

Getting to the Essentials of Stewardship August 14, 2011

Hang on to your wallet the preacher's gone to preachin on money.

No I have not.

Certainly the idea of Christian Stewardship also includes your money but only as a small part of all the rest of your person, your time, your talents, your commitments, even the way you see this world; even the way you pray.

Today, we are looking into the Essentials of what it means, as a Christian, to acknowledge our privilege and duty of "stewardship" before God.

The first essential for us to understand is just **how much of our life does** comes under the concept of stewardship. And for that understanding we have to go back to the afternoon of the sixth Day of Creation. (Genesis 1:26 – 2:15)

Having spent the entire morning of the 6th day creating all the other animals of the Earth, then late in the day, *God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'*

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

God Blessed them and God said, "be fruitful and multiply "

.... *The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to **till it and keep it.***

... *God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*

There are three points about stewardship that we need to take from this part of the Creation story.

First – that our "dominion" over the earth (KJV says "rule) is not what we think it is.

When we hear the word "Dominion" in our current fallen world, we say "O Goody" that means I can do whatever I want with the planet because it is mine to do with as I please: so dig more oil wells, clearcut more trees, fish the oceans free of fish...

You would be surprised how many people actually believe this twisted, self-serving, concept of our "God given" dominion.

But that's not what the word "dominion" obviously means to God.

As proof, note that having given Adam "dominion" God then put him in a garden - definitely a nice place to live - but God also gave Adam a job to do. **Point 1: you are not your own boss – if some else is giving you a job assignment.**

Adam's job "was to till and to keep the garden" This implies that Adam was working for someone else, this also implies giving before taking.

So God didn't start Adam off in the garden with a harvest basket but with a plow and a pair of hedge trimmers.

Adam's first act of dominion was to care for the garden to cause it to grow and flourish. And "to be fruitful and to fill the earth," further implied that as their numbers grew, so would humanity's responsibility to till and keep (to take care) of the land, sea, plants, and animals placed under their charge.

Second point: since God blessed the humans, as He blessed his creation, and blessed all the work that He had done in creating. .. this means that Just because God had put man into his creation to care for it, it did not mean that God was relinquishing ownership over it. God very much remained in ownership of the planet and humanity's dominion (rule) was that of a Steward (a trusted servant) expected to care the master's property. God expected to see a return from his investment: humanity was expected to "be fruitful and multiply."

And further God proved His continued ownership, following humanity's act of defiance, by immediately evicting Adam and Eve out of the garden and adding to what should have been pleasant labor, now sweat, hard work, and pain. God didn't do that to be vindictive, but strange as this may sound, it was done for our sake (something we can talk about later if you like).

So humanity's dominion over the earth was expected to be fulfilled in a steward's role, in responsible care of the earth – in being fruitful. **God made it and God continues to own it and we were put here to take care of it.**

Which brings up the third most important point.

Why did God put humanity on a planet where from the very start we were expected to work, to take care of something, and to cause it to flourish?

Was it because God didn't have enough hired hands among the angels?

Was it because God needed more servants to keep Him happy?

Is that what we were made to be.... God's tenement farmers, working land that is not ours and sending all the profits up to the big house?

NO -- and if you get nothing else out of today's message get this.

God made us this way. God put us in this stewardship position, because this is at the heart of who God is.

Male & female, we were specifically made in God's image - meaning we share in God's attributes: Love, friendship, parenthood, stewardship – these are all a part of us because they were first a part of God.

God has a steward's heart, God has a servant's heart, God has a parent's heart!

So God built these characteristics into us.

And God put us in charge of a garden – because God likes to care for gardens and knew that we would be happiest caring for a garden.

Since God likes to make things, care for things, watch things be fruitful and multiply.

Thus to be made in God's image means to be made as steward: caring for and causing that which we have been entrusted with to be fruitful.

Think about this -- God had already worked for six days creating the planet and the garden with all that was needed to grow and flourish, before bringing humanity into the picture. God didn't bring us in at the start of the project – but after its completion (like getting a house ready for a couple of newlyweds).

And having first finished all the work before creating humanity, God's only charge to us was to keep it growing, to care for it, to make it better (*so how good of a job have we done with God's creation?*)

God doesn't want humanity to be his servants – but his family, God wants us to grow and He wants to watch us care for the things that He cares for.

God wants to enjoy walking with us in our garden in the cool of the evening.

(that's not an image of God you often think of ... is it?)

Well, you know the rest of the story after that ... with humanity's rebellion, with our desire to own rather than share, to rule rather than serve together, the garden was closed and the ground was cursed.

And after that everything, humanity and the world, was left – pretty much in a state of waiting until the time came to launch God's rescue plan for both the planet and his wandering children.

And so one day, somewhere back in time at the appropriate time, God asked one man to be faithful and to follow where God would lead him. And from that one man, God built a nation. And then God brought that nation to a promised land and blessed them with homes they did not build, wells they did not dig, vineyards they did not plant.... **Another garden.**

And God taught them of their stewardship relationship with himself, by so dividing and ruling the land that no individual could ever claim sole ownership – but rather families, whole tribes, ultimately God Himself who owned the land.

And God also reminded them of His ownership by commanding that fields should be rounded and vineyards picked only once to leave food for the less fortunate, and that a tithe (10%) of the harvests, be returned to the priests for their portion. God didn't really need the bread or the meat – but how else could you remind stubborn humanity as to who was the ultimate owner and who was the steward.

And through the prophets God warned the Hebrew nation that he couldn't be fooled by Sabbath offerings or long temple prayers if they were oppressing their widows and workers the rest of the week.

AS the Prophet Isaiah proclaimed – the true God honoring acts of worship are caring for creation and sharing with the needy. The stewards heart is what God is seeking... (Isaiah 58:7)

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;

This is what stewardship means for the human race.

This is the true worship and relationship that God seeks to have with us,

As the Apostle Paul reminded the Ephesians – that in Christ Jesus we had been created anew **to do good works** – to be stewards - which had always been God's purpose for our lives.

Thus, we demonstrate our membership in God's family by caring God's people – and in many ways they are all God's people: every child, every widow, every persecuted, every oppressed.

So now that we know the who and the what of stewardship, what about the how much of stewardship.

This brings us to a rather scary parable that Jesus told near the end of his ministry. (you'll find these events recorded in Matthew 23-25)

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving the Temple, Jesus having just spoken several comments inside that probably got them invited outside, perhaps to break the tension or change the subject, the disciples begin admiring the majesty of the Temple and how beautifully it had been built. In reply, Jesus offhandedly remarks that in the not too distant future, *not one of these Temple stones would be left standing one upon another.*

Well that certainly got the disciples attention, and once they were safely away from the area and could ask him what and when he meant – they did.

Jesus then tells them of future events, of their witness throughout the world. That there would be both persecutions and triumphs, wars and rumors of wars. That there would eventually come false prophets, failing faith, an increase of lawlessness. That the Temple would be destroyed. And eventually the end would come.

But it would come at a time when the world least expected it.

So Jesus warns his disciples to be faithful in their duties. He explains that the faithful steward, would always be **working** and **watching** for the master's return.

And then Jesus tells a parable about watching, about prepared waiting – it involved ten bridesmaids – waiting for the groom to come and the wedding to begin. Five had planned for a long wait and had sufficient oil to keep their lamps lit until the bridegroom arrived – and they got to go into the Wedding feast. But the other five bridesmaids had not prepared for a long wait. And their lamps having ran out of oil, they were out searching for resupply when the groom arrived and the wedding feast went on without them.

That seems a clear enough lesson – the end is coming, but be prepared for a long wait.

Next Jesus tells a parable about what we are to be doing while we are waiting, this is the scary one: a master, headed off on a long journey, divides his wealth up unequally among his servants (his stewards), one getting much, one getting less, one getting little (but even the little was somewhere between \$300 – 500,000 by our currency). That he was expecting them to increase his wealth was obvious by his response upon his return.

Both the one who had been given much, and the one who had been given less – each had doubled his finances and both of them were rewarded even more greatly for their efforts.

But the one who had been given just a little – fearfully had hid it – actually burying it in the ground – so that he returned the exact sum, even the exact coins, that he had originally been given. He had neither spent nor lost his master's bestowed wealth -- but he had also done nothing with it.

This infuriated the master, who considered his resources wasted because they had not been wisely used. So he took the funds away from the one who did nothing with them, gave them to the one who had done the most and threw this "worthless slave" out the door.

And perhaps it is just an accident that the word Jesus used here for money – talents – now in our modern English world means so much more: it now means all of the resources at our personal disposal.... All our abilities, time, energy, life, skills, and yes our money too.

So there is no escaping the lesson in stewardship that Jesus sought to teach his disciples. **That whether you think God has given you a lot or a little – HE expects you to be using everything you've got to grow it for the Glory of God –**

that my friends is what it means to be a steward.

So we were designed to think like and are expected to live like watchful, industrious, stewards of the family business – so that one day, in our turn, we will hear: *well done thou good and faithful servant enter into the joy of the Lord.*

Since this is what we were meant to be....

That's why Paul was not embarrassed to ask the Corinthians to gather up an offering to send to the hungry in Jerusalem

And that is why Paul was so bold as to declare that their return blessing would be in proportion to their generosity of spirit: sow sparingly and reap sparingly, sow bountifully reap bountifully. *For He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.* 2 Corinthians 9:10

Yes here Paul is talking primarily about the stewardship of our finances – but that is still within the larger context of the stewardship of our life.

And what about Israel's 10% tithe – is that what God still financially expects us to give back to the house of God?

That is certainly a commendable goal. But many Bible students see here in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 what is often called "the modern tithe" a new principle of Christian giving.

With the caution of sowing sparingly & reaping sparingly or sowing bountifully and reaping bountifully still ringing in their minds, Paul continues... ***Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*** (2 Corinthians 9:7)

There it is, **Give what you have made up your mind to give and then give it joyfully.** Notice there are no set percentages: 2% 5 % 10% 50% you must decide.

If you and your family can joyfully live on half your income... then by all means, give the other half into ministry.

Make up your mind as to what you want and feel that you can give – and then give it cheerfully, with no sense of reluctance or compulsion. NO one is keeping tabs except you and God.

And why would God love a cheerful giver – because God has always been a cheerful and abundant giver to us. Once again, God expects of us, his recreated children, as he is himself.

You as well as I know how often these last passages have been abused by the Health-Wealth Gospel people, but you'll never hear anyone in this church asking you to give any specific amount. Or promising you a specific blessing in return – again, that's between you and God.

When we come into our Fall stewardship season. The Session will present you a budget based upon the ministry we hope to do in the coming year. Then we will ask you to prayerfully pledge what financial role you will play in supporting that ministry. And we will also ask you to pledge your time, your talent, your energy, your prayers, and your vision ... as faithful stewards of God's ministry here on earth – until we all can get back to the garden.