

Stewards of God's Grace
1 Peter 4:10–11; Luke 12:42–48

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A parishioner came to visit me here at the church this past week. The only time he was available was around five o'clock in the afternoon, and so he arrived here towards the end of the day. It happened to be a beautiful time of day. The sun was beginning to set, and the light was streaming through our stained-glass windows. The colours and the reflections filled the church, and for a moment this man, who is not unfamiliar with our church, simply stood and took it all in. He was struck by the beauty and the solemnity of the sight. And I thought to myself again: what a blessing this church building is. We are very blessed to have this building as our church and to gather here week by week. We have these beautiful William Morris stained-glass windows, our historic J. C. Bishop organ, and this wonderful building that has been entrusted to us. And we should be grateful – not only to God, but also to the Christians who came before us, whose faith, generosity, hard work and commitment enabled these things to be built and preserved and eventually passed on to us.

But there is something interesting about receiving a treasure that has been entrusted to you. When you receive something valuable, you don't simply say, 'Wonderful! This is mine!' You also begin to think: How do I look after this? If we have inherited a beautiful building, then we need to look after it. The building, the windows, the organ, and everything else need to be properly maintained. But stewardship is not merely about preserving something. It is also about using and sharing what has been entrusted to us. And that is one of the reasons I am encouraged when we are able to open this church during the week, so that people from the community can come in, sit quietly, pray, reflect, or simply enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of this place. We have received a blessing, and we want that blessing to become a blessing to others.

And that brings us to our theme this morning: 'Stewards of God's Grace.' Because the truth is that the church building is only one small example of a much bigger reality. We are all stewards. Everything we have ultimately comes from God. Our lives, our time, our strength, our abilities, our opportunities, our experiences, our families, our possessions, our money – and, above all, the gospel and the grace of God that we have received through Jesus Christ. We have received these things from God, and therefore we are called to use them faithfully for God and for the good of others.

1. We are stewards, not owners.

Our reading from 1 Peter brings us directly into this idea. Peter is writing to Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor. These Christians were living as followers of Jesus in difficult circumstances. They were facing pressure, opposition and suffering because of their faith. And Peter is encouraging them to live faithfully as God's people while they wait for the return of

Christ. Listen to what he says: 'Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.'

The word Peter uses for 'stewards' is *oikonomoi*. It refers to a household manager – a person entrusted with the responsibility of managing someone else's property. And that is an important distinction. A steward does not own what has been entrusted to him. A steward manages something that belongs to someone else. And Peter is saying that this is how we should understand our lives as Christians. We are not ultimately the owners of our lives. We are stewards of what God has entrusted to us.

That is a very important Christian way of looking at life. Because there is another way of looking at life, which says: 'This is my life.' 'My money is my money.' 'My possessions are mine.' 'My abilities are mine.' 'I have achieved these things because I worked hard for them.' And, of course, there is nothing wrong with working hard. Scripture commends diligence, responsibility and honest work. But the Christian says something more. 'Yes, I have worked hard – but who gave me the life, strength, abilities, opportunities and circumstances that made that work possible?'

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7: 'What do you have that you did not receive?' Everything ultimately comes from God. The Christian therefore looks at life and says: 'This is God's world. This is God's life that he has given me. These are God's gifts that he has entrusted to me. I am a steward.'

And that mindset changes the way we live. If I think I am the owner, I can use everything however I please. But if I understand that I am a steward, I begin to ask: 'Lord, what do you want me to do with what you have entrusted to me?' How should I use my time? How should I use my money? How should I use my abilities? How should I use my home? How should I use my opportunities? How should I use my life? That is the mindset of Christian stewardship.

2. God has entrusted each of us with gifts to serve others.

Peter goes on to say: 'Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.' Notice three words. 'Each of you.' Peter is speaking to the whole church – not just the minister, not just the church leaders, not just the people who are naturally outgoing, not just those who have been Christians for forty years. 'Each of you.'

And secondly, notice: 'Whatever gift you have received.' Peter is thinking particularly here about what we might call grace-gifts or ministry gifts – the abilities God gives his people for serving others. And in verse 11 he gives us two broad categories: 'If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God; if anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides.'

There is the ministry of speaking – teaching God's Word, encouraging, exhorting, sharing the gospel, speaking God's truth into people's lives. And there is the ministry of serving – the practical work of caring for people and getting things done.

If you can teach – teach. If you can encourage – encourage. If you can lead – lead. If you can provide hospitality – do so. If you can care for someone – care for them. If you can pray – pray. If you can give generously – give. If you can serve practically – serve. If you can help with administration – help. If you can maintain the church building – serve in that way. If you can welcome someone who is new – welcome them. Whatever God has entrusted to you, use it to serve others.

And notice something else Peter says: ‘...with the strength God provides.’ Even the ability to serve is itself a gift from God. So Christian service is not: ‘Look what I can do for God.’ It is: ‘Look what God has given me, and what a privilege it is to use it for him.’ That is why Peter says that all of this is ultimately: ‘so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.’ The purpose of stewardship is not to make ourselves look impressive. The purpose is the glory of God.

3. God’s grace is not given to us to be kept to ourselves.

Peter calls these gifts: ‘God’s grace in its various forms.’ That word ‘grace’ is important. We rightly think first of the saving grace of God – the grace by which God saves us through Jesus Christ. We did not earn our salvation. We did not deserve it. God gave us what we could never have earned for ourselves. Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again, and through faith in him we receive forgiveness, reconciliation with God and the hope of eternal life. That grace is at the very heart of Christianity.

But Peter then uses the word ‘grace’ to describe the various ways in which God graciously equips and blesses his people for service. God’s grace does not merely save us. God’s grace also equips us. God gives us gifts so that his grace might flow through us to others. And that means God’s grace is not something we are meant to keep to ourselves.

Think about it this way: God blesses us so that we might become a blessing. God comforts us so that we might comfort others. God teaches us so that we might teach others. God strengthens us so that we might strengthen others. God gives us hospitality so that we might welcome others. God gives us resources so that we might use them for others. God gives us opportunities so that we might use them for others. Grace comes to us, and grace flows through us. That is the heart of Christian stewardship.

4. Jesus calls us to be faithful until he returns.

And that brings us to our Gospel reading in Luke 12. Jesus tells a parable about a master who goes away and leaves a servant in charge of his household. The master has entrusted responsibility to this servant. And Jesus asks: ‘Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time?’ The answer is the servant who is faithful while the master is away.

But then Jesus describes another servant. This servant says: ‘My master is taking a long time in coming.’ And because he thinks the master is delayed, he begins to abuse his fellow servants. He eats and drinks and gets drunk. He uses the master’s household not to serve others but to serve himself. But then the master returns. And the servant discovers that the master’s apparent

absence did not mean the master had ceased to be the owner. The master returns. And the servant is held accountable.

Jesus uses extraordinarily strong language: 'The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him... He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.' It is deliberately shocking language. Jesus is warning us about the reality and seriousness of God's judgment.

The issue is not simply that the servant has made a few mistakes. His behaviour reveals his heart. He has been entrusted with the master's household, but he has lived as though the master will never return. He has taken what belongs to his master and used it for himself. And when the master returns, his unfaithfulness is exposed. That is a sobering warning. Because Jesus is saying: The Master is coming back. And when he comes, we will give an account for how we have lived. What did we do with what God entrusted to us? How did we use our time? How did we use our opportunities? How did we use our abilities? How did we treat the people God placed around us? How did we use the gifts of grace that God gave us? Did we use them to serve? Or did we use them primarily for ourselves?

5. Faithful stewardship is an expression of genuine faith.

There is something very important here. Neither Peter nor Jesus is teaching us that we earn salvation by being good stewards. We are not saved because we have served enough people. We are not accepted by God because we have used our gifts sufficiently well. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But the grace that saves us is also the grace that changes us. And therefore, how we live matters. Our stewardship does not earn our salvation, but our stewardship can reveal the reality of our faith.

The faithful servant in Jesus' parable is faithful because he understands that the master is coming and that what has been entrusted to him belongs to the master. The Christian understands: 'My life belongs to Christ.' And therefore: 'What can I do with this life that Christ has given me?' That is a very different way of living.

Conclusion: What has God entrusted to you?

So, friends, perhaps the question for each of us this morning is a very simple one: What has God entrusted to you? What gifts has he given you? What abilities? What experiences? What opportunities? What resources? What relationships? What time? What strength? What position? What knowledge of his Word? What opportunities to serve? And then ask the second question: How can I use these things faithfully for God and for others? Perhaps God has given you the gift of encouragement. Who can you encourage this week? Perhaps God has given you the gift of hospitality. Who could you welcome?

Perhaps God has given you practical skills. Where could you serve? Perhaps God has given you financial resources. How could you use them generously? Perhaps God has given you a knowledge of Scripture. Who could you teach or encourage with God's Word? Perhaps you have time that you could give to the ministry of the church. Perhaps you have experience that could be passed on to someone younger. Perhaps you have simply the ability to notice people who are lonely or overlooked. Whatever God has given you, don't keep it to yourself.

Peter says: 'Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.' And perhaps this is the most important thing to remember: We are not owners. We are stewards. Everything we have has been received. Everything we have ultimately belongs to God. And everything God has given us is an opportunity to glorify him and bless others.

So let us receive God's grace with gratitude. Let us steward God's grace with faithfulness. And let us allow God's grace to flow through us in service to others. Because one day the Master will return. And what a joy it will be to hear him say: 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

Amen.