

Faithful Stewards: What God Requires of Those He Entrusts

"Ye Are God's Building"

Stewardship of God's Work – God Gives the Increase

1 Corinthians 3:5-11

The problem being addressed in this chapter is not primarily about growth or ministry strategy, but about spiritual immaturity (carnality) that had produced division. The Corinthians were thinking carnally, evaluating ministry by human preference rather than by God's purpose. It is into that context that Paul reminds them what gospel ministry truly is.

These verses are given so the church would understand that growth – and any true fruit of ministry – is ultimately the work of God. While God uses faithful servants in His work, the increase itself does not come from men, but from Him. Human effort apart from God produces nothing of lasting value, and growth that does not come from God is of little consequence.

The emphasis here is on being mature enough in one's faith to understand that what we do for the Lord is not done for personal recognition, but for His glory alone. It is not that we have nothing to do with it – we do – but everything we do is dependent upon Him. All we are, all we have, and all we do is because of Him.

As Acts 17:28 reminds us, *"For in him we live, and move, and have our being."* Even so, God has ordained that His work be carried out through His people. He gives the increase, but He calls His servants to labor faithfully in what belongs to Him.

I. THE SERVANTS GOD USES IN HIS WORK (VS. 5)

The Apostle begins his answer to the division within the church (vs. 1-4) with a question. His intent is not to provoke people, but to help them reset their perspective and priority. *"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos?"* In other words, *what are they really, when seen correctly?*

A. The servants of God are instruments, not the originator of the work.

1. Paul does not deny that God used him, or that God used Apollos. He simply refuses to let either be treated as the source of the work. They were *"ministers by whom ye believed,"* not the ones in whom they believed.
2. Faith did not rest in Paul or Apollos. They were the instruments, or channels that God used to accomplish His purpose.
3. That distinction is important when it comes to stewardship. A steward does not originate the work; he simply carries it out, and he doesn't own the result; he serves the One who does.

B. The servants of God are first and always servants.

1. The word used for "ministers" (διάκονος) emphasizes service, not status or position. It's not word of rank or position, but one of function. This is meant to lower the servant in order to exalt the Lord.
2. This is foundational to stewardship: before anyone is entrusted with responsibility, they are first placed under authority. Whatever role God assigns – planting, watering, teaching, or serving – it is always to be carried out as service to Him, not to a man nor even to a church.

- Stewardship begins with humility.

C. God assigns the role and the ability.

1. *“Even as the Lord gave to every man”* – this shifts the focus away from comparison entirely. All of us, as servants, have different roles, but not because of preference by the Lord, but because of His purposes and appointment.
 2. This truth helps the church:
 - a) It guards against pride in visible roles, and
 - b) It guards against discouragement in less visible ones.
- Stewardship is not about choosing our place of service – it’s about being faithful in the place God assigns.

D. Right understanding of servants protects the work of God.

1. When the servants of God are misunderstood, as Paul, Apollos, and Peter were (1:12), the work of God is distorted. The Corinthians had turned their gratitude for their faith into allegiance to a person. Paul corrects that by reminding them: *servants are not competitors; they are coworkers under God.*
2. This is the first corrective step in Paul’s teaching on stewardship. Before anything is said on labor, growth, or reward, the Apostle establishes that God’s work advances through servants, not personalities, and servants are accountable to the One who assigns them.

II. THE LABOR GOD ASSIGNS TO HIS SERVANT (VS. 6-8A)

Having established who the servants are, the text now

explains what the servants do.

A. God assigns different tasks within the same work (vs. 6)

1. *"I have planted, Apollos watered..."* – the work was the same, but the tasks were different.

Romans 12:6

⁶ Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, *let us prophesy* according to the proportion of faith;

2. Planting and watering are not competing ministries, but are complementary ones. The Apostle Paul planted the work in Corinth while Apollos "watered" it – continued where Paul left off (most likely as the overseer/pastor).
3. Neither task stands alone, and neither task is complete in itself.

That distinction matters for stewardship. We are not all called to do the same thing, but we are called to be faithful in the thing assigned.

B. Faithfulness is measured by obedience; not how visible it is.

Historically, Paul had been used by God to establish the church at Corinth, and Apollos labored there after him, but Paul does not emphasize positions or titles – he emphasizes that each served in the role God assigned, and that neither role was the source of growth.

Colossians 3:23

²³ And whatsoever ye do, do *it* heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;

This guards against exalting certain forms of service, and undervaluing others.

- Stewardship doesn't ask, *"Which task is greater?"* It asks, *"Am I faithful in what God has given me to do?"*

C. Labor is necessary, but it is not the ultimate goal (vs. 7).

1. The labor we do is not unimportant or minimized, but is affirmed. The work was real, and it mattered, but Paul is careful to say that labor, by itself, is not decisive. That's why the Holy Spirit inspired him to write: *"So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth..."*
 2. This is a statement of dependence upon God.
- Stewardship acknowledges both of the truths taught in this text: God calls His servants to labor faithfully, and He alone determines the outcome of that labor – *"...but God that giveth the increase."*

D. Unity is preserved when labor is properly understood (vs. 8a).

1. As we've seen, when labor is misunderstood, it becomes a source of comparison. When it is properly understood, it becomes a source of unity.
 2. *"Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one..."* – Paul and Apollos are united by a shared purpose under the same Lord.
- Unity is essential to stewardship. The work of God advances through cooperation under His direction, not through competition among servants.

III. THE GROWTH GOD ALONE PROVIDES – "BUT GOD GAVE

THE INCREASE" (VS. 6-7)

A. Growth is a work of God, not the achievement of man – "God gave the increase."

1. Growth – in our spiritual life, fruitfulness in ministry, and maturity in spiritual growth – is something only God can produce. Servants may plant and water, but they cannot give life.

Psalm 127:1

¹ Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh *but* in vain.

2. This guards the church from trusting in personalities, programs, or performance.
- Stewardship acknowledges that while labor is required, increase is not earned – it is given.

B. The sovereignty of God does not cancel the responsibility of man.

1. God has chosen to work through His servants, but the result of that work remains entirely in His hands.
2. That balance is essential to stewardship: labor without dependence leads to pride, and dependence without labor leads to neglect.

C. God deliberately removes grounds for boasting

"Neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth..."

1. This isn't a denial of worth or value in the individual servant. This is a denial of credit to that servant because if credit shifts to men, stewardship collapses into ownership.

2. By removing the servant as the measure of success, we are assured that glory belongs to God, unity is preserved among servants, and faithfulness remains the standard.

D. Stewardship is sustained by trust in the work of God.

1. Faithfulness is never wasted, even when results seem slow or unseen. Growth may not always be visible, but God is always at work.
2. Stewardship rests on confidence in what God is doing, not on what we can produce, often beyond what we can see.

John 15:5

⁵ I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

IV. THE OWNERSHIP GOD DECLARES OVER HIS WORK (VS. 9)

A. The servants of God work *with* God, not *instead* of God.

1. God is the One directing and empowering His servants so they can accomplish His purpose, working under His authority as stewards.
 2. This shows us that God is sovereign over the work, and that He has graciously involved His servants in it.
- Stewardship exists precisely because God chooses to work through those who belong to Him.

B. The church belongs to God, not to its servants.

"Ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building."

1. Both the image of the “husbandry” and of the “building” emphasize the same truth: ownership.
 - a) “Husbandry” (γεώργιον) – speaks of a cultivated field, one that is ready for planting, watering, and eventually harvesting.
 - b) “Building” – His structure for His purpose.
2. This is speaking of the church, not just individual believers.
3. This is foundational to stewardship. One cannot steward what he owns because stewardship only exists where ownership belongs to another.

C. These metaphors of the husbandry and building show that God’s work is living and purposeful.

1. A field is living and growing and a building is structured and purposeful.
2. Together they show that the work of God is not accidental or self-directed. It is designed and built according to His plan.
3. This helps the church to not treat the church as a business to be managed, or treating it as a possession to be controlled.

D. Ownership determines responsibility.

1. It’s simple – because the church belongs to God, servants are accountable to Him.
2. This is where stewardship becomes clear: servants labor, God gives the increase, and God alone owns the work.

V. THE FOUNDATION GOD HAS LAID FOR HIS WORK (VS. 10-11)

A. All stewardship operates by God's grace.

"According to the grace of God which is given unto me..."

This truth guards against pride in service. If the calling, the labor, and the opportunity all come from God, then no servant stands on personal merit.

B. The foundation is fixed.

"Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

This means the work belongs to God, the growth comes from God, and the foundation is Christ alone.

- Stewardship never determines the foundation – it serves upon it.

C. Faithfulness is measured in relation to the foundation.

Nothing built apart from Christ has lasting value.

- Stewardship is about faithfully serving Christ in what already belongs to Him.

Conclusion:

As we have considered what it means to be a good steward of the work that God has given, remember that it isn't about personalities, people, methods, or human success. God is the owner and we're the servants, and as such, He assigns the labor and gives the increase as He sees fit. He's entrusted us with His work.

That truth should shape how we think about our service, our labor, and our place in the church. Faithfulness is not

measured by visible results, but by obedience to the role God assigns and dependence on the One who gives the growth.

As the foundation of it all is Jesus Christ. Everything we do, everything God builds, and everything that lasts rests upon Him. Stewardship, then, is simply this: faithfully serving Christ in what belongs to Him, trusting Him for what only He can do.

Before we were ever stewards, we were sinners in need of grace. Christ did not come to improve our work – He came to save us. He lived the life we could not live, died the death we deserved, and rose again so that we might belong to Him. Stewardship is never the way we earn standing with God; it is the response of those who already stand on the foundation of Jesus Christ.