

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: 1 Cor. 4:1-2; 1 Cor. 9:17; Titus 1:7-8; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4.

The subject of our meditation is to be that of stewardship. A steward is a man who, on the one hand, stands in a living relationship to all that his Lord has, and, on the other hand, in an equally close relationship to all who look to his Lord for the supply of their needs, or to receive somewhat of His bounty. So that the steward is a very responsible person. He is responsible for the reputation of his master. What the world knows of his master will very largely accord with what the steward is, and what the world or the household receives of enrichment and good, will depend very much upon him. That is a very simple illustration, but that, and very much more, is what is bound up with this word "steward," or "stewardship."

The Apostle Paul spoke of himself as a steward, as having been entrusted with a stewardship, and it is impressive to note that he applies the term to the believers in the Corinthian church or assembly. We can quite readily understand and appreciate that Paul should be a steward, but when he addresses the people in the Corinthian assembly and says to them: "Let a man so account of us, as of ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1), thus bringing them all in, surely that is transferring the designation to very ordinary believers. We cannot, therefore, evade the issue by saying, Well, that applies to special people like Paul! It clearly applies to ordinary people, like the Corinthians and ourselves, and the exhortation is that men should be able to regard us, to take account of us as stewards.

The Fact of Responsibility

That speaks of something more than merely having a standing as believers. We might perhaps think the world must take account of us as Christians; they will do so in any case if we make a profession! But this Divine thought takes us much further. It brings us out into a place of specific and definite responsibility in two connections; firstly, to the Lord, binding up the Lord's interests with us in an active way; secondly, in a like practical way, to man. We are stewards, we stand in a place between, with a responsibility in two directions.

The Lord's people need to be reminded, from time to time, of the fact of their responsibility. There is a tremendous responsibility resting upon everyone who is related to the Lord, because that relationship is never a passive one, or ought never to be so. It is not the case that we are just members of a family, and there the matter begins and ends. Membership of the family, in the household of faith, is but one phase of truth, of the teaching of the Word of God. It has its own special meaning and value. The fact that believers are called by a variety of designations, and that the various designations seem to counter one another, presents no actual conflict when it is seen that they are but so many aspects of a whole, and not mutually exclusive. For instance, in the case of earthly relationships, for one to be a member of a family would preclude one from being the steward of the household but with the spiritual relationship it is not so. We have to keep the family relationship in its own place, to recognize that it brings its own responsibility and obligations, and has its own meaning and value; but with that in its place, you yet find yourself, in another direction, in the position of a steward, where you come into a great and specific responsibility. This holds good of all. We are all called to be stewards: that is God's thought for every one of us. Such an observation leads us to one or two important considerations.

The Qualification for Stewardship

A fact which should be very helpful to us is that all the Lord's dealings with us are with the design of making us such stewards as it is required we should be. A steward has to be qualified for his stewardship. A steward must be a man of certain definite characteristics. The fulfillment of his stewardship will demand experience. He cannot step into a true spiritual stewardship at will. There has to be a real preparation, a real development, a real endowment for such a stewardship. If you read carefully the connection in Paul's mind between the stewardship and its fulfillment, you will see that the connection is a very practical one, a very active one, a very deep one. He was conscious of the need of special enablement, special gifts, special qualifications, and for such equipment he had to go through special experiences. Stewardship is a matter of training, and deep training at that.

In order to make us able stewards, the Lord takes us into many different kinds of experiences; into extraordinary, unusual experiences; into such a variety of experiences as come to none but His Own people. No one else goes through quite the same variety of experiences. There are features about the experiences of God's people which are uncommon. Other people in the world may go through certain sufferings which are seemingly like the sufferings of believers: they may know the difficulty of poverty, the difficulty of maintaining their

position in the world; outwardly there may be a similarity; but in reality, on the inward side, there are elements associated with the experiences of believers which are not associated with the experiences of the world; theirs are peculiar. They have factors of a spiritual character associated with them, which are entirely foreign to the ungodly, to the unbelieving. With the experience of a believer there comes a challenge which does not come to the unbeliever; there is a demand to be faced which in the case of the world is not there. I believe that we go through a great many things as the Lord's people which we should never go through if we were not His people. It is simply because we are the Lord's that we go that way. The explanation is not merely that we have to face an enemy when we take sides with the Lord. We have further to take into account the fact that the Lord allows the enemy to do what he does.

(1.) An Experimental Knowledge of the Need

To what end is this? We have already shown that what governs the Lord in His dealings with us, His mysterious dealings, His strange leadings, His unique permissions, is His design of making us stewards. How do those things accomplish such an end? A steward must know the needs of the people to whom he is to minister. He must know of their needs, and he must know the nature of their needs. The man of God is not just an official. He is not someone taken out of a crowd and put into office, and set a daily task which can be learned by studying a manual. He has to have a vital relationship with the whole position, and he must know, in a living, experimental way, the nature of the needs to which he has to minister. Between him and those to whom he is to minister his Master's riches, there must be a sympathy of heart by way of inward understanding. He must know the variety of their needs, for what he would give to one would never do for another; what he might give to quite a number would be altogether out of place to give to others. He will find, as the physician finds, that no two cases are exactly alike, because no two temperaments are exactly alike. A dozen people may have the same complaint, but it may be needful to treat each one differently, because of different temperamental factors in each case. The true physician is one who not only takes the complaint into account, but the person who has the complaint. It is like that with the steward. There has to be an understanding of the need, of the situation; there must be a heart-understanding, a sympathy.

The Lord deals with us in order that we might be able to minister in an apt way. His stewards are to be men of understanding, who can touch the various needs, who can reach the heart, so that the Lord's children are saying - That just fits me! That touches my case! That person must know! That one must have been through it! Who has been telling him about me? Yes, the Lord knows, and He would take you and me through experiences such as will make us stewards in a living way: and that is what He is doing. The steward must understand the universal needs, the variety of needs, and must understand in a way that no one can who merely studies from the outside. The Lord's way of training His stewards is to take them THROUGH things: and who is better able to meet the need than the One who has known that need Himself?

(2.) An Experimental Knowledge of the Resource

Then the steward has not only to understand the nature of the need to be met, but he must have an equal knowledge of the resources with which he is to meet it. He must know the quality of that which is at his command, the nature of it, the values that are in it. Here again, we can never know the values of the things of God unless we have gone through experiences in which we have put them to the test, and proved them. No one really knows the value of Divine things who has not proved their value in his own life.

The stewardship of the Gospel is something more than our seeing the Gospel of the grace of God in the New Testament, as a system of truth, as something which embraces in a formula certain matters such as forgiveness of sins, justification by faith, and all the other elements of the Gospel: it is something more than that. The stewardship of the Gospel implies that the Gospel has become wrought into the very being of the steward, and that the steward himself is rejoicing in it. Such a steward can come out of the treasure house and meet the household, and meet those beyond, and say: I have something here of tremendous value; I am rejoicing in it myself; I know it, and I can assure you I am not giving you something that has simply been taken hold of and passed on apart from experience; it is not something that is the result of my studies, gleanings from other minds, what the commentators and "authorities" say. I am up-to-date in my personal knowledge and benefit of this matter.

What is true of the Gospel is true of the many-sided mysteries of God. That is another stewardship of which Paul speaks. You and I are led into the mysteries of God, into the depths, to discover those secrets, in order that we may come out with the treasures of darkness. Ah, but what darkness it is while we are there! No treasures seem to abound in the darkness. All seems death, and desolation. Poverty and starvation seem to reign. But to come out with the treasures of darkness, TREASURES of darkness, constitutes stewardship.

Stewards are men and women who have been through the dark, and have discovered treasures and have the treasures of darkness to pass on.

(3.) Faithfulness

How much have you to dispense? Are you sure that you are dispensing what you have? The Lord did not lead you through that trial, through that darkness, through that strange experience, just for your own sake. The Lord has not dealt with you as He has, in order that you should be shut up to yourself, to enjoy the result alone. He has done that to constitute you a steward. If you and I will only allow that fact to govern us in the days of difficulty and trial, it will help us through. We should hold fast to the fact that the trial is to mean enrichment for the Lord's people, and an increase of equipment and qualification for stewardship. There are so many who have a measure of spiritual wealth and are not making it available for others; others are not getting the benefit of it. They have a knowledge of the Lord that has come through experience, and if only they would get alongside of others, those others would get some of the good of the Lord's dealings with them, would be blessed, and enriched. Ask the Lord to release you into your stewardship within your measure. We are not speaking of an official, organized service for God, where you have to be continually ministering to others, whether you have the resources with which to do it or not. That is all false, and puts strain upon you; you may well revolt against that kind of thing. We simply have in mind the way in which the Lord creates living contacts. Children of God may cross your path in dire need, and may all the time be looking for the person who can help them. They have been crying to the Lord to meet the need, and have been watching to see how the Lord would answer. They may cross your path, and you talk upon all sorts of ordinary things; they pass on their way, and you have failed in your stewardship. They have not received that for which they have been asking, and the steward has disappointed the Lord, and those who were looking to the Lord. Let us ask the Lord to give us release from our tied-up state, to fulfill this stewardship.

The Lord's Word is: "...it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful," not eloquent, intellectual, with a strong personality, none of those things. What is your mental conception of a steward? One who has a great facility of speech, who finds no difficulty in talking? No! "...it is required in stewards, that a man be found FAITHFUL." I believe that the greatest virtue in the eyes of God is faithfulness; it embraces everything. Faithfulness is after God's own heart.

Take a passing glance at this steward - Paul the Apostle. "Demas forsook me..."; (2 Tim. 4:10); "...all that are in Asia turned away from me..." (2 Tim. 1:15). Look at him when everything which would inspire to faithfulness is breaking down. He is left practically alone. He has more enemies than ever. And now the tragedy, the pathos is that so many of his enemies are those to whom he has been most used. While there were enemies without it was not so difficult, but now the very people for whom he has spent himself have become his enemies. But there is no thought, no hint, no suggestion of giving up. His word is, "...faithful unto death..." This steward was faithful. You cannot say that, when he died, the situation outwardly testified to tremendous success. It did not look like that at all. Paul's life was not vindicated up to the hilt. No! He died largely a lonely man, but faithful. "...it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." But what enrichment of others may follow from the meeting of that requirement, costly as it is. Paul is not dead! I only hope that Paul knows of all that has sprung from his ministry, all that his ministry means to us. The Lord has met us through His servant, and we never, never get to the depths or anywhere near the bottom of the fullness of Christ that has come through Paul. We shall go on, and, if we live twice or three times the length of our present life, we shall still be making discoveries of what we owe to Paul's faithfulness as a steward. That has been going on century after century.

That is faithful stewardship, and although the steward may be called away from his earthly stewardship, the stewardship goes on. Faithfulness is always rewarded beyond our wildest dreams. May the Lord maintain us in faithfulness, even though that faithfulness may sometimes involve us in an appearance of utter failure. The Lord make us good stewards.