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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**September 22, 2013**

**Stewarding the Mysteries of God**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father, we do thank you for your grace, we do thank you for the body of Christ, we thank you for the immense privilege that we have to gather here each week without fear, thus far without fear, and again, Lord, we just pray that we would have the ability of your Holy Spirit here with us, that you would be guiding us into your truth. And once again we acknowledge without your Spirit's help, this is a hopeless task, and so we pray your Spirit would guide us, enable us to open up your word, enable us to make it a permanent part of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, last week we looked at stewardship and we looked at it as a matter of passion. And we saw that a good steward has at least three areas in which that passion for the kingdom of God is expressed. It's expressed in money, it's expressed in minutes, and it's expressed in stewarding the mysteries of God. We spent last week looking at money and minutes and this morning and next week we're going to be looking into the mysteries of God. But first I want to tell you a joke. One of the things that's missing I'm told

by some of my kids from my messages is an occasional joke. And since I'm told my messages are often not very much fun, that a joke might loosen things up, so here's -- here's my joke. Some of you have already heard this, and if you've heard this, bear with me. God has just finished all of creation and he sees Adam, and Adam is downcast and he asks Adam if he has a problem. Adam replies that yeah, he has a problem, he's -- he's lonely. God says to him, "I'll tell you what, Adam, I'm going to make you a woman and she will gather food for you, she will cook for you, she will bear your children, she will be a constant companion, she will manage your household for you, her joy will be in passionately meeting your every need." Adam said, after thinking for a second, "Well, that sounds great, God. What's this going to cost me?" God said, "An arm and a leg." Adam thought for a minute. He said, "well, what can I get for a rib?" And the rest is history.

History is what we are looking at this morning, and there really is a reason why I told you this joke. It actually tells us two very important truths about the mysteries of God. First, everyone in one way or another has heard of this mystery, and second, most everyone has it wrong. You see, in order for this joke that I just told to make sense, you had to know some facts. You had to know, first of all, that God created Adam, that God saw that he was lonely, that he made Eve from his rib. And this everybody already

knows. What they don't know is what the real story is and what it has to do with their lives. That's where our stewardship of the mysteries of God is critical. Our scripture this morning is *1 Corinthians 4:1* which says this: *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.* Now this morning, I want to look at what the mystery is and next week we'll look at why we need to steward it and how God expects us to do that. So we'll cover what, why, and how. And first, what the mystery is.

Now, any discussion of what the mystery of God is has to first address a number of things that it is not. And that has to include naturalistic evolution. You see, in our culture there are two competing creation stories, and as you well know there is bitter hostility between the two. It's no secret that evolutionists don't like creationists and actually vice versa. To the evolutionist, a creationist is a backwoods religious hick clinging to myths as silly as a flat earth. In spite of overwhelming evidence, he clings to his myths because he's a religious fanatic with no scientific background, totally afraid of any scientific progress. Actually the real reason why creationism stubbornly remains the majority opinion is because the evidence for evolution is anything but overwhelming. In fact, it's almost nonexistent. A recent CNN Gallup poll revealed that 53 percent of respondents believed

creationism over evolution, and that more than anything infuriates evolutionists. See, the majority of people still believe that there was a man named Adam and a woman named Eve. And what happened with them and the consequences of that is where folks begin to get shaky.

The next aspect of what the mysteries of God is not lies in the understanding of God's love. You see, it's not this mushy amplified niceness of some kindly old grandfatherly figure that people associate with the God of love. A God who is truly loving what is good is a God who hates what is evil. And he doesn't just hate evil. He judges it. He judges it in us and in our world. He sent his only begotten Son to conquer it and we crucified him for it. That's why John said in *John 3:19*: *And this is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.* You know, many people think of Jesus as a wonderful teacher or political leader or ruler or even as a rebel of sorts, but only his sheep understand that he was God in the flesh, sent to earth to conquer an evil the earth had fallen in love with. That's why Jesus says in *John 7:7*: *The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.*

So if you understand the mystery of God, first you understand that

it's not rooted in evolution or in some kind of mushy Hallmark card kind of God, you also have to understand why all religions are not the same. You know, many folks love to say that all religions, they're like spokes in a wheel. They all point to their version of the mystery of God, and the mystery insists that all religions are like different pathways up a mountain. And it's only when you get to the top of the mountain that you realize that all of these paths really do lead to the same place and that place is love or something like love. Tim Keller points out the astounding arrogance it takes to make that seemingly humble statement. You see, the only way that you can describe the top of the mountain or the center of the spokes of the wheel is if you genuinely believe you've been there yourself. I mean, how else would you know that all the pathways supposedly converge at the top unless you think you've actually been there. See, Christians understand the mysteries of God not by virtue of some internal illumination but instead by an external revelation. Now, we didn't arrive at who God was and what he has done by virtue of some internal divine illumination that showed us the top of the mountain or the center of the spokes of the wheel like gurus and mystics understand, we received the knowledge of who God is by revelation in his word, the Bible. It is outside of us and it is given by God to us. The only way to know the mysteries of God is through his word which spells out the mystery in his terms and not in ours. It is in his word

that we learn that God says *there is none good*, because God's standard is perfection and if you are not perfect, then you are according to God not good. And since none of us is perfect, all of us without Christ are lost. Now, virtually every other religion in the world will tell you otherwise. They will tell you how to work your way up to God. You know, there's the five-fold path of Islam, there's reincarnation in Hinduism, there's Dharma in Buddhism, there's even keeping the ten commandments in Judaism. It is Christianity alone that tells us we are incapable of working our way up to God but that God was willing through his son Jesus Christ to work his way down to us. That's why Jesus says in *John 14:6*: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" You understand the mystery when you understand that God is saying that we come to the Father by faith in what Christ has done and not at all by my efforts. And he demands that you understand what his definition of good is as opposed to the one the enemy wants you to believe. You see, the word "gospel" itself means good news, but it's only good news to those who understand the bad news about Adam and Eve. And believe me, that news is truly bleak. I mean, to understand how bleak, we need only look at *Romans 5:12* which says this, it says: *Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.* The man who sinned was Adam. We all know about that. We know his sin, it

was rank disobedience. He ate the fruit that God had expressly forbidden him to eat. God had drawn a line in the sand and he told Adam he dare not cross it, and yes, Adam dared. Through that one act of cosmic defiance, "*death spread to all men, because all sinned.*"

Now, the hardest part for us to grapple with is the last three words of that statement "*because all sinned.*" I don't know about you, but I look at that first time I grappled with it, I thought well, you know, I wasn't there. I mean, I never saw Eve, I never saw the tree, I never saw the fruit, I don't know any of this. So why does God say "*because all sinned?*" Those three words describe a curse that every son and daughter of Adam is under. None of us was there in the garden and yet all of us are not only considered guilty, we've also been given the death penalty for what Adam has done. I mean, everyone born is automatically in the process of dying. We're dying because of Adam's sin. No one denies the first part, that death spread to all men because we all know we're going to die. What we really struggle with is the reason why all of us are facing this death penalty that is directly because of Adam's sin. Again, *sin came into the world through one man and death through sin.* Anyone with eyes can see that we live in a creation in which sickness, pain, and death are normal but that's not the normal that God created us for. Romans 8 tells us that all the

creation is now in bondage to decay, that it now groans as it awaits its liberation and that this bondage to decay was all the result of Adam's sin. Again, *sin came into the world through one man and death through sin*. We see all the evidence of death because it surrounds us. But again, what about the part that says and *"so death spread to all men because all sinned?"* Doesn't that mean that God is holding you and I responsible for something somebody else did? See, that's the part that we have a hard time understanding and accepting, that God holds you and me as responsible as Adam was for something that Adam did. *"Because all sinned"* means that Adam represented all of mankind when he sinned, he's what theologians call our federal corporate head, and when he fell, he and everyone he represented fell along with him, and that includes you and me. This is a very hard concept for our culture to accept, particularly in North America. I mean, we believe in rugged individualism, we believe in reaping what we sew. In the fall of Adam, we find out reaping what Adam sewed, and it's a very bitter harvest indeed. I mean, can you imagine being blamed and held responsible for something you had nothing to do with? Do you think it's outrageous that you should be considered guilty for something you had no control over, that you should be held responsible for the actions of someone else? Well, it's not as far-fetched as you think. What if I offered you an all-expenses paid trip to Fallujah, Iraq, or you could choose Damascus, Syria,



and I told you all you had to do was walk down the middle of a busy street with an American flag on your back singing "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy." How long do you think you would last? You know, we all know in those cities, there are plenty of people who would be willing to kill us outright not for what we've ever done but for who we are. See, there are many in the Middle East who wouldn't hesitate to kill you and me just because we're Americans. You may have been a complete isolationist who was never in favor of the war in the first place. You may shout, "It was President Bush who started the war and not me!" You and I both know that won't make a bit of difference. We all know that regardless of whether you think it's right or wrong, when President Bush started the war in Iraq, we too started that war because he was our federal corporate head. So when our president acted, we acted. When Adam ate the forbidden fruit, you and I ate it as well. In Adam's fall, we sinned all, and Adam spread death to all men because all sinned. Worse still, we are now all considered radically unfit for heaven because of what happened there. Adam traded perfection for imperfection and we are all sons and daughters of Adam, so his sin has now become our sin. But you know, we forget that the exact opposite is true as well. You know, it was Adam who got us into this mess. Adam alone. And it is Christ alone who's going to get us out of this mess.

You know, if you think you don't deserve to be blamed for Adam's fall, consider that we also don't deserve to be credited with the gift of Christ's righteousness. *Romans 5:15* says: *But the gift is not like the trespass. For if by the one man's trespass the many died, how much more have the grace of God and the gift overflowed to the many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ.* Like I said, it was Adam who got us into this mess and it is Christ, the second Adam, who gets us out. The mystery here, the real mystery here is that God would be willing to die for us. You see, that mystery is not naturalistic evolution and it is not the mushy love of some kindly old grandfather figure who demands nothing of his creatures. It's not working my way up to God by religion, it is not also presuming we are entitled to heaven simply because of our existence. You see, there are many, many people today out there in the world who think that forgiveness is God's problem and not ours. Because after all, if God is merciful and forgiving, he will forgive, he must forgive us. We subconsciously believe in Heinrich Heine's famous quote, "God will forgive me. That's his job." But you see, mercy is not his obligation. Justice is God's obligation. Mercy is God's choice. You know, we can demand justice from God but we can never demand mercy. Just think about mercy for a moment. Mercy is something that only a victor can grant to the vanquished. It's never something that the vanquished can demand. You know, when we were kids wrestling, you know, when

ever we began losing, you know, it's going bad, you'd cry out, "Mercy! Mercy!" It was much more of a plea than it was a demand. You can ask for mercy but if you need it, then by definition you're hardly in a position to demand it. What is unique about us human beings is that we think we can demand it. "God will forgive me. That's his job." But God specifically says that mercy is his right and his prerogative to give as he sees fit. In Romans 9, God is explaining why not all of Israel has accepted Christ as the Messiah, and he says something very disturbing to lots of people who think it's God's exclusive job to extend mercy. God declares that mercy is not something that he owes to every human being and that again, mercy is his prerogative. Listen to what he says in Romans 9:14-18, he says: *What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.*

Pharaoh was a perfect example of one who did not receive mercy. God here was talking about the Pharaoh who enslaved the Jews in

Egypt. This is the Pharaoh who saw ten extraordinary plagues, he saw ten miraculous proofs that God was real, that God was with Israel. He saw the Nile river turned into blood. He saw fire and hail raining down from heaven. He even saw the parting of the Red Sea, and that was not enough to penetrate Pharaohs's hard heart. Why? Because God had withheld his mercy. We just happen to think that every human being everywhere is automatically entitled to that mercy by virtue of being born, but God says otherwise. You know, I once heard someone say that if God were to fling every single one of us wholesale directly from earth right into hell, you know what the entire universe would say? The entire universe would chant, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God of hosts." We have this colossally twisted notion of our own inherent goodness and our worthiness for heaven. C.S. Lewis once said, "When a man is getting worse, he understands his own 'badness' less and less. A moderately bad man knows he's not very good. A thoroughly bad man thinks he is all right." Most every non-Christian I know thinks they are all right when it comes to God. You know, a lot of the fault of that lies with the church. It lies with the church because we don't explain the mysteries of God any more because people simply don't want to hear it. You know, part of the curse of Adam's fall is that no one wants to learn about the curse of Adam's fall. We have all inherited from Adam a rebel's heart and it is there from day one. You know, there are amongst us even here

certain individuals who think nothing of lying and cheating and stealing and even engaging in simple assault and we accept this behavior as normal because they're all between one and five years old. Did you break that window? No. Did you take that cookie? No. Did you hit your sister? No. Did you scream for that toy? No. If you have any doubts that we are a fallen creation, just spend some time in the nursery. It's warfare down there. It's carnage down there. The only thing that prevents infants from being absolute despots is the fact that they have no power. So why is it that we don't ever have to teach our kids to hit or bite or cheat or lie? We all know it, it's because they come by these behaviors naturally.

You know, I remember one day coming home from our local deli only to find out that one of my kids who will remain nameless -- Ben -- had pocketed a candy bar. So we had a long talk, a very painful talk, and we went back to the deli and I waited till it was empty and I went up to the woman, I said, "My son has something he wants to tell you." So he told her that he had stolen -- quivering lip, whole bit -- that he had stolen the candy bar, he was sorry and he was bringing it back, and it was embarrassing and it was a painful situation but it was absolutely necessary to undo and to walk back something that my son did quite naturally on his own. I know for certain I never taught him how to steal candy bars. That was not

part of my thing. You know, I never taught any of my kids these tricks and yet they all did these and other things without the benefit of any teaching and they did them very, very well. Like I said, they came by these skills naturally. It was in their nature. It was in their nature to directly counter what they knew they had been taught and what they knew God expected of them. So our job as parents is by God's grace to train that out of them, but for that nature, we can thank Adam. Adam was the wellspring. He was the point of origin for every human being. He fundamentally altered his very nature, trading in flawless perfection for fallen rebellion the second he ate that fruit. That fallenness and that rebellion was passed on to every one of his descendents, and that includes you and me. So we are now fallen rebels not just by behavior but by nature. I mean, *Ephesians 2* says that we are *by nature children of wrath*.

So God is forced to judge every son and daughter of Adam on two counts. Count 1 is what we do and Count 2 is who we are. We do sins because we are sinners. We are creatures now altogether different from our creator because Adam sold us all out. Our perfection is now gone. And a perfect creator and a fallen sinful rebellious creature can no longer co-exist. We are now radically unfit for heaven because it is still perfect and we no longer are. So when God says in *Romans 3:10*: "*There is none good, no not one,*"

he is describing a goodness we all lost in the Garden of Eden. It was a perfect goodness and now it is all gone and God holds us responsible. That's when I hear people say, "Hey, I'm not perfect but really, I'm trying my best," I shudder. Our best will never come even close to perfection, and perfection defines the nature of God. Perfection is what a perfect God must demand of us or he would cease to be perfect. You know, we think God marks on a curve based on our fallen abilities, but he doesn't because he can't, and can't isn't a word we usually associate with God. I mean, after all, we think God is God, he's all powerful, he can do whatever he wants, can't he? The shocking answer is no. Scripture says there's a number of things that God can't do. It says he can't lie. It says he can't change his character to accommodate our fallenness. Furthermore, if he would allow us fallen imperfect creatures into his perfect heaven, then what would that heaven become? I mean, you see God's dilemma? A perfect creator, an imperfect rebellious creature. How does God reconcile the two and still stay true to his character? How does he make us perfect all over again? This is the heart of the mystery that we are stewards of.

Well, there are two ways to be perfect. One, to be flawless as Adam was and Jesus still is; the other is to have my flaws, my imperfections, my sins paid for by someone else, someone capable of

paying, and that has to be someone perfect. So if a flawless God were to become one of us and then flawlessly live out his human life so that he could offer that life as a substitute sacrifice for our sins, then we could be perfect again. God himself would exchange his perfection for our sin. This is a notion so fantastic, nobody could ever make it up. The Bible says Christ, the son, the second person of the trinity was the creator and sustainer of all life. In *John 1:3*, it says: *All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.* The Bible furthermore says this Christ gave up his glory, entered into space and time and came to planet earth. In *John 1:14*, it says: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* But the deepest part of the mystery is what God tells us in *2 Corinthians 5:21*. There he tells us: *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* You know what that means? That means that when Jesus was on the cross, he was not nobly shouldering our burdens, instead he was becoming them. That a perfectly holy God for our sakes became rape and murder and rage and pornography and envy and theft and drunkenness and lying, you name it. He became my sin and his father punished him for that sin. We all know the external facts, I mean, we know that he was arrested, mocked,



beaten, stripped, flogged, and crucified, but it's only when you look beneath the surface that you begin to understand that he was orchestrating the entire thing himself and that he was never the victim that people claimed he was. Time and again Jesus warned his disciples ahead of time exactly what was going to take place at the cross. In *Matthew 16:21*, it says: *From then on Jesus began to point out to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised on the third day.* So we know the cross was no accident. Jesus knowingly and willingly sacrificed himself to become our sin. We know his own father had the exquisite agony of watching his own creation, that's us, torture and murder his only begotten son, and because he had become our sin, his own father had to abandon him. It was Jesus who cried, "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" Because his own father had to reject the sin that he had become. Now, do you think Jesus Christ would have undergone that humiliation and that torture if it hadn't been absolutely necessary? Do you think God's perfect character required perfect justice and perfect mercy to both be satisfied in one horrendous sacrifice or was Jesus trying to make a point, just trying to show us how much he loved us? Believe it or not, there's a lot of evangelicals today who believe that. When Jesus rose from the dead, it was because he had endured his own sacrifice flawlessly. He had substituted his own righteousness for my sin

and God had accepted it. This is the mystery that we are the stewards of. This is the secret to eternal life to all who understand it. It started in the Garden of Eden with the fall of Adam, it ended with an empty tomb on Easter Sunday, and they are all connected. *Romans 5:19* sums it all up, it says: *For as by one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.* By faith in Christ's sacrifice we are made righteous in him. That's what the mystery of God is in a nutshell.

So one simple question this morning, how many of your friends, how many of your relatives, how many of your associates understand this mystery? How many of them don't even know the real story or what it has to do with their lives? *Romans 10:17* says: *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.* I have told this mystery to many, many folks, most of them from Christian backgrounds, and almost 100 percent almost to a person, the response has been not necessarily one of accepting it but always saying "I've never heard that before." If there are more important words we could ever speak to someone than these, I don't know what they are. These are the mysteries of God. Some of have heard it, many more have not. The many know only what they've heard from stories, tales, and jokes like the one that I told this morning. Yet this mystery is the most important information they will ever

hear or you will ever speak. See, if I understand this mystery, then I understand why my best efforts are not good enough because my best efforts will always fall short of perfection. *Romans 3:23* says: *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

And finally, if you understand the mysteries of God, you understand that the story of the mystery is not a joke at all, that it is in fact a matter of life and death: Eternal life and eternal death. *1 Corinthians 4:1* says: *Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.* That stewardship is an awesome responsibility. It doesn't require a Ph.D. in Theology. It requires first and foremost, prayer. You have to want to discharge this responsibility well enough to pray about it. You know, the history of this mystery is actually very simple, and most of you already know it or my joke wouldn't have made any sense at all. The problem is is that the history has been twisted and distorted to suit the world, the flesh, and the devil, and it is our job to simply untwist it and present it with the Holy Spirit's power. In Adam's fall, we sinned all. We were fallen, we were cursed, we were doomed, God saw, God cared, God came to earth, God lived perfectly among us as one of us, God took our punishment, God died in our place, God rose from the dead. We live forever when we trust in that God. It's that simple. That's the mystery of God.

Next week we're going to look at what it means to be responsible stewards with this mystery. We will look at why we steward it and how God expects us to do that. Let me give you a hint. It's all wrapped up in the very next verse, *1 Corinthians 4:2* which says: *Moreover, it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.* We're back to faithfulness. You see, the ultimate measure of a steward's worth, whether it be money or minutes or mysteries is faithfulness. You know, when it comes to the mysteries of God, some folks think that a faithful steward is someone who is persuasive, you know he could talk somebody into becoming a Christian. Some folks think that it's someone who is theologically brilliant, he can argue somebody into becoming a Christian. Still some other folks think it's someone who ascribes to the words often wrongly attributed to St. Francis: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." He can imitate Christ and model them into becoming a Christian. The fact is, you can't talk, you can't argue, you can't model anyone into heaven. God says you can plant, you can water, but only He can give the increase. You know, preach the gospel at all times, use words as necessary implies that Godly behavior is all that is necessary to preach the gospel, but we all know that Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses certainly can appear to be godly and so can a host of other cults. I don't know if I'm the only preacher who finds those words particularly

annoying, but I do. I mean, the fact is, you cannot preach the gospel and you cannot steward the mysteries of God without recognizing that words are absolutely necessary. Even Paul recognized this. He said this in *Romans 10:14*, he said: *How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*

So here's the big question. Do you preach the good news? Now, you may not preach it to congregations but do you preach it to your friends? Do you preach it to your relatives, to your co-workers, to your family, to your children? How are they to hear without someone preaching? We will see next week that the heavy lifting of granting folks the power to hear is not our job to do, it is God's, and he is more than capable. Let me conclude with what he asks of us. It is this faithful understanding in *1 Corinthians 4:1-2*: *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.* Let's pray.

*Father God, what an incredible privilege we have, it's not just the money that you've given us, it's not just the minutes that you've given us, but it's the mysteries of who you are. It's the mystery of what the gospel is. It's the ability to communicate the word to*

a world that is lost, to a world that has no clue. Father, I pray that you would place in us a burden, a burning desire to do just that and that you would give us the ability to trust not in our intellectual prowess, not to our ability to argue or to persuade but in your supernatural Holy Spirit power. Give us the ability, give us the heart to preach your word, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.