

# STEWARDS OF GODS GRACE

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Ps. 71: 1, 3, 8, 10

Ps. 93:1, 4

Ps. 133: 1, 2

Ordination

Ps. 134: 1 – 3

Ps. 77: 5, 7

Ps. 119: 22, 24, 50

Scripture reading: 1 Peter 4: 1 – 5:5

**Text: 1 Peter 4: 7 – 11**

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

We confess in LD 12 that in Christ we are all prophets, priests and kings.

However, we are only prophets, priests and kings in a limited sense of the word.

We are not all called to the special office of prophet.

Neither are we called to the special office of priest or king.

Instead, we are only prophets, priests and kings in as much as we share in the anointing of *Christ*. We are not Christ, but as the body of Christ we do share in all His gifts.

Each one of us is called a steward of the variety of gifts that we receive in Christ. And as stewards we are accountable to God. We have to serve one another in the body of Christ as good stewards of the diversity of His gifts. And each one of us, says the apostle, has received a gift.

Each one! And yet, we are not all gifted to become a deacon in the church. Not all of us can become an elder or minister. Neither are we all called to one of these special offices.

In that sense there is no equality in the church of Christ. We did not all receive the same gifts, neither did all of us receive the same amount of gifts or the same measure of gifts.

Each one has his own place in the body of Christ to serve according to his own gifts and calling.

Roman Catholics often refer to those in a special office as *clergy*, and speak of the normal believers as *laity*. That implies that the priests and bishops are the spiritual ones, and the rest, the laity, are unskilled or ignorant with regard to faith and spiritual matters. Over against such an un-Scriptural distinction between the believer and those believers who hold a special office, we often use the expression "*office of all believers*" to indicate that the normal believer is also spiritual and equipped for service.

In our circles there are not many who would speak of believers as laity. In this regard we are well aware of the Romanist error.

But, there is also another extreme, another error, of which we are maybe not so much aware. After the great Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Anabaptists went to the opposite extreme so that many of them denied any distinction between the normal believer and those in office, or denied the special offices all together.

In our own day this is very common amongst Charismatics. We are all prophets, they say, therefore we all prophesy. They will stand up and declare that the Lord has told them this in a dream, or that the Lord told them that in a vision. Yes, they are all prophets, they reckon, receiving direct revelation from God.

It is therefore very common amongst Charismatics to say "The Lord told me this" or: "The Spirit told me that", without referring to holy Scripture. Equipped with the Spirit the normal believer is then able to proclaim God's Word just like the minister. For: we are all prophets, are we not?

Most of them also deny the office of elder, because we are all kings, we are all rulers. And we are all equal in the body of Christ, they say.

In the same way they would argue that we are all deacons without distinction.

That error is not new. It was already present in the church 3 500 years ago.

We read about it in Numbers chapter 16 where Korah, Dathan and Abiram gathered against Moses and Aaron, and said to them:

“You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?” – Num. 16: 3.

Does that not sound familiar? Was it not true that the whole congregation of Israel was holy – each one of them? Did God not expressly say “...you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”? – Ex. 19: 6.

May they not **all** then enter the holy presence of the LORD to bring sacrifices to Him? Should this service of the LORD be limited to a few? And does the LORD not prove their equality by extending His holy presence to the whole congregation of Israel?

When these men, Korah, Dathan and Abiram, dared to take on themselves the task of the priests, the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up and they went down alive into the pit and the earth closed its mouth above them – Num. 16: 33.

And the 250 men, elders of Israel, who followed Korah, Dathan and Abiram were consumed with fire from heaven – Num. 16: 35.

And when the whole gathering of Israel complained about the terrible fate of these men, the wrath of the Lord devoured another 14 700 of them! – Num. 16: 49.

The Lord made a memorable example of them.

We are not all equal in the church. We did not all receive the same gifts. And we are not all called to the special offices in the church. Each one has to know his own place, and has to serve according to his own calling.

Today the same spirit of Korah, Dathan and Abiram has entered many churches. They don't want to hear about the *special* offices anymore. We are all special and we are all equal, they say. We are *all* called to an office in the church, they say.

Why must some be more special than others?

Are we not all anointed as priests, kings, and prophets?

There you have the two extremes.

The one makes the un-Scriptural distinction between clergy and laity.

And the other extreme: those who do not acknowledge or respect any *special* office any more.

However, also in the New Testament the Lord makes a clear distinction between the task of normal believers and that of the office bearers. Even within the so called "office of all believers" we have to distinguish between men and women, between parents and children, and even between men and men, and between women and women, for we have not all received the same gifts or function within the household of God.

When a man acts in the "office of all believers" his place and function remains different from that of a woman. And even an older woman may have a different function than a younger woman.

Dear congregation, our text this morning makes clear that we all received gifts of grace, and that each one of us is counted a steward of God's grace.

The text speaks to all of us. No one is excluded. But the application will differ from believer to believer – each one according to his own gifts and calling.

I proclaim God's Word to you with the theme:

## **Our stewardship in the congregation of Christ**

We will note...

1. The time of our stewardship

2. That we are stewards of God's grace
3. The purpose of our stewardship

In the first place we note...

## **The time of our stewardship**

“...the end of all things is at hand...” (verse 7)

With these words the apostle places our lives in the right perspective.

Our life in this world is short. And apart from our own fleeting life the end of all things is at hand. Christ will soon return, and then each one will appear before His throne to give account.

The expectation of Christ's return makes us serious and watchful.

Our translation says:

“...therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.”

We may also translate:

“...therefore be serious and watchful in order to pray.”

In order to pray as we should we need to know the seriousness of the time in which we live. We live in the last days.

Soon Christ will return to judge the living and the dead.

Moreover, the short time that we are living in this world will be a time of testing and temptations, yes, as he says, a time of fiery trials (verse 12).

The end of all things is at hand, therefore be serious and watchful – serious and watchful in your prayer; also serious and watchful in order to pray as you should.

By adding prayer he makes clear that we are not able to do anything in our own strength. We cannot stand one moment if we trust in our own abilities or our own strength. If we are to stand and to persevere we are to seek our strength from God alone.

The urgency to do so is enhanced by the timeframe in which we live.

Yes, it is the last days.

This timeframe also affects the way in which we serve in the congregation of Christ.

A steward is someone who has to give account to another. He works with another man's goods that have been entrusted to him *only for a time*. In the end he has to give account.

As stewards of God's various gifts to us, we will have to give account on the day of Christ's coming.

In that day each one will be rewarded according to the faithful or unfaithful way in which he exercised his stewardship.

In this one letter the apostle refers twelve times to the coming of Christ. He cannot stop speaking of the glory that will be revealed in that day.

He calls the second coming "the revelation of Jesus Christ". It will be the day of His revelation because in that day Christ will be revealed to us in the fullness of His divine majesty and glory.

And His glory will be our glory.

That expectation is very prominent in this epistle.

"...gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ..." – chapter 1:13.

"...rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is

revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” – chapter 4:13.

“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed...” – chapter 5:1.

“...when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away” – chapter 5:4.

Yes, the coming of Christ will also be a day of reward. Then the faithful shepherds who served well will receive the crown of glory.

When the apostle Paul exhorted Timothy to be a faithful pastor, he also urged Timothy to fulfil his office faithfully by placing all his labour in the context of that great day when Christ will come to judge the living and the dead.

“I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” – 2 Tim. 4: 1, 2.

He charges him before God and the Lord Jesus Christ who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing. He reminds Him of that great day when we all have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give account. And in that expectation Timothy has to labour. It is that expectation that spurs us on to serve well as faithful stewards.

In the same way the apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthians to live well pleasing to the Lord:

“For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men...” – 2 Cor. 5: 10, 11.

It is the expectation of Christ’s return that encourages and excites us to serve the Lord with zeal.

The work, especially of elders, is often very difficult. You will not always receive a thankful response from those whom you serve; especially not if you had the task to correct or to rebuke. You may even meet with hostility and all kinds of criticism, or even slander.

If you look at men and their response to your labour, you may become disheartened and may even become weary of the work.

How then will you continue your labour with untiring zeal?

Not by looking at men, but by labouring in the expectation of Christ’s return. In faith we labour, so to speak, with the sound of the last trumpet in our ears.

There is a day of reward. For those who served faithfully it will be a day of glory.

That applies not only to elders, but to all who serve as stewards of God’s grace.

And so, when he says “the end of all things is at hand”, he places our labour in the right perspective. This expectation of Christ’s coming makes us, as he says, serious and watchful in our prayers. It makes us sober minded, as he already said earlier in this letter:

“...gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” – chapter 1: 13.

The expectation of Christ’s coming makes us sober minded.

When you know that the end of all things is at hand, it makes you serious and watchful.

What then is our stewardship, and how are we to exercise our stewardship?

We note that in the second place, that we are called as...

## Stewards of God's grace

From verse 8 we read:

“...above all things have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins’. Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies...”

The new life in Christ is lived in a close knit unity within the body of Christ in which we all serve one another in love.

In chapter 1: 22 he said:

“Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart...”

And now, again he reminds us of the **fervency** of love that binds together the new people of God. It is the love of Christ towards us, a love that surpasses knowledge, which was poured out also in our hearts.

And this love binds us together.

He exhorts us that this love must be fervent, intense.

And he quotes from Prov. 10:12 where we read:

“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins”.

Where there is hatred people speak bad things of one another, slander, and spread stories about one another. Where there is hatred, people spread whatever is reproachful and dishonourable in one another’s life.

But where people love one another they kindly and courteously forgive one another. They willingly bury each other’s vices and seek to preserve the honour of another.

This fervent love for one another, lays the foundation for all service that we render in the church. Without love all our gifts are nothing, and all our service will be in vain. Without love we will not be able to do any good in the congregation.

The love which Christ has shown to us, which we also show to one another, binds us together as one body in Christ; and it is through this love for one another that we use our gifts to *serve* one another.

The apostle now gives us some examples of this love. Verse 9:

“Be hospitable to one another without grumbling”.

In the time of the apostle this hospitality would mean for example to provide lodging for a travelling Christian. Some had to flee from their homes in other cities because of the persecution, and were often destitute. Even the apostles themselves were guests at many Christian homes.

And the apostle Paul even mentions that the hospitality of the churches testified of their love as a fruit of their faith.

Thus we see that our service to one another is both physical and spiritual. We are also to serve one another with our possessions and earthly goods.

As for the spiritual gifts, the apostle says that each one of us received a gift.

In fact, we all received the gift of the Holy Spirit, who distributes a variety of gifts to each one in the congregation. The emphasis falls on the variety of gifts. In our translation “the manifold grace of God”. That is: the variety of various gifts.

We did not all receive the same gifts. We need each other and we are indeed given **to** each other as servants to serve one another with the gifts we received.

In **that** sense we are all deacons, for the word deacon means: servant. We are each other’s servants.

This same instruction applies, of course, in a special way to the office bearers.

But the whole congregation are all servants called to serving one another in the body of Christ.

In this context the apostle uses the word *steward*. Serve one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Yes, we are only stewards. The gifts that we received from God is not really our own. It belongs to God. In His grace He has entrusted these gifts to us only for a while, and for a purpose, until the day of Christ’s coming.

It is not our own to do with it as we please. The gifts that we received are also not given in the first place for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others; to serve the other members of the body with as many gifts as we received.

As stewards of God’s gifts we will one day have to give account of the way in which we used these gifts. And the only proper way we may use them, is in humble service, serving one another with fervent love.

The more gifts you received, the bigger servant you become!

The more you received, the more you have to give account of in the day of Christ’s coming.

The gifts are not given so that we may puff up ourselves and elevate ourselves above others, but they are given as instruments for service, serving one another in love.

What then are the gifts of grace?

The apostle gives two examples:

“If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies...” – verse 11.

We must understand that he is now speaking about the office of teaching in the Church. Those who are called to this office, this service in the congregation, are to act faithfully. Their teaching may only be that which God Himself has spoken: the oracles of God.

He who speaks, that is, he who is rightly appointed in the Church to speak, let him speak as the oracles of God. That is: let him reverently in the fear of God and in sincerity perform the charge committed to him, regarding himself as engaged in **God's** work, and as ministering **God's** Word, and not his own.

This applies also to the elders in the church who has to instruct and exhort others. They have to teach the oracles of God; they are representatives of Christ, ministering nothing but **His** oracles.

If we do not bear in mind the majesty of God's Word, we will become careless in our ministry and indulge ourselves in a worldly stewardship.

Let those who are called to instruct others in the congregation proclaim the infallible oracles of God.

The apostle leaves no room for human inventions.

Note: he doesn't say: he who speaks must **pretend** to speak the words of God, while he is actually making up his own words.

That is what the false prophets do in their arrogance. Peter doesn't teach pastors such hypocrisy, to pretend that they received from God whatever doctrine it pleases them to announce. But he exhorts teachers and pastors to be meek and to fear God, to be faithful servants of His Word only.

The apostle continues, saying:

“If any one ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies...”

If anyone ministers – that includes of course the office of teaching, but it also extends wider to all service in the congregation.

Whatever service you are rendering in the Church, know that you can do only what the Lord enables you to do, and that you are only an instrument of God. Take heed that you do not abuse the grace of God by exalting yourself. Serve as one who receives everything by grace alone. Serve in the power of God, and not in your own power.

It applies also to the office of deacon. Sometimes people may be inclined to think that the more practical work of a deacon requires less spiritual gifts: collecting money and distributing it to those in need, caring for the sick and elderly. And so one may be tempted to undertake the work of a deacon in his own strength. He may agree that the ministry of the Word needs special grace, but think that deacon's work is just a matter of rolling up one's sleeves and getting the job done.

However, when the first deacons were to be chosen, the apostles said:

“...seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, **full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom...**”

Without special endowment of the Holy Spirit, and without an exceptional measure of wisdom, no deacon can fulfil his task to the honour of God or for the up building of the congregation.

Yes, if anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies.

In **all** our work of ministry we are completely dependent on the gifts and the ability and the power which Christ bestows on us by His Spirit.

If God is to be glorified by any ministry in His Name, it must be ministry performed in **His** strength.

Paul speaks of the cheerfulness that God gives for showing mercy. This is very different from grumbling hospitality or helping the poor with a condescending attitude.

Anyone who has served in a ministry of mercy will know the need for patience and strength to carry on. And therefore the apostle teaches us to look to the Lord from the very start of our ministry, in order that all our labour may be to the praise of His grace and to His glory.

We note that in the third place...

## **The purpose of our stewardship**

“...that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Brothers and sisters, all our service is to be directed to the glory of God through Jesus Christ. To Him belong the glory and the dominion. His Name has to be glorified.

Note that we are to do this “through Jesus Christ”. When Peter wrote this, he might have remembered the time when he was full of self confidence, when he said:

“Lord I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death!”

And he might have remembered his own failure.

But now his trust is in the Lord; *He* enables and equips us for service.

As Head of the body He gives life and strength to each member of the body. It is only through our union with Him that we are able to serve. It is only through Christ that we are able to glorify the Father.

Nothing is our own, and nothing has been given for our own glory. All the gifts that enable us for service, and all power to exercise it, we receive by His grace alone, and for the purpose to glorify Him who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings.

Brothers and sisters, we are well acquainted with this doctrine. *Soli Deo Gloria*: all the honour to God alone. But in the practice of our lives, nothing is more natural to our sinful nature, than to seek our own honour and to trust in our own abilities.

Therefore the exhortation: that we shall minister with the ability which God supplies through Christ, and that all our service are to be directed to the glory of His Name.

Dear congregation, dear deacons and elders, stewards of God's grace, let us fix our eyes on the coming of Christ to whom we will have to give account. Let us serve one another with fervent love. Let us seek His face in prayer to enable us, that each one in union with Christ our Head, may serve the body of Christ, and that all our service may be directed to the glory of God.

In our day it has become necessary to emphasise that there is a variety of various gifts, and that some are exceptional gifts. Only some are called to the special offices, and we as congregation are called to except those who serve in these offices, and to receive them with thankfulness as gifts of Christ. Let us not be infected by the spirit of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, elevating ourselves beyond our calling, or envying the office of another, or become critical of the servants of God, but let us receive them with thankfulness, for they are gifts of Christ given to His congregation for work of service.

Let us love one another with a fervent love, serving as faithful stewards, each one according to his calling.

But who of us is suitable for this? Let us seek our strength in Christ who enables us by His grace. Amen.

