from Philipians 1.

it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake. Christians indeed are kings and paupers in this world.

well in verses 14 to 21 Paul continues on and he admonishes or he counsels these Corinthian Christians about their behaviour.

And he's able to do so because we are told in verse 15, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. That is, he is the earthly father who had founded the church and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ to these people.

He was their founder. And he was the one who originally pointed them to godly living. Now, many of those whom he had brought to Christ back in Corinth were acting in an arrogant and boastful way.

[23 : 58] They were writing him off as well as his ministry and were creating division within the church in Corinth. So like any good father who has the best interest of his child at heart, Paul too has the best interest of these people, his beloved children at heart.

And that is why he admonishes them. He then goes on to give them an example of how to live as Christians. Verse 16, be imitators of me.

And he doesn't say to become a follower of him. He says be imitators of me. If he said to become a follower of him, that would contradict everything that he has just said beforehand.

All he wants them to do is imitate him so that they in turn may learn to imitate Jesus. So for the Corinthians to imitate Paul means to be servants of Jesus Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. it's nothing more and it's nothing less. To imitate the Apostle Paul meant for the Corinthian Christians to walk close to God.

[25 : 14] It meant spending time in prayer and study and the study of God's word. It meant to be aware of God's presence in their lives at all times. It meant that they would be suffering for the sake of the Christian gospel.

people. It meant that they would be talking, proclaiming and testifying about the power of the kingdom of God. God. This is 1999, nearly 2,000 years on, and there is no lesser task demanded from each one of us today.

The model of Christian leadership that Paul talks about in this passage is valid for all time. It's not a leadership which we might like to take hold of for a little while and then transfer to another style of leadership.

This is a model of Christian leadership that is valid for all time, not just on the odd occasion. And that model is this, that we are to be servants of the Lord Jesus Christ and that we are to be stewards or caretakers of God's mysteries, the Christian gospel, proclaiming the one true Christian gospel that has been handed down to us through the scriptures.

scriptures. Do we imitate the apostle Paul in this matter or are we imitating the Corinthian Christians and Paul rightly admonished?

[26 : 48] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.