

Trustworthy Stewards

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father in heaven, we thank you and we praise you because you have sent Jesus to be with us and he will come again in glory.

We pray that you give us humility as we hear your word this morning. We ask that you would shape our lives in the light of the coming of Jesus. In his name we pray.

Amen. Please be seated. We're continuing our break from Genesis by looking at 1 Corinthians 4.

And as you're turning back to that first reading that we heard, I want to say something about Advent because as David said, Advent is very much crowded out in our society around us.

My son Alexander, who's four, was very excited to see everything decorated for Christmas at the bay. I think it was Labor Day. And he's been asking us ever since then, is today Christmas?

[1 : 02] For three months. So I want to talk about Advent a little bit. It is a season that means coming. And it is a season of preparing for the celebration of the coming of Jesus at Bethlehem.

But also Advent is a lot about thinking of the future second coming of Jesus in glory when he comes to judge the world. And that's why when we see the themes of Advent, we hear about Jesus' judgment.

And it is something that changes us. It's good for us. Every Sunday we actually speak of the themes of Advent when we say we believe that Jesus was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man. We also said Jesus shall come again with glory to come again to judge the quick and the dead. You see, we are actually every day, every Sunday, thinking about the themes of Advent which are central to our Christian life.

So it's an important season. It is a season in which we actually take inventory of our lives in the light of those two great truths. Jesus has come to save us and be our Lord and he will come again in glory that all the world will see to judge the world.

[2 : 20] So Advent calls us to take time to consider how do those truths change my life every day? Change what I do and what I think.

How might they change my priorities to know these truths? Well, so it's a very healthy spiritual exercise to be part of Advent because we're thinking particularly about what the nearness of Jesus means to our lives.

And so that's why this reading from Corinthians was chosen. It was chosen in the first prayer book in 1549 as the reading for the third Sunday of Advent.

And it was chosen because in that reading we see Paul's life shaped very directly by Jesus' future coming in glory to judge him.

And his aim, if you look at verse 6, Paul's aim is that we might learn how this is applied to his life. So I just want to look briefly at the profound effect that Jesus coming again has on Paul's life and what he is all about.

[3 : 32] Well, right away on verse 1 we see that it shapes Paul's identity. Verse 1 says, This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

And you see what Paul is saying here. He is saying right away, right up front, that he is a servant of Christ Jesus. There's a deep humility about this position.

That word for servant means that he belongs to Christ first of all and he does immediately what Jesus commands him to do. That's who he is.

And secondly, he says that he is a steward of the mysteries of God. And in that culture that Paul was in, a steward was somebody who was an educated slave who had the job of distributing money and goods on behalf of the owner of a farm or on behalf of the master of an extended household.

And so Paul says that I am entrusted with the job of distributing the mysteries of God, of passing it out. That's what I'm all about. And we need to know what are the mysteries of God.

[4 : 49] You know, we read mysteries, murder mysteries and mystery novels and we think of a puzzle that has not been figured out when we read them. But that is not the definition of mystery in the New Testament.

What Paul means by mystery is that the plan of salvation, which was hidden since the beginning of time, is now revealed. So the mystery is actually something that is revealed in the New Testament. Throughout the Old Testament, promises were made looking forward to a day when God would deliver his people, when he would very powerfully come to save them. But those who heard that message did not know how that would happen.

In faith, as we've been hearing in the Genesis series, they received the promises and looked for the fulfillment of that promise, but did not see it.

But of course, in Jesus, that hidden plan has been made completely clear and open. It's clearly shown to everyone who hears someone speak about Jesus who died on a cross for the forgiveness of sins and rose again in power.

[6 : 06] The mystery is made clear and open. And so Paul is saying that like a steward, he has been entrusted with the treasure of the revelation of the good news of Jesus.

And he is all about giving away that revelation to other people. And because that revelation is so precious, the thing that he has been entrusted with is so valuable, he says in verse 2, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

In other words, he is saying that stewards have to give away exactly what has been given to them. That's a critical point because there were unscrupulous stewards just as there are unscrupulous investment brokers now.

That they would take a cut of what was given to them, skim it off the top. But being trustworthy means giving the whole gospel away, not just parts of it and keeping part of it.

It means being completely clear about the revelation of Jesus and not distorting it or watering it down in any way. And really, this is the job description that Paul is mentioning of every pastor in every church in the world.

[7 : 27] We had a preacher a couple of years ago, a couple of summers ago, Dr. Bruce Winter, who often gives weekends for clergy. And one of the things that he says is that this sermon or this passage that we're hearing about today is a passage that every clergy person should preach at a new church that he goes to.

And that they should, and this passage should be the passage that is clear right from the very beginning for every pastor. And that's because pastors and churches are often very confused about what their primary role is and needs to be made clear.

You know, are they at an administrator or a chair of meeting or an inspiring speaker or leader? Are they a counselor or a fundraiser or a service leader?

Well, Paul is clear here that a pastor should first of all be a servant of Christ who takes care of the treasure that he has been entrusted with, the treasure of the gospel.

And like a trustworthy steward, their job is to be completely faithful to that revelation of Jesus. And in case you're thinking, well, that's the clergy's job, this has implications for every person in the church who hears the gospel.

[8 : 50] Because in receiving it, we suddenly become stewards as well. Because the nature of that treasure that Paul's talking about is that it is not ours to keep.

We are all called to be trustworthy in giving away what we have received, to give that revelation away. And you know, the church in Corinth had to learn this because the qualities they wanted to see in Paul were very different from that job description that is here in verses 1 and 2.

Very different. They were very proud of their spiritual gifts. They were attracted to people who were great public speakers and who were charismatic leaders. They wanted to hear impressive wisdom spoken by teachers, even if they were preaching another gospel.

And so Paul did not make the grade. In fact, in chapter 2, he's brutally honest about himself. He says, when I first came to you, I was not eloquent.

I did not have superior wisdom. I came in weakness and with much trembling. He says, my message and my preaching were not with wise or persuasive words.

[10 : 04] Well, I have to say that if Paul was applying to any church in Vancouver and he put that in his cover letter, I can guarantee he would not be hired.

Nobody would want him. They would want nothing to do with him. He wouldn't have the qualities that they were looking for. But you know, Paul says that in his deficiency, there was a demonstration of God's power.

That's what the beginning of chapter 2 says to us. A demonstration of God's power because, why? Because he faithfully preached Jesus Christ and him crucified.

In other words, God changed hearts and minds and lives shaped them by Paul's preaching. Not because of how clever or eloquent or impressive he was, but simply because he was a faithful steward of the mysteries of God.

the Holy Spirit did a mighty work through God's word at Corinth. Not because of Paul's talent, but because he was a trustworthy steward.

[11:10] That was the qualification that was all important. And I think there's a great encouragement for us as we hear this, as we hear of Paul's experience because we often feel like we are not qualified to speak about the gospel, about the mysteries of God.

We may feel we're not outgoing enough or wise enough or eloquent enough or confident enough. Well, Paul undermines, in fact, he destroys that argument here because he says, that's the way I was.

And he says that the one thing that qualifies you is that you have received the treasure of Jesus, that you know it by hearing God's word, and that you are faithful in giving it away.

That's what qualifies you to be a steward of Christ. It is that you have heard the revelation and are faithful in giving it away. And this, I think, is where the Lord's judgment comes into this passage because Paul takes a lot of heat for not meeting people's expectations.

He is going through a rough time in Corinth. He was being compared very unfavorably to the impressive wisdom teachers. He was criticized and personally attacked and his credentials as a legitimate apostle were being questioned.

[12:35] He was in a difficult situation and he must have been tempted to actually adjust the message or get some good techniques going to be more acceptable. But he tells us that he stood firm and he stood firm because of the judgment of Jesus Christ.

Look at verse 3. He says, but with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. And literally in the Greek it says human day in contrast to the day of the Lord which we hear about in the earlier chapter.

He says, I do not even judge myself. I'm not aware of anything against myself but I am not hereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. And Paul is saying here that the judgments and the opinions of the Corinthians or any other person, even his own judgments of himself mean very, very little in comparison to the Lord who will judge him and who is judging him.

He is saying that it is God himself who is near and who he looks to as his judge. And he is not saying here that ministers shouldn't be accountable to their congregations or to one another, what they teach and how they live.

Paul is very clear in his letters that they should be accountable. He says, woe if me if I don't preach the gospel. And he says in Thessalonians, test everything, hold to that which is good.

[14:07] But what Paul is talking about is the judgment without love that he experienced in Corinth. it is a condemnation, a personal attack because he does not measure up to their expectations.

He was criticized because he did not dress the gospel up enough. Paul says, I'm not accountable to you in this way. He is in everything accountable to Jesus Christ first.

It's the Lord who judges me. He says, I will face the one who has given me the job of steward. And that's what counts. And that is what strengthened him to stand firm.

And that's why Paul has such courage in the face of opposition. He's much more concerned with Jesus' judgment than human opinion and criticism. And you know, I think this speaks to our lives because we're living in a minority situation like Paul was.

The gospel that we are entrusted with is an offense to the majority of our culture, as it was in Paul's day. Because the message of Christmas is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in order to die for our sins on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins.

[15:28] And of course the implication of that is that all of humanity, the whole world, is sinful and spiritually lost. And only Jesus can save us. Well, that does not go over well.

It's an unpopular message and the pressure is to hide the gospel or at least to change it to make it more popular. And that pressure is powerful even within the church.

But Paul says we are accountable first to the one who makes each of us stewards. Jesus has entrusted us with a treasure and we are to be faithful to that work and to him. all of us will see the one who has hired us as steward, as our judge, the one who has brought us into that relationship. And what Paul is doing here is something remarkable. What he has done is he's shifted the attention of the Corinthians to judgment, to the fact that they, along with Paul, will see Jesus as their judge.

[16 : 33] He is telling them, he is my judge, he will be yours as well, so remember as you think, and as you speak, and as you set your priorities, that you are going to stand in front of Jesus, who sees into the hearts of people.

And if this doesn't make a person evaluate their lives, then nothing will. This is what would have made the Corinthians evaluate their lives. And that's what Advent does for us. It naturally moves us to self-examination, because it looks at Jesus being our judge, the one who brings light into our lives.

And that brings us to verse 5, doesn't it? Because here is the description of judgment for Christians. He says this to the Corinthians, therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart. God. And then everyone will receive their commendation from God. You see, here Paul is saying that humans are completely wrong in thinking that they can condemn a person, especially a fellow Christian, because people are all able to hide their thoughts and their feelings and their intentions from one another.

[17 : 57] We get quite good at doing that in our lives. And so we can't really see into people's lives. But the nature of judgment is that Jesus has the authority to bring to light the things that are hidden in darkness.

And darkness here is not an evil thing, even though darkness is often talked about that way in scripture. Here it is something neutral. It describes everything that has been kept hidden. The good thoughts and intentions along with the bad. The private prayers and the unseen ministries that we have been doing along with our private grudges and our complaints. Jesus will disclose it all. And we will see at that time what is worthy of praise in our lives and what isn't. And Jesus will rightly judge those things and deal with them in the way that is far more just than we could imagine.

This is the judgment that all Christians face, even though we are all secure in heaven and eternal life. And there is a good and a holy awe and respect that comes from this.

[19 : 08] That brings wisdom. And that's what Psalm means when he said the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom. And as David read today, the steadfast love of the Lord is associated with judgment.

It's from everlasting to everlasting and those who fear him and his righteousness to children's children. There is a wonderful gift about judgment. Often we think of judgment as something to dread.

And yes, it is something awesome to be actually laid bare before God. But here we see in this reading that everyone will receive their commendation from God.

In the Greek it's saying that everyone will receive their praise from God. Isn't that extraordinary? This is an amazing thing to say. That the God that is worthy of all praise and worship is going to praise us for the things that we were faithful in.

For the ways that we were trustworthy stewards. And we don't know for sure what that reward will look like, what the praise will sound like, but we have a sense of it from Jesus in Matthew 25 in the parable of the talents.

[20 : 16] Because it's here that we hear God say, well done, good and faithful servant. You are faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things.

Enter into the joy of your Lord. Now those are words for Christians to live for. Each of us ought to have a strong ambition to live our lives so that one day we will hear God praise us in this way. That's how judgment wonderfully affects our lives and actually shapes us. You know, the day of the Lord, that judgment day, is a day that Christians in the New Testament longed for. They yearned for that day because things are made right and because there is praise that is given for the service they have given to their God faithfully. And so they would say, come quickly, Lord Jesus.

May that be our prayer as well to God. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. We do need God's help in changing our lives for that day, but that is what he is doing. He is shaping us through his word for that day when we will see him.

[21 : 28] And so I think it would be good for us to end with a prayer from the service that was at the beginning of the service that we prayed today. It's a prayer about God's judgment, really, and that God will strengthen us for that day.

It's called the Collect for Purity. We'll say it together again and think of that prayer in the light of this passage that we've just been looking at today. Right at the top of the page, we'll say together, Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy name through Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen.