1 Corinthians 4:2

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[0:00] Now, I invite you to turn with me in God's Word to 1 Corinthians chapter 4, and we'll read again verse 2.

1 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 2. Now, it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful, or as we have it in the authorized version and in some other versions, instead of this phrase, those who have been given a trust, we have the word stewards.
It is required of stewards that they be found faithful. Recently, I was reflecting on what it means to be an interim moderator.
Some of you may know that since I retired from regular congregational ministry, I've been on three occasions appointed interim moderator of another congregation.
For any here this evening who are not familiar with our Presbyterian way of doing things, an interim moderator is someone appointed by the Presbytery when a minister leaves another congregation.
[1:35] And so, another minister, sometimes one who's got his own congregation to look after, but rather usefully, quite often, a retired minister, because the idea is he can give more time, which is usually true to the other congregation.

And he's asked to help work along with the elders and along with the congregation as they seek a new shepherd of God's flock among them.
So, because I've had in recent years a fair experience, I was interim moderator in the Leith Church in Edinburgh for three years.
Then I was appointed interim moderator of another congregation in our Presbytery, Livingston. But that was rather abruptly terminated when I found myself having had a heart attack in hospital.
So, I had to resign that one. But in God's providence, I've made a reasonable recovery. And so, it wasn't long before I was appointed to our church in the centre of London, London City Presbyterian Church.
[2:57] And I was wondering if there's anything in the Bible, not exactly the same as our interim moderatorships, but something that would provide a guideline for what you're supposed to do.

As an interim moderator. Here in Bonacord, you've had plenty experience over the years of interim moderators. It was rather curious.
I don't know if it was alarming, but just the day after I was appointed interim moderator for the Leith congregation, it came out on the sports news that Glenn Hoddle, at that time manager at Tottenham Hotspur.
And I was a little interested because our two grandsons in London, that's the nearest Premier League team to where they live. And they, of course, support Spurs. And it came out that he'd been sacked.
So, I was just wondering if that had any prophetic word to say to me. But the fact that it said in the same breath that a caretaker manager had been appointed struck me as, in some ways, similar to what had just happened to me, being made interim moderator.
[4:24] And you can think of similar situations. A minister of the cabinet resigns. The prime minister may make an appointment immediately, but sometimes he appoints an acting minister to give him time to reflect on who to appoint.

In days gone by, or in countries where we have royalty, and it may be the king or queen who dies or resigns, there's no immediate successor.
They may appoint a regent to take over the duties until someone else is appointed and crowned king or queen. So, it's a very common thing in many spheres of life.
But in the Bible, any guidance? My thoughts went to that passage in the book of Kings, where the wicked queen Athaliah, when her husband died, and she had ambitions of queenship, and the first

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thing she did was slaughter all the king's sons so that she could become the queen.
Regent, really, but the queen. Except little Josiah, just an infant and hidden by the high priest Jehoiada for seven years, away from the wrath of wicked queen Athaliah.
[6:00] And the Bible tells us that when, at age seven, Josiah was crowned king, Jehoiada basically took control in a good way, not as a dictator.

And the Bible also tells us that Josiah did what was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the high priest.
So, Jehoiada was, if not an interim moderator, he certainly has a great deal to teach those who have such or similar responsibilities.
And I also wondered about the case of Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, where in Acts chapter 16, we read that he went, along with Paul and others, on the second missionary tour.
They arrived in Philippi. We know that Luke was there because it begins, we. We arrived. He doesn't put his own name, but there he is. And then we read at the end of the chapter, after Paul and Silas have been imprisoned and freed, a congregation has been formed under the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.
[7:23] And the end of the chapter says that they, they went away. So, in other words, the writer who had said we, he clearly stayed.

And lots of commentators, I think with good reason, feel that perhaps Luke was left to take charge of the congregation. Some time later, quite a while later, after they, they, they, you have a verse after Paul's been to Athens and Corinth and Ephesus and so on.
And again, a verse comes in, so we left Philippi. And they went on Paul's last trip to Jerusalem, leading to imprisonment in Rome.
So, maybe Luke was a kind of pastor, interim moderator, acting pastor there in Philippi. So, we're thinking of somebody who is given responsibility for a limited period and is accountable.
In our case, accountable to the presbytery and also accountable in a very real way to the congregation that he is seeking to help and pastor.
[8:41] But I'm quite sure that the concept can be broadened. And it can include not just those who have this particular responsibility of being an interim moderator, but all who have responsibility of any kind in the church of God.

And I think that in addition to the words that I've used, there are others. Some that you may be familiar with, there is this word steward that you have in our text.
Some of you may happen to be trustees of some charity, and you have that similar kind of responsibility. Here in Scotland, in large estates, we use the word factor.
The man who has responsibility for the owner, the laird or whoever it is. Or it may be a variety of other terms, but the responsibility is clearly one of stewardship.
And that's what I want us to think about this evening. Stewardship. Stewardship. What does it mean to be a steward called by God, as it says here, to exercise a trust?
[10:00] And I want to consider, firstly, stewardship because we're human beings. And then, secondly, we'll look at stewardship because we're Christians.

This is a narrower sphere, or at least a smaller number of people, but there are very specific stewardship responsibilities if you and I are God's children, Christian men and women.
And then, finally, stewardship because we're church leaders. Now, there are particular duties that devolve on elders, teaching elders, ruling elders, deacons.
But I think it's perfectly correct to widen it out so that there are many responsibilities, even in a local congregation. Many in this congregation, one or another, and we'll maybe look at some later on.
And there is a stewardship because we are church leaders or church workers. So, first of all, stewardship because we're human beings.
[11:30] And taking a broad sweep of Scripture, I'd suggest that we have there, first of all, an accountability towards God's creation.

A steward is accountable. And there is this accountability towards God's creation. We read from the book of Genesis.
And we're told there that Adam was given charge. We sang about it in Psalm 8. You gave him charge of all that you have made.
He was put there to till the garden. He was put there to glorify God in his gardening and in his taking care of the earth's resources that God had given to him.

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And as you go through the Old Testament, you find that there's a great emphasis on Israel, God's people, his covenant people. They're being given care for the land that God had given to them.
[12:33] And you find that they are called to exercise accountability to God for the land and its resources that he gave to them.

You think, for example, of the institution, not only of the weekly Sabbath, but also of the seven-yearly Sabbath.
And then the 50-year, year of Jubilee and so on, where there is a clear responsibility towards the land. The seven-year Sabbath, the land lay fallow in order that it might not be over-exploited.
A real message for the world today. You find such interesting comments, almost as throwaway comments in other contexts, which also speak of this accountability.
For example, Deuteronomy 20, verse 19. When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit.
[13:43] Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people that you should besiege them? Or again, there's the whole concept of land being held in trust.

Having been received ultimately from God, the great giver, but having been received on the human level from previous generations, it must be handed in good shape to future generations.
Leviticus 25, verse 23. The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine, says God, and you are but aliens and my tenants.
Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. In Psalm 145, verse 16, we sing with the psalmist, You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.
And if God has a care, as we're told, for even the spatters that fall from the sky, if God has a care for them, how much more we, who are the stewards of his creation.
[15:03] And what we read, the well-known verse in Proverbs 12, 10, what we read there, A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal.

It's not just for self-interest. If I don't care for my animal, or whatever else I may be utilizing, of course I'm going to lose out.
But it goes deeper than that. It is because God is the maker, creator of all creation. Those who have been made in his image, as we have been, and all that he has made.
And so, there is this accountability towards God's creation. And Christians, therefore, I think, should be ready to participate in debates about global warming, about GM crops, about the resources that we use.
Though, of course, always avoiding what sadly so many special interest groups do not avoid, falling into the worship of creation, falling into some kind of pantheism.
[16:20] We don't do that, because God has made these things. God is separate from his creation. But we are accountable to God for the creation he has given us.

So, stewardship, because we're human beings, it involves accountability towards God's creation. It involves, too, accountability towards the world's poor.
And that is a repeated emphasis, especially as we read about Israel and its development, as we come to the time of the prophets, but right on into the New Testament.
Something that's basic in all of this is what we read in this passage at verse 7, where God, or Paul, gives God's word to the Corinthians.
What do you have that you did not receive? And if some of us are richer than others, it is only as stewards of what God has given to us, which we are called upon, in that sense, to be distributors of God's largesse to those who are in need.
[17:39] And so you find in the laws of Israel, those generous laws, for example, on gleaning. The book of Ruth, you remember, where she had to go out.

She and her mother-in-law are destitute. So what could she do? Well, there was that generous law in Israel, with an eye to the poor, where, as it tells us, if a reaper went out and he accidentally dropped a sheep, well, he didn't go back for it.
And he didn't glean in the corners of the fields so that the poor might have enough to eat. And the constant reference to the widows and to the orphans and to the foreigners and to the refugees, to all in special need.

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There is an accountability that God lays upon, not just upon Christians, but upon all, though particularly upon his own people.
We find, for example, in Proverbs chapter 24, how that widens out to a concern for the poor and the oppressed, whoever and wherever they might be.
[18:53] Proverbs 24, 11. Rescue those being led away to death. Hold back those staggering towards slaughter. If you say, but we knew nothing about this, does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?

Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done? And that, of course, spills over into the New Testament.
Words that came to Christians in those days and come to us today. James 2, 15. Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.
If one of you says to him, go, I wish you well. Keep warm and well fed. But does nothing about his physical needs. What good is it? Or John, with the same message.
1 John 3, 17. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?
[19:58] Now, we are thinking of this under the general title of stewardship because we're human beings. And that is true. But, of course, it comes with particular force to those of us who are, in a sense, more than human beings because we've been brought into a new family and we have, by God's grace, a new nature.

So there, we are even more accountable to God, to the poor and the needy as a call from God. And that's why it's a glorious thing to see how throughout our congregations and our denomination, there is this constant seeking to meet the needs of the world's poor and needy.
You only need to look at the projects. As an example, the projects year on year of Women for Mission. One year it will be for the needy in Africa, those suffering from AIDS and orphans. Another year it will be health needs in India or Peru or Colombia or other parts of the world. This constant remembering, thank God, of our stewardship to the world's poor.
And so there is, because we're human beings, there's accountability towards God's creation, accountability towards the world's poor. And then too, there is accountability towards our Creator.
[21:29] And that is not only for Christian men and women. It is for every man, woman, or child in the world. And that comes through loud and clear when we're told, for example, that we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of the deeds done in the flesh, whether they be good or bad.

It comes through very clearly when a heathen man, even though he had a position of high authority, Pontius Pilate, when he turned round and said, what shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ? And that question comes to everyone in this world of ours, including many who don't want to hear it, perhaps have never heard it, who know very little of anything about Jesus Christ, yet he came as a witness to the entire world, all God's created beings.
And again, this word comes to everyone, to everyone here tonight, perhaps among us, there are those who have heard this gospel many a time, but have not yet come in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ.
And this word comes to you, your stewardship, before God, your maker. How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?
[23:00] Stewardship because we're human beings. But then also, there is stewardship because we're Christians, especially because we're Christians.

Now, I've already touched, obviously, on some of that, but let's remind ourselves of some other things that the Bible says. Our Lord, to his disciples, said on one occasion, to whom much is given, much shall be required.
And you and I, Christian people, you and I have been given much. We have been given, above all else, our salvation in Jesus Christ.
We have been given eternal life, made sons and daughters of God, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ. And because of that, along with that, we are also given responsibilities, a role in the church of God.
We have been given gifts, all of us, by Almighty God, gifts for which we are accountable. There is a stewardship of our gifts and talents.

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[24:13] Some have more, some have less. But God's Word teaches us that there is no one in the church of God who has not received some gifts that he or she might use for the benefit of others and for the glory of God.

Now, we've quoted here from Corinthians, and Paul there, writing to the Corinthians, stresses, that they had received, some of them, many gifts, wonderful gifts, but they were using them wrongly. They were using them for their own proud ends. They were using them, some of them, to lord it over other people, to make a good impression as they spoke in tongues or exercised healings or words of knowledge and revelation.
Oh, isn't it wonderful? Our church has so much of that, but they don't. And Paul is strongly criticizing this attitude of pride towards the use of their gifts.
Some in Corinth were using their being Christians and the gifts they had, their church membership, as also some in churches that James tells us about in his letter.
[25:32] They were using their gifts in order to form an elite for the poor. You go and sit there and we'll sit here and so on and so forth. And you can read other examples among the Corinthians and how they observed the Lord's Supper.

And the parable that Jesus told of the talents is one that shows us it's not enough to refrain from these things.
It's not enough not to be proud. It's not enough not to do this or that that is wrong, that hurts our fellow believers within the church or disadvantages them.
We must positively use the talents, not be like the man who, it sounded great when he said it, you know, he went and hid the talent in the ground so that it wouldn't get lost, wouldn't get stolen.
And yet he is severely condemned by the master. You should have used your talent. You should have made it increase so that I would receive my own plus what you had gained with the talent.
[26:43] And so it is to us as Christians that our stewardship for which we are and will be held accountable is that we might use wisely our talents that we should know.

You should know what's my gift? What talents have I been given? I can't be saying oh I'm not really much in these things I haven't can't do this and I can't do that.
We can all say that. But everyone it seems to me through the teaching of scripture is called to a stewardship a recognition of and an accountability for the way we use our talents.
There's a very instructive incident in the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah having set lots of things in order building a wall and so on he had another job there back in Persia and he had to go back.
We don't know for how long and then he got another permission from the emperor and off he goes again to see how things are going in Jerusalem. And when he gets there in chapter 13 among other things we read this at verse 10 I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.
[28:13] Now here's what I think is very striking. Nehemiah is very angry. The worship of God in the temple was not being carried out as it should and those responsible the assistance of the priests and those who directed the conduct of worship it mentions the singers there well they had to put bread on the table for their families so off they went.

What does Nehemiah do? He doesn't go and look for the Levites and give them a really good telling off. What we read is this so I rebuked the officials and asked them why is the house of God neglected?
And then we read so all Judah brought the tithes. You see the point? These men the leaders the nobles and others they had been given certain gifts material gifts money and fields and crops and so on and they were accountable to God but under God they were also accountable to the church and they were failing in their responsibility and so it is they who receive the severest admonition from God's servant Nehemiah.
Stewardship because we are Christians God's people and especially of course you and I and this congregation and the one that I'm a member of and others here are members of we are called by God to communicate the good news of the gospel and our stewardship before God is not only in material things it is supremely in making known God's judgment of sin and God's offer of mercy in Jesus Christ.
No wonder the apostle Paul said woe is me if I preach not the gospel and you remember the description given in Ezekiel chapter 3 and chapter 33 of the watchman on the walls if he sees the

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enemy coming and he blows the trumpet we are told that whatever happened even if the enemy comes in that the watchman has saved his own soul his blood will not be on his own hands but if he sees the enemy coming and he doesn't bother blowing the trumpet and the tragedy occurs God says I will hold you watchmen responsible accountable for you did not make known the need to make preparation to this needy people and so it is with us on a far greater level men and women lost in sin men and women under the judgment of God men and women of whom the Bible says that they will stand before
[31:33] God's great white throne and that they will be judged and you and I have been entrusted with the message of life with the message of hope in Jesus Christ Christ and so Paul tells us in chapter 3 of this same letter the one before the one we read that all of us will have the building of our lives tested in that great day now I know that in the context in chapter 3 of 1st Corinthians he is thinking first of all of the apostles and of God's ministering servants the preachers of the word and so on but you just need to go on and see that it's much wider than that because he says if any man or any woman whoever it might be on their foundation which is Jesus Christ he is speaking to Christian men and women if we build straw and wood that will be burnt in that great judgment day then God will hold us accountable so there is a very real stewardship not only because we're human beings but because we're Christians and finally there is a stewardship because we're church leaders or church workers

Paul here and elsewhere describes himself as a servant with a commission a servant with a commission and well we know that he was part of a unique band the apostolic band but they have not they have no successors as apostles God called them that they might be his instruments in establishing the church but there are others who are called to serve in many ways as they did and you find references to such when Paul says that he's a servant with a commission and that he is a steward as an apostle it's clearly extended Titus 1 7 for example it extends to all elders of the church of God teaching and ruling elders since an overseer or an elder is entrusted with God's work he must be blameless or Hebrews 13 17 obey your leaders all who have that authority leadership appointed in the church obey your leaders and submit to their authority why they keep watch over you as men who must give account but I believe that we can extend it even further to any who have any responsibility of any kind in the church of God so as I work as an interim moderator and work there in London with what we call the vacancy committee which consists not only of elders and deacons but other members of the congregation male and female as I work with them they are people who have been appointed stewards under God for the welfare of their congregation and looking around you here
I'm no doubt there are Sunday school teachers and there are youth leaders and workers and there are those in charge of the building and those in charge of the church's finances and those who have been asked to be missionary coordinators and those who take their turn welcoming people on the door a very important task and those who have myriad responsibilities because the church is a body and every member has its own place and its own responsibility there comes this call to be stewards stewards of our responsibilities and our tasks and our tasks in the church before God there's an interesting reference at the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians chapter 4 at verse 17 now as we know and you can get the proof of it in something Paul says in that letter
Paul sent the letter and it was read aloud it was God's word and it was read aloud but as a letter from the apostle and in the letter to the Colossians and also to the Ephesians you'll remember that Paul although he begins speaking generally to everybody he then singles out different groups he says a word for the boys and girls children obey your parents in the Lord then a word for their mums and dads do not exasperate your children but bring them up in the nurture and discipline of the Lord a word for employers masters a word for some who were literally slaves other servants a word for them and so he goes singling out every part of the church every person and then at the end of Colossians he says he says this say to
Archippus take heed to the ministry that you have received in the Lord that you fulfill it I've often reflected on that verse because we're not told anything about Archippus he is mentioned in the letter to Philemon and in that context I've wondered sometimes could Archippus maybe have been the pastor of that congregation that met in that house I don't know but he's mentioned again there in the letter to the Colossians and he obviously had some particular responsibility otherwise why did Paul single him out but what's interesting is that Paul says to the congregation you say to Archippus take heed to the responsibility you have received and the Lord that you fulfill it it sounds doesn't it it

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sounds as if
[38:22] Archippus was falling down in some area he'd received his trust he was a steward in some ways as Paul says here of the mysteries of God but he wasn't fulfilling it the way he should now we might tend to say and there's other biblical teaching that would support it well we should have a word in private with that person but Paul to the whole congregation says you've got a responsibility obviously it would be done in love and with tact and yet it had to be done that this man called to be a steward should really fulfill his stewardship and he says to the members of the congregation you've got a part to play you can help them you can encourage them perhaps a little word of rebuke perhaps a word of assurance that if they find things difficult there's folks there who will help them well you can think of an interim moderator or a minister who would be very thankful perhaps it might be hurtful in some way because of their own failures but a real blessing to enable them to fulfill their responsibility so then the call to stewardship because we're human beings because we're

Christians because we're church workers in one way or another let me close by saying that it is understandable that we often have the reaction which is to refuse responsibility because we feel in the words of scripture who is sufficient for these things there might be a call in a congregation for somebody to accept the office of deacon or elder there might be a call for somebody to help out in campaigners or in the little lambs or in evangelistic visiting or pastoral visiting and there might be the response well it's a good thing but really I don't think I could
I don't think I have the gifts I don't think that really that I'm the person now where that stems from true humility before God we thank God for it but let each man or woman search himself for herself when such a call comes to you that you are before God not despising his gifts that he has given to you and rejecting the call that through his appointed body the church and the leaders of the church that call is coming some of you serve on charities and many charities nowadays have great difficulty getting trustees partly because the legislation becomes ever more onerous and nobody wants to be serving very altruistically in a charity and then suddenly be sued for something that they never did and I gather in fact I know because I'm a trustee of a charity still down in London the charity commission is recognizing that situation so it is indeed understandable that people sometimes are reluctant but friends when God calls
God equips he never sends anybody a warfare at his own charges it's wonderful how sympathetic God is in the Bible to reluctant servants of his when they say no he does sometimes criticize them quite sharply but very often he seems to be sympathetic to Moses to Jeremiah to others that we can think of in scripture but he keeps insisting that when he calls they must obey and we as a denomination I think must also be much in prayer that God would raise up as we look around the denomination and see because it just so happens we're going through a time when several of our ministers are reaching retirement age there were a few years when I retired there were very few nine years ago but that's changing and we need more ministers of the word of God more preachers in our churches and let's pray that God will raise them up but if here among us
I don't know who are all here but if perhaps some young man here who is a believer who has experience as a believer who has gifts if God is speaking to you and saying that he's calling you to be a steward of the mysteries of God then by his grace don't refuse accept and amazingly reluctant trembling apprehensive though you may be you will one day hear his word well done good and faithful servant let's bow in prayer

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