

## THE STEWARDSHIP OF SOULS

A steward is "a person entrusted with the management of estates or affairs not his own." This is a great and prominent Bible doctrine and one that has not seemed to receive the emphasis in our teaching and thinking that it should. Stewardship is a principle which every person who would be pleasing to God must recognize. It is, however, a principle that offends the pride of man, and the majority of people refuse to recognize it. Stewardship implies that man does not own anything, that he is only taking care of the property of God, and that he must give account to God for the way he handles this property. Proud men do not want such responsibility and accountability.

Everything in heaven and on earth belongs to God. "Behold the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the Lord's thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is." Duet. 10:14. Ours is not ours. Jehovah says, "All the earth is mine." Exodus 19:5.

Even though the human being who live on the earth have gone astray from God, and even though their allegiance belongs to Satan, still they belong to God by right of creation. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." Psalms 24:1. Christians belong to God in a double sense. In addition to being God's by creation, they are his by redemption, bought by the precious blood of Jesus Christ. "The church of the Lord, which he hath purchased with his own blood." Acts 20:28. "Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things. . . but with the precious blood of Christ." 1 Pet 1:18-19. Both body and the spirit of the Christian belong to God. "Therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." 1 Cor 6:20.

Since divine ownership in earthly affairs implies human stewardship in those affairs, let us see what the Bible teaches about the stewardship of human souls.

Preaching the gospel is a grave responsibility. The New Testament sometimes speaks of human beings saving other human beings. Man is not the savior of men, but he saves only in the sense that he brings to others the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation. Rom 1:16. Paul spoke of saving others, and James teaches that Christians may rescue erring children of God and thus save them. James 5:19-20.

Concerning teachers of error and the effect their teaching would have upon others, Jesus said: "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." Matt 15:14. What a responsibility rests upon the preacher! James teaches us that those who teach the word will receive a heavier judgment. James 3:1

A careful reading of Paul's instructions to Timothy will impress anew upon our minds the serious task faced by the preacher. He is to preach the word. He is to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine," and he is to be faithful in doing this even though men turn aside from the truth and follow fables. 2 Tim 4:1-4. He is to strive with all of his might to be a workman whom God approves and is to handle the word of truth aright. 2 Tim 2:15. He is not to entangle himself with this life's affairs but give himself without reservation to the ministry of the word. He is to guard himself with zeal and watchfulness that which has been committed to his trust. 1 Tim 6:20. The great conviction of the apostle Paul and the feeling of urgency in his heart should be a powerful incentive to all gospel preachers: "For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel." 1 Cor 9:16.

When a preacher stands before dying, eternity-bound men, he should feel the responsibilities that are his and the possibilities of the moment. Let him remember that he is to preach so that men will see Christ crucified and not the preacher, that his aim is to cause people to see what a wonderful Savior Jesus is and not to cause them to exclaim what a fine orator the preacher is! Let him preach only after much prayer and preparation! How could anyone ever be so presumptuous as to stand before hungry men and women without bringing them something that will satisfy their hunger? Lectures about religion will not do this! Pep talks will not! Civic club speeches will not! Philosophical speculations will not! Only the old time gospel will! Let every preacher preach the gospel! Let him preach it without compromise or apology and with a fervent love in his heart for souls. By doing this he will prove himself a faithful servant and steward.

Yes, preaching the gospel is a serious task and we would that all who attempt this work would, in a measure, realize just how serious it is! Preaching in a semi-humorous vein and joking about sacred things is likely to condemn a soul. A sarcastic tone of voice, even though a truth be stated, might very well be a stumbling-block in the way of some soul. We should not laugh and

and joke about the religion of another person, however erroneous it may be. It is a sacred thing to him. Leading men away from error to the light of truth is no easy task and is not to be taken lightly. When a preacher proclaims the certain doom of the impenitent he should not give them the impression that he is glad of their condemnation, but should preach in such a way that they will be convinced of his concern for their souls. By careful preparation, by living faithful, and by earnest and faithful preaching, the evangelist of the gospel will prove that he is a good steward.

God provided for a group of men to be appointed in the local church. . . . men with specified qualifications. In each church God entrusts to these men the care of his redeemed children. The souls which God entrusts to these bishops are God's souls. . bought with the precious blood of his only begotten son. Speaking of these men and their qualifications, Paul said, "For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God." Tit. 1:7. The close relationship existing between these men and the other members of the church is emphasized in this passage: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account that they may do it with joy and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." Heb. 13:17

The work of the elders calls for a sympathetic understanding between them and the souls for which they watch. It demands constant and patient care and watchfulness. It calls for an accurate knowledge of the Word of God. It calls for work that can never be done by any number of business meetings, important though such meetings are. The important work of elders is described in the New Testament by reference to these men as pastors or shepherds. To the elders at Ephesus Paul said: "Feed the church." Peter added his exhortation: "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock." 1 Pet 5:1-3

Faithful elders are precious in the sight of God. How encouraging is the promised reward! "And when the chief shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away." 1 Pet 5:4

We shall be held accountable for the souls within the sphere of our influence. It is a Christian's duty to try to win souls. The church is the Lord's army and every member should be a recruiting officer, constantly watching for an opportunity to enlist someone else in this great cause. Winning those back who have drifted should also be a great concern of all of us. "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." James 5:19,20

Listen to these words: "Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word of my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to win the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul." Ezekiel 3:18-19

There are many ways of leading men to Christ. Living faithfully before them is a powerful force! Handing a friend an attractive pamphlet or lending a book is an effective medium. Bringing people to services to hear the gospel preached has led many to become Christians. Inviting our friends and neighbors to hear a radio sermon or to watch a television program in which the gospel is preached has led many to become Christians. Have you even won a soul for Christ? Will you go to the judgment empty-handed?

Cain asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" This was asked in an effort to evade his responsibility. In a real sense we are the keepers of the souls of others. May God help us to realize the meaning and importance of the stewardship of souls.

