

The Marks *of a* Steward



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Heb. 11:8–12; Rom. 4:13, 18–21; Matt. 6:24; Heb. 9:14; 1 John 5:2, 3; Luke 16:10–12.*

Memory Text: “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (*1 Corinthians 4:1, 2, NKJV*).

Stewards are known by their brand, or their distinctive mark, just as retailers are known by their logos or brand names. In fact, many people have become famous by turning themselves into marketable brands.

A Christian steward's brand, or mark, is a reflection of Christ's love through the relationship that he or she has with Him. When we live and practice the traits of Christ, our lives will reveal our brand. Our brand is His brand; our identities are blended with His (*1 Cor. 6:17*).

This week, we look at identifying character traits of God's stewards that make up their brand name. These traits inspire us to look for Jesus' return and to do the work entrusted to us as faithful stewards of His truth. Each characteristic describes a deepening relationship we can have with the One who came to seek and save the lost. The more these qualities are studied, the deeper they will be ingrained in our lives. God's character of love, in all its dynamics, will become our brand and have an influence on every aspect of our lives, today and eternally.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 10.

Faithfulness

“Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2, *NKJV*). To fight and win “the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12, *NKJV*) is crucial for a faithful steward. “Faithful” is what God is and what we are to become through Him working in us. Being faithful means staying true to what we know is right, especially in the heat of spiritual battles.

Spiritual conflicts between right and wrong, good and evil, will surely come. They are part of the fight of faith. The decision that marks stewards in every situation is the choice to be faithful. If you love wealth, be sure to remain faithful to God and what He says about the dangers of loving money. If you crave fame, remain faithful to what the Word of God says about humility. If you struggle with lustful thoughts, remain faithful to the promises of holiness. If you want power, remain faithful to what God says about being a servant of all. The choice to be faithful or unfaithful often is made in a split second, even if the consequences can be eternal.

Read Hebrews 11:8–12, 17–19, and Romans 4:13, 18–21. What do these verses teach us about being faithful?

In Hebrew, “faithful” means to trust. The same Hebrew root gives us the word “amen,” and it really means to be “solid” or “firm.” Faithfulness means we have been tested and tried, and still we have remained firmly committed to God’s plan.

Preparing to speak before the emperor, the Reformer Martin Luther “read the word of God, looked over his writings, and sought to draw up his reply in a suitable form. . . . He drew near the holy Scriptures . . . and with emotion placed his left hand on the sacred volume, and raising his right toward heaven, swore to remain faithful to the gospel, and freely to confess his faith, even should he seal his testimony with his blood.”—J. H. Merle d’Aubigné, *History of the Reformation* (New York: The American Tract Society, 1846), vol. 2, book 7, p. 260.

Read Revelation 2:10. What should the words about being “‘faithful unto death’ ” mean to us in our everyday walk with the Lord?

Loyalty

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24, NKJV). **What does this text teach us about the supreme importance of loyalty to God?**

Knowing that God’s name means “jealous” (*Exod. 34:14*) should give us a clarion call for loyalty. Loyalty to a “jealous” God is loyalty in love. In the fight of faith, loyalty helps define who we are and encourages us to stay in the battle.

Our loyalty is important to God (*1 Kings 8:61*). It is not a contract that tries to foresee every contingency; nor is it just a list of rules. It is, rather, the visible expression of our personal beliefs, faith, and commitment.

Read 1 Chronicles 28:9. What does this text teach us about the importance of loyalty?

Where there is loyalty, however, there is the possibility of betrayal. Loyalty, like love, must be offered freely, or it’s not true loyalty. Sometimes in war, frontline troops are forced to stay and fight; otherwise, their officers would have them shot. These men might do their duty, but it isn’t necessarily out of loyalty. That’s not the kind of loyalty God asks of us.

Look at Job. He did not foresee the catastrophic events that would destroy his family, possessions, and health. He could have given up trust, love, and commitment, but his loyalty to God was an unwavering choice of morality. Honest and unafraid to praise God publicly, he uttered the famous words, “‘Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him’” (*Job 13:15, NKJV*). His fidelity in the face of disaster is the essence of loyalty, and it illustrates loyal stewards at their finest.

Ask yourself: How loyal am I to the Lord, who died for me? In what ways could I better reveal that loyalty?

A Clear Conscience

There are many precious things that we can possess. Health, love, friends, a great family—these all are blessings. But perhaps one of the most important of all is a clear conscience.

Read Hebrews 10:19–22 and 1 Timothy 4:1, 2. What does it mean to have an “evil conscience” and a “conscience seared with a hot iron”?

Our consciences function as internal monitors of our outward lives. A conscience needs to attach itself to a high and perfect standard: God’s law. God wrote His law on Adam’s heart, but sin almost obliterated it—not just in him but in his descendants. Only fragments of the law remained. “[Gentiles] show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness” (*Rom. 2:15, NIV*). Jesus succeeded where Adam failed because God’s law was “within [His] heart” (*Pss. 40:8, NKJV*).

What does Paul say is our only solution to a bad conscience? See *Heb. 9:14*.

“The cobwebbed closet of conscience is to be entered. The windows of the soul are to be closed earthward and thrown wide open heavenward that the bright beams of the Sun of righteousness may have free access. . . . The mind is to be kept clear and pure that it may distinguish between good and evil.”—Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 1, pp. 327, 328. When God’s law has been inscribed on the heart of the believer (*Heb. 8:10*), and the believer by faith seeks to follow that law, a clear conscience is the likely result.

If you have ever struggled under the strain of a guilty conscience, you know how terrible it can be—how it can be a continuous presence, never giving you relief. How can focusing on Jesus, and His death on the cross for you and your sin, help to free you from the curse of a guilty conscience?

Obedience

Abel knelt obediently at his altar, holding the lamb offering as God had commanded. Cain, on the other hand, knelt furiously at his altar holding the fruit. Both had brought offerings; yet, only one brother had been obedient to God’s command. The slain lamb was accepted, but the produce from the ground was rejected. Both brothers had understood the meaning and instructions regarding the offering of sacrifices, but only one obeyed what the Lord had commanded (*Gen. 4:1–5*).

“The death of Abel was in consequence of Cain’s refusing to accept God’s plan in the school of obedience, to be saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, typified by the sacrificial offerings pointing to Christ. Cain refused the shedding of blood, which symbolized the blood of Christ to be shed for the world.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1109.

Obedience starts in the mind. It involves the delicate process of mentally accepting the responsibility of carrying out commands from a higher authority. Obedience stems from a relationship with an authority figure and the willingness to obey that figure. In the case of our relationship to God, our obedience is a voluntary, loving action that molds our behavior to moral obligations. Obedience to God must be as specific as He directs, and not only as we think or desire it should be. The case of Cain is a perfect example of someone doing his own thing instead of doing what God asks.

Read 1 John 5:2, 3 and Romans 1:5; 10:16, 17. What do these texts teach us about the meaning of obedience to the Christian, who is saved by faith without the deeds of the law?

We don’t obey to be saved; we obey because we already are saved. Obedience is the practical statement of a moral faith. Samuel told Saul, “‘Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams’” (*1 Sam. 15:22, NKJV*).

What did Samuel mean by “‘to obey is better than sacrifice’”? What should that tell us as Christians that could help us not fall into the false gospel of cheap grace?

Trustworthy

Read Luke 16:10–12. What does this teach us about being trustworthy? Why is this trait so important for a faithful steward?

This principle of trustworthiness is seen all through the Bible. For example, in one story four chief Levite gatekeepers were entrusted to protect the Old Testament sanctuary at night. They were to guard the rooms full of treasure and to hold the keys to open the doors every morning (*1 Chron. 9:26, 27*). They were given this task because they were deemed trustworthy.

Being trustworthy is a characteristic of a good steward. This means that trustworthy stewards understand the deep significance of their roles; they understand that God is trustworthy, and they will aim to be the same (*Deut. 32:4, 1 Kings 8:56*).

Trustworthiness implies a mature set of character traits. It is the highest level of character and competence that a person can achieve in the eyes of observers. Reflecting God's character means you will do what you say you will do, regardless of circumstances or people who press you to do otherwise (*2 Kings 12:15*).

Daniel was considered trustworthy by the monarchs of two world kingdoms. His reputation throughout his life as a trustworthy counselor who fearlessly delivered wisdom and truth to kings was in direct opposition to that of the court soothsayers and magicians. Trustworthiness is the crown jewel of ethics; it puts your moral principles on display in their purest form. This quality in a steward does not appear overnight but comes over time by being faithful in even the little things.

Others notice our trustworthiness. They respect us and depend on us because they know we are not swayed easily by opinions, fads, or flattery. Being trustworthy is thus a demonstration of character performance in every responsibility played out on earth, the proving ground for heaven. "We are to be faithful, trustworthy subjects of the kingdom of Christ, that those who are worldly-wise may have a true representation of the riches, the goodness, the mercy, the tenderness, and the courtesy of the citizens of the kingdom of God."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 190.

Think about someone whom you know personally who is trustworthy. What can you learn from that person that would help you be more trustworthy, as well?

Further Thought: Another mark of a good steward is individual accountability.

“It has ever been the design of Satan to draw the minds of the people from Jesus to man, and to destroy individual accountability. Satan failed in his design when he tempted the Son of God; but he succeeded better when he came to fallen man. Christianity became corrupted.”—Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 213.

With Christ at the center of our being, we are open to His guidance. As a result, our faith, loyalty, obedience, clear conscience, trustworthiness, and individual accountability will be revealed in our lives. Thus, as stewards, we are made complete in the hands of God (*Ps. 139:23, 24*).

Individual accountability is an essential biblical principle. While on earth, Jesus was individually accountable to the Father (*John 8:28*). We are accountable for every idle word (*Matt. 12:36*). “‘For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required’” (*Luke 12:48, NKJV*). The biggest threat to individual accountability, though, is the tendency to transfer our responsibilities to someone else. “Let it be borne in mind that it is not our own property which is entrusted to us for investment. If it were, we might claim discretionary power; we might shift our responsibility upon others, and leave our stewardship with them. But this cannot be, because the Lord has made us individually His stewards.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 177.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Look at all the different marks of a steward we studied this week: individual accountability, trustworthiness, obedience, loyalty, a clear conscience, and faithfulness. How do these relate to each other? How would slackness in one area lead to slackness in the others? Or how might firm adherence in one area lead to adherence in the others?
- 2 Dwell more on how the promises of the gospel can help those who are struggling with a guilty conscience. What promises can they claim?
- 3 We often view the concept of “loyalty” as good in and of itself. But is that always so? In what ways might it be possible to be loyal to someone or something that is not good? Why, then, must the concept of “loyalty” always be understood in a specific context in order to see if this loyalty is good or misplaced?

The Stubborn Bride

by ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Knock, knock. Elisha Athota, a construction worker, opened the front door of his house in Vanukuru in central India. Outside stood a man and a woman Elisha had never seen before.

“We want to ask you something very important,” the man said. “We want you to marry our daughter. Her name is Solomi.”

Elisha was surprised. He wanted to get married, but he never expected to find a wife this way. Elisha spoke with the two strangers for a few minutes. Then he shook his head. “I cannot marry your daughter,” he said.

Elisha explained to the parents that he was a Seventh-day Adventist and only wanted to marry a woman who kept his faith. The parents assured him that their daughter would become an Adventist. Elisha and Solomi (pictured below) liked each other, and after a while the two were married.

“But after the marriage, she broke the promise that her parents had made,” Elisha said in an interview at the headquarters of the Adventist Church’s South Andhra Section, with Solomi seated at his side.

Solomi said she had been unconvinced that Saturday was the biblical Sabbath, so she kept attending her Sunday church.

Her husband sank into discouragement. He didn’t know what to do. Seeing his sadness, Solomi began to pray that God would reveal to her whether Saturday or Sunday was the true Sabbath.

Around that time, an Adventist pastor showed up at her church. The pastor was visiting various churches in the area, passing out religious literature.

The pastor gave Solomi some literature and encouraged her to visit his church the next Sabbath. When she came, he began Bible studies that explained the difference between Saturday and Sunday.

Five months after the wedding, Solomi embraced the Sabbath. Today, she and her husband are full-time Bible workers. Elisha said he realizes now the importance of following the advice of Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:14: “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (NKJV).

“If your potential spouse doesn’t agree to keep the Sabbath, don’t take the risk of getting married,” he said. “Marry someone of your own faith.”

But if a mistake is made or something goes wrong, don’t lose hope, he said. “I really regretted my marriage decision at first, but now I am very happy,” he said.

Solomi said she also was filled with joy.

“We are most happy about one thing: We are now able to teach the Sabbath truth to many people,” she said.



The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Corinthians 4:1, 2*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Identify the characteristics of a Christian steward.

Feel: Appreciate the importance of incorporating those characteristics into his or her personal life.

Do: Resolve to take tangible steps to integrate these marks into his or her daily walk.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Identifying the Marks of a Steward

- Ⓐ What is the substance of faithfulness and loyalty?
- Ⓑ What is the essence of integrity?
- Ⓒ What is the importance of obedience and trustworthiness?

II. Feel: Experiencing the Life of an Authentic Steward

- Ⓐ How can we foster the replication of authentic stewardship, first in our own lives and then throughout the church?
- Ⓑ How can we nurture the maturation of young Christians who genuinely desire to be God's stewards?

III. Do: Creating an Atmosphere of Stewardship

- Ⓐ How can we make stewardship attractive and adventuresome for those who have never experienced it?
- Ⓑ How can we illustrate the principles of stewardship so that the picture is clear and not overly complex?
- Ⓒ How can we demonstrate the spiritual benefits of authentic stewardship?

► **Summary:** Just as a target provides goals for the archer, so our lesson provides goals for all those who would seek the path of committed stewardship. These marks of real stewardship, when integrated into the life, form the basis for purpose, success, meaning, and a sense of belonging.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 Corinthians 4:1, 2*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Faithfulness is a divine requirement. Without it, no human being can achieve lasting peace or enjoy spiritual attainment.

Just for Teachers: Every athletic activity involves certain practices that must be mastered in order to achieve success. These practices are repeated with increasing accomplishment until they are mastered finally. Some skills come more naturally than others, and it is only with great difficulty that we master those that are not innate; but with continued effort, even these learned behaviors can become almost instinctive.

Dan's right-handed sons determined, when they began playing basketball, that they would train their bodies to use their left hands as adroitly as they used their right ones. They not only dribbled the ball left-handed in practice, they ate left-handed, tried to write left-handed, and tried to become left-handed as well as right. Left-handedness became more normal with each successive effort. In the same way, the characteristics of authentic stewardship may seem distant and hard to achieve now, but with diligent effort, they can become as natural as breathing.

Opening Discussion: Choose a profession or vocation with which class members are familiar. Ask the class to make a list of characteristics that they think a person would need to be successful in that line of work. Then invite them to describe why they think that those things are necessary or helpful. Discuss what might happen if those essential characteristics were missing.

Now make the spiritual application: without being limited by the list emphasized in the lesson, ask class members to develop a list of those characteristics that are essential for the Christian steward. Why are these characteristics necessary, and how do they contribute to achieving the work of a steward? If those characteristics are absent, how is the function of the steward compromised?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: This week's study isolates some of the key traits of a Christian steward. Other qualities could be added, no doubt, but

our list gives us the opportunity to delve into many of the core requirements for successful stewardship. For the sake of organization, the following commentary uses the following groupings: (a) faithfulness and loyalty, (b) integrity (a clear conscience), and (c) obedience and trustworthiness.

Bible Commentary

I. Faithfulness and Loyalty (*Review 1 Corinthians 4:1, 2; Hebrews 11:8–12, 17–19; Revelation 2:10; Matthew 6:24; and 1 Chronicles 28:9 with the class.*)

Paul writes, “Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful. As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don’t even trust my own judgment on this point” (*1 Cor. 4:2, 3, NLT*). When faithfulness and loyalty are measured, the only opinion that counts is God’s. Erring human beings, longing for approval and acceptance, often lose sight of this fact and try to please the church, their friends, their fellow employees, their classmates, or their peers.

Faithfulness, according to Paul, has nothing to do with popularity. It is committed loyalty to God’s assigned duties—nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. The fact that we cannot be faithful to both the multitude and our God is as certain as the fact that we cannot serve both God and mammon. Should our eyes become distracted by worldly assessments, we will surely misinterpret God’s directives. We may easily pass the world’s judgment and still fail miserably to pass God’s standard. God’s standard requires single-mindedness. David admonished Solomon, “ ‘As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal heart and with a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts’ ” (*1 Chron. 28:9, NKJV*).

This attitude of single-mindedness is where Ananias and Sapphira failed. We often forget that they did have God’s work at heart—probably better than millions of Christians today who give no thought to supporting God’s mission in any way. They were giving a substantial donation to the cause; but they were not giving all that they had pledged. Their loyalties were divided. They were not single-minded. *God gets the lion’s share, but we also need to be on the lookout for ourselves*, seems to be their thought. Split loyalties are unacceptable to God. The rich, young ruler of the nineteenth chapter of Matthew learned this truth the hard way. A willing mind and a loyal heart unconditionally surrendered to God are Christ’s absolute requirements.

Consider This: In light of the tragic stories of Ananias and Sapphira and the rich, young ruler, what safeguards should we employ to make certain that we do not divide our loyalties?

II. Integrity (Review Hebrews 9:14; 10:19–22; 1 Timothy 4:1, 2; Romans 2:14, 15; and Psalm 40:7, 8 with the class.)

A clear conscience is the inevitable consequence of one thing: integrity. Integrity is an assessment of completeness and soundness. It may refer to undivided loyalties or to an undamaged state of being. Without integrity it is absolutely impossible to possess a clear conscience. The Greek word from which we derive the English word *conscience* is *syneidēsis*, a blending of the words *syn*, meaning “with,” and *oida*, meaning “to know.” Whenever the self that we project to the world is different from the person we really are, that crisis of integrity makes us susceptible to psychosis and other forms of mental deterioration, even producing physical symptoms. Happy is that person who is authentic and genuine before God.

Consider This: How does an openness to criticism help validate our integrity?

III. Obedience and Trustworthiness (Review 1 John 5:2; Romans 1:5; 10:16, 17; Luke 16:10–12; and 1 Chronicles 9:26, 27 with the class.)

Obedience is perhaps the purest evidence of trust. J. H. Sammis surely understood that relationship when he penned the lyrics to Daniel Towner’s classic hymn “Trust and Obey.” Obedience, or doing what another says to do, is based on a trusting relationship with another who has been accepted as an authority.

There is, of course, another motive for obedience beyond trust. That is obedience motivated by fear. If a person is captured by a terrorist, he or she is likely to obey the terrorist out of fear. This form of forced obedience, however, is not the type that sustains the ongoing relationship between master and steward. The trust of which we speak is the result of an ever-increasing relationship built over time. George Beverly Shea, the soloist associated with Billy Graham’s crusades, sang, “The longer I serve Him, the sweeter He grows.” Each day that God provides our needs, each day that we study more deeply the price of our redemption, each answered prayer, and each additional moment spent pondering the wonders of creation build and strengthen that relationship.

Seeing a more complete picture of God’s character and personality makes it easier for us to trust Him and thus obey Him. Relationships, however, are not one-way streets. Committed stewards first learn to trust God but inevitably

order their lives so that God can trust them. This commitment is trustworthiness. It, too, builds over time. God first tests us with small things, but as the relationship grows, He entrusts us with greater responsibilities.

Consider This: How are trust and trustworthiness related?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The indispensable mark of a steward is a relationship with the Owner. It may not be perfect, but it must exist to some degree. If we incorporate the characteristics of this lesson into our lives, we can enjoy the greatest peace and fullest satisfaction that life can supply.

Thought/Application Questions:

❶ What practices might we adopt that would help us trust God more?

❷ What changes might be made so that God could trust us more?

❸ What plans might the church develop to cultivate and encourage both of the above?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: We have been told that we have nothing to fear except that we forget how God has led and taught us in the past. Because we have established that obedience depends on trust and trust depends on relationship, the final component of the class should review that relationship between trust and obedience, focusing on how God has led us personally.

Closing Activity:

Have the class share personal testimonies of God's leading and instruction, highlighting how this has built trust. Ask members to share how this has encouraged their obedience.