

1 Corinthians 4:1-5
(Genesis 41:38-43; Matthew 25:14-30)
“Stewards of God’s Mysteries”

Introduction

I suspect that we all have had the same dream in one form or another: we are back in school and learn to our horror that we have a crucial exam just about to begin in a course we didn’t realize we were taking, a course necessary in order to graduate. I continued to have that dream in various forms for many years after completing my formal studies. It has recurred in a somewhat different form in the years since: It is Sunday morning and I am scheduled to preach, but I can’t understand why I didn’t prepare a sermon. Besides, I can’t find my suit coat and Bible – where could I have left them? The music is winding down, my presence is expected, but my dream turns into a Kafkaesque comedy of errors. I simply can’t get there from here, and when I finally arrive, the last of the congregation is walking out in disgust.

The dream arises from a deep human insecurity. What is expected of me? Do I even know? Am I up to the task? When will I be examined? Who will be examining me? Paul is addressing a group of Christians who have managed to get it all wrong. They don’t understand who they are in Christ or what has been entrusted to them. They are judging one another and their leaders, but judging them without a clue, it seems, of what really matters.

So Paul now turns to address what it means to be in union with Christ. It is not enough to say that we are in Christ, a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We need to know what that actually means in the living of our lives. So in the verses before us this morning, Paul answers four crucial questions: How should we regard ourselves? What is entrusted to us? What is required of us? And, whose judgment ultimately matters?

Body

1. How should we regard ourselves?

“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ, stewards ...” (4:1). You may be thinking, wait a minute. Paul has just been telling us that all things are ours for we are Christ’s and Christ is God’s (3:21f). Now he’s demoting us to bondservants working for a master? In order to understand this, we must hear it in the light of Jesus words,

Whoever would be great among you must be your servant and
whoever would be first among you must be slave, even as the Son of

Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:26).

Paul captured this well in his call to the Philippian Christians to have the mind of Christ:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death (Philippians 2:5f).

However, Paul is describing a very particular type of servant, a steward. A steward may live in a lovely home and wear handsome clothing and handle large sums of money and oversee a wealthy estate. But what the steward must always remember is that everything he has actually belongs to his master and has been entrusted to him to use for his master's sake. Yes, we are God's children, but these are years of stewardship in which we must learn to handle well what has been entrusted to us.

2. What is entrusted to us?

Well then, what has been entrusted to us? We are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (4:1). Of course, we are stewards of all that God gives us: the days of our lives, the talents and gifts that are ours, the relationships that bring us both joy and sorrow, our work and play. Paul writes later in this letter, "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God" (10:31).

But here he particularly focuses on the one great thing entrusted to us: God's mysteries. In chapter two, he said that true wisdom, God's "secret and hidden wisdom," is made known to the mature (2:7). This wisdom is taught by God's Spirit to those in whom God's Spirit lives. At the heart of this wisdom, summarized in the "word of the cross" (1:18), is the mystery that has now been revealed. Alexander the Great called the sessions with his military officers where he revealed his battle plans the *mysterium*, the mystery. So, here, Paul is referring to God's great plan for uniting all things in heaven and earth (the cosmos) in Christ (Ephesians 1:9&10).

We have, in other words, been entrusted with the life saving, culture transforming, history redeeming, cosmos renewing good news of God's plan to make all things new in Christ. That message, emanating from the victory of the cross, Christ's triumph over everything that would otherwise separate us from God, is the greatest treasure entrusted to us and we are both to guard it

as a treasure and wield it as a weapon against the powers of darkness and destruction, bondage and death.

3. What is required of us?

“It is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (4:2). Paul says nothing of success. Success is the American god. Paul insists that we think, rather, in terms of faithfulness. In writing to his young disciple, Timothy, Paul says, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). He is describing a faithful life. We quoted early the well-known words from Philippians 2, calling us to have the mind of Christ, who emptied himself and took the form of a servant. There again Paul is describing a faithful life.

It is easy to think that our lives are worth the number of accomplishments and awards and “successes” that can be written in an obituary. But that is to fall for the world’s great lie. Too many Christians, far too many Christian leaders, have fallen for that lie, and the church celebrates all those things rather than what truly matters: faithfulness. A Christian’s motto should be that of the Marine Corps: *Semper Fidelis*, “always faithful.”

4. Whose judgment ultimately matters?

But who determines that? Some days I think I’ve been as faithful as I can be, even by grace. Other days, I feel like an utter failure. Paul writes words that should comfort and encourage every Christian – especially during hard times:

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart” (4:3-5).

Paul warns against the kind of judgments that we all find ourselves making with such careless ease when, as he says, we don’t know the hidden things yet to be disclosed. So don’t judge me, Paul says. In fact, I don’t even judge myself, because I can fool you and I can even fool myself. But there is one who knows all, and who will pass the only judgment that counts when he comes to settle accounts and make all things new.

What heartache we would spare others and ourselves if we would leave the judgment of others and of ourselves to the one who alone is perfectly just.

Conclusion

That said, it might be frightening to think of a day coming when the things hidden in darkness, even the purposes of the heart, will be revealed. What hope has anyone of not facing a fearful and humiliating judgment? Just this: the cross of Christ, the resurrection, the mystery now revealed of God's aim to heal what is broken, to redeem what is enslaved, to give life to those who are dead, to wipe away every tear, to make all things new. Thus Paul ends on a hopeful note: "Then each one will receive his commendation from God" (4:5). Not his condemnation, but his commendation.

How can this be? This word is for those of whom the apostle writes, "And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, so that as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1:30f). If you are in Christ then you are a dearly loved steward of God's mysteries. Be faithful, and when you stand before him you will hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your Master" (Matthew 25:23).

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