

MAN'S STEWARDSHIP

"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." I Corinthians 4:1-2.

In a previous message I quoted many verses of scripture which declare the great fact of God's ownership. For example, God's Word says:

"The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1).

"For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains; and the wild beasts of the field are mine" (Psalm 50:10-11).

"The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of hosts" (Haggai 2:8).

"What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (I Corinthians 6:19-20).

Since God owns us, He should possess and use us. Our wills should be subject to the demands of His perfect will, and our lives should be at His disposal.

The truths of God's ownership and man's stewardship are stamped indelibly on the pages of the Holy Scriptures. We shall now center our thoughts on the subject of man's stewardship.

I. The Reason For It.

Man's stewardship grows out of God's ownership. The teaching that man is a steward follows logically from the fact of God's ownership. When God had created the earth, He needed a being with intelligence and wisdom to whom He could entrust His creation with its limitless supply of raw materials; some being who could honor Him by having dominion over and developing these natural resources. "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26-28).

Thus man became God's steward to care for His creation, to have dominion over it and to develop it. God was the Creator and Owner. Man was His honored steward. God has never relinquished His claim to the ownership of the earth. Man was simply to subdue the earth and to have dominion over it. This he has done in a remarkable way, but all along man has been prone to forget God's ownership.

When God placed man in the garden of Eden, He tried to impress upon him the fact of divine ownership by reserving one tree and one day. These were to be held sacred to God, and not used by man. They were to remind man that he was responsible to God. When Adam disobeyed God and took of the forbidden fruit, his sin was a violation of the principle of divine ownership, as well as rebellion against the authority of God. God's purpose in keeping the fruit of this tree from Adam and Eve was not to deprive them of something good, but rather to remind them that He was the owner of all things. The first sin was committed when Adam and Eve set their affections on material things rather than on God and appropriated to themselves what God had reserved for Himself.

God never deeded the garden of Eden to Adam and Eve. He retained the ownership, and merely put the couple in the garden "to dress and to keep it." In other words, they were appointed caretakers, and were responsible to God for the way in which they complied with instructions received. Here is the first recorded instance of the direct and personal application of the doctrine of man's stewardship. Along with this, we also have the record of man's unfaithfulness to his trust, and the penalty resulting therefrom.

The first task assigned to man by his Creator was to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. This task certainly imposed a sacred trust. Under God, man was to work for a completely developed race occupying a fully developed earth. It was at this point that Satan attacked the divine program. Satan's purpose was to thwart the plan of God for the establishment of a kingdom of righteousness on the earth by turning our first parents away from the work of construction and order and setting them to the work of destruction and disorder. The spiritual conflict has raged around this point through the centuries.

So far as the conquest of the earth is concerned man readily accepted his commission from God, moved in and took possession. He has subdued it on practically every level. He has visited every pole, traversed every sea and explored every continent. He has developed the vast resources of the earth and harnessed its wonderful powers, but, sad to say, for his own selfish use and not for the glory of God. Man has claimed ownership in a world in which God appointed him only as a steward.

God's Word states clearly and repeatedly that man is a steward. A few of these statements follow:

"And Abram said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?" (Genesis 15:2).

"And they came near to the steward of Joseph's house, and they communed with him at the door of the house" (Genesis 43:19).

"So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first" (Matthew 20:8).

"And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season?" (Luke 12:42).

"And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward. Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed" (Luke 16:1-3).

"For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me" (I Corinthians 9:16-17). Paul here acknowledged his stewardship, whether he was faithful or unfaithful in it.

Man was made a steward as a means of keeping alive in him a consciousness of God. Those who have no sense of stewardship have no real consciousness of God in their lives. Nor do they seem to have any real conviction as to the divine meaning and mission of life. They usually live on the lower levels, which are devoted to the things that minister only to the physical nature, and seldom rising above these to seek after the things of the spirit. Also, man was made a steward as a means of keeping alive in him a sense of his dependence upon and responsibility to God. Where there is a real sense of dependence upon and responsibility to God, there will be an acknowledgment of stewardship. Moreover, God made man a steward in order to save him from himself. When one fails to acknowledge his stewardship, his interests, thoughts, plans and efforts center in self. Self becomes the stackpole around which all of life is built. Furthermore, God made man a steward in order that he might become a co-worker in the rescuing of lost souls.

II. The Responsibility For It.

God's ownership rights declare that man, in his relationship to God, is only a steward.

According to the etymology of the word, and according to oriental custom, a steward was the manager of a household. As to how full was the confidence which his master often reposed in his steward, that was revealed very clearly in the case of Joseph in the house of Potiphar (Genesis 39:1-6). In the society of the first century A. D., a steward held a position of trust, dignity and honor. In that era people of means often found it advantageous and necessary to employ persons to manage their households, estates, staffs of servants and affairs in general. For this assignment full responsibility was committed to the steward. To him the owner looked for results and an accounting.

So, a steward is a person who has been entrusted with the oversight and management of the affairs of another. It goes without saying that he is to manage these affairs according to the will and the instructions of their owner. He simply controls and uses that which belongs to another. Therefore, a steward occupies a position of trust, influence, responsibility and some peril.

Every person is a steward of everything with which God has entrusted him. He is responsible to God for what he has, is or can become, whether or not he acknowledges God. God will hold him responsible for the way in which he uses all that he has received. The steward has charge of two elements -- self and substance, and these two always go together.

It is noteworthy that even the unfaithful and unprofitable servants mentioned in the parables did not presume to claim absolute ownership. Their unfaithfulness appears in the fact that they did not wisely administer the affairs which had been entrusted to them.

Every Christian is responsible for the wise administration of his entrustment. It is his privilege and responsibility to lay the first share of his time, talents, opportunities, energy, influence and possessions on the altar of God to be used in His kingdom enterprises for His glory and for the welfare of His creatures.

The deeper one's religious experience the greater will be his sense of stewardship. When God gets us He gets our possessions. If He does not get our possessions, it is because He does not have us. When Christ got Simon Peter He got his boat also. Then, when the throng pressed Him on the shore of Galilee, He had a boat from which to preach because He had the man who possessed the boat. When God gets a man with a car, He gets a car to be used in His service. When He gets a man with talent, He gets that talent for the interests of His kingdom. When God gets a man with means, He gets funds to be used in the furtherance of the gospel.

III. The Requirement For It.

God's steward is not required to be talented or successful, but he is required to be faithful. If a Christian is not a faithful steward, he is out of fellowship with God and harmony with His will.

Faithfulness is a requirement for any service, but especially for one involving such responsible trusts as stewardship. The reasonable expectation is that the man who is entrusted with a responsible position will be found faithful in the doing of that work.

A faithful person is one who is trustworthy in the transaction of business, the execution of commands or the discharge of duties. Faithfulness is one of the most beautiful things in the world. It elicits our admiration wherever we find it. No matter how capable one may be, if he is not dependable, he is not worth much to another. The measure of any man's worth is his fidelity to duty.

Stewards are required to be faithful to their trust. "It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." Faithfulness in stewardship is approved by both God and men. Faithfulness in stewardship will be rewarded. Unfaithful stewardship is punishable with the loss of opportunity. If a steward is unfaithful, the Master may take away either the trust or the steward. Either is possible, and either is just. Examples of both are plentiful. Faithfulness in stewardship brings blessings, but unfaithfulness deprives one of blessings. "Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful."