

“Stewardship”

(Fifth in a series of messages on the theme “Living in the Kingdom: Values that Matter”)

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Psalm 24:1-2, 50:10-12; 1 Chronicles 29:10-14; Luke 12:42-48

Dear friends, if we live under the gracious rule of our King, Jesus Christ, these things should matter to us and should be practiced by us as we relate to our fellow human beings: respect, compassion, hospitality, justice... The last few weeks, we have highlighted each of these core values of kingdom living.

This morning we lift up another value that ought to matter to us, for it certainly matters to God: “stewardship.” Now I realize that that the word “stewardship” does not strike us as something that is inherently exciting. In fact, very topic could elicit some groans, for we tend to associate stewardship with money and fund raising and capital campaigns. If a congregation hears the pastor is going to preach about “stewardship” people immediately think “Oh no, another sermon asking for money.” Actually, preaching about money is a perfectly appropriate thing for a pastor to do, for Jesus preached about money more than any other topic, save the kingdom of God. If I couldn’t talk about money in the pulpit, I would be leaving out huge chunks of the New Testament. And of course, without money from God’s people, this church could not do what it does.

But stewardship is so much more than about money. In fact, it is a total approach to life; it impacts not only the way we use our money, but our possessions, our talents, our time, our bodies, our environment, our world. “Stewardship” is, in fact, is hugely important concept for God’s people to grasp, and it has revolutionary implications, for it has to do with the very purpose for which God has created us.

God has created us, among other things, to be “stewards.” Now a steward is someone who manages someone else’s property. Our calling in life is to take care of the owner’s stuff. And who is the owner? The Bible leaves no doubt:

Ps 24:1 The earth is the LORD’S, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;

Ps 24:2 for he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the waters.

God says:

Ps 50:10 for every animal of the forest is mine,
and the cattle on a thousand hills.

Ps 50:11 I know every bird in the mountains,
and the creatures of the field are mine...

Ps 50:12 If I were hungry I would not tell you,
for the world is mine, and all that is in it.

Everything comes from God, and everything belongs to God. We don’t even own our own lives. What we have, we are to manage for God.

There are a series of parables and sayings from Jesus that reinforces this very point. There are variations on the theme, but they tell of a master or a nobleman who goes on a journey and leaves his estate in the care of his servants – his stewards. The master-owner, of course, is God; the stewards are you and me.

We tend to resist that notion, however – as did Jesus' original audience. We want the entire estate to belong to us. We prefer not to think of ourselves not as stewards but as owners. We look out on our world and we say, "Mine!" Isn't that one of the first words we learn to say as toddlers? "Mine!" We wish to be kings and queens of our own lives and in control of our own "stuff." After all, we have earned it, haven't we? We have sweated over our jobs and focused energy on our careers and on making our net worth grow and we take a certain pride in the possessions we are able to accumulate and properties we are able to control. In our pride, we are tempted to thank ourselves for our blessings. Bart Simpson, the television cartoon character was once asked by his father to offer grace before dinner. This is how he prayed: *"Dear God, we earned the money to buy this food, so thank you for nothing."*

We did it all ourselves, thank you very much. We like to think we are self-made people.

Speaking of self-made people, I like the story told by John Ortberg about the CEO of a large Fortune 500 company who is driving along with his wife. They pull into a service station, and it's a full-service station, so the attendant comes over to fill up the tank. The husband goes in to pay the bill and comes back out to find his wife engaged in a rather animated conversation with the service station attendant. He gets in the car, and as they drive away, he asks her,

What were you two talking about?

She tells him that she actually knows this guy. As a matter of fact, he used to be her boyfriend. They used to date. The CEO is feeling kind of smug about this. After a while, he says to her,

I'll bet I know what you're thinking. I'll bet you're thinking that you're glad that you married me, the Fortune 500 CEO, and not a service station attendant.

And she says,

No. Actually I was thinking that if I had married him, he would have been a Fortune 500 CEO, and you would have been a service station attendant.

There is no such thing as a self-made human being. We owe it all to Another: God has given us everything – even the ability to earn a living. We owe our very lives to him. God is the Owner, and we are caretakers of his property.

To his credit, King David understood this difference between ownership and stewardship. You would think that a king, above all, would have trouble realizing that he was not the ultimate master of all his resources and of all his stuff. (And he had a lot of stuff!) But such was not the case with David, who always had a heart for God.

At one point, towards the end of his reign, David resolved to build the Lord a house – a temple - to which his people could come and offer worship and sacrifices. He called forth the gifts and talents of his people and made plans to begin its construction. David, himself, gave very generously for this project. In

the end, it remained for his son Solomon to build the temple, but David paved the way. After all the gifts were brought in – when the capital campaign was over – David offered the most beautiful prayer:

“Praise be to you, O LORD,

God of our father Israel,

from everlasting to everlasting.

^{1Ch 29:11} Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power

and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,

for everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom;

you are exalted as head over all.

^{1Ch 29:12} Wealth and honor come from you;

you are the ruler of all things.

In your hands are strength and power

to exalt and give strength to all.

^{1Ch 29:13} Now, our God, we give you thanks,

and praise your glorious name.

^{1Ch 29:14} “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?

Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

There was no doubt in David’s mind who the Owner was. He understood himself – at least at this point in his life - to be a manager of God’s resources and he therefore sought to honor God with them.

There is great wisdom in keeping this perspective on life and all our stuff. If we insist that we are the master of our own lives, and seek to control what is “ours”, we set ourselves up for heartache. For what we think we control can so easily begin to control us, wreaking havoc in our lives. Without reference to God, our possessions can begin to possess us. Our money can become our god. Our time can be misspent. Our resources can be wasted. Our talent can be used to the wrong ends. Our bodies can be terribly abused; our world can be hopelessly polluted. The things we think we own begin to “own” us and we can become enslaved. Worry, envy, greed, pride, selfishness, fear... all follow.

So it’s vitally important you and I settle the ownership question once and for all.

Someone has said: *“The person outside Christ will look at the world and laugh and say, “Mine.” The Christian will look at the world and his own life and say, “Thine.”*

I heard about a sixth-grade Sunday school class that learned the truth about stewardship. Each child in the class was given a bunch of stickers that read, *“This belongs to Jesus.”* They were instructed to put these little stickers on everything at home they owned -- their music CD’s, their skate boards, bicycles, everything—to remind them that all of these things actually belong to Jesus and to encourage them to use these things in ways pleasing to Him. Maybe we all ought to have a bunch of those stickers – we can put them on our large screen TV’s, our computers, our cars, our bank statements, our checkbooks. We could put one on our calendars to remind us that our time belongs to Jesus. Everything ultimately belongs to God. It isn’t the other way around at all. We only think it is. We constantly need to remind ourselves of that.

Now if God is the owner of all things, and you and I are stewards of God’s property, it follows that you and I will seek to best stewards we can possibly be; we won’t cling to things too tightly, or bury our resources in the ground, or use them only in selfish ways. We will invest what belongs to God in things that matter – in ways that make God smile.

We will be smart about the way we use God's money; we will give joyfully and generously to causes that advance God's kingdom of love. Money that is unduly hoarded is lost to the kingdom.

We will seek to use our time wisely -not wasting it. We will make the most of the opportunities we have to bless and serve others and will choose not to procrastinate when we can make a difference today.

We will take care of our bodies. We will be mindful of our own health. Immoralities and excessive habits that degrade and weaken the body will be shunned. The Apostle Paul writes, *"Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God..."*

We will use our spiritual gifts and talents for the sake of others. We will take the heart the words of Peter: *"As each has received a gift, employ it for one another as good stewards of God's grace."*

Since the earth is the Lord's, we will care about the environment and will work against all that would spoil or pollute the planet.

The good steward will also share the gospel, remembering that Jesus said, *"You shall be my witnesses."* By word of mouth and the life he or she leads, the good steward will say to others, *"Jesus Christ is the most important priority in my life, and I want you to know him and love him as I do."*

You can see that stewardship is so much more than about money and giving to the church: it is a total life-style – a life-response to God's grace. And living as a steward ought to be a great privilege and joy. It certainly is a great responsibility.

This brings us to another thing about being a steward: a steward will be held accountable by the owner of the estate. Jesus urges us stewards to be alert to his coming when we will be held to account for our stewardship:

"Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time?

Lk 12:43 It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns.

Lk 12:44 I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

Lk 12:45 But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk.

Lk 12:46 The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

Lk 12:47 "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows.

Lk 12:48 But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

That is a rather vivid and sobering parable! All of which is to say, you and I will be held accountable by the Lord for our stewardship. May we be found faithful and wise!

Many other parables of Jesus deal with trust and accountability. The parable of the talents reminds us that however little or however much we have, we are accountable for its use--all of it. We must give a

final answer to God. Our auditing day is coming and the report must be filed. The Apostle Paul (Romans 14:12) echoes the same reality: *"So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God."*

Pope John XXIII once said: *"I believe that, when I stand before God, God will simply ask me, 'How did you use the gift of life I gave you?'"*

God will ask, *"What did you do with my stuff?"* How will you and I answer?

Brothers and sisters, we are not owner's but stewards of God's property. Let us manage God's resources with great wisdom and care, such that it may bless people, advance his kingdom of love, and make Him smile! Amen.