

Privileged to be God's Steward

Ephesians 3:8-13

Halifax: 13 January 2008

Introduction:

Last week we began talking about what Paul says about the dispensation or stewardship that God had given to him...

- I explained to you that a steward is one who is given the responsibility to dispense something for his master.
 - For example, the owner of a large household with lots of servants would appoint a steward to dole out food to the household.
 - The food dispensed would not be the steward's food, but the food that his master had provide him to dispense according to his plan.
- So it was that the Lord gave Paul the stewardship of the gospel to the gentiles.
 - God revealed to him the truth that the gentiles were to be full members of His household through Jesus Christ,
 - and it was Paul's stewardship to take that glorious message to them.

Now I pointed out to you that you also are stewards in some sense or another...

- If you are a man with a family, then you are the head of your household, and God has given you the responsibility to oversee your home and to minister his truth to them.
- If you are an officer in the Church, the Lord has given you the responsibility to care for His people as a deacon or an elder...
- There is a sense that even in your daily secular calling, you are given the responsibility to distribute what is God's—
 - as a baker, to distribute God's bread to his creatures...which all bakers do whether they know that it is God's bread or not...
 - as a doctor, to bring his mercy to the infirm...
 - as one who possesses a portion in this world, to distribute that for Him...
- And every one of you who believes has been given various amounts of responsibility as God's steward of spiritual blessings...
 - with whatever knowledge he has given you to give to others...
 - with whatever wisdom he has given you...
 - with whatever truth He has made known to you...
 - and in particular, he has given you responsibility for the stewardship of your own soul—to see that it partakes of spiritual food...

So I showed you that not just Paul, but also you who know the Lord are God's stewards...

- and now as we move along in Ephesians this week,
 - I want to show you from verse 8-13 what a privilege it is to be God's steward...
 - I want to show you three ways that you can more fully appreciate the privilege it is to be God's steward.

I. First, you can more fully appreciate the privilege to be God's steward as you realise how unworthy you are to be His steward.

A. Paul is astounded that the Lord chose *him*, of all people!

- look at verse 8
- 1. He says, "**To me** was this grace given..."
 - a. He is saying, "to **me**, of all people!"
 - "to **me**, who am less than the least of the saints!"
 - b. What does he mean by that?
 - Is this just a show of modesty?
 - After all, there is no doubt but that Paul was one of the greatest saints who ever lived!
 - How can he say that he is less than the least of all the saints?
 - c. His meaning can be discovered from other places in scripture where we will find two ways that Paul finds lowliness in himself...
 - 1) First, he finds lowliness in what he was before his conversion...
 - In 1 Cor 15:9, he says:
 - 1 Cor 15:9-10: "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.
 - He was always mindful that he did not save himself...
 - He knows what he was before the grace of the Lord overtook him—a blasphemer and a murder—
 - These are the highest violations of two parts of God's Law—
 - our duty to God and our duty to man...
 - as a blasphemer, he violated his duty to God...
 - as a murder, he violated his duty to man.

- And for him, it was all the worse because he had been taught the scriptures from his earliest days!
- 2) Secondly, he finds lowliness in his remaining corruption, in what he still is a part from God's grace.
- In Romans 7, he explains that he still finds that nothing good dwells in him but what God's grace has imparted to him.
 - In 7:18-19, he says:
 - Rom 7:18-19: For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.
 - As with every Christian,
 - Paul knew that God had given him a love for His law at conversion...this was a work of God's grace...
 - but he found that he was unable to keep God's law in his daily concourse because of remaining corruption...

TRANS> Paul saw what he was—and so to him it was a most wondrous thing that he should be given a stewardship from God.

2. He looked at his stewardship as a *grace* given.
- *grace* is something you in no way deserve, but are given anyway!
- a. He was convinced that he in no way deserved to be the apostle to the Gentiles!
- 1) God did not choose him because of his merit!
 - In fact, it was just the opposite.
 - 2) In Timothy, he says that God actually chose him because of demerit—
 - in order that he might be a pattern of God's grace to all!
 - He says:
 - 1 Tim 1:16: For this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.
 - He sees himself as chosen because of he was so wicked—in order to show to all what God's grace can do...
 - that it can bring pardon to the greatest offender and transform the most obstinate sinner.

- b. Paul marvelled that a person like him should be given the privilege to serve Jesus Christ as the minister to the Gentiles!
- B. Now my friends, you must learn from Paul's example here...
 - 1. I say, has God given **you—you** of all people—a stewardship?
 - a. Has He entrusted to you a wife and children?
 - b. Has He entrusted to you a knowledge of His Word for you to share with other people?
 - c. Has He entrusted to you your own soul—an everlasting soul—to feed?
 - 2. How it ought to humble you that He has chosen **you**.
 - a. You know all about what you are apart from the grace of God...
 - You know all about the sin you struggle with each day...
 - You know about the shameful thoughts and deeds that cling to you...
 - You know about the struggles you have every day in your prayers...
 - You know that apart from the grace of God, nothing good dwells in you.
 - b. Let me point something out to you here...
 - You may look at these sins as a little thing... but do you realise that for every one of them you deserve to go to Hell—but for the mercy of God in Jesus Christ?
 - And yet, God has put you—you—of all people, into His service.
 - It is easy to become too familiar with your sin and forget how marvellous it is to be accepted of God despite it...
 - I don't mean that you should go around morose and dejected...
 - That is not a proper response to such grace...
 - Rather you should go around as one who realises that you have been lavished with incomprehensible grace!
 - c. Unless you are still dead to God, you can see clearly how unworthy you are of the place He has given you in this world to serve.
 - Even if the only stewardship you officially have been given is that of your own soul—
 - how amazing it is that He has entrusted that to you, sinner that you are!
 - 3. There is no cause for an air of superiority!
 - a. Those Christians who assume such an air show that they may in fact not even be true believers...

- As we will see in more detail in this evening's message,
 - A true believer is not one who perfectly obeys God's law...
 - He is rather one who lives constantly under the full light of God's law and so finds that he must constantly lean on Jesus Christ for grace and mercy.
- b. Look at the lowliness of those who have gone before...
 - There is Abraham who referred to himself as dust and ashes...
 - There is Jacob who said he was unworthy of the least of God's mercies...
 - There is David who said, "Who am I and what is my house that you have brought me this far?"
 - There is Isaiah who said, "Woe is me, for I am undone—who saw himself as a man of unclean lips though he was a prophet.
 - And there is Paul who says, "to me was this grace given, who am less than the least of the saints!"
 - With these great ones seeing their lowliness before God, are you prepared to stand up and say,
 - "God chose me because He knew I could do it?"
 - It is not fitting my brothers and sisters... it is not fitting to say such things...
 - If you are proud to be in God's service, then you probably are not really in His service.
 - You are yet in service to the Devil, for pride is his root sin.

TRANS> But brothers and sisters,

- If as you see more and more clearly what you are before God...
 - you come to understand more and more what a privilege it is to be placed into His service!
 - That is the first way you can more fully come to appreciate the privilege to be God's steward.

II. Second, you can more fully appreciate the privilege to be God's steward as you grasp how important the work that the Lord has given you to do really is.

- It is a privilege to be entrusted with any work...
 - but the greater the work, the greater the privilege...
- I want to show you three ways the stewardship God entrusts to His people is shown to be important.

- A. First, see that the work is important because it involves the handling of great riches.
- It is a great privilege to be made the steward of great treasures—
 - The rule is: “The greater the riches, the greater the privilege.”
1. Paul speaks of the riches that God gave him to dispense as “the unsearchable riches of Christ.”
 - a. He calls them the unsearchable riches of Christ because they cannot be measured by human beings—they are an infinite ocean depth that can never be sounded out!
 - Oh how great they are!
 - The riches of the forgiveness of sin through His cross!
 - The riches of justification through His merit
 - The riches of sanctification through His Spirit.
 - The riches of adoption
 - The riches of a new birth and new life...
 - The riches of an everlasting inheritance in the house of God that will never fade away...
 - The riches of living communion with God.
 - Christ brings all these too us—they are the riches of Christ.
 - b. As God’s ambassador, it was Paul’s responsibility to take these riches to the Gentiles and to distribute them to all who were prepared to receive them.
 - What a privilege it is to have such precious wealth to give away to the nations!
 - wealth that is not yours, but your master’s—yet you are able to give it out!
 - A man who is given great sums of money to manage feels that he has a very important job...
 - but Paul was given riches that cannot be searched out...
 - Their value surpasses all understanding!
2. You need to look at the wonder that you have been entrusted with these riches also—you need to see what a privilege it is...
 - a. What a privilege to bring them to your children...
 - To baptise them into the covenant...
 - To tell them all through their lives what we have in Jesus Christ...

- To bring them to sit under the preach of God's Word...
 - You may feel that you don't have a great inheritance for them...
 - but if you have this inheritance, you have unspeakable riches!
- b. What a privilege to have these riches to tell your neighbour about...
- You may not be a preacher, but you can tell everyone what God has done for you in Jesus Christ...
 - Like the woman at the well, you can say, come and see—you can invite them to hear the gospel.
 - Are you not glad when you find—say a park that is really great...
 - and when you are able to tell someone about it so that they are able to enjoy it also?
 - How much greater is the gospel of Jesus Christ?
 - Do you act like it's a privilege?
 - Do you see that it is a privilege?
 - Do you treat it as precious, unspeakable riches?
- c. What about to your own soul?
- Do you administer the riches of Christ to you own soul as a precious treasure?
 - Do you, as Proverbs says, seek wisdom as a treasure that is better than the finest gold?
 - Do you hunger and thirst for it and receive it with eagerness?
 - Do you give it priority status in your life?

TRANS> What a great work, what a privilege to handle such precious riches.

B. Second, see the importance of the work in that it accomplishes great things.

- The greatness of a stewardship is measured by the greatness of what it accomplishes...
1. The work that Paul did was the work that caused the Gentiles to see the fellowship or the dispensation of the mystery...
- a. When Paul preached, the Spirit of God worked through his preaching to open the blind eyes of sinful Gentiles...
- As I mentioned last week, he preached to the dead and they came to life!
 - The gospel is like a seed that he sowed as a faithful farmer...
 - and miraculously, precious fruit comes up right out of the ground!

- As he preached the precious truth,
 - Paul saw the dead coming to life,
 - He saw them adopted into God's family,
 - He saw them pardoned and cleansed,
 - He saw them receive all the benefits of Christ—
 - righteousness, peace, joy in the Spirit, sanctification, God's favour.
 - It was a marvellous thing to take riches to starving souls whom God had prepared beforehand that they might receive them!
- b. It was for Paul to set forth to them Christ and Him crucified and then see the miraculous results!
 - The outcome of his work in them is given in verse 12...
 - He says,
 - Eph 3:12: "in whom [in Christ Jesus our Lord] we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him."
 - Notice the word "we"—
 - After he had preached, it was not just Paul who had access to the Lord with boldness, but "we"—Paul and the Ephesians to whom he preached!
 - Paul, who was once a blasphemer and a murderer could boldly approach God
 - and through his labours, so could these once pagan Gentiles who were cut off from God, without Christ and without hope!
 - Paul and these Ephesians were persons condemned by God's Law...
 - persons that would be engulfed in torment by the fire of God's wrath if they dared to approach Him—
 - persons destined to be brought to such misery on the day of judgement...
 - These are the persons who now have boldness and access with confidence through Jesus Christ!
 - They are able to come to God freely and to commune with Him joyfully!
 - How do they do it?
 - They come in Jesus Christ!

- In Him, they have a sacrifice for sin that has fully atoned for their sins!
 - The Lord Jesus who offered that sacrifice and who is that sacrifice is also their advocate so that when they come before God, they know that He pleads the merit of that sacrifice...
- They are certain of God's acceptance of them... He cannot reject them because Christ has done all and His work has been accepted!
- Paul, together with the Gentiles to whom he preached, are able to have this sure access to God and all His blessings and favour through Jesus Christ.
 - Paul was privileged to lead the Gentiles into this blessed fellowship!

2. A doctor's work is highly esteemed because it is given to him to save lives—

- He is privileged to heal and to save lives...
- But how much greater is that privilege that Paul was given...
 - To reconcile those who were under the wrath and curse of God and give them access to Him as children...
 - To bring them from the darkest eternal death to the brightest eternal life.
- How careful a doctor will be because his work is so important...
 - How much more careful should he be who is entrusted with the gospel!
 - How you ought to pray for this work of the ministry...
 - that life from the dead would be the result...
 - that faith would spring up as the gospel is sown!

TRANS> So you see the first two ways that the importance of the work is seen...

- In that it involves handling of something very precious...
- In that it brings such tremendous benefits to the hearers...

C. Third, see the importance of the work in that it brings glory to God.

1. In verse 10, Paul explains that the principalities and powers in the heavenly places were looking on with wonder and amazement at the grace of God that was displayed as the Lord brought Gentiles from death to life!
 - They were able to see the access to God that both Paul and the Gentiles who heard him were given!
 - The work was done for the purpose to igniting the praise of the principalities and power...

- Hear what Eph 3:10-11 says:
 - Eph 3:10-11: to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord,

- a. Now these principalities and powers *in heavenly places* are the angels!
 - 1) The angels have been watching God's dealings with this sinful world and they have been learning all about the manifold (multisided) wisdom of God!
 - They are filled with joy as they see the working of God in this world.
 - This world is a theatre of His justice and grace!

 - 2) They have been able to see the marvels of God's working in human history.
 - They have seen how far into darkness the nations of the world did drift when left to themselves... into idolatry and folly...
 - They have seen how rebellious the Jews could be, though chosen and given the very oracles of God declaring his acceptance of them...that they should even reject their own messiah...
 - They have seen how a lowly child, born to a virgin, should become the Lord of glory through the shameful death of the cross...
 - They have seen how the Holy Spirit should then break forth upon the nations to bring them to everlasting salvation through the foolishness of preaching...
 - and how the preparation was made for that gospel through the spread of the Greek language and the Roman peace.
 - And so through Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, the angels saw the Gentiles drawing near to God with boldness and access of confidence
 - and they praise the God of grace who did it!

- b. The point is, that Paul's work caused these onlooking angels to glorify God!
 - What He was doing was on display to them!
 - The whole church is on display to them!
 - And they see just how gracious their God can be to such sinners as us and they worship Him because of it...
 - And I tell you, there is no greater thing in all the creation than for the creation to worship God and to delight in His glory!

- It is the highest and best thing of all, and Paul was privileged to have a part in igniting that worship, even in heaven!

TRANS> Now you will say to me,

- “Yes, Paul was very privileged, not only to tell the Gentiles of God’s grace to them, but also to bring them into that grace causing heaven and earth to glorify Him!”
 - But I am not the apostle Paul...
 - I have nothing to compare with a privilege like that!
- And I will say to you...
 - True enough—Paul had a privilege that was higher than most...almost as high as any!
 - But do not be so quick to dismiss your own stewardship...

2. You have also are privileged to do a work of very high importance for God.

a. Every one of you have been given the stewardship, at the very least, of your own soul...

1) And I tell you that if you are believer, everything you do by the grace of God will bring glory to God at the last day!

a) Think about it...

- How did the Gentiles to whom Paul preached bring glory to God before the angels?
- They did it by drawing near to God as new creations in Jesus Christ.
 - It was not just Paul’s preaching, but the response of each and every Gentile who believed to that preaching that was object of the angels’ attention...

b) That means that everything takes on a whole new significance—your whole life in Jesus Christ, right down to the very details, brings glory to God.

- Every word you have spoken for Christ will be remembered...
 - Every comforting word, every encouraging word, every admonition, every rebuke, every restoring word...
- Also, every cup of cold water you have given in His name will be rewarded...
 - every visit to the lonely, every helping hand to the needy, every gift, every bandaged wound...

- And not only that,
 - but every prayer you have offered up to God, every praise, every grateful thought, every tear, every confession will be remembered and brought to light.
- 2) And I tell you that both now and in the day of judgement, the angels look on and they see...
- They see the marvel of God's transforming grace in you and they glorify God for it...and they will glorify God for it...
 - and so will this lower creation in that day.
 - Each of those Gentiles to whom Paul ministered who were given access to God through Jesus Christ,
 - and who began to receive the riches of His grace,
 - were part of the glorification of God through Paul's ministry.
 - Each one had a part in it whether as a father, a mother, a child, a butcher, a baker, a homemaker, or whatever!
- b. Brothers and sisters, I am telling you that what God has given you to do is very very important because it brings glory to Him when you do it.
- 1) What makes your life so important and so significant is that it is lived before God...
- and anything that is associated with the glorious God takes on a huge importance.
 - There is nothing trivial or unimportant.
 - That's why there is a Hell for sinners who are not redeemed by the blood of Jesus...
 - because what they do brings dishonour to God—
 - That's what makes it such a big deal.
- 2) So don't try to get off by saying,
- "I don't have such important work to do as Paul—he was privileged to be given so great a work, but who am I?"
 - It is true that Paul's work was greater than yours...
 - But in the economy of God there is great and greater, but there no such thing trivial.
 - Whatever is connected with Him takes on, from a creaturely perspective, a huge importance!

- We don't realise that because we look at ourselves instead of looking at God!
- It is your great privilege to promote the glory of God in heaven and earth.
 - This is what God has called every one of you to do.
 - You all have responsibility for this in various ways as God's steward...

TRANS> How privileged you are to be given a stewardship from God!

- So far we have seen two ways this privilege may be better understood...
 - because of the unworthiness of those to whom it is given...
 - because of the importance of the work as a work involving great riches, bringing about great benefits, and igniting the praises of heaven...
- And now I want you to see a third thing that will help you to more fully appreciate the privilege it is to be God's steward...

III. Third, you can more fully appreciate the privilege to be God's steward as you patiently bear reproach in the execution of His work.

A. It is evident from Ephesians 3 that Paul saw his privilege all the more keenly through his sufferings...

1. It was when he described himself in verse 1 as "a prisoner in Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles" that he began to go into all this about his stewardship!
 - He was in prison because of his labours among the Gentiles...
 - The Jews were offended that he was out ministering to the Gentiles and telling them that they could enter the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ.
 - They had falsely accused him of bringing a Gentile into the temple beyond the place that Gentiles were permitted to go...
 - On those grounds,
 - Paul had been arrested and certain Jews were making every effort to see him executed, even if they had to do it themselves!
 - They were looking for an occasion against him.
2. But did this opposition dissuade Paul?
 - Did it discourage him in his work that there was so much opposition?
 - a. Not at all!
 - It rather excited him all the more about his work!

- He was persecuted only because he was about his master's work...
 - And he counted it a very high honour to suffer for Christ who had suffered for him...
 - He was not suffering for wrong doing, but simply for doing the work that God had given him to do.
- b. Besides that,
- He knew that his imprisonment would only serve for the furtherance of the gospel...
 - although he was bound, the gospel was not bound...
 - and the more it was opposed, the more it spread.
- c. Paul was so far from self-pity or discouragement—
- He was invigorated by his imprisonment!
 - Here was an opportunity to show all the more his love for his Lord by joyfully suffering for Him.
 - By suffering in doing the work, he was able to show his sincerity.
 - All Paul can think about is the privilege it is to be God's imprisoned steward!
3. And you can see that after speaking of his privileges as a steward,
- the great apostle exhorts the Gentiles not to lose heart because of his sufferings...
 - In verse 13, he says:
 - Eph 3:13: Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.
- a. Now you can see how this might be a temptation for them...
- It is the nature of sheep to scatter when their shepherd is smitten...
 - You know how the disciples scattered when Jesus was crucified.
 - They had been quite confident that they would stand...
 - but you know how, when the hour testing came, their confidence was shown to be unfounded...
 - even Peter who was the most forward of them all denied Christ three times.
- b. And there are different ways that the sheep scatter...
- 1) Sometimes, they completely abandon their shepherd when trouble comes.

- Jesus speaks about this in the parable of the sower...
- As soon as tribulation arises because of the word, they are offended and walk no more with him.

TRANS> But sometimes, their response is much more subtle than that...

- 2) Sometimes, when they hear their leader spoken against, they just distance themselves from him a little...
 - They distance themselves from that point or those areas about which he is reproached...
 - There is a tendency, in other words,
 - to soften our belief on something that is not popular to believe...
 - at least we won't say very much about it...
 - or to slacken our practice in an area that brings on reproach from our family, our friends, or our society...
 - after all, I don't want to turn them away from the gospel...
- c. This error is, I believe, one of the greatest problems in the evangelical church today...
- Rather than outright denying Christ as is often done by hypocrites in times of severe persecution,
 - we simply modify our confession, our creed, and our calling in those particular area's that are offensive!
 - We cannot bring people to Christ by removing from our creed what people find offensive about Him...
 - That is to bring them to something other than Christ—a Christ that has been modified to please the world...
 - and that is not Christ!
 - That is idolatry.
 - Idolatry is the fashioning our own god.

TRANS> But brothers and sisters,

- B. If you will bear suffering for the Christ, you will grow in your appreciation for the stewardship he has entrusted to you all the more...
 1. You will grow because you will understand more of the Lord's sufferings for you by experiencing your own sufferings for Him...

- Nothing can teach you about His sufferings for you as well as the experience of your own sufferings for Him...
 - In Philippians, Paul spoke of this as the fellowship of His sufferings.
 - When you suffer, you with Him, it is because you are fully joined to His cause—fully identified with Him!
2. You will grow because it will force you to contemplate the importance of the work...
- a. Until there is a price, we often fail to see the value of a thing...
 - If a child is given a car, he does not appreciate the value of it nearly as much as he does if he has to work for it.
 - b. When there is a price, you have to ask yourself if it is worth it...
 - 1) That's the question you ask when you are called to suffer for Christ—am I willing to bear this for Him?
 - You have to weigh the options...
 - You have to take a good hard look at the work you have been called to do... even at the things we have already considered this morning...
 - how important is this work?
 - how privileged am I to be given this work?
 - 2) And I tell you that this weighing exercise will be good for you if you are indeed a true child of God...
 - Because in going through it, you will come to see all the more how privileged you are to be given so great a work...
 - that it is a work worth suffering for...
 - You will conclude with Moses that it is far better to suffer reproach with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.
 - Moses, when he might have been a prince in Egypt, chose rather to suffer in the wilderness with Israel.
 - And far from regretting the choice, he realised how much better it was to have Christ than all that this world has to offer.
 - Bearing the cross for Christ a thousand times better than taking the highest throne on earth.
3. And all of this will increase your love for Jesus Christ who suffered for you...
- a. He believed that His stewardship—
 - which was to bring eternal to you, His people,
 - was worth suffering for.

b. And the truth is,

- if you understand the value of His stewardship as being worth leaving the glories of heaven to come and bear shame on the cross...
- you will surely better understand the value of the stewardship that He has given to you...
- and you will gladly suffer reproach in the work that He has given to you.

Now brothers and sisters,

- If you are living a godly life, you are tested every day...
 - people scorn you, they speak evil of you because of your faith, they laugh at you, and they oppose you...
 - And in the days to come, I would say that it will get worse instead of better...
- The day may come when I am imprisoned for preaching the truth in our land...
 - The question is, will you be willing to stand for the truth in that day, or will you draw back?
 - And that question can best be answered by looking at what you do when you are opposed in little ways for your faith now...
 - What do you do? Do you soften the message? Do you adjust your obedience to please the world?
 - Oh brothers and sisters, see that you do not do it!
 - Get a good look at the privilege that you have been given to be Christ's disciple and to work for Him!