



Stewardship

Matthew 25:14-30

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I'm preaching this sermon at the request of the deacons. And it does not come because are any particular problems, but rather because the subject of stewardship and money and tithing is one that does need to be addressed from time to time in the teaching ministry of the church. We have just had our annual membership meeting where we gave thanks to the Lord for the generous giving of the congregation. Every year we have a surplus that we are able to put towards missions and saving up for a future church building. So, we are not in a situation in which there is a problem that needs to be addressed. And we acknowledge God's grace in Christ for that because by nature we are all selfish and greedy. Anything that is praiseworthy in our lives comes from God.

I was going to cover both stewardship and tithing in one sermon, but this is another instance where one sermon became two. The subject of how much to give is one that that must be carefully stated and so I came to the conclusion that I need to a whole sermon to deal with it. So this evening we will just consider the idea of stewardship by examining the parable of the talents that we find in Matthew 25:14-20 and next week we will consider the subject of how much we should give.

In preparing for this sermon I listened to part of a sermon by Kevin DeYoung and in it he said that the subject of stewardship and money needs to be preached and taught, not because God needs the money or even because the church needs the money, but because we need to give. I thought that that was an insightful way to say it. This is not about fund raising. This is not about trying to raise more money. It is about the Christian life. It is about reminding ourselves that giving is an important part of the Christian life. This subject needs to be addressed, not to raise

more money but because giving is one of the fruits of the gospel. It is part of not living for ourselves but for the one who gave his life for us.

There are situations in which it is appropriate to say that money is needed for this or that reason. Thankfully there are no issues with our church finances. Thankfully God's grace is prompting giving in our congregation. But like every other area we need to be reminded of the biblical teaching and like every other area we need to examine our present practice in the light of God's Word. Like every other area in the Christian life, none of us are perfect here and we can all grow.

The first thing I would like to do is read to you of a couple of things from our ARP standards. In the course of the sermon we will see that what our standards say is biblically based, but I thought it would be useful just to bring some of what they say to your attention. Our Standards include the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms which summarize the main teachings of the Word of God, but we also have a Form of Government and a Book of Discipline and a Directory of Public Worship. Our Form of Government has a section which describes the responsibilities of each church member and one of those responsibilities is that each member is to, "Give of their substance as the Lord may prosper them." And one of the vows for church membership is "Do you promise to exercise faithful stewardship of God's resources entrusted to you for the furtherance of God's kingdom and purposes?"

That is one of the vows that we make when we become communicant members of the church. And that vow is based on biblical teaching as we will see.

Our Directory of Public Worship has a small section which has the title "Tithes and Offerings." It is just one text and two paragraphs and so I will quote it in full. First there is a text from Psalm 96:7-8, "Give unto the LORD, O ye kindreds of the people, Give unto the LORD, glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; bring an offering and come into his courts." Then comes this paragraph:

"From ancient times tithes and offerings have been made to and received by God. They are part of the ordinary worship of God, commanded in the Law. Our Lord also taught the importance of

returning to God a portion of what one has received. The Apostle Paul instructed the Corinthians to lay aside their gifts for the saints in Jerusalem on the first day of the week. This coincides with the day when the early church met for worship.” Here is the second paragraph:

“The presentation of tithes and offerings is to be made humbly before God, in singleness of heart. Pride and self-righteousness in giving is to be abhorred. Giving must be from a cheerful heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion. Giving to God should be done in response and thanksgiving for all He has given to us.” (Directory of Public Worship, Chapter 5, B,6, a & b).

Now in those two paragraphs, there are 9 footnotes and 20 separate Scripture references are cited. If you are at all familiar with our standards, you will be familiar with the fact that just about every phrase in most parts of them is based on a text or texts of Scripture. The only places where there are no texts are places that deal with procedures that promote good order, but are not all based on specific texts, because Scripture does not give an exhaustive description of how the church should be organized. The phrase that is used to describe the documents that deal with organizing church life is that they are “founded upon or agreeable to the Word of God.”

Anyway, in the two paragraphs that I just read, there are all kinds of scripture references because the Bible has a lot to say on the subject of giving. I’m going to pick out a few of the ideas from what I have just read to you and expound them from the relevant biblical passages. The standards of the church are actually quite good and are worthy of seeing the light of day from time to time. But the standards themselves constantly point us back to the Word of God and so to the Word of God we shall go. One of our core convictions as Bible-believing-Christians is that the Bible is our supreme authority because it is the inerrant Word of God. The authority of the Bible is the authority of God himself.

The subject that I want to deal with from the Bible directly is the idea of stewardship. This concept is found in the 5th vow for church membership. “Do you promise to exercise faithful stewardship of God’s resources entrusted to you for the furtherance of God’s kingdom and purposes?” This question carefully describes our relationship to what

we think of as our possessions. It says basically that we do not own what we think of as our possessions or our resources. What we think of as our stuff or our money is described as “God’s resources entrusted to you.” That is the biblical concept of stewardship. Stewardship means that nothing that we think of as our own is really our own. It all belongs to God and he gives it to us to use in the pursuit of his goals. The words of the 5th vow express this clearly. “Do you promise to exercise faithful stewardship of God’s resources entrusted to you for the furtherance of God’s kingdom and purposes?” So, the proper term to describe our relationship to our money and things is stewardship rather than ownership.

Let’s see how Scripture teaches this. One of the key stewardship passages is Jesus’ parable of the talents which is found in Matthew 25:9-30. We read it as our Scripture reading. I won’t read the whole thing again. But notice that Jesus begins by saying “For it shall be like...” This is short-form for the kingdom of heaven is like. This is the one of a number of parables in a row which are all about what the kingdom of heaven is like. In the parable that comes before this one, Jesus begins, “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like.” So, the parable of the talents is about what the kingdom of heaven is like.

This is what Jesus says in verse 9, “For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property.” That is the idea of stewardship. In the kingdom of heaven, God is the landowner, we are the servants and what we think of as our resources actually belong to God and they are entrusted to us to be used on his behalf.

The parable makes it plain that the landowner expected his servants to use the resources that he gave to them in such a way that there would be a return on his investment. Verse 19 says, “Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.”

Remember that Jesus is teaching us about what the kingdom of heaven is like. If we are Christians, we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and Jesus is telling us that we do not own what we think of as our resources. They belong to God. They are entrusted to us to be used to pursue his

aims and goals. And when he returns, he is going to settle accounts with us.

The parable describes three scenarios to give us an idea of what God is looking for and how we can expect to be judged. The first two servants had doubled the money he had entrusted to them. They were commended. They were each told "Well done, good and faithful servant." They had done what was expected of them. They had invested the master's resources and had gotten a healthy return and so they were commended. Servant number three was not commended. Servant number three had buried his talent and so when the time of settling accounts came, there had been no increase; he had accomplished nothing with his talent. All he could do was offer back the talent that had been entrusted to him. And the master was not pleased, to say the least. He obviously had expected more. And so, he called him a wicked and slothful servant. And his one talent was taken from him and he was cast into outer darkness. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Jesus' message is clear.

God has entrusted us with resources that we are to use to promote his kingdom. Those resources include our money, but they also include everything else that God has given us. Our lives, our health, our time, our abilities, the circumstances of our lives. All of these things are to be used to further God's goals and God's agenda. A verse that puts this in a nutshell is 2 Corinthians 5:15 which says that Jesus, "died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." Earlier in the same passage Paul puts the same idea in different words, 2 Corinthians 5:9-10, "So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

This is the idea of stewardship. We are not owners of our resources but stewards. They are entrusted to us to be used to pursue God's goals and purposes. We can summarize those purposes in many different ways. 2 Corinthians 5 speaks of pleasing God, of doing good rather than evil and of living for Christ rather than living for ourselves. There are many other ways that the Bible puts this idea, but these are enough for now. And a

key part of the stewardship idea is that we shall have to give an account of how we have used and managed the resources entrusted to us.

So, hear again, the 5th vow of our vows for profession of faith and feel the weight of them that comes from the Word of God. “Do you promise to exercise faithful stewardship of God’s resources entrusted to you for the furtherance of God’s kingdom and purposes?” Stewardship is a weighty matter.

Now in order to fill out what this means we need to elaborate on what it means to please God and to do good rather than evil and to live for Christ rather than living for ourselves. In order for us to evaluate how we are doing in our management of the resources that God has entrusted to us we need to be clear on what God is expecting us to accomplish with them.

To understand that we must go back to the creation because at the creation God has given to mankind his fundamental task in what we call the cultural or creation mandate. And when we think about the task that God gave to us at the time of our creation, it is clear that it involves our creaturely life of being fruitful and multiplying and having dominion over the earth and working and keeping the garden. This is very important for our understanding of stewardship because it teaches us that God’s purpose for our lives includes our everyday lives of family and work and relationships and enjoying the fruits of our labors. What is clear from the creation account is that God’s purpose for our lives involves our creaturely existence and the everyday stuff of making a living, fulfilling our daily responsibilities and enjoying life. I especially include enjoying life, because both we and the rest of the creation are designed by God to give or experience a lot of pleasure. There is no way that we can fulfill God’s purpose for our lives without a lot of enjoyment and pleasure.

But the key to this as far as God’s purpose for us is concerned is how we relate to God in those pleasures. The chapters in Genesis make it clear that obedience to God is central to the way we are to relate to God. There are also a couple of New Testament verses that put this whole matter in a nutshell. One is 1 Corinthians 10:31 which says, “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” The

other is 1 Timothy 4:4-6 which says that things like marriage and foods were created by God, “to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

The point of all this in connection with stewardship is that a huge part of God’s purpose for us is has to do with our everyday life of relationships, work and enjoyment of life. Stewardship in this area means living everyday life to the glory of God which includes things like obedience to his laws, enjoying his gifts with thanksgiving and loving God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. The key here as far as stewardship is concerned that there is a Godward aspect to our everyday lives – that we do our work to please God, that we enjoy God’s gifts with thanksgiving, that we prioritize our relationship with God.

Those of us who are studying *The Things of Earth* by Joe Rigney are reading a very profound treatment of how we can live this earthly life to the glory of God. If you are not in one of the groups that are studying that book, I highly recommend that you get it and read it. It is the best treatment that I have ever read of how to live everyday life to the glory of God. Only start with chapter 3 because the first two chapters are very difficult and not really necessary to profit from the book.

Anyway, the point I am making is stewardship includes the everyday life of work and play and family and friends and the enjoyment of life. It is doing it to the glory of God which means prioritizing our relationship with him and seeking to do everything in such a way as to be pleasing to God. And of course, this assumes salvation. The first step of any stewardship is acknowledgement of our sins, trusting in Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit who alone can make us willing and able to live for God and not for ourselves.

But then, stewardship requires some degree of self-denial. Enjoyment of life with thanksgiving to God is an important part of living life to the glory of God, but the life of stewardship involves more than seeking to enjoy the pleasures of life. Right from the beginning or at least from close to the beginning, we find that pleasing God required sacrifices and offerings to God. We do not know much about them from the early part

of the Bible, but we do know that Cain and Abel already made sacrifices to God. And as the story of the Bible unfolds, the idea of making sacrifices to God is an important part of the lives of the people of God.

And this included the giving of money or if not money than something of value such as a portion of the harvest or a valuable animal. Stewardship has always included an aspect of giving up stuff as an offering to God. God is glorified when we enjoy his gifts with thanksgiving, but he also requires that we give a portion of what he has given us back to him as a sacrifice. Those sacrifices were used for two main purposes, to maintain the corporate worship of God and to help the poor. We can expand the idea in the light of the New Testament to include supporting the work of the church and the kingdom as well as helping the poor. And so, the summary of the 5th vow, “for the furtherance of God’s kingdom and purposes.”

Stewardship includes sacrifice “for the furtherance of God’s kingdom and purposes.” Stewardship means that all that we have and all that we are belongs to God and is to be used for his glory. A huge part of that is living all of life unto him – doing our work with the aim of pleasing God, living as a family or as a single with the aim of pleasing God, enjoying God’s gifts with thanksgiving with the aim of pleasing God.

However, the Bible also speaks about making sacrifices for God for the advancement of his kingdom. That means self-denial. Sacrifice and self-denial means making decisions to do things and not to do other things that are not directed at pleasing ourselves. There is lots that we can do that is pleasurable that can be done to the glory of God. But stewardship also involves dedicating some of the resources that God has entrusted to us to things that do not benefit us directly, but that benefit others and that support the work of God’s kingdom. That does not only involve money. It also involves time and energy.

Stewardship involves some degree of sacrifice and self-denial. The kind of life that Jesus is urging us to live in the parable of the talents is described in all that the Bible teaches about the kind of life that brings glory to God and it is clear that the kind of life that brings glory to God is a life that includes dedicating significant resources of time and money

to other people besides ourselves and other causes besides our pleasure and our own desires.

We see this in the gift theology of the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 12:7 says “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The term “manifestation of the Spirit” here means spiritual gift. All believers have gifts that are given for the common good. Ephesians 4:12 says that the work of shepherds and teachers is to “equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” The Bible has a lot to say about helping the poor.

We can use God’s resources appropriately when we eat and drink and work and play to the glory of God. But we are not using God’s resources appropriately if we only eat and drink and work and play to the glory of God, but never deny ourselves and make sacrifices to serve other people and to contribute to building up the body of Christ.

The life of stewardship is not a life of asceticism where the focus is mostly on self-denial and sacrifice. But neither is it a life which is all about ourselves and our pleasures without any self-denial and sacrifice. We are saved to love. Love is other-centered. Love involves doing things for other people. Love involves putting others before ourselves. And it involves being engaged in building the body of Christ – supporting the work of the kingdom, contributing to the great commission.

I’ve decided to spend a whole sermon on the idea of tithing and the issue of how much we should give. I was going to do it all in one sermon, but along the way I decided that the question of how much needs more time to deal with it properly.

This morning I just want to focus on the idea of stewardship from the perspective of the parable of the Talents. I’ve made it clear that it involves doing everything to the glory of God, but the Bible also makes it clear that it involves dedicating time and money in sacrificial ways to promote God’s church and kingdom. And the parable of the Talents makes it clear that this is a very serious matter. We will have to give an account of what we have done with the resources that God has entrusted to us. And we will either hear the words “Well done, good and faithful servant” or we will hear the words, “You wicked and

slothful servant.... Cast the worthless servant into outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This is a call for us to soberly reflect on our lives in the light of the concept of stewardship. Are we using the resources that God has entrusted to us in ways that pursue his goals for them?

Now Jesus introduced this parable with the words, “For it will be like” and the meaning of those words, as we have seen, is - this is what the kingdom of God is like. But this is not the whole story. We must remember the one who told the parable and what he had come to earth to do. He came to bring the kingdom of God and that involved his death on the cross for the sins of his people.

The kingdom of God is not a kingdom where the citizens earn the favor of God. The kingdom of God is not a kingdom where the citizens serve God perfectly. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace and forgiveness and renewal. Stewardship is not about being without sin. Stewardship is not something that earns our salvation. Stewardship describes the lives of those who are saved by grace and who seek to please God out of thankfulness and love.

So stewardship is a serious matter as the parable makes clear. And we must seriously consider our lives in the light of this parable. But it is not the way to salvation. No one does it perfectly in this life. Our anchor is Christ and our hope is his righteousness. The point of the text and the point of the sermon is not to drive us to despair, but to drive us to Christ and to urge us to take a careful look at our lives in the light of the fact that we are stewards and not owners of the resources that God has entrusted to us.