

God's Gifts, God's Stewards

We have been tracking through 1 Corinthians and watching the conflict of two different kinds of spiritualities.

One is marked by a high confidence in human competencies and a low sense of need for God's intervention. I call this **the 'human project'**. In the human project, we are in charge, we own it, and it is up to us to get it done – even if we might need a little help along the way. Much of life seems to run in the terms of the human project. It is a very natural thing to think like this and live like this.

Bumper Stickers for the Human Project

- 'We Try Harder'...
- "We make money the old fashioned way, we earn it..."
- 'God helps those who help themselves...'

The other is marked by a lower confidence in human competencies, and a large sense of need for God to intervene. I call this **the God project**. Or a better phrase for it is **the gospel of grace**.

You see the conflict between these spiritualities played out all over the world.

The Church in Corinth dominated by people who had a high confidence in their own competencies. They talked easily about their wisdom, their abilities, and their accomplishments. It naturally leads to a sense of pride and accomplishment. So these Corinthians thought they were **'better than'** – some of their teachers and especially than the Apostle Paul. They criticized him for his lack of polished eloquence, for his personal appearance, and for the content of his teaching.

Paul is responding to their criticisms with a line of thought about life, and the headline of his thoughts over these early chapters is this,

Life is God's Gift

Here is how he puts it in vs 7 of chapter 4:

What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

1 Cor 4.7 ESV

This is a profound, probing question, and worth a lot of thought. Here's how the Message paraphrases it:

For who do you know that really knows you, knows your heart? And even if they did, is there anything they would discover in you that you could take credit for? Isn't everything you have and everything you are sheer gifts from God?

1 Cor 4.7 Msg

The reason that Paul asks them this is because they are **acting like owners**. They are **strutting around**, criticizing everyone, especially Paul, and rewriting the gospel as well. They are acting like they are the **authors** of this whole thing, the **owners** of the whole thing, like they can **take credit** for this whole thing.

Paul sees that under the church issue there is a heart issue. They are acting like this whole thing was **their project**. So he **puts this question** to them to help them think through the heart issue, and it is one of the most important questions about life.

What do you have that was not given to you, a grace gift from the grace God? **What are you** that is not a grace gift from the grace God? Everything we have and everything we are – have they not been given from above?

Can you think of one exception?

Well, the Corinthians would have begun to think through **a list**. Maybe they would have started with the **supernatural dimensions of life** that came with their conversions...

- **The gospel** – our forgiveness. A brand new life. The promise of eternity. Well, they sure came as a gifts. We didn't ask for it or deserve it, but God sent this man Paul to tell us about it and then we believed in Jesus – and wow!
- **Speaking of Jesus** – well, same with him! And we never did like those Jews much, but look what came from them. Sheer gift.
- **The Holy Spirit** and all his gifts – speaking in tongues, words of knowledge and prophecies and miracles of healing – and it would have been a long list in Corinth - well we even call them gifts!
- **The church** – all our fellow believers. We didn't know these people, and a lot of them weren't our kind of people. But now they are family – even more than family to us. Gift.

And then they would begin to think more deeply about other aspects of their lives, what you and I might call **the natural dimensions of life**...

- **My community.** 'Corinth is a pretty remarkable place, and I often wondered why I was born here. Seems like a gift, to be honest. And my family, and my job. Well I've worked hard – but when I think about why I work hard, I'm beginning to think that I was made this way. Hmm. Maybe someone made me this way. With my skills and my character and my aptitudes. And then when I think about my opportunities in life. You know, to be honest, there aren't very many of them that I was responsible for. They just seemed to come along. And somehow they came to me.'
- **My body and my mind.** Well, I didn't have much to do with any of them. I mean I have tried to take care of myself, but then again even the desire to take care of myself is something that came to me from the way I was raised by my parents, and the education others provided for me – all gifts.
- And how about **my days upon this earth.** 'That sure seems to be something that I don't have much control over – and sometimes I'm not sure why God puts up with me at all. And here is another day, another week, another year. Gifts all!'

Have you **ever thought it through**? What do you have that you did not receive?

At the end of his life, **King David** took a great offering for the building of the Temple, which would be undertaken by his son Solomon. The offering was greater than any ever given by Israel, totaling to hundreds of thousands of pounds of iron and bronze and silver and gold and fine jewels. It was a great outpouring, and brought David and the whole assembly to prayer.

David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: "Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all... But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you..."

1 Chron 29.12,14

This is **the heart of a man** – who has stood at the pinnacle of success in his days upon earth, but **who understands that everything is gift**. Life, death, present, future, capacities, opportunities, mercies, salvation, seasons of abundance, seasons of hardship, days behind, eternity ahead... things natural and things supernatural – it is all gift from the God of grace.

He **lives life with open hands**. Because you have freely received. And you want to freely give. Open hands are the posture for both.

Sometimes it is **artists** who see the giftedness of life most clearly. **Hoagy Carmichael** was one of the great songwriters of the golden era of Hollywood, and of all his songs, **Stardust** was arguably his most creative, most beautiful, most famous. Carmichael said this about the writing of *Stardust*...

And then it happened, that queer sensation that this melody was bigger than me, maybe I hadn't written it at all ... the recollection of how when and where it all happened became vague as the lingering strains hung in the rafters of the studio. I wanted to shout back at it, 'Maybe I didn't write you, but I found you...'"

For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you..."

Along with this discovery that every single thing about your life is a gift comes a second discovery...

We are God's Stewards

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

1 Cor 4.1-2

Paul is responding to his critics here, and saying this is how you should think about us. We are **not owners, but servants and stewards** of the owner. Let's think about this a little more clearly.

We've Been Welcomed into the Owner's Household

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

1 Cor 4.1-2

A steward was a privileged position on the ancient world. It meant that someone with no means, no title, and no rank, was raised up beyond his natural status in life and welcomed into the life of a household. He was given responsibilities and opportunities and privileges. But he is clear that he is not the owner. A steward never forgets that. But he is also clear that the owner has welcomed him into his household and entrusted him with his affairs.

That is what Paul is saying has happened to us. Christ has made me his own! He has put me on his team. Look at **the phrase, 'of Christ'**. Paul is again saying that **we are Christ's**, and Christ is God's.

I have said over the years that there are **three things that have happened to me in life** that I have never quite gotten over. One is that

Christ forgave me. 35 years later, his mercy still pushes deeper and deeper into the corridors of my heart and my life. And it is still surprising, breathtaking, unending.

The second is that Becca said 'yes' to me. I have not yet gotten over that, either.

And the third is that Christ made me a servant on his team. A steward of his mysteries. A pastor in his church.

Here is the charge to the stewards – and this room is full of servants who are stewards of God's gifts...

Be Faithful...

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

1 Cor 4.1-2

That is what he asks. He doesn't ask that you be popular or successful, or a 'star' – he asks that we be trustworthy, be faithful.

The steward thinks like this: "All I have is his gift. And I am his, not mine; he has taken me into his home. I can hardly believe it! And look at what he has put into my hands so that I can put it to use for him. I have the best master in the world. There is no one like him. There is nothing I would rather do than bring him joy."

So **Paul turns to his critics and says...** look, slow down on all your criticisms. I'm not too concerned about answering to you anyway; I'm here because the Master of the house sent me. He's the one I want to please. So let's get past the criticisms and opinions and judgments. Can you really see that clearly to judge the motives of people's heart? I've learned not to do that with myself; my heart is so complex that even I can't sort it out. But I know who can – the master of the house. Let's slow down on our criticisms of each other and focus on living for him. He's the one we want to please.

Let's get on with being his servants, his stewards. He's the Master of the house. He's the one who has given us everything.