

Credentials of a Faithful Steward

2 Corinthians 8:16–24

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Introduction

Turn again with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter. 8. One of the greatest travesties of life in this fallen world is how often hucksters and con-men, impersonating pastors and pretending to be followers of Jesus, have brought scandal and shame upon the name of Christ. Having just celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, I'm reminded of the corruption of John Tetzel and the Roman Catholic Church, who built St. Peter's Basilica in Rome from the money extorted through the sale of indulgences. It was the idea that if you gave money to the church, the Pope would sign an official letter that remitted punishment in Purgatory. If you wanted to get yourself or your loved ones into heaven, all you had to do was open your wallet. It was that kind of financial corruption that really was the catalyst of Martin Luther's disillusionment with Roman Catholicism; many of his *95 Theses* were protestations against the sale of indulgences.

Sadly, though, ecclesiastical financial corruption didn't end in the 16th century. If you think for moment, I'm sure it wouldn't take you too long to remember the last time you heard of or read about some financial scandal in some local church or parachurch ministry. A quick Google search for "Evangelical Financial Scandals" yields nearly a half a million results. In 1991, Diane Sawyer and ABC News conducted an investigation into prosperity preacher Robert Tilton, and found that his ministry was throwing away the prayer requests it was receiving, but keeping the money or valuables enclosed in the letters, estimated to be worth about 80 million dollars annually. Back in 2014, the former Seattle-based pastor Mark Driscoll made headlines because he had used over \$200,000 of church funds to buy copies of his book on marriage in order to catapult it to the top of the New York Times best-seller list. James MacDonald, the longtime pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel and the figurehead of the Harvest Church Planting Network, has been implicated in recent reports that, under his careless leadership, the church has found itself 65 million dollars in debt, at the same time that MacDonald purchased a two million dollar mansion and demanding a raise of \$100,000 per year.

Todd Johnson is the director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon Conwell Seminary. And in a 2013 study of church financial matters, where he was assessing how much money the professing church has in comparison to the costs of missions, he needed to include a line item in his records for "Ecclesiastical Crime," which he estimated to be 39 billion dollars worldwide. Losses due to mismanagement of funds is also a line item and comes to 8 billion dollars.

Now, when you hear that, what's your reaction? I'll tell you: for me, it makes me sick, and it makes me angry. And I'm sure I'm not alone in that. Why? Because, whether these people are genuine Christians or not, each of them attaches the name of Jesus to their ministry. And though some of them may not even belong to Christ, the Lord's name is shamed, dishonored, blasphemed, dragged through the mud on account of these financial scandals and others like them. John Calvin wrote, "There is nothing which is more apt to lay one open to sinister imputations than the handling of public money" (301–02). And he's right. And that means that the followers of Jesus—those who would serve His church—must conduct themselves with the greatest circumspection concerning matters of money.

And New Testament teaching bears that out. As he brings his letter of exhortation to a close, the writer of Hebrews charges his congregation: "Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have." Both in the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8, and in the qualifications for elders in Titus 1:7 and 1 Peter 5:2, the Scriptures tell us that both the elder and the deacon must not be fond of sordid gain. Why? Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:10: "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

Money is not the root of all evil, but the *love* of money is a root of *all sorts* of evil. And so because, as Calvin says, "there is nothing which is more apt to lay one open to sinister imputations than the handling of public money"—because financial scandal has so much potential to bring shame upon the name of Christ and His Church—it must be a priority for the church to conduct ourselves with the greatest circumspection and integrity when it comes to handling and stewarding finances.

And in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, as the Apostle Paul administrates this collection for the poor saints of the Jerusalem church, he is aware of that reality. Because of persecution and other circumstances orchestrated by divine providence, the believers in Jerusalem are unable to provide themselves with the basic necessities of life. And so Paul has arranged to take up an offering from the various Gentile churches to offer relief to the Jerusalem church. And as he does this, it is plain that Paul is acutely aware of the great need for circumspection and integrity when it comes to the practical matters of receiving, transporting, and delivering this monetary gift.

And that need is only heightened because of how the false apostles have sown seeds of doubt concerning the integrity of the Apostle Paul. Several times throughout this letter Paul feels the need to assert his integrity with regard to financial matters. In chapter 2 verse 17, he denies that he peddles the word of God, and in chapter 7 verse 2 he insists that he wronged, corrupted, and took advantage of no one. In chapter 11 verses 7 to 9, he reminds them of how he "preached the gospel of God to [them] without charge." He says, "I robbed other churches by taking wages

from them to serve you,”—sort of a sarcastic way of saying, “I depended upon the gifts of other churches so that I could minister among you without asking for any money.” And so he says, “In everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so.” And in chapter 12, starting in verse 14, he says, “Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is *yours*, but *you!*” I’m not after your money! I’m not after your possessions, your stuff! I’m after *you!* I want your *hearts!* Verse 15: “I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls.” “I don’t want you to spend for me, *I* will spend for you!” “If I love you more,”—that is, by relying on gifts from other churches rather than ask you for financial support, “am I to be loved less? But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.” In other words, that was the accusation: that, sure, he didn’t charge them for his ministry, but that was only his way of ingratiating himself to them so that he could go in for the big take, like with this offering.

And so that’s what Paul was dealing with—this great mistrust and suspicion of his character. And so he is particularly sensitive of the need to handle this collection in the most honest, aboveboard, manifestly-sincere way. And to do that, he is not going to come to Corinth and transport the money himself with no accountability. No, he’s going to dispatch a three-man delegation to Corinth ahead of him, who will deliver this letter and who will begin assisting the Corinthian church with the logistics of taking up the collection for Jerusalem.

Now, someone’s going to say, “But who are these three jokers? Just another group of cronies that Paul’s got to do his bidding!” If people were apt to question Paul’s integrity, there would obviously be questions concerning the character and the qualifications of these men that Paul sends. And so Paul writes this passage to answer those questions. In chapter 8 verses 16 to 24, our passage this morning, we have a letter of commendation that Paul writes on behalf of this three-man delegation, in which he introduces each man, states their relationship to him, and outlines their credentials and qualifications to undertake the mission they’ve been charged with.

Let’s read the text. 2 Corinthians 8, verses 16 to 24: “But thanks be to God who puts the same earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus. ¹⁷For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest, he has gone to you of his own accord. ¹⁸We have sent along with him the brother whose fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches; ¹⁹and not only this, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work, which is being administered by us for the glory of the Lord Himself, and to show our readiness, ²⁰taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift; ²¹for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. ²²We have sent with them our brother, whom we have often tested and found diligent in many things, but now even more diligent because of his great confidence in you. ²³As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are messengers of the

churches, a glory to Christ. ²⁴Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.”

Now we have often stated that the instructions that Paul gives concerning this offering for the Jerusalem saints provide for us what could be called the most detailed theology of Christian giving in all of Scripture—timeless principles for how the church of God in all ages is to think about finances, stewardship, and generosity. Well in this text, we glean principles for how to be faithful stewards of God’s money, so as to avoid any hint of the kind of financial scandal that would bring reproach upon the name of Christ. In this text, we have illustrated for us what it means to engage in ecclesiastical stewardship with the utmost integrity.

And in Paul’s commendation of Titus (in verses 16 and 17), his commendation of the two brothers traveling with him (in verses 18, 19, and 22), and his defense of his own integrity of heart (in verses 19 to 21), we find the **credentials**, or the **characteristics**, that must mark stewards with integrity. If the people of God are going to faithfully steward the money entrusted to us as we minister to the needs of the saints, we must understand the necessary **credentials** of those we put in charge of administering those funds. And in this passage Paul provides us with **six** of those **credentials** that must characterize **stewards with integrity**. Six credentials of faithful stewards.

I. A God-Given Passion for the Task (vv. 16–17)

And we find that **first credential** in verses 16 and 17. A faithful steward ought to be marked by **a God-given passion for the task** to which he’s been called. A God-given passion for the task. Paul says, “But thanks be to God who puts the same earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest, he has gone to you of his own accord.”

And so Paul begins his commendation of Titus to the Corinthians by testifying to the great *earnestness* that God had put in his heart on behalf of the Corinthians. Paul has used this term “earnestness” a number of times in chapters 7 and 8. Paul uses the word seven times in his letters, and five of them come in 2 Corinthians 7 and 8. In chapter 7, verses 11 and 12, Paul uses the term to speak of the fruit of the Corinthians’ repentance; whereas they had been apathetic about their sin, repentance had worked in them an eagerness and diligence to deal with sin biblically. And whereas they had become suspicious and dismissive of Paul, repentance had worked in them an earnest and affectionate longing for Paul, a rekindling of brotherly love for their dear apostle. The term speaks of *eagerness*, of *willingness*, of *diligence*, of whole-hearted *enthusiasm*. When Paul wants to assure the Corinthians of Titus’s qualifications for administering this collection among them, he points to the earnest love and affection that God has put in his heart for them.

And notice, it is “earnestness *on your behalf*.” Titus could have been possessed of an earnestness merely for his task. He could have been marked by an earnestness for the saints in Jerusalem. And if he were entirely corrupt, he could have been marked by an earnestness for the Corinthians’ money. But Paul says his earnestness is for the Corinthians themselves! Titus loves these believers in Corinth, and he has a genuine desire to do them good. Chapter 7 verse 15: “His affection abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all.”

And Paul also calls it the same earnestness: “But thanks be to God who puts *the same* earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus.” The same as who? The same earnestness that Paul has for the Corinthians. Just as Paul was earnest for the Corinthians that they should abound in the grace of generosity, verse 7, so was Titus passionately concerned with the Corinthians’ progress in sanctifying grace. Just as Paul was earnest that the Corinthians should take advantage of this opportunity that the collection afforded them to prove the genuineness and sincerity of their love by carrying forth their generous spirit into action, verse 8, so also was Titus earnest for that same thing. Just as Paul was earnest to maintain the principles of voluntariness, proportionality, and equality in Christian giving, verses 12 to 15, so also had God worked into Titus’s heart a passion and a zeal for these same apostolic principles. Later on in verse 23, Paul calls Titus his partner and his fellow-worker, indicating that Titus shared the perspective, the desires, the attitude, and the commitment to mission that marked Paul. If the Corinthians had repented of their foolishness and reaffirmed their love and loyalty to Paul, they have nothing to worry about when Titus shows up in Corinth, because God has put the same earnestness for the Corinthians that was in Paul’s heart into Titus’s heart.

And do notice that as well: Paul thanks *God* for the earnestness that is in Titus’s heart! Because God is the one who put it there! And God would have had to be the one to put it there! Titus had walked with Paul through the entire conflict at Corinth. He had witnessed firsthand the pain and anxiety the Corinthians’ suspicion and doubts had caused Paul. He shared the hurt and the tears of his friend and mentor. It would have been understandable if Titus was tempted to remain cold or disinterested with regard to the Corinthians. But that’s not his attitude! He is earnest for them! You say, “How earnest?” Verse 17: “He not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest, he has gone to you of his own accord.” Paul says, “When I came to Titus and asked him to return again to Corinth ahead of me, and to initiate the collection of the offering, he wasn’t diffident or hesitant or backward! He didn’t say, ‘Ok, Paul, well, I’ll go pray about it and let you know.’ He agreed right away! And not only did he agree! He was so very earnest on your behalf that in reality I didn’t even need to ask! There was no arm-twisting! He was ready and eager to go to you of his own accord! There was an uncoerced, voluntary, eager willingness to serve you already in his heart!”

And you say, “Where’d that come from?” It came from *God!* Verse 16 again: “But thanks be to God who puts”—literally, “who *gives* the same earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus!” And once again we are thrust back to this dominant note of divine *grace* that must characterize and undergird all instruction concerning Christian giving. Verse 1: “We wish to make known to you the *grace* of God which has been *given* in the churches of Macedonia!” Verse 9: “For you know the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor!” And now here in verse 16: “Thanks be to God, the *Giver* of earnestness in the hearts of men!”

And here it’s worth observing, just briefly, how Scripture takes for granted the twin truths of (a) the absolute sovereignty of God even over the hearts and attitudes of men, and (b) the responsibility and free agency of man. The earnestness for the Corinthians that Titus feels in his heart is his own genuine affections! He is conscious of them as his own and as the uncoerced, spontaneous overflow of his heart! And yet Scripture sees no conflict in saying that it was God Himself who *put* that earnest affection in his heart—who so sovereignly works in the heart of man, who works *in* us, both to *will* and to work for His good pleasure, that any holy impulses that we discover in our hearts are to be attributed to the kind *grace* of the God who puts them there!

And so we say that a faithful steward must be marked by a **God-given passion for his task**. If we are going to entrust a man with the responsibility of overseeing and administrating the financial gifts of the people of God one to another, we must discern in them the workings of divine grace in such a way that they are possessed of an uncoerced, eager willingness to serve. We don’t want someone whose arm needs to be twisted. We don’t want someone who needs to be emotionally manipulated. We don’t even want someone who’s just a nice guy with a naturally “driven” temperament or personality. We want someone whose heart is set aflame with a **God-given passion** for the ministry to which he’s been called. Are you such a person? Are you striving by God’s grace to *be* such a person?

II. A Good Reputation Recognized by the Church (vv. 18–19a)

A **second credential** of the faithful steward comes in verses 18 and 19. And that **second credential** is, number two, that the faithful steward must possess a **good reputation, recognized by the church**. Verse 18: “We have sent along with him the brother whose fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches; and not only this, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work.”

Now, Paul knows that if this collection is to be administered with genuine integrity, he can’t send Titus by himself! And so with Titus, Paul dispatches two other envoys to accompany him and assist him in the work. And in these verses we have Paul’s commendation of the first of those

two brethren. And this first man is unnamed; we know him only as “the brother whose fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches.” And though we don’t know his name, what’s important is he would have been known to the Corinthians.

And in fact he would have been known to more than just the Corinthians, because his fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches. And the word “fame” is most often translated as “praise” in the New Testament. This brother was praised among the churches for his ministry of the Gospel. He was of high renown; he had a **good reputation**. And the New Testament often indicates that this is to be a mark of those who are entrusted with important ministerial responsibilities. We’re first introduced to Timothy in Acts chapter 16. And in verse 2 Luke says that he “he was *well spoken of* by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium.” In Acts chapter 6, when the apostles directed the congregation to appoint what we might call “proto-deacons” to assist in the serving of food, the first qualification they gave was that they be “men of good reputation.” And in 1 Timothy 3:7, the final qualification that Paul lists for the man who would occupy the office of elder in the church is: “He must have *a good reputation* with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.” And so the faithful steward must have a good reputation. And that was true of this brother.

But notice what he was famous for. It wasn’t that he had good reputation merely for being a good administrator. It wasn’t that he was praised in the churches for his financial savvy or business acumen. When the church is considering whom we ought to entrust with our finances, we ought not use worldly canons of appraisal, and merely look for the most successful or financially accomplished people. Look again at verse 18: This brother’s fame was in the things of the gospel; literally, it’s just “fame *in the Gospel*.” In Philippians 4:3, Paul speaks of how Euodia and Syntyche have “shared my struggle *in the gospel*,” which is a reference to their labors in Gospel ministry, and for the cause of the advance of the Gospel through Paul’s missionary labors. That’s also what it means here. This brother had a reputation for being a devoted minister of the Gospel—one who faithfully preached the cross, served the church, and labored for the advance of the cause of Christ in the world. The Gospel was dominant in the formation of this man’s character and reputation! And so Pastor John comments on this verse saying, “Paul did not choose him to help with the collection because of his business acumen, but because of his spiritual maturity, unimpeachable character, and reputation for integrity” (305).

But that’s not all. Look at verse 19: “And not only this, but he has also been *appointed by the churches* to travel with us in this gracious work.” The word “appointed” comes from a Greek word that means “to choose by the stretching out of the hand.” The only other time the word is used in the New Testament is in Acts 14:23, where Paul and his companions return to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch at the end of the first missionary journey. Luke notes, “When they had *appointed* elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord.” So here it speaks of the official appointment of elders.

And so to be appointed by the churches meant that at a congregational or leadership meeting of some sort this man's name would have been proposed to be a team-member on Paul's three-man delegation to Corinth. And there would have been a consensus among the church where they said, "Yes, this man is a man of blameless character, worthy to be trusted, fitted by the Lord Himself for this task. We appoint him with the authority of our local church." And that didn't happen in just one church. The text says that he was appointed by the *churches*, plural. So you see, there was ecclesiastical order in the administration of this collection! It wasn't just the case that Paul decided to pick three yes-men who were under his thumb, would do his bidding, and were accountable to no one! It wasn't just that certain men felt they had a burden for this ministry and appointed *themselves* to the task apart from the evaluation of their leaders! No, the churches of Macedonia themselves appointed this man! He and the other brother, it says in verse 23, were messengers *of the churches*. So if anyone was going to accuse Paul of foul play—of assembling a team to embezzle the money from the offering—they would have to accuse the churches of Macedonia of conspiring with him as well!

And so you see the manifest wisdom in entrusting these matters to the discretion of the local churches! Even Paul, who was an apostle, and who therefore possessed a measure of authority that was unique to that period of the church's infancy—even he did not operate unilaterally. No, he placed himself under the authority of the local churches and their evaluations of the servants that would make up his team. And he did so in order to pursue the highest degree of integrity—so that his actions would be unimpeachable, above reproach.

III. Motivated by the Glory of Christ and the Good of the Church (v. 19b)

A faithful steward, then, must be marked by a God-given passion for his task, and must possess a good reputation recognized by the church. A **third credential** for faithful stewards who minister in integrity is, **number three**, that they are **motivated by the glory of Christ and the good of the church**. And we see this in the second half of verse 19. This brother has been "appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work, which is being administered by us *for the glory of the Lord Himself*, and *to show our readiness*."

Paul turns from the commendation of the first brother to a kind of a defense of his own integrity in the way he approaches this ministry. After having distanced himself a bit from the collection by highlighting the role that Titus and the unnamed brother will have, it's as if he doesn't want to be misunderstood to be divorcing himself entirely from the matter. And so he says, this collection project *is* being administered by *us*. And he uses the editorial plural there to refer to himself. One commentator put it this way: "He recognized that while others were or were to be his traveling companions and assistants in the project . . . , he himself was, in the final analysis,

its sole administrator, responsible for its genesis, its organization, its completion, and its safe delivery to Jerusalem” (Harris, 604).

And here it’s worth observing something important about pastoral ministry, especially for the many seminary students who are aspiring pastors. The Apostle Paul had one of the most formidable intellects the world has ever known. The precision of his argumentation, the depth of his spiritual insight, the brilliance of his theological understanding is virtually unparalleled. On top of being something of a theological genius, he was a sensitive and caring pastor. Time after time just in 2 Corinthians—to say nothing of the rest of the New Testament—we observe his pastoral tact, his interminable graciousness, as he deals with a faithless and wayward congregation. On top of that, many times his writing could be mistaken for that of a lyric poet or master of literature. And this brilliant theologian, this sensitive and caring pastor, this literary genius didn’t think it beneath him to carry out the administration of an offering.

That’s instructive for us pastors, and for those aspiring to be pastors. It’s easy for us to think that our gifts are fit more for the pulpit, or for the counselor’s room, or for the author’s chair. But when it comes to organization, administration, and perhaps even accountancy, we check out. But if Paul’s example here teaches us anything, it’s that a faithful pastor invests the same care and effort into the little, practical things that he does with the aspects of his calling that perhaps he enjoys more.

And he could do those practical things well because he was **motivated by the glory of Christ and the good of the church**. Paul says he administrates the collection “for the glory of the Lord Himself.” It is the glory of Jesus that Paul aims at in all of his ministry. This is what drives him. It’s the passion of his life! He said it in Philippians 1:20: that his earnest expectation and hope is that Christ will be *magnified* in his body, whether by life or by death. The magnification of the glory of Lord Jesus paces Paul’s every move. And he saw in this offering the opportunity to make much of Christ. If the Corinthians can raise the eyes of their hearts to the cross, and there see the *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ displayed, and remember how *lavishly generous* the Father of lights has been to them, the One from whom is every good and perfect gift, and if in the strength of that grace they can open their hearts and their hands to their brothers and sisters in need, then their generosity will magnify the beauty of the Lord’s generosity.

Paul also says he administrates this offering “to show our readiness,” that is, his readiness to help the saints in Jerusalem who were in need. At times in his life and ministry, Paul was suspected of not being eager to help the poor at all—especially since he was the Apostle to the Gentiles, and spoke so negatively about the powerlessness of the Mosaic Law to save. And, of course, because before he had been converted he had so violently persecuted the Jerusalem Church. In fact, when Paul was first recognized as an apostle by Peter, James, and John, they felt they needed to admonish him to remember the poor, Galatians 2:10. But in that same verse, Paul says, “This

was the very thing I also was *eager* to do.” And that eagerness—that readiness to serve the church, even the church that he once persecuted—was put on display in his labors toward the administration of this collection. In Galatians 1:23, he says the churches of Judea kept hearing about him: “He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.” And the next verse says, “And they were glorifying God because of me.” Well now, anyone who doubted the sincerity of Paul’s love to his brethren in Jerusalem could say, “He who once persecuted us is now laboring to meet the physical needs of the church he once tried to destroy,” and Paul’s hope is that they will once again glorify God because of him.

And this twofold motivation of **the glory of Christ and the good of the church** is often on Paul’s mind. In 2 Corinthians 4:15 he writes, “For all things are for your sakes,”—there’s Paul motivated by the good of the church. “Everything I do, I do it for you!” In the language of 2 Timothy 2:10, “I endure all things for the sake of the elect.” But he goes on: “For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound *to the glory of God*.” And he says something very similar about the collection itself in chapter 9 verses 12 and 13. There he writes, “For the ministry of this service is not only *fully supplying the needs of the saints*, but is also overflowing through many *thanksgivings* to God. Because of the proof given by this ministry, *they will glorify God for your obedience* to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all.” The faithful steward is **motivated by the glory of Christ and the good of the church**.

IV. Prioritizes Manifest Integrity (vv. 20–21)

Fourth: because the faithful steward is driven by the glory of Christ and the good of the church in all he does, he **prioritizes manifest integrity**. Paul continues in verses 20 and 21: “We are taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift; for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.”

As we mentioned in the introduction, this collection comes in the context of Paul’s conflict with the false apostles in Corinth, who were experts in slandering him and casting aspersions on his character. Paul had vigorously defended his own integrity to the Corinthians concerning financial matters—even before this letter. In 1 Corinthians chapter 9, he gives a lengthy treatment of the pastor’s right to be supported by the local church. He says in 1 Corinthians 9:14 that “the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.” And yet, he says, though we had this right, verse 12: “Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.” In verse 18 he says it’s his reward to preach the gospel “without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.”

And so the accusation is, “Sure! He didn’t take any money from you when he was first with you! That’s how he draws you in! But now all of a sudden he’s overseeing this big campaign for ‘the saints in Jerusalem.’ Yeah, right! This is all a scam to manipulate you out of your money!” And so Paul does everything he can—he takes precaution—so that no one will discredit him in his administration of this generous gift, because above all else he wants to bring glory to the name of Christ. He recognizes that, for good or for ill, his reputation was bound up with the reputation of Christ—something that’s true of all Christians. And because he knows that few things bring reproach upon the name of Christ than financial scandal in the church, he takes every precaution he can think of to safeguard the integrity of this collection—not out of self-centered concern for the approval of others, but to protect his own name insofar as it is bound up with the name of Jesus.

And so Calvin writes, “The more upright a person is, in that proportion does Satan assail him by every kind of contrivance, if he can by any means shake his credit, for there would arise from this a much greater occasion of stumbling. Hence the higher the station in which we are placed, we must so much the more carefully imitate Paul’s circumspection and modesty. He was not so lifted up as not to be under control equally with any individual of the flock. He was not so self-complacent as to think it beneath his station to provide against calumnies” (Calvin, 301).

You see, it wasn’t that Paul needed Titus and the two brethren to act as his guards because he’s a man that couldn’t be trusted. No, look at the text again. Verse 21: It’s that he has regard for what is honorable, *not only* the sight of the Lord, *but also* in the sight of men! And this is so instructive. This was the man who wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:3, “But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court,” and in 2 Corinthians 1:12, “For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our *conscience*,” and in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, “We speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.” This was not someone who was a slave to the fear of man, or who sought his self-worth and identity in the evaluation of other people!

And yet at the same time, he recognized that reputation was not unimportant. In Acts 24:16 in his trial before Felix, he declared, “I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God *and* before men.” And here he follows that same pattern as well. Commentator Philip Hughes writes, “Nowhere does the New Testament suggest that a Christian may be careless and unconcerned about his reputation for personal integrity; for always he must remember that he is no longer living to himself (5:15; Rom 14:7), that in a real sense in his own reputation is the reputation of Christ and His church is at stake, and accordingly that he should abstain from anything which even has the appearance of evil (1 Thess 5:22)” (318). And Charles Hodge provides us with our exhortation: “It was not enough for the apostle to *do* right, he recognized the importance of *appearing* right. It is a foolish pride which leads to a disregard of public

opinion. We are bound to act in such a way that not only God, who sees the heart and knows all things, may approve our conduct, but also so that men may be constrained to recognize our integrity” (586).

And so Paul says, “We do everything in our power to ensure that anyone watching us—whether they be sympathetic or hostile to our cause—will be forced to acknowledge that we have conducted ourselves with integrity! That we’ve skimmed nothing off the top! That none of the funds have been distributed in a manner contrary to the intent of those who gave them when they were sought!” (cf. Martin). We prioritize not only *integrity*, but we **prioritize *manifest integrity***, for the sake of the name of Christ.

V. Tested and Well-Proven (v. 22a)

A **fifth credential** emerges in Paul’s commendation of the second brother, which we find in verse 22. And that is that the faithful steward will be **tested and well-proven**. Verse 22: “We have sent with them our brother, whom we have *often tested* and *found diligent* in many things.” And both for the sake of time and because the point is plain on the surface of the text, I won’t take time to belabor it. The import is obvious. This second brother was a man who had been often tested, and who had been found to pass those many and various tests each time, such that he earned a reputation for diligence and excellence. And from this we learn that those whom the church entrusts with the task of overseeing its finances in any way, must be men who are **tested and well-proven**. What does Paul say in 1 Timothy 3:6 concerning the qualifications for an elder? “Not a novice!” He is not to be a *neophytos*, a neophyte—one who has just sprung up recently. No, let them—along with the deacons, 1 Timothy 3:10—let them first be tested, and then let them serve if they are beyond reproach. Much more, of course, could be said about that, but for the sake of time we move along.

VI. Believes the Best (v. 22b)

Number **six**. We find that a faithful steward who ministers with integrity **believes the best** about those whom he serves. He **believes the best**. Look again at verse 22: “We have sent with them our brother, whom we have often tested and found diligent in many things, but now *even more diligent* because of his *great confidence* in you.”

And here, once again, I’ll have to be more brief than I’d like. But notice that it’s not only that this man had often been tested and each time found diligent, but now his diligence and his eagerness to serve had only intensified because of the great confidence he had in the Corinthians’ obedience. He thought about his upcoming mission, and he considered that his task was to take up an offering from this church that up until so recently had been ensnared by theological error and slanderous manipulation. And because of that conflict, we might not have thought less of

this man if he was less-than-enthusiastic about making this trip! But as he reflected on their repentance—on the good report that Titus had brought back to Paul from Corinth—he had complete and total confidence in their obedience! The success of this brother’s mission and the glorification of Christ was grounded in the Corinthians’ obedience and generosity, and this man was hopeful. He was so sure of their obedience that it brought him joy to think about going to Corinth!

And friends, the faithful steward strives to imitate this **sixth credential**—to **believe the absolute best** about those to whom we’re ministering. We ought to be possessed by an indomitable, unwavering, confident hopefulness in the power of God’s grace to overcome sin in the lives of His people—by an intransigent optimism that the Holy Spirit can change hearts and subdue sin, even in the most stubborn believers! What a difference that makes if you’re the Corinthians! to know that the brothers coming to administrate this offering aren’t dreading coming to you, with side-eyed suspicion that you’re going to let your flesh gain the upper hand, pigeonholing you into the errors of your past disobedience! What a difference it would make to know that, despite your recent unfaithfulness, these brothers have such confidence that the grace of God has done its work in you that they’re eager to come and minister among you! That would certainly make me feel like these aren’t just the guys who are coming to take my money, but that they’re the instruments in the Lord’s hands to cultivate the grace of God in my heart, and to aid in having Christ more fully formed in me.

Conclusion (vv. 23–24)

And so, dear friends, the faithful steward who ministers with integrity, will, by the grace of God, be marked by these **six credentials**. He will be possessed of a God-given passion for his task and a good reputation that is recognized by the church. He will be motivated by the glory of Christ and the good of the church. He will prioritize manifest integrity, will be tested and well-proven, and will believe the best about those whom he ministers. This is what we must require of those whom we entrust with the finances of the church. And it is what we ought to aspire to be should we ever be called upon to fill that role. If our elders and ministry leaders should ever need someone of such unimpeachable character and devotion to one’s task in order to serve in such a ministry, let us each strive, by the grace of God, to be the kind of people who would be found ready to serve, having been outfitted by the Holy Spirit with such **credentials** to bless and benefit the body of Christ!

And as Paul brings this little mini-letter of commendation to a close, he offers a summary commendation in verse 23, along with a concluding appeal in verse 24. Look at the text: “As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches, a glory to Christ. Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.” Paul says, “Receive these men when they

come to you. They are faithful stewards. They have the support and official seal of the churches of Christ. The Holy Spirit of God has worked in them the credentials of grace in such a way that these men can be described as nothing less than a glory to Christ, men whose lives bring attention to the excellence and beauty of Jesus. Therefore, receive them in the mission they come to you with. Show them the proof of your love for the dear brethren in Jerusalem. Show them that my confident boasting about your sure obedience wasn't unwarranted—that you don't only have a name that you are generous, but that divine grace has genuinely worked that driving disposition of generosity in you.”

And that is my concluding appeal to you, GraceLife. Not only ought you to strive for the kind of unimpeachable character that is serviceable to the church in the administration of financial matters. But when others are serving in that role who are marked by these six credentials for faithful stewards, when they come to receive your offerings to meet the needs of the people of God, dear people: receive them as servants of the churches, and abound in the grace of generosity! In so doing, you will demonstrate openly that your love for the brethren is not mere talk, but is sincere and genuine. And in the case that your pastors and leaders have boasted about what the grace of God has accomplished in your heart, give them no reason to be ashamed, but prove that their confidence in you is well-founded.