

AN EVER PRESENT TENSION

There has always been a tension between conformity and creativity. We want our children to conform to acceptable social standards, and rules of common safety. All humanity puts an innate value on not “acting out” too much or “rocking the boat” too much. We don’t want to raise “weird” or “wild” children.

And yet most parents don’t want their children to become clones of themselves. We challenge them to “spread their wings” as they grow older, even though we suffer the pangs of increasing separation. Society typically applauds and rewards those who perform and think “outside the box” with creative and forward inventiveness and prowess.

We could also call this the tension between being dependent or being independent. A newborn baby is totally dependent on its nurturers, but year by year strives for and achieves new accomplishments of independence. We value the dependence family members have for one another, or co-workers have for one another. Without that dependence, families, businesses, churches, governments and nearly all organizations would disintegrate.

Yet we strive to be set free from being dependent at every turn. We love our independence and freedom of choice. This is true in what we eat, where we go, what hobbies we embrace and with whom we choose to spend our time. And on and on it goes. How we love and “pledge allegiance” to our freedoms – especially freedom from dependence. I love the right to choose – and to have opinions.

Take this to a Christian dimension and you have the tension between being called as a bond-servant of Christ, and yet having been given “free will” – freedom in Christ to make choices and have opinions. This is the very struggle the Corinthian church was battling, and God through Paul calls it to our attention as he begins this fourth chapter of 1 Corinthians that we commence considering today. The Corinthians were judging leaders as being better than another and treating their less favorite as not as important. Divisions and criticisms within the church were tearing their church apart and Paul makes it clear as he begins this chapter how each follower of Christ was to properly regard himself in this struggle.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5 *Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.*

But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.

MY GUIDE AS A SERVANT / STEWARD

1. I am to regard myself as a servant of Christ and steward of God’s mysteries (v. 1)
2. I understand my chief priority as servant and steward is to be found worthy of trust (v. 2)
3. I do not look to man’s approval as my chief motivation, nor do I rely upon my own assessment of my performance as fully accurate (v. 3)
4. I will seek to please God and earn His smile and “well done” above all else (v. 4)
5. I understand my primary assessment and reward will come in God’s time, when all true motives of the heart are revealed. This both holds me accountable and gives me hope to carry on. (v. 5)

SCRIPTURES HELPING US UNDERSTAND “SERVANT”

A servant in this passage is literally an “under-rower”, that is, like the slave who rowed the Roman galley ships from the hull of the vessel. He was a “nobody” who literally powered the empire’s forward motion.

1 Corinthians 9:19 *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might*

win more.

Matthew 20:26 *Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.*

Mark 10:45 *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*

Luke 16:13 *No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*

John 12:26 *[Jesus:] If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.*

Philippians 2:7 *[Jesus] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.*

2 Timothy 2:24 *The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged.*

Revelation 22:3-4 *There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.*

POINTS TO BE OBSERVED

1. Jesus is my primary role model as a servant
2. I restrict my right to be independent and free to do whatever I want for the sake of serving others
3. I am mastered by Jesus Christ alone, above others and even above myself
4. Serving Jesus means (a) following His teachings and (b) serving others
5. Serving Jesus means keeping my opinions to a minimum for the sake of avoiding quarrels and patiently pointing others to Jesus with kindness and love

We can see that personal creativity and independence is not squelched, but it is held in check under the administration and permission of our Master, Jesus. We are most "free" when we are submitting ourselves to becoming more like Jesus. And likewise, we are most in bondage when we use our quest for creativity and independence to run our own lives.

SCRIPTURES HELPING US UNDERSTAND "STEWARD"

"Steward" is used less in the New Testament than "servant." They are similar in that both are in submission to the Master. But a steward is a "chief-servant" - most trusted by the Master to guard and distribute His gifts and wealth appropriately. Joseph was a steward under Pharaoh in Egypt.

1 Corinthians 9:16-17 *For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me.*

2 Timothy 1:14 *Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.*

1 Peter 4:10 *As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*

Matthew 13:52 *"Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old."*

POINTS TO BE OBSERVED

1. I am under compulsion to share the gospel message in word and deed. It is my duty and joyful obligation as a caretaker of the "mysteries" of God
Romans 1:14-15 *I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also ...*
2. I am to guard, protect and defend the doctrines of the faith – sharing the truth in love (Eph. 4:15)
3. God wants me to use my unique, creative personality and talents to serve others as a good steward of the gifts He has given me

4. Whether I share something I have heard from someone else (old) or share a new creative take I have discovered (new) I will be faithful in giving credit to God, the giver of all truth

Sometimes as stewards of God's mysteries we share something old – reiterating and reinforcing. Other times we share something new – fresh perspective, perhaps never heard before by the listener. Both are our obligation and privilege as a steward of God's truth. Never apologize for reinforcing or for giving fresh perspective – both are essential.

SCRIPTURES HELPING US UNDERSTAND THE JUDGMENT OF OUR SERVICE

Romans 2:16 ... on the day, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

Romans 14:4 Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Acts 10:42 And He [Jesus] ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead.

The ultimate judging of the follower of Christ will be at what the Scripture calls the "Bema Seat". This is not the judgment of ultimate destination – heaven or hell. Rather it is the judgment for reward. Here is the best text describing this judgment:

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad

To reiterate – "what we have done whether good or bad" is not the qualification for heaven or hell, but the standard by which we will be "recompensed" or rewarded. The specifics of this are not indicated, but it is clear that our actions in this life as servants and stewards will affect the outcome of our life to come.

3 IMPROPER JUDGMENTS (v. 5)

From our 1 Corinthians passage of the day, verse 5, I note 3 improper judgments about which Paul warns.

1. Pre-mature judgment – God will judge perfectly at the end of time, so don't pre-judge another
2. Surface judgment - God knows the heart and true motive of another's service – you don't
3. Self-appointed judgment - God has the last word. We assess effectiveness, but not motive

LAST THOUGHTS

Are you rebuffed at the nerve of another to criticize, or are you "patient when wronged"?

Do you see the possibility of some truth in a putdown, or are you ready to defend and fight?

Are you willing and ready to serve even one who is totally unappreciative?

Are you able to forego some freedoms and independence for the sake of conforming to the needs of serving others?

Are you willing to conform to the image of Jesus, even if that means giving up some pet lifestyle? As a bond-servant of Christ and keeper and defender of His mysteries, I must be willing to place my right to "free will" under submission to His Lordship. He will use my creativity, personality and giftedness to the best advantage of His kingdom, if I will release them to His care. As I am totally dependant upon Him, He will allow me the independence He deems as appropriate as I move toward conformity with His person. This is the tension every believer will face. But face and yield, he must, to become a fully devoted follower.

MY FAVORITE "SERVANT / STEWARD QUOTATION:

"The best way to know if you are a godly servant, is to note how you act when you are treated like one."