

All Forward, Hard!

Over the years of serving as a youth pastor, my wife, Krista, and I have taken many students down to Appalachian Bible College in Mount Hope, West Virginia, for what we called our *Faith Fusion Trip*. The purpose was to “fuse” the incoming freshmen into the senior high group through three days filled with cooperative adventure activities. While we utilized a variety of measures like a high ropes course, caving, rappelling, and paintball, the most impactful activity for accomplishing our “fusion” goal was the whitewater rafting trip down the Lower New River. It was a mentally taxing and physically demanding day that left every participant feeling exhausted, accomplished, and connected.

However, before our group could even think about navigating down the river and through its treacherous rapids, the river guides put us through an essential training course on crucial commands and rowing techniques. It was important to quickly understand, respond, and obey the commands of the guides and to do so in unison. Understanding the difference between “All forward!” and “All forward, hard!” and “Highside!” can make the difference between staying in the raft or the raft flipping and all its contents winding up in the river. Everybody in the raft is essential in serving the greater purpose of getting down the river and protecting the valuable contents inside the raft.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul reminds his readers that those who serve the Lord should be viewed in a particular way. By extension, they should regard *themselves* in the manner described in chapter 4:

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 faithful... do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4:1-5)

The text defines Paul and his fellow workers as servants or “under rowers” and stewards or “caretakers” of the Gospel. What is more, every follower of Jesus is likewise to be faithful in serving and administering the Gospel. As under rowers we are to pick up the oars and dig into the waves while our Captain, the Lord Jesus, providentially directs us. And while we may not receive recognition for our efforts below deck, our Captain above will not forget our faithful labor.

Malachi 3:16-18, describes this dynamic as service springing from a person that has great reverence and high regard for God. In turn, God commends the few but faithful “who feared the LORD and esteemed His name.” He describes them as His treasured possessions, His sons, and as being distinct in their devout service. The prophet Malachi explains that these servants “spoke with one another” (v. 16) in order to encourage each other to remain faithful. He further indicates that God would record their service in a “book of remembrance” and ultimately reward them for their devotion.

The truth is, “rowing” for the Lord and for the spread of the Gospel can sometimes feel exhausting, thankless, and without demonstrative results. Also, being “below deck”, we may not see where our Captain is leading. Nevertheless, He is the Captain - the Guide who will direct us to the places in which He has providentially prepared for us to serve. His command is, “All forward, hard!”

So, are you rowing? Are you grabbing the oars of service to take the Gospel wherever God directs so that He may be made known? If not, join in! It’s worth it! And if you are, remain faithful, so you may be rewarded by hearing the Savior say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

1 Peter 4:10-11 (NIV) - “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. ***If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.***”