

STEWARDSHIP

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For this special Sunday of focus of the Free to Minister campaign I want to spend some moments talking with you about stewardship. My text is going to be Luke 12:35-38, and 42. “Be dressed, ready for service and keep your lamps burning like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth: he will dress himself to serve, have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night.... The Lord answered, ‘Who then is the faithful and wise manager or the faithful and wise steward whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time. It will be good for that steward whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth he will put him in charge of all his possessions.’”

Stewardship is a quaint old English word that is almost completely dropped out of our contemporary vocabulary. The most popular contemporary model we have for a steward is that of an airline attendant – steward or stewardess. But unfortunately that kind of occupation does not adequately represent what the biblical idea of what the steward or stewardess.

Because of the difficulty in translating this term modern translations of the scriptures totally drop steward. You’re reading through the NIV for example I don’t think you’ll find that word “steward.” You won’t find it in the Living Bible or any of the other more modern translations. With that omission of the word “steward” there is a consequent loss of meaning for the term “stewardship”. No matter what other words you use it doesn’t quite get at what the New Testament represents that word to be.

Steward when it’s used in the Bible comes from a combination of two Greek words – “house” and “to arrange.” A steward is literally one who arranges a house. It was a term used in Bible days to describe a person who was left in charge of a wealthy landowners’ estate. He was, in effect, that administration of that estate. The chief operating officer. The owner could totally entrust the affairs of his business, his household, his properties, his produce and his employees to the care of the household manager. The steward. The owner could even go away for a period of time and while the owner was gone complete responsibility for the administration of the estate would fall to the steward.

The terms therefore steward and stewardship are particularly appropriate for us as Christians because our Lord for the present time has left for business elsewhere. He has entrusted to us the care of his estate, his work on earth.

Five words especially describe what it is to be a steward. I want to walk with you one by one through these words that we might gain a clearer perception of our responsibility as stewards.

The first word in stewardship is the word ownership.

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A steward recognizes the principle of ownership. What has been entrusted to him is not his own personal possession. It is the possession of the owner. It is delegated to him in trust for a period of time until the master returns to personally take charge of his own estate.

We understand this concept a little bit better in southern California than most places elsewhere because we have a great deal of leased land. We understand that that land is, for a while, in the possession of the tenant. But there comes a time on the calendar maybe after our lifetime when the land reverts to its original owner. Such is the idea of ownership and stewardship. Stewards recognize that whatever they have is simply for a leased time. The Christian therefore properly owns nothing. We give up all claims to ownership on anything when we come to Jesus Christ. Then the Lord treats us as stewards and entrusts things to us.

We must remember that in Bible days the banking that people had to take advantage of was not anything like contemporary banking. So if a wealthy person went away for a while and they had liquid assets such as cash or jewelry or gold bars or anything like that, they would leave it in trust in deposit with a friend, a reliable acquaintance. It was the responsibility of the trustee to guard what had been given him.

Paul sees the gospel somewhat in these terms. He has been given a trust. And he will guard it. 2 Thessalonians 2:4. He entrusts the gospel to others like Timothy who will in turn entrust it to others. It's not ownership but it's a period of responsibility.

The whole idea of being a trustee rather than an owner teaches us that we are to use life and all of its blessings for the master's benefit, for Jesus' service. And not something that's our own personal, private possession.

A steward knows that he brought nothing into the world and he'll take nothing out of the world. And that the time that is his between those times of coming and leaving are simply a trust. Whatever has been given him is not his to keep but his to use.

So I ask myself, as I look at that first principle, Have I settled in my heart the principle of ownership? Have you settled it? Who owns your home? Your automobile? Your investments? Your furnishings? Your clothing? Your recreational equipment? Your employment? You may use all these things and because we have a good master he lets us use them even for our own pleasure. Use them. But in the last analysis they are his not ours.

Our own families even are not ours. They are his. Hanna the mother of Samuel knew well this concept of ownership when she recognized that little Samuel was to be given to the Lord. When parents dedicate their children to Christ they are recognizing that they have trustee responsibilities for that child. But the child belongs to God. In that time God entrusts him/her to them they do not own the child. The child belongs to the Lord. The years of the child's development, it is a trust given to parents. Not a possession for our own keeping. Nothing I have is really mine when you come right down to it. I am Christ's. Nothing is mine yet everything is mine.

What has been given me is mine to use but it's not mine. Even as a pastor I must stay away from words like "my church" and speaking of you as "my people." This is not *my* church. This is God's church. You are not my people. You are God's people. If I begin saying "my church", "my people" then I begin to exercise a possessive interest in that which the Lord has only

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committed to me a trustee responsibility. It's his. We're his. You are not your own, Paul emphatically declares. You are not your own. Why? Because you were bought at a price. The price of Calvary. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. Our bodies, our possessions, our family, our talents are not ours to do with as we may decide. They're all God's. He has entrusted them to us and expects us to honor him through rightful use of the gifts he has given us – ownership.

The second key word in stewardship is responsibility.

A steward is given responsibility. Many of you have read the Philipps translation of the New Testament. It came out before the Living Bible a number of years ago. J.B. Philipps, the Anglican translated the beautiful work on the New Testament. In one of his works Philipps tells the mythical story of a junior angel who was witnessing the glorious reception of the Son of God into heaven following Jesus' work on earth after his resurrection and his ascension. The junior angel was watching all of this unfold and seeing the throngs and multitudes of the angelic host giving a thunderous welcome to Jesus as he came into glory. The junior angel wondered exactly what was happening. He had been unaware of the events, so the story goes. The senior angel began to explain to him the significance of what had transpired. The senior angel told him about the greatness of the Lord's love which had taken him from heaven to earth and from earth to the cross and death.

As the older angel unfolded this marvelous story of God's redemption and plan of salvation for the human race the junior angel was moved with tears as he listened to the glorious story. Finally the junior angel wanted to know how the world would come to know this good news that Jesus had died for the whole world. The senior angel responded that Jesus had left behind a very small company of people who were going to spread throughout the whole earth with the good news that God loved them and that Jesus had died for the sins of every person in the world. The junior angel pondered this for a while and in wonderment said, How can this be? The savior risked everything in coming into the world to give salvation to the world but he has left the care of this message to just a few people. What if they don't carry out their responsibility? Will the coming of the Son of God have been in vain if this small group doesn't do what they're supposed to do? He's risked everything in committing that news to them. He turns to the senior angel, Surely if they fail the master has another plan. The senior angel responded No, there is no other plan.

Jesus gave total and complete responsibility to that small group of people. They were faithful to that responsibility and we have the gospel today because they were. But the Lord now in this generation and in this community entrusts that responsibility to us. This concept of personal responsibility destroys a myth I frequently hear in the church. If I don't do it, somebody else will. Or God will raise up somebody else. I've heard this phrase used so many times to justify someone's abdicating a place of responsibility in the kingdom of God. The Lord will just raise somebody else up their place of responsibility.

I believe the Lord will raise someone else up. But he intended to raise them up all along anyway. He didn't need the first person to leave their responsibilities in order to raise up the second person. He wanted the first and the second person both to be raised up. There will never be anyone to take the place of the person who abdicated their responsibility. They may take a position, but they'll never take the place. God has entrusted to all of his people special responsibilities.

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I've shared this before with this congregation, the words of my uncle. He penned them on the eve of his departure for a missionary trek that would take him through Tibet from China to the India side. Only four months before he penned these words he had laid his wife and his only child, a five year old boy, in a single mountainside grave on a cold winter day in Tibet. While waiting for spring to come and during these months of grief he considered forsaking his call to Tibet and returning home to America. But he sensed that God had given him a special responsibility to Tibet. On May 18, 1927 he began the epic journey which no missionary and no westerner had ever undertaken to go through Tibet from the China side to the India side, on foot with the gospel. He took a hundred thousand pieces of the gospel literature with him. Finally he was given up for dead and reported so in *Time* magazine. But ten months after setting out he emerged on the India side. He had completed his task.

The evening before he left for that monumental trek he had gone out to the mountainside grave where rested his wife and only son and he sat down and wrote these words, which are always etched in my consciousness. They are words where he assumes responsibility as a steward until the furthest nook and corner of Tibet has heard the call of God and the story of redemption in Christ my task is not complete until the last man has heard the gospel witness my work is not done.

I believe we as a church must feel the same way about our community. Our responsibility does not end, even if we have disappointments, keen disappointments and grief in our life, our responsibility never ends until we have reached the last nook and corner in our community and in our world and every person has had a chance to respond clearly to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Responsibility.

The third and the fourth requirements in a steward are reliability and accountability. Paul said it succinctly. "Moreover it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful." Reliability. 1 Corinthians 4:2. "All are given responsibility by the master not ever one who has responsibility is reliable. But everyone is accountable.

In Jesus' day in his parable of the talents he tells the story of stewardship. In those days it took an average laborer six thousand days to earn a single talent. Or eighteen and a half years of a person's life would be spent working before they would earn the equivalent of one talent. That's assuming that they don't eat, sleep, or dress during those 18½ years and all their money goes to collecting the one talent.

The average wage earner in southern California, or head of household I am told, is supposedly equivalent of about \$10 an hour. The average household about \$20,000 a year. Many of you are perhaps more than that. That would mean to translate that story into our modern money system that a talent would be worth about \$480,000.

Jesus' story of the talents is about three men left with huge amounts of money to manage. The first had 2.4 million. The second \$960,000. And the third \$480,000. When the owner returned the first handed him 4.8 million. And the second 1.92 million. Both had doubled their trust. But the third had done a very stupid thing. If you were given \$480,000 and you go bury that in your backyard you've got rocks in your head. It's crazy to bury \$480,000 and let it set in your backyard.

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That's the point of the story. As this third man comes to Jesus he begins to give excuses. He says, Lord, I knew that you were a hard man, reaping where you did not sow. Lots of people who never do anything in the kingdom of God have false pictures of God. This steward certainly had a false picture – you're a hard man reaping where you do not sow. He had a very negative image of God. Instead of a loving God, he saw God as a hard cruel, Pharaoh like taskmaster. It's true that when stewards are unreliable they give excuses as to why they're unreliable. When their excuses are examined under close examination they do not hold up. Jesus says if you really believe what you're saying that I was a hard man then all the more reason you should have gone out and made a profit on the trust I gave you.

But sometimes we miss the point, another critical point in this story. There were three stewards and two of them were reliable and only one was unreliable. Too many times we only focus on the one and forget that two-thirds are reliable. I believe that about the body of Christ and I believe that about this church. There are at least two thirds of every steward here that are reliable. Two thirds of God's people at least are going to be told on that day, Well done good and faithful.

I want to be and I really believe you want to be in that two thirds. Or more. Let's make it a hundred percent that can be found reliable. And therefore not afraid to be accountable.

The fifth mark of a steward is availability. There's ownership, responsibility, reliability and accountability and finally availability. That's the theme of Jesus story in Luke 12. The master went to a wedding banquet and left his servants in charge. They remained dressed for service, kept the lights on and continued waiting for his return even into the second and third watches of the night which could range from about nine at night to three in the morning. They stayed up in the graveyard shift waiting for him. They kept themselves available for the master's return.

Leslie Flynn has a chapter in one of his books entitled "You aim to please but whom?" He points out that many believers fail to take responsibilities because they live only to please themselves. He tells the story of a young man who repeatedly turned down the opportunity to teach a teenage boys' Sunday school class. The reason why was he liked to go out and play golf on Sundays and he knew if he took a commitment to teach a class of teenage boys he couldn't have that time free to go play golf on Sundays. He came to realize that his attitude was self-centered and that he needed to be available to the Lord. He took the class and within a few months he had led 6 boys to the Lord. The pastor asked him, Has giving up golf on Sunday been worthwhile? The man replied with tears in his eyes, "My only regret is I've waited so long to put others ahead of myself."

We need to avoid connecting our lives on the cafeteria plan – self-service only. We need to be available to the Lord and to his work.

How about your stewardship? Have you settled the question of ownership? What responsibilities does the master call you to? Will you be reliable in those responsibilities? He will make you accountable. Will you be available?

There's an O'Henry like twist of Jesus' story in Luke 12. When the master returns from the wedding banquet it would be expected that the servants having waited up for him would now serve him. But just like Jesus, upon his return he sets his servants down and he takes the servant's cloth, dresses and waits upon them. It is like the Lord to do this. Because our service

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to him is more than matched by his stewardship toward us. He is responsible for us. He is absolutely reliable. He will hold himself accountable to how he cares for us. And he is always available to serve our needs and longings.

I'd like to say one last thing about stewardship. One last thing needs to be said. Our stress in the message so far is focused on our duty as stewards. But Christian duty weights us down if it is given to the Lord without love for him in our hearts. On the eve of his death, Jesus gathers his disciples together and tells them, "I no longer call you servants. I call you friends." After his resurrection he faces Peter with the call to stewardship. But the Lord's concern is no longer to simply communicate the principles of stewardships. The Lord's fundamental concern in that moment is a question, Do you love me? Having taught Peter and the other disciples the principles of stewardship throughout his earthly ministry the bottom line became one of love.

If you love me, Jesus says, then I'm going to give you my people to care for. Feed my sheep. Take care of my sheep. In other words, reach out to others. Minister to them. Provide for them. Care for them. The critical question is the one of love. When we love Jesus we gladly acknowledge his ownership. It's no problem at all acknowledging the Lord's ownership when there's love in our heart for him. We joyfully take responsibility. Responsibility doesn't become some sort of drudge. Something that somebody has made us do. But we joyfully take it. Because love joyfully affirms and accepts responsibility. And love makes us therefore and motivates us to be reliable. It makes us unafraid of being accountable. Because we love and we're not afraid to be accountable. Love always seeks to be available to the lover. To be bound by his or her interests and concerns. And that's the way it is with love for the Lord. To be ever present and available for him.

There is no limit to how the Lord can use us when the duty of stewardship is motivated by love. I give you the message that is part duty. With the understanding that duty must be undergirded by feelings of love for the Lord. If we do things simply out of obedience we may get those things done. But they will not be done from a spirit of "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Neither, on the other hand, if we simply say we love the Lord and assume no responsibility will we ever really know the meaning of true love. Love and duty are linked together. They're yoked together. You really never do duty well unless you love and you never really love well unless you assume duty. God calls us to acknowledge ownership, responsibility, reliability, accountability and availability. And we do it for his glory.

Our Father, we thank you for calling us into your presence. Into your presence eternally and into your presence now through this moment of prayer. Each of us look, Lord, at our stewardship. We've each been given something to manage. Something to be responsible for. Maybe that includes our job, it includes whatever possessions we have. It includes the dreams you've given us. It includes family. And it also includes the body, which you've called us to. In your kingdom at large. In all these things we have been given a stewardship. Called while you're in heaven, to be the managers of your estate on earth. You cannot be personally present to be the Father, the husband, or the wife to our families so you call us to be that. You're not personally present to hold down our job, to pursue it. So you leave us in charge because that is your work which we are simply doing. You're not here physically to minister in the church to teach a boy or a girl's class. You're not here personally, physically to do that. But you're doing it through us. We're left in charge and under your authority, under your leadership. Lord, it's your desire that everyone of us would be the best steward that we possibly could be using whatever talent or talents you've

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given us all for your glory. We pray to do that, Lord. We pray that on that day we'll all hear your words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Lord, we pray for anyone here who feels maybe like Peter that they have failed you too many times to ever be used of you. If there's anything, Lord, that keeps us from feeling free to minister, it's our own inferiority, it's our own failure, it's our own mistakes. So Lord, you need to come to us. And you do come to us like you came to Peter. We know we've failed you. We wonder could you really use us, Lord. You ask a very simple, heart to heart question, Do you love me? Lord, no matter what we've done, if it was like Peter, if we denied you, we know that when we are asked that by you, we know what the answer is. You know what the answer is. Lord, we made the failure that was not our true self. It's the old self. You know in our heart of hearts, we do love you. Father, we thank you that out of the sheer abundance of your grace when we say to Jesus that we love him, he turns around and trusts us with the kingdom. Trusts us with people. Trusts us with responsibility. It's a grace we'll never fully understand. We thank you for the call you've put upon each life here. Help us, Lord, to the full. To develop all the potential we have as stewards of yours. In the name of the Lord, we ask it. Amen.