

A Faithful Steward

1 Corinthians 4:1–5

Today we have witnessed the ordination and installation of a new ruling elder. This is a happy occasion for a church, as it is evidence that the risen Christ has ascended to the Father and given gifted men to his church, including ruling elders who assist the ministers of the Word in the church's government and discipline.

My objective in this sermon is twofold: first, to explain the text, applying it to our contemporary situation. But I also want to apply it specifically to Ray, our new ruling elder (and to our two longtime-serving ruling elders). The OPC Form of Government specifies that when a new ruling elder is ordained and installed, “after this, the minister shall give to him and to the congregation an exhortation suited to the occasion.”¹ This sermon, in part, will serve that purpose.

The broad application of our text is clear: church officers are to be faithful stewards, and we will expand upon that as we go along. But in a larger sense, *all of us* are called to be faithful, so it is not as though this sermon has application only to our new ruling elder, and to no one else. God wants *all* his people to be faithful to their calling, whether to special office as ministers, elders and deacons; or to the general office of the believer. Since the Old Testament ceremonial law has been fulfilled in Christ, there is no longer a special class of priests; *all* Christians share in a priestly role, meaning they have the right and responsibility to read the Holy Scriptures and pray, as well as to serve God and others in their daily lives. God wants us all to serve him faithfully.

But let's now consider what the Bible means by a faithful steward. First Corinthians 4 begins: “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Who is the “us”? Two verses before, Paul had made reference to himself, Apollos and Cephas. “Cephas” is the Aramaic name of Simon Peter, the man always named first among our Lord's twelve apostles. Paul is likewise an apostle, chosen later. Apollos, a Jew born in Alexandria, was not an apostle. He was eloquent and well-versed in the Scriptures, but didn't know initially that Jesus was the Messiah. After being discipled by Aquila and Priscilla, he traveled to Corinth, where he met Paul, and began to serve with him as he planted a church there. In the previous chapter Paul wrote of him: “Who then is Paul, and who is *Apollos*, but ministers [διάκονοι *diakonoi*] through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, *Apollos* watered, but God gave the increase.” Apollos, then, helped Paul to plant the church in Corinth. He is one of the three meant by the “us” in our present text. Though not one of the apostles, his ministry was very useful to the apostle Paul. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to value Apollos's ministry.

¹ https://opc.org/BCO/FG.html#Chapter_XXV accessed 1-7-26

So our text begins: “Let a man so consider us, as *servants* of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in *stewards* that one be found faithful.” The apostle uses two words: “servants” (singular ὑπηρέτης *hypēretēs*, a helper, or assistant, who serves a master or a superior). It is possible the Greek word originally meant something like *under-rower*. Imagine, if you will, in ancient times, wooden boats powered by rowers working oars. Rowing is hard work! To be an under-rower was not glamorous work, but it was a job, and it put food on the table. The under-rower did not have independent authority. His job was to work hard and please his employer.

The second word is “stewards” (singular οἰκονόμος *oikonomos*—related to our word *economy*, from οἶκος *oikos*, *house*, and νόμος *nomos*, *law*). An οἰκονόμος was an important household servant to whom the head of the house entrusted the management of his affairs: the care of receipts and expenditures, and the duty of dealing out the proper portion to all the servants, and to underage children.² The steward was a servant in a position of trust.

It is of note that the Latin translation (known as the Vulgate) has “*dispensers* of the mysteries of God.” In Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy the “mysteries of God”³ are the sacraments—not just the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper established by Christ, but seven (for Rome), or possibly more (for Eastern Orthodoxy). This led to the idea that salvation is a commodity dispensed by the church, through its clergy. But the Bible teaches that God saves sinners who call upon him in faith as his ministers proclaim the Gospel. As Paul wrote in Romans: “I am not ashamed of the *gospel* of Christ: for it is the power of God unto *salvation* to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. . . . There is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be *saved*. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!”⁴

Salvation, then, is a gift given by God, through his Spirit. The church’s role is to send out qualified men to preach the gospel and administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper. The ruling elder’s job is to assist the minister and give careful oversight over the preaching of the good news of Christ, that the church may be edified.

² Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon, οἰκονόμος (Logos Bible Software)

³ *dispensatores mysteriorum Dei*

⁴ Rom. 1:16, 10:12–15 KJV

So Paul in our 1 Corinthians 4:1 text uses two words that describe ruling elders and ministers. Putting the two words together it would appear that the two terms complement each another. Υπηρέτης *hypēretēs* (*servant*) indicates that the church officer has only *derived* authority. He has no independent authority but must only and always do what Christ commands through his Word; anything else is illegitimate and dishonoring to Christ the King; it is, in the words of 1 Peter 5, “lording it over” God’s people.⁵ Οἰκονόμος *oikonomos* (*steward*) indicates that the church officer has an important work and stands in a position of trust.

It is important to note that *no* church officer—no matter what high-sounding title he takes to himself—has independent authority. *Christ* has ultimate authority and requires all church leaders to understand that. The church cannot just make up doctrines. The church may teach only what is revealed in the Bible. It must teach everything that’s in the Bible—and nothing that’s *not* in the Bible. To understand that is liberating! Christ—and Christ alone—calls all the shots. He has given us *all* things that pertain to life and godliness⁶. No good thing does he withhold from them that walk uprightly. Christian, study your Bible, and attend a church that faithfully preaches the gospel and puts into practice *all* the teachings of the Bible.

With respect to you, Ray, your work as a ruling elder is important. It is a position of trust, committed to you by Christ, the only King and Head of his church. Yet in your work as ruling elder you must always remember that you are under Christ’s authority and must ultimately give account to him. He wants you to be a *faithful* steward. He wants you to hear his “Well done!” at the last day. It will be worth it all when we see Jesus!

But there’s an application to all of us generally. God wants us *all* to be faithful. The God of heaven is faithful. He is always true to his Word, true to keep his promises. Ordinary Christians are to be faithful. Paul commends Silvanus for being faithful. Fathers are to train their children to be faithful children. He wants us all to discharge all our responsibilities faithfully. The problem is, we fall short of his perfect standard. He requires that we obey his every command, all our life long, with a perfect heart and for his glory alone. But “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” This is why we need Christ. He endured the wrath of God on behalf of the sins of his people. He gives his perfect righteousness as a free gift to those who look to him in faith. We are saved, not by *our* deserving, but by the perfect faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

My dear hearer, do you acknowledge that you are a sinner with no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? Do you repent of your sins and flee to Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world? Do you accept his free gift of eternal life? Do you commit yourself to him to be his follower forever? “Neither is

⁵ κατακυριεύω *katakyrieō* (1 Pet. 5:3)

⁶ 2 Pet. 1:3

there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The church elder must never forget that he serves the Lord Christ. He is not the boss. He serves at the will of Christ, the Lord of the church. Like the man who was an "under-rower" on an ancient galley, the pastor or elder is a servant of Christ. He is subject to Christ's authority. His job is to represent Christ.

Ray, let me make this personal: you are a servant, not the Master. If you want to receive Christ's "Well done" at the last day, never forget that you serve Christ. To paraphrase Peter, you are not a lord over God's heritage.⁷ You are a servant, serving your Master. We have one Lord, and his name is Christ! Whenever a church begins to teach and require things on the basis of its own authority, it steals from the rightful authority of Christ. A faithful elder points men and women to Christ, the Lover of their souls. He does this from a heartfelt desire to serve the Lord and advance his kingdom. This attitude of heart will come to light at the judgment seat of Christ. Paul writes, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God."

Some ministers and elders serve as "men-pleasers."⁸ They design their ministry in ways that make their people happy but do not please the King. People might be very happy if their pastor and elders tell them how great they are and what a good job they are doing. But the gospel reminds us that we are sinners. Some people—even church people—are offended by that. They would rather hire a minister—a misnomer, for a minister is not hired but called by Christ, through his church. But some people want a minister who tells them what they want to hear. Ruling elders too might be tempted to urge their minister to soft-pedal the gospel to make it more appealing, so as to draw bigger crowds. Never do this, Ray! The most important thing is pleasing Christ, not pleasing people. Paul reminds us that the final judge is the Lord. The faithful elder earnestly wants to hear his "Well done."

Calvin hits the nail on the head when he says that "we think of ourselves too indulgently, but God is a judge of the utmost strictness." He cites Proverbs 21:2, which says, "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts." The Lord knows our hearts perfectly. Nothing gets past him.

If a coach keeps telling his team, "You guys are really great, you're doing a fantastic job," they might get beaten by a team that works harder. A good coach constantly urges his players to work on their deficiencies, so that they can improve

⁷ 1 Pet. 5:3

⁸ Eph. 6:6, Col. 3:22

and be more competitive. Some of the things a good coach might say will hurt, but if they take his advice and improve their game, it will pay off in the end. Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.” A faithful elder might have to speak words that wound our pride; he points out areas that we need to work on. He does this not out of spite but of a sincere desire to ready us for the final judgment.

The words “Therefore judge nothing before the time” are not to be taken absolutely; there is a place for Christians to judge. Jesus commanded: “Judge not according to the appearance, but *judge righteous judgment*” (John 7:24). “Judge righteous judgment”—it can’t get any plainer than that! Judgment is inescapable. Sin must be exposed as sin, for God’s glory. But all things must be judged according to the standard of God’s holy Word. No human perfectly knows another person’s heart. “Judge nothing before the time” means we should not jump to hasty conclusions or render rash and uncharitable judgments. It is a reminder that all human judgments ultimately will be tested at the judgment seat of Christ. We need to be humble and realize our human limitations. But God’s judgments are perfect, and there is no appeal from them. When Christ sits as Judge at the final day, and separates the sheep from the goats, he “will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one’s praise will come from God.” Believer in Jesus Christ, let us live every day in such conformity to God’s Word, the Holy Bible, as to earn God’s praise. The praise of men is hollow and short-lived. The praise of God is eternal and ultimately satisfying.

That said, let us look at the duties of church elders. Here is a good summary: Church elders are responsible for overseeing the spiritual wellbeing of the congregation: teaching the Word, providing care and guidance, and ensuring church discipline. They are also expected to model Christlike behavior and lead by example in their personal lives.⁹

Our Form of Government goes into more detail: “Ruling elders, individually and jointly with the pastor in the session, are to lead the church in the service of Christ. They are to watch diligently over the people committed to their charge, to prevent corruption of doctrine or morals. Evils which they cannot correct by private admonition they should bring to the notice of the session. They should visit the people, especially the sick, instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourning, and nourish and guard the children of the covenant. They should pray with and for the people. They should have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and help him in his labors.”¹⁰

Here, obviously, is a tall order! It is impossible for any mere man to live up to this. It simply cannot be done without the power of Christ. Moreover, there are the

⁹ Generated by AI

¹⁰ https://opc.org/BCO/FG.html#Chapter_X

limitations of time and energy. Most ruling elders also are breadwinners. They have responsibilities at the workplace and also family responsibilities. Clearly, every man must prioritize.

The ruling elder is part of a team—a plurality of elders. He cannot do everything alone. He would run himself ragged. With the apostle Paul he would very gladly “spend and be spent.”¹¹ But he’s not Superman; he has human limitations. To be effective he must have the mind of Christ, who “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” In our own strength no one of us can measure up. It is comforting to remember that our heavenly Father “knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14).

My advice, Ray, is to prayerfully consider, in consultation with the session, what your gifts are, and where you should focus your attention. Never become complacent, but at the same time, don’t run yourself ragged. Jealously guard your relationship with the Lord, especially your daily devotions. Love your wife and family. Pray for strength. Ask God to help you be a good steward of your gifts and resources. God promises that “they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa. 40:31).

I must also give a charge to the congregation. Dear congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, first *value* your elders. Hold them in high esteem. They are gifts from the ascended Christ, the Lord of the church. He has sovereignly put us into local flocks to be shepherded by gifted men who will pray for us, encourage us, comfort us and challenge us to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

Second, *pray* for your elders. As Moses, when he was interceding, as Israel fought with Amalek, needed the comfort and support of Aaron and Hur, so your elders need your prayer support as they seek to lead their flock into the green pastures beside the still waters of the Word.

Third, give your elders, including your newest elder, the benefit of the doubt. Don’t be quick to judge. The Bible teaches that love (“charity”) “seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, *thinketh no evil*; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth” (1 Cor. 13). If we hold our elders up in high esteem we will want to think the best of them. This is not to say that they are above criticism. In another place Paul says, “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.”¹² But God’s people should not be trigger-happy. Bringing charges should be a last resort, not a first resort.

¹¹ 2 Cor. 12:15

¹² 1 Tim. 5:20

Let us all be faithful stewards of the gifts and ministries that God has given us. Let us pray for the day when “the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.”

Let us consider one another to provoke one another unto love and to good works, and let us live in joyful fellowship with Christ and with his church. Amen.

See also: [Service of Ordination and Installation for Ray Boyer](#).