**Stewards of God’s Mysteries!**

**1 Corinthians 4:1-5**

Gaudete – 3rd Sunday in Advent

12.12.2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our text, Paul is changing gears a bit from the chapter preceding it. That chapter was the culmination of Paul’s focus upon you and me, that is, the Corinthians – and all Christians – being God’s temple. He called us to repentance for our self-deception and boasting. He finally speaks about your riches in Christ, that all things are yours.

Now, Paul is focused upon “us.” The “us” to which he is referring are, apostles and pastors – those who today we would say hold the Office of the Holy Ministry.

What exactly are those who hold the public office of the Holy Ministry? God’s Word through Paul’s pen declares, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Take great note of what is said, Pastors are ***servants of Christ*** and ***stewards*** of ***God’s mysteries***.

That word translated as steward carries with it much weight. A steward is one who has authority over a house, but that authority is not His own, it is granted to Him by the owner of the house. A steward can only do what the owner commands and permits.

Pastors are not the hirelings of the church. In fact, Paul makes a point of stating that stewards are to be trustworthy. Actually, the Greek has more force than that. That word would be better translated as “faithful.” They are to be faithful (trustworthy) in the task that the One who has given them their stewardship has appointed to them. This means that they will have to answer to God.

Apostles and pastors do not work for themselves. They work for God! Christ calls them as His servants and gives to them the stewardship of His mysteries.

What are the mysteries of God! The mysteries of God are the Gospel of Jesus Christ, especially the Sacraments. Near the beginning of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, He calls the crucifixion of Christ a mystery. Near the end of this epistle he calls the resurrection of all believers with Christ a mystery.

If we were to compare Christianity with every other religion in the world, including all the false teachings of Christianity, we see that God’s entire work of salvation is a mystery. Man does the work of making Himself right before God in all false religions. Christianity is a mystery because God does the work which makes man right before God. God works out man’s salvation. God does what is necessary to make peace with man, despite man’s continued disobedience to God. That God would do for those who are disobedient to Him, that is, for sinful mankind, is a mystery.

Paul summarizes this in his first letter to Timothy. *And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.* (1 Tim. 3:16)

Christmas is one of those mysteries, for why would God become flesh? Why would He leave His heavenly kingdom and deny Himself the full use of His divine power? Truly a mystery.

Why would Jesus allow Himself to be abused, suffer, and die on the cross to take away the sin of the world? Another mystery!

How could He, as a man come back to life three days later?

How is it that we are joined to His death and resurrection in baptism?

Why does God command that a Word spoken by His steward should remove both sin, its consequences, and open heaven?

What does it mean that we eat of His body and drink of His blood, receiving forgiveness of sins in the meal which He places before us?

All these things are mysteries.

It is these things which the servants of Christ have been made stewards of, and will be held accountable to God that they were faithful in administering.

Unfortunately, many do not see any use in these mysteries. Will they help me find a new job? Will they make me a better student? Will they give me guidance about how to be a better wife? How to be a better husband? Will they pay the bills? Can they get me ready for retirement?

That is why people look for pastors who will do something more than be stewards of God’s mysteries. Paul warned pastors to be prepared, to expect people to want something from them other than what Christ command them to be stewards of. He wrote:

 *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.* (2 Tim. 4:1-5)

Many want a pastor to build their self-esteem. Some want pastors to bring law and order to our increasingly ungodly nation. Many want a pastor who is going to be their buddy, doing what ***they*** want him to do, and tell them what ***they*** want to hear.

The worldly clamor loudly, “We want a pastor who is going to be sensitive to our desires – for we know what is best for us.”

In Corinth the church was broken up into cliques around their favorite pastors. It was like a popularity contest. How often does that same thing happen today? And what are the reasons for following each particular pastor? The reasons are as varied as the number of people sitting in the pews. Of course, all want a successful pastor. But what makes one successful? The world says, “A pastor with a growing church.”

Is that what God wants? Or, does God want His stewards to be faithful?

John the baptizer pointed to Christ, a faithful steward of the mysteries of God – and for it he was beheaded.

Paul was a faithful steward – and for that, five times he received 40 lashes less one, three times he was beaten with rods, and once he was stoned. He said to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Paul daily bore the cross of proclaiming the truth of Christ, for he was determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He did not try to persuade with eloquent speech or fine sounding words. He proclaimed most simply the message of Christ – foolishness to Gentiles and a stumbling block to Jews – but to those who are being saved, the cross is the wisdom of God. (see 1 Cor. 1:17-2:5)

A friend of mine, Pastor Rolf Preus, tells this story.

About thirty years ago when I was serving as pastor of a congregation in Clear Lake, Minnesota a single mother with a very troubled teenage son from a neighboring town asked me if I would be willing to teach her son in my catechism class. Naturally, I said I’d be happy to do so. Since she was at work when we had classes, I agreed to pick him up before class and drop him off afterward. I asked only one thing of her: to come to church on Sundays and to bring him with her.

After missing church a couple of times I called her to talk about it and she informed me – very politely – that church just didn’t relate to her son’s needs. All this stuff in the Bible, all this talk about Jesus, it just didn’t connect with her boy. He needed practical help to deal with his problems in life. He wasn’t getting that in church.

I learned something very valuable from that woman. I knew what she wanted from me. I knew what her boy was lacking. He needed a father. He needed structure, discipline, and a loving home. She wanted the church to be that for her boy. She wanted her boy to learn to behave and she wasn’t doing a very good job of teaching him.

This woman wanted God to fix her problems. God does that. But he does it on His terms, not ours. We need more than structure, discipline, and a good moral code. We need a new life! The mysteries of God are not a list of instructions on how to fix things. They reveal God to us. They reveal God to us in our need no matter how deep it is. (from Rolf Preus)

How often do we want God – and His stewards – to give us what ***we want*** rather than what **He**, in His infinite wisdom ***knows*** that we need. We want pastors to give us the answers to why every evil is committed, like what happened in Waukesha at the Christmas parade. We want them to tell us what God was doing in that. What happened is that a sinner, sinned. All such things are evidence of the sadness that sinfulness brings into the world. This same sinfulness brought about the death of God the Father’s only beloved Son – the Innocent One.

Every year some folks declare they are not going to celebrate Christmas – they just have lost the mood. Of course, when talking with such folks about Christmas, they talk about the family, food, gathering together – but they usually do not mention anything about the birth of God’s Christ.

Christ’s birth gives us hope in the midst of the sadness that is life in this world. As a star led the magi to the Christ child, the Christ is evidence that God does understand how sin brings about pain, suffering, and death – and in some of the most vile ways imaginable.

Dearly beloved of God, the mysteries of God bring us to the manger where God took on human flesh and ultimately suffered and died. The mysteries of God are that Jesus suffered to **undo** all the wrong ***we have done***. It is not just a story ***about*** Jesus dying for us. The Gospel actually ***gives to us*** what the perfect life of Jesus, sacrificed upon the cross, has won. It gives us the forgiveness of sins, makes us righteous before God, and builds hope in us of a life eternal without the pain caused by sinfulness.

God takes our sins, our failures, our mess and covers it all with the blood He shed in His obedient suffering – unto the forgiveness of our sins.

I wish that I could step into your lives and solve all your problems. I wish that I could dry all your tears, take away all your pain, and give you a recipe for a life that is perfect and happy.

Unfortunately, in my own sinfulness, I would probably only make a bigger mess of things. In fact, all the problems in your life and mine, all our tears, all our pain, all our sorrows are by-products of the sinfulness that infects us all.

Christ however has already done away with it all. It is a mystery, but as it is almost Christmas, let me put it before you this way. Wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger is your Savior. In this same Jesus Christ, on the last day, when we are raised from the dead, all that is now hidden will be revealed when we joyously join our Savior in His eternal kingdom.

There is the hope of the Christian, that the sinfulness of this world will not be a part of our future. There is the eternal joy of Christmas, the blessings that are ours, because God was wrapped with swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, taking on our human flesh.

But today, we are not yet there – we are here. Or are we?

You are already baptized into Christ’s death AND His resurrection.

You already join Him at His table – with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven – and at His table He feeds us His body and gives us to drink of the blood that He shed upon to cross to forgive us and grant us new life.

Your ears are no filled with Christ, His Spirit granting you hope and strength.

It is the mystery of the Gospel that Christ Himself sustains us in this life, even as He prepares us unto life everlasting. Praise be His holy name. In the name of Jesus. Amen.