

How to be a steward of life

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

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Crossroads Ministries

301 S. 8th Street
Opelika, Alabama 36801

Website: www.fbcopelika.com

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/jeffmeyers

In Psalm 42:1 it says, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee." Would that be our prayer today.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we gather today under the name of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, Lord, we have declared your goodness, we have declared your grace through song and, Lord, now as the deer that pants after the water, Lord, I pray that as we open your word, that our soul would long after you. May our affection be nowhere else. May our attention be on nobody else but you and you alone. Somehow, some way as only you can do supernaturally, would you drown out the voices of our culture, drown out the voices of opinions and philosophies and ideas, and may your voice be the only voice we hear. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Well, this morning as we celebrate in our community what we know as one of our two spring breaks, I thought it would be very fitting that it be a little interactive today and so I'm going to ask at one point of interaction: if you were as I was growing up, if you ever participated in what we know as Bible drill or sword drill, raise your hand. Oh, good. You're going to feel at home today because it's going to feel like Bible drill.

There are three principle passages of Scripture that we're going to find ourselves in today and then numerous other passages that if you're a notetaker, and I hope you are, I'm going to warn you in advance that the pencil or the pen is going to start smoking here in a few minutes, okay? So three passages of Scripture. We're going to find ourselves, we're going to begin in 1 Corinthians 3. Then after we look at 1 Corinthians 3, we're going to go into Matthew 7. Then we're going to conclude in Revelation 4. I will repeat these several times but 1 Corinthians 3, Matthew 7, and Revelation 4 and today we're going to deal with the subject matter that for the majority of time when you find yourself in this situation, in this context, in what we know as a worship service, the majority of the time, in fact 98-99% of the time when you hear this word, it has to do with finances or money. The word is stewardship. I've got good news for you, this is one of those other one or two times because what we're going to talk about today is being a steward of our lives.

Now, by definition, a steward is somebody who owns nothing but manages everything. A steward is someone who has been given resources by which they then have the ability to

take and to foster their care. Now, the illustration of finances is a perfect illustration because we recognize that every aspect that we have financially or materially comes from and is of the Lord, and so he gives us these resources to manage; he gives them to us to be a steward over. Today we're going to take that concept and we're going to ratchet it up a little bit and we're not just going to talk about our finances, we're going to talk about us being a steward of our life because the last time I checked, every aspect of our life, not just our finances, but even the breath in our lungs is a gift from God.

How many times have you said, "But it's my life"? No, it's not. It's not yours. Why? Because if it weren't for a holy God, you wouldn't have the life that you claim to be yours and so the breath that we breathe, the words that we speak, the actions that we take in and above even our material possessions ought to be managed by us to the glory of God.

Today we're going to talk about: what does it look like to be a steward of our life? And as you turn to 1 Corinthians 3, we have a passage of Scripture that not only alludes to the way that we live our life each and every day, but the day of where we allow or allow the opportunity to present what we've done with our life to the Lord whom we have believed on. Beginning in verse 11 of 1 Corinthians 3,

11 For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; 13 Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. 14 If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. 15 If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

Now, several things that I want to call to your attention based on this passage of Scripture today and the first one is this: it is the parable that is utilized. Now, verse 10 says there is no other foundation whereby we must lay but that which is Jesus Christ, and when I use the word "parable" that is a story or that is an illustration to prove a point, and here's where I want you to go back to Matthew 7, you see, Matthew 7, Jesus is communicating what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. It begins with, "Blessed are these and blessed are those," and all types of instructions and warnings, but when you get to the very end, Jesus tells a story. It's a story of two individuals who build identical houses on very different foundations, and here in 1 Corinthians 3:10 it says there is no other foundation that can be laid other than Jesus Christ. So I want us to go back to this story, this illustration that Jesus uses at the end of Matthew 7, beginning in verse 24. From the words of Jesus,

24 Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: 25 And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. 26 And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be

likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: 27 And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

Jesus makes a very clear distinction here that there are only two foundations that you can build your life on. It can be built on a rock or it can be built on sand. There is not a third option. There is not a fourth option. There is not a D, All or None of the above. In fact, later in 1 Corinthians 10, there is this allusion back to the Israelites coming out of Egypt and it says after 400 years of slavery they came out of Egypt, they go across the Red Sea, they are wandering in the wilderness and they're begging the Lord, they're thirsty saying, "Please bring us something to drink." What does the Lord do? The Lord tells Moses to take his staff and to strike the rock. In 1 Corinthians 10, speaking of that event thousands of years earlier it says, "And that rock was Christ Jesus."

Now here's what I want you to hear and allow me to quote Leonard Ravenhill, a hero of my faith. He says there's a thousand roads to hell and none that come out. In other words, there are only two paths when it comes to eternity: one leads to heaven and one leads to hell and the one that makes the difference is Jesus Christ. That's it. And when in 1 Corinthians 3:10 when it says there is no other foundation that can be laid but the foundation of Jesus Christ, understand in God's salvation economy you're either saved or you're lost. That's it. There are no other options.

Now the reason that is important to establish from the beginning is when you get to verse 11 of 1 Corinthians 3, it's talking about judgment. It's talking about works. It's talking about fire. And here's what I want you to hear very clearly this morning: verses 11 through 15 are not speaking of a judgment that determines one's eternity, it's not speaking of a heaven or hell issue, in fact, what it's speaking to is this: you have people who have acknowledged that they were sinful, you have people who understand that they've messed up, and they've asked Jesus Christ to save them and to forgive them and he is the foundation whereby they are building their house of faith on and verses 11 through 15 share that you and I as stewards of the life that we now have in Christ Jesus, are still held accountable to what we do with the faith that the Lord has given us the privilege to live out.

Notice what it says in verse 15, the very end of that passage we read, "Yet so they shall be saved from or by fire." In other words, the passage that we're addressing today is written to those who already believe in Jesus Christ about the day of which they are held with the privilege and the opportunity to be accountable of how they were a steward of the relationship with Jesus. Verses 11 through 15 have nothing to do with eternity, nothing to do with heaven or hell. That was established in verse 10 because there is no other foundation that you can lay but that of Christ Jesus.

Now let's pick it up in verse 11 of 1 Corinthians 3. That means that there are two possible decisions. It says that the life that you live as a believer in Jesus Christ, you can either build your life with gold, silver and precious stones, or with wood, hay and stubble. That's it. There are books that have been written, there are seminars that you can attend,

that they will spend an enormous amount of time and attention to try to determine what is the gold and what is the silver and what is the precious stones, and what is the wood, what is the hay, what is the stubble, but allow me to make it simple today. In 2 Corinthians 5:10, speaking of this event and speaking of believers in Jesus Christ, it says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of that which we've done in the flesh," listen, "whether it be good or whether it be bad." In other words, as someone who has already confessed Jesus Christ as their Savior, we are held in the stewardship of our life of faith that we now possess and there are two roads or two opportunities or two decisions that we can make: we can either do the things that honor and glorify the Lord or we can do the things that do not. But what does it say? "It shall be revealed by fire."

You know, in the book of Revelation 1, we have an interesting picture where the Apostle John, and let me remind you who John was, John was the beloved apostle; John was the one who sat next to Jesus when they had their meals; John was the only one of the apostles who was at the cross when Jesus breathed his last breath; and John was the only one who Jesus says, "If I will, there can be one of you who will remain alive until my second coming." Can we just all agree that John, at least in the eyes of the Lord, had a very special position?

That being said, Revelation 1, the Apostle John, he's on the island of Patmos. In fact, he is so faithful to Jesus Christ he is there awaiting his martyrdom. He has been diminished to this place with an absence of food and an absence of sanitation for his impending, slow, dreadful death, and there in Revelation 1 he has this vision, he has this dream and it says, "I saw Jesus like I had never seen him before. His hair was white as wool. There was a garment that went down his body. His feet were blazing like bronze." But there's this one illustration and it says, "and his eyes were as a flame of fire."

Now, I don't want to make trite this very serious context of Scripture but I had an old football coach that anytime he would ask you, he'd say, "Did you miss your block?" "No, sir." He'd say, "Look me in the eyes, boy. Look me in the eyes." Why? Because he used to tell us all the time, "The eyes are the window to your soul." And when John the apostle sees Jesus and his eyes of fire, do you know what Revelation 1 says? "He fell at his feet as if dead."

Now, here's the thing I want you to notice based on this passage in 1 Corinthians 3: Jesus Christ does not look at the Apostle Paul and say, "Yup, that's right, give me a switch because I'm going lay a whooping on you." But what does he say? He says, "Fear not." He says, "Get up. I'm the Alpha and the Omega. I'm the first and the last. I have the keys to death and hell." You see, when we look at this passage in 1 Corinthians 3 and we talk about being a steward of the life the Lord has given us, there is really one of two options of which to look at it: there is the glass half full and the glass half empty. The glass half empty says this, that one day even as a believer in Jesus Christ, when we appear before him and we see him face-to-face there is going to be a chronicling of our life, all the shortcomings, all the missteps, all the opportunities that were lost. And I understand that perspective because it does say there is wood, there's hay and there's stubble, but the last

time I checked, anytime you put wood, hay or stubble in a fire, it doesn't last for days and weeks and years, it's gone almost immediately. And rather than the glass half empty, I prefer to see the glass half full, that this is an opportunity not to disclose all of our shortcomings but much the opposite, to show us all the things that were a steward of to the glory of God with the life that he gave us. It says one day it shall be revealed by fire.

Now, here's what's interesting about this passage in 1 Corinthians 3, verse 14 it says, "If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward." And basically what I'm going to speak to this morning in that context of verse 14 are the "prizes" that are available for a life lived in proper stewardship to Jesus Christ. Now the reason I put it in quotes you'll see in just a moment, that this is not a study, this is not a lesson, this is not a message in crown collecting, in fact, it's going to be much the opposite. But the Bible does say that there are things that can happen in our lives, behaviors in our lives, attitudes in our lives, that when we possess them, the Lord rewards us and these five specific passages in your New Testament speaks of a phrase or a concept known as a crown and the illustration is given, much like an Olympic athlete who thousands of years ago would have received a crown or wreath or leaves upon his head, today they would receive a medal around their neck, that if these behaviors, if these concepts are present in your life, that you as a steward are rewarded for your faithfulness.

Now I'm going to walk through these five real quick. This is the section where I said if you're a notetaker, get ready for the pen to start smoking. Here we go. The first one is found in 1 Corinthians 9:25. It says, "Though the world seeks after a crown that is corruptible, we seek after one that is incorruptible." And he talks about that in verse 26 and 27 saying that I put my body into subjection and my faithfulness to the Lord, and the idea that you get from 1 Corinthians 9:25 is there is a reward, there is a crown that is given when we don't give up, we don't give in, and we don't give out. In other words, when he said, "You know what? I don't want to keep doing this anymore. I'm not interested in living for the things of the Lord. I'm tired of living like this. I want there to be a mountaintop and there's a valley," he says, "Don't worry. You hang in there. You be a good steward of wherever you find yourself and one day you will be rewarded with a crown that never perishes." You see, it's the first of the rewards that we don't give up, give in or give out.

The second one is found in 2 Timothy 4:8. It's the last paragraph of the Apostle Paul's ministry to us and in this paragraph of Scripture it talks about doing the work of an evangelist and it talks about holding true to fast doctrine in the midst of improper and erroneous doctrine, but in verse 8 it says, "For those who love his appearing, they shall receive a crown." Now, this is one of the five "reward/prizes" that I think oftentimes is the most confusing. What does that mean to love his appearing? Does that mean that I sell everything that I have and go and sit on a mountaintop and hope he comes back during my lifetime?

You know, years ago I had the privilege of traveling literally the world as a vocational evangelist and typically when I was here in the United States and I was in oftentimes very small rural environments, we would have these week, two week long revival meetings.

Every night as I closed the message, I would introduce the next night's either subject matter or concept. In other words, typically we'd have a night where it was a student night. We were facilitating the teenagers in the community and I would warn them, I'd say, "Tomorrow night is student night. We're going to be in the high schools. We're going to have lots of kids coming. It's going to be loud. Bring your ear plugs." I mean, one of those kind of things. But one of the things I always said everywhere I traveled, at least one night wherever I served, I would speak to or talk about the second coming of Jesus Christ. You say, "Well, why did you always do that?" Because the second coming of Jesus is mentioned eight times more frequently than the first coming of Jesus Christ.

So one night I made the announcement that tomorrow night, we're going to talk about Jesus' second coming. Let it be. Went on about my business. The next day I found myself in a home in a rural community such as that, oftentimes they fed you before the service in a home and the pastor was there, I was there, the man that was leading the music was there and we're just having a great time of fellowship enjoying each other. It was just a great time. I never saw coming what came at me that night. A young lady whose home that we were in, she was probably in her mid to late 30s had fixed a fantastic meal. It was a wonderful time. We had a great time and then as things began to die down, we began to transition to go back to the church. She said, "Jeff, can I ask you a question?" I said, "Sure." She said, "Are you going to talk about the second coming again like you mentioned tonight?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." I said, "Why?" And she said, "Well, I want to thank you for being in my home, I want to thank you for being here this week, but if you're talking about the second coming tonight, I'm not going to be there." I thought that was a little bit odd. I said, "Ma'am, can I ask you why?" Here was her response, one of the most frightening things I ever heard in my life, she said, "Honestly, Jeff, I like things the way they are. I don't want them to change." That is a pitifully sad statement, that we would rather have the brokenness and the disease and the disappointments of this world than that which the Lord Jesus will bring with him one day.

In 2 Timothy 4:8, it says there is a crown of rejoicing to those who love his appearing. Allow me to give that an everyday interpretation for us: if you desire the things of what he offers you more than the things of this world, there is the opportunity as a steward of Christ to receive a reward for desiring his presence more than this world's things and trappings.

The third one is found in the book of James 1:12. James 1 is about temptations and trials and the struggles of life. It says there in verse 12 of chapter 1 that one has received a crown or a reward if they endure the trials or the tribulations of life. Now very differently than 1 Corinthians 9:25 where it says if we don't give up, give in, or give out, this one says when you find yourselves in the valleys of life, when like Job's wife everybody tells you to quit and give up and you don't and you don't go the way of the world, you don't fall into the trap of temptation, and when the world says you'd be better off if you did it this way than God's way and you said, "Nope, I'm doing it God's way no matter if nobody goes with me at all."

The next one, or the fourth one, is found in 1 Peter 5:4, oftentimes called the shepherd's crown or even the pastor's crown. It says that when you find yourself in a situation where you have the privilege and the opportunity of leading others spiritually, you do so faithfully. Now what that means is when you have those who you infuse the truths of God's word in in their lives, that you do so when given the opportunity. Now don't think of this literally as just a church setting or a pastor setting because many of you, if not all of you, have a flock. Sometimes it's your family. Sometimes it's your coworkers. Sometimes it's fellow students. That when you have the opportunity to speak the truth of God's word in their life, you do so and you don't back down. It says you will be rewarded one day.

Last but not least, the book of Revelation 2:10, oftentimes we call it the martyrs' crown. It says that those who are faithful unto their death will receive the crown of life. Oftentimes people say, "Well, I guess unless I'm put upon the martyrs' block, that's a missed opportunity for me." Well, not necessarily because sometimes some of you have experienced the death of a dream or the death of progress or the death of "earthly success" because you weren't willing to forsake your values and your beliefs and it says he who experiences death on behalf of the Lord Jesus shall receive a crown of life.

Now you take all those constructs and I know we could spend a lot of time on them, but basically what it says is this: that when we are faithful to the Lord, that we don't give in, give out, or give up, when we hand in there in the valleys of life, when we minister to the people around us the things of God, when are willing to choose the Lord over anybody or anything else, that one day we're rewarded.

Which brings me to my final thought and point today, the future ramification or understanding or the possibility here. This is where we need to go Revelation 4. What's the purpose? Why is this put in Scripture and why does it matter to each and every one of us? You see, it was 30 years ago this week, or about 30 years ago this week, that this concept became very relevant in my life. It was spring break and as a young student, I found myself as a part of our student ministry, I found myself on a ski trip. We made our way to Colorado and we skied by day, we did Bible study by night, and it just so happened that while I was there, that the individual that had been brought in to lead our Bible studies was in the adjoining condominium. In other words, they had a series of rooms, we had a series of rooms, but there was a meeting area in the middle and every night he would teach and instruct us and do Bible study but because we had a common meeting area, I had the ability to continue that dialog and just to talk about other things of life while we were there because we would cross paths on a frequent basis.

And I remember that while we were up there in Colorado, this subject matter was addressed, this concept of being a steward, this idea of one day being rewarded for or receiving, shall we say, accolades for living a life of faithfulness to the Lord. And I struggled with it, I really did, and so I was given the opportunity, I crossed this young man's path and I just said, "Hey, can I talk to you about this subject matter?" He said, "Sure." And I said, "Maybe I'm just missing the point. I know I'm young. I don't know what I'm doing," I said, "but I'm struggling." He said, "What's going on?" And here was

the illustration I gave some 30 years ago. I'm going to give it to you exactly as I gave it to him. I said, "Let's just imagine one day that my mansion is next to Billy Graham's. He's got five and I've got one." I said, "When we've been in there 10,000 years, I'm going to be jealous and envious that I don't have as many as he does." I said, "I just don't grasp this. I don't get it." I said, "If this is true about Scripture that we're rewarded for our stewardship, our faithfulness, what do you do when one day walking the streets of gold you see those that have more than you. Would not envy, would not jealousy creep in?" And he pointed me to this passage in Revelation 4 that I want to point you to this morning.

The book of Revelation, most of the activities take place on earth, most of it is about the judgment of God on those that are rebellious against his will and his way, but chapters 4 and chapters 5, the layers are peeled away and we actually see the throne room of God. It says in verse 9 of chapter 4,

9 And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, [listen to verse 10] 10 The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 11 Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

Allow me to clarify a misconception: you were not created to be a crown collector. Your task as a believer in Jesus Christ is not to go do and to say and to be so that one day you can stand on a podium and say, "Look at me!" No, in fact it's just the opposite. In fact, the picture that we have is, as we are faithful, as we are a good steward of what the Lord has given us, then we have the privilege and we have the opportunity of one day when we see him face-to-face, not say, "Hey, look what I did," but casting them and saying, "Thank you, O Lord, that you gave me the life that you did."

As we close this morning, you know, one of the great things about physical and emotional and mental maturity is they give us a lesson in spiritual maturity. Think about birthdays and Christmas and other occasions. As a child, you couldn't wait to open your presents. As an adult, you can't wait for the children to open yours. The same Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 at the beginning of the chapter said, "Oh, how I long that you would mature in your faith. Oh, how I wish you were eating steak and meat, unfortunately, you're still eating milk." But he was saying to each and every one of us that we should grow in the maturation of our faith, it's not about what we can get from God, it's about what we have the privilege of giving to him. One day each and every one of us will stand before him and we have the opportunity not to say, "Look what I did!" but say, "Thank you, God, for the life you gave me." The question is: as a steward of his, what will you have the privilege of giving back?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, this morning as we talk about all the subjects and the situation at hand, you know, maybe you're one of those

individuals that realized, "I don't even have the foundation taken care of. I don't even have that secured." I've got great news for you. We read it in chapter 3, verse 10, that the foundation is Jesus Christ. It's not a series of classes. It's not about jumping through hoops. It's not even about checking off boxes. It's about a relationship. And maybe that person today and you say, "I know I've missed out on it all but I want to embrace it." I've got good news, all you need to do is have a very sincere conversation with the Lord because the Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

You don't have to have this conversation out loud. In fact, you don't even have to say the same words that I might say, but maybe your prayer, maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "God, today I want to confess that I've built the house of my life on the wrong foundation. I've built it on something other than Jesus Christ but today I realize that I need Jesus Christ to be my foundation. God, I believe today that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe today that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to pay the price for my sin on the cross and three days later he rose again so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I'm asking you to forgive me and I'm asking you to save me, not based on my own works or my own deeds, but on the blood of Jesus Christ alone. In the best way I know how, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, in just a moment we're going to have a time of response. I'm going to pray over us. We're going to stand and sing and you have the privilege of stepping out and stepping forward and saying that's the decision I made today. That's the conversation I had with the Lord today. But maybe this time of decision, maybe it's not about that. Maybe that took place years ago. Maybe that foundation was laid decades ago, but maybe today you realize that you've been a greater steward of the world than you have of the word. Maybe you've been a greater steward of the opinions of humanity than the opinion of God. And maybe today is the day not of walking forward down this aisle but walking out in just a moment realizing that you were called to be a steward, a manager of the things that God has given you and you have the privilege to return them to him.

Lord, this morning as we come to this time of decision, however your Holy Spirit has used your word to show us and to convict us of where we are, God, I pray that we would not take this moment for granted. God, I pray that we wouldn't just say, "You know, it was just another hour, another day, until next week." But God, whatever you've spoken to us, as your word says that today is the day of salvation, may today be the day that we render what we need to render. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.