

## OUR CALLING AS STEWARDS

**INTRO:** We are in a series called “Put it in Perspective” in which we are looking at the basics of Christianity and how it applies to the major areas and issues of life. So far we have seen that God is creator and is sovereign; that humanity, although created in the IOG is fallen and corrupted; that we only get in right relationship with God through Jesus Christ but, in addition to that, we are beings who were not created only for the 70 or 80 years of this life but will live forever—therefore, we need to have an eternal perspective on our lives and use what we have now to secure our *eternal* futures; and we saw last week that God guides us in this process primarily through his written word, the Bible.

Beginning today, we will be turning to practical application of this: how we are to live this out in the major areas of life. And the integrating concept of how we do this is called “stewardship.” Most people, when they hear the word “stewardship,” think of money. For example, some churches have what they call “stewardship campaigns” when they are trying to raise money for the annual budget or for a special project. Stewardship certainly involves our money, but stewardship involves much more than that. As we will see, **we are stewards over every aspect of our lives—material and immaterial.**

In addition to looking at stewardship too narrowly—IOW thinking that it only pertains to money—Christians also are subject to another error when we consider the nature of stewardship. Christians recognize that we all have a fundamental problem: we are all born with what is called indwelling sin which corrupts every part of us: our thoughts, our emotions, what we say, and how we act. We can’t do anything to change what’s inside us. Therefore, if God is going to accept us and save us He has to do for us what we can’t do for ourselves. And he did that in the person of Jesus Christ. God became a man in the person of Jesus and lived the life we should have lived, died the death we should have died, and paid the price for our sin that otherwise we would have to—but couldn’t—pay. All we can do is to come to him with empty hands—with nothing—and turn to him in faith, accepting who he is, and what he has done, and receiving him into our lives as our savior and Lord, so that he can start living his life through us and change us from the inside out.

But the problem is this—particularly in evangelical circles: many people seem to think that, if I have just said the so-called “sinner’s prayer”—you know, “Jesus, I’m a sinner. I repent of my sins, and accept you into my heart as my personal savior,” then THAT’S IT; I’M IN! I don’t have to worry about the judgment because salvation is a gift of grace through faith, and I did that.

Now, it is true, of course, that salvation IS a gift of God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But how do we know that the words we said when we “accepted Jesus into our heart” were true? Jesus is not fooled by our words. In **1 Cor 2:14** James tells us that **“the demons also believe, and shudder.”** IOW, they believe, but they’re not saved. How do we know *we* are? Knowing what the Bible says about stewardship will answer that question for us.

**O/S:** Today I want to do three things: (1) Get a good understanding of the nature of biblical stewardship is by looking at two passages in Genesis; (2) Consider one of Jesus’ important parables that describes stewardship; and (3) Conclude with a few observations.

### **I. WHAT IS A STEWARD?**

A. The OT describes a steward as “someone who is over someone else’s house [or, household].” For example, Abraham had a chief steward (Eliezer). Eliezer was responsible for Abraham’s cattle, and business affairs, and even over his family. When it was time for Isaac to get married, Abraham entrusted Eliezer with the responsibility of finding Isaac a wife.

B. In the NT the same idea applies. The NT uses a couple of Greek words which describe a steward as a manager, foreman, or guardian of someone else’s household or property.

C. All Christians are called “stewards” in **1 Cor 4:1-2**. We all have been given a spiritual gift or gifts. **1 Pet 4:10** tells us that we are stewards of those spiritual gifts. Leaders of the church are also specifically called “stewards” of the church.

### **II. BIBLICAL PASSAGES REGARDING STEWARDSHIP**

This idea of stewardship was always God’s plan from the beginning. Even before he created Adam and Eve God’s plan was always that human beings would be his stewards over *everything in existence*.

A. **Gen 1:26-28** reflects the beginning of mankind’s stewardship over all of creation. **[READ]**

That is the language of stewardship. Remember: God created the world and everything in it, and **Ps 24:1** and other places in the Bible tell us that God *owns* the world and everything in it. Note also, the stewardship over nature which God gave to humanity was given equally to men and women (**Gen 1:28**). “Filling the earth” and the fact that the stewardship mandate was given to both men and women gives a relational component to our stewardship. IOW, we are not just stewards over “things” but are also stewards over the people with whom we are involved and have relationships.

#### **B. Gen 2:15-17 establish additional terms and conditions of our stewardship. [READ]**

I want to concentrate on two words here that help to further define the nature of stewardship: “cultivate” and “keep.” “Cultivating” means “work,” “till,” but in the Hebrew also has the meaning of “serve.” It basically means taking the raw materials we have and bring something good out of them where there was no good before. We certainly understand this when it comes to gardening. But “cultivating” is not limited to tending a garden, but applies to everything: our marriage; children, what we do with our money, etc.

#### **[EXPLAIN]**

“Keeping” means “watch over,” “take care of,” “preserve,” “protect,” “do something carefully,” “guard.” It means that we are responsible for taking care of and protecting that which is under our authority.

#### **Gen 2:15-17 tells us something else about the nature of stewardship:**

1. God retains the ultimate ownership and authority over creation. Remember: a steward is someone who is managing someone *else’s* property. Since God is the owner, he gets to set the rules. With Adam and Eve there was basically one rule: “Don’t eat from a certain tree.”
2. Stewards have to give an account to the master of how they do their stewardship. There are consequences for what we do and there is a day of reckoning. As was true with Adam and Eve, we will be held accountable by God for what we do with our stewardship.

Note that even after mankind’s fall into sin, although God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, he did not revoke the stewardship he gave them [**READ Gen 3:23**]. “Cultivating the land” is the language of stewardship. That stewardship has been passed down to us.

One basic application of all this is: if we are to be faithful stewards, we must be in right relationship with our master—God—instead of being in rebellion against him. The only way that is possible is through Jesus Christ. Because how can we expect to know our master’s will if we don’t know the master? How can we expect to give a proper accounting of our stewardship if we are not in proper relationship with the one to whom we will have to account? If there is anyone here who has not yet come to faith in Christ, then you need to do this. That is fundamental. It’s the starting point. Please think about this and do something about it. If you want to talk with somebody about this, please see pastor Wade, or me, or some other believer. But do something.

So far we have seen that God’s plan from the beginning always has been that human beings would be his stewards over everything. We are to preserve what he has given us and bring good out of the circumstances of our lives. And we are accountable to him and will give an account of our stewardship at the judgment.

Jesus spoke several parables that deal with stewardship. I only have time to discuss one, so let us look at the important parable of the talents.

### **III. THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS (Matt 25:14-30) [READ]**

A talent originally was a unit of weight, not a unit of money. Scholars think that it was equivalent to what an average man could carry (60-125 lbs.). It later became a unit of money equivalent to approximately 20 years’ wages. The use of the term “talent” to signify “ability” probably stems from this parable.

The main points of the parable are as follows: (1) Like the master in the parable, God entrusts all people with a portion of his resources and expects us to act as good stewards of what he has given us. (2) Jesus has gone away—back to his father in heaven—but he will be returning and will settle accounts with us. At the judgment, like the two good servants, God’s people will be commended and rewarded if we have faithfully discharged our stewardship responsibilities. But like the wicked servant, those who fail to serve God with the gifts he has given them will be punished by separation from God and all things good. And we know that the parable is talking about the final judgment because in **v.30** it talks about “**outer darkness**” and “**weeping and gnashing of teeth**” Everywhere else in the NT those terms are references to hell.

But let’s look at this parable a little deeper:

1. In the parable, the master entrusted differing amounts of talents to each servant: one 5, one 2, one 1. The same is true of us. Deb Sonntag and Chris Olson are excellent musicians. Chris Moran and Sally Buss are excellent artists. Dave Dunsirn can do all kinds of home repairs that I would be totally incompetent to do. Anyone under the age of 30 can run rings around me when it comes to figuring out

computers. Why the difference? **Matt 25:15** tells us. It says that the master gave the different amounts of talents to his stewards **“each according to his own ability.”** This tells us that God has not given us anything that we are not able to handle. Therefore, God legitimately expects us to faithfully use whatever we have been entrusted with.

2. Just as the servants in the parable were stewards over everything which the master entrusted to them, so we are stewards over everything God has entrusted to us, including what we have, what we do, what we say, what we think, what we are, our relationships, our circumstances, and even our hardships and suffering. Again, God is concerned about our whole life—not just our lip-service to him.

3. God takes a “long view” of our lives. He is primarily concerned with our *eternal* destinies, not merely what happens to us here and now. But we need to understand that everything we do now has eternal implications. That’s why we need to understand the critical importance of stewardship—because what we do here and now will determine not only *where* we will spend our eternity but *how* we will spend it. IOW, that’s why the master in the parable said **“you were faithful with a few things [i.e., what you had and did in your earthly life] so I will put you in charge of many things [i.e., in eternity].”**

4. 1 Sam 16:7 says, “man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” So here’s how we tend to think: When they stand before the Lord at the judgment, the guy with 10 will get much greater commendation than the guy with 4 (who ended up with less than the first guy started with). But that’s not true. God’s commendation to the servant with 4 was *identical* to his commendation to the servant who had 10: **“Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master” (Matt 25:21, 23).** God looks primarily not to *how much* we have, but to our attitude and faithfulness with what we have.

5. It is true that, in this life, some people seem to have gotten a very “raw deal”: poverty; serious health problems; oppression; all kinds of hardship; while others seem to skate by with all kinds of advantages. And it doesn’t seem fair.

But that’s where the fact that God looks at the inside not the outside of a person, *and* the fact that God takes a long view of life and is primarily interested in our *eternal* wellbeing, not just our life here on this earth, *and* the fact that a talent was originally a unit of weight, are all important. Why? Because it may well be that those in this world who have the “heaviest load,” the toughest circumstances, the least amount of money, and the fewest advantages, are actually equivalent to the servant that was given the five talents, not the servant who was given the one talent. Why is that? Because God knows that that person has the ability to carry a heavy load that the more privileged person may not have.

I encounter this all the time in Africa, where the Africans look at Americans as all having gotten 5 talents while they only have 1 or just ½ of one. I tell my African friends, “You may have the 5 and I have the one. Why? Because you face poverty, malaria, war, all kinds of things that I never have had to face. And God may have said, when handing out talents, ‘Jonathan, you’re an OK guy, so I’ll give you a talent—but you’re just not strong enough to carry the load I am going to ask these others to carry.’”

If I am faithful with my one, then I will be rewarded. But, if you are faithful in your harder circumstances—if you are a good steward of your sufferings—when you stand before Jesus in the judgment, he may say something like this: “You had a hard life, didn’t you? I know, because I placed you there because I knew you could handle it. And I was with you every step of the way. And now it’s over, and you *were* faithful; you passed the test. Now do you regret it? Because let me show you what I have for you now.” And he’ll open up the curtain and show us all that will be ours for all of eternity.

All of the passages—OT and NT—we have looked at are telling us the same thing, namely:

**PROP: We are stewards over every aspect of our lives—material and immaterial.**

So what can we conclude from all of this? Three things:

1. When we say that we are stewards over every aspect of our lives that means more than our money. It means everything we have *influence* over. This means that we are stewards over our environment, our minds, our time, our bodies, our relationships, our circumstances, our sufferings, as well as our money. We need to approach life from the fundamental starting point that we really don’t “own” anything—even the immaterial aspects of our lives—God does. He has simply given us our lives and all aspects of our lives to be his stewards or managers.

2. Because God is the master and owner, and we are his stewards, that means that we are going to have to give an account of our stewardship of our lives at the judgment. Jesus’ parable has told us that at the judgment he is

not going to simply ask us: “Did you pray the ‘sinner’s prayer’ and accept me into your heart as your personal savior?” Instead, *everything* about our lives will be exposed and come into judgment. As Jesus himself says in **Luke 12:2-3**, “**there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known, whatever you have done in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be shouted from the rooftops.**”

This does not mean that we can earn our salvation by doing good deeds. Instead, it means that how we do our stewardship—how we live our lives—is the outward and visible sign of our inward, spiritual state. As Martin Luther said, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” Jesus is not fooled by our lip-service. Rather, we demonstrate that he truly *is* our Lord—that he truly *is* in us, that our faith is *real*—by how we live in all areas of our lives. *That* is stewardship. Christianity is holistic. It is designed to affect all aspects of our lives. If it is not doing so then we need to seriously re-evaluate our lives and our relationship with Jesus. Because if he is not Lord over *all* of our life, then he is not our Lord. And, BTW, Jesus *cannot* be your savior if he is not your Lord.

3. The issue of faithfulness in suffering—i.e., being a good steward of our hardships, disappointments, and sufferings—cannot be over-emphasized. Why? Because most of the people in the world are poor, and *everyone* will face hardships of various kinds. Think about it: If someone is suffering—really going through the wringer—who can better comfort that person: someone who has himself or herself suffered and gone through the wringer, or someone who has never really suffered but has always known a life of luxury and privilege?

This is particularly important because **Rom 8:29** tells us that the whole point of our lives is to be conformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself was a poor man, a “**man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.**” He was persecuted by the rich and powerful, unjustly accused and condemned, and then killed. He said, “If you follow me, you can expect similar treatment.” It is our job to show Jesus to people. Just as Jesus is the human face of God, so we are the human face of Jesus. We are the only Jesus that many people will ever see. What kind of Jesus do they see in us?

**CONCL:** God has sent us, as his stewards, to reveal his love and compassion to people, to not live just for ourselves but to point people to the only true and lasting source of comfort and hope they will ever find—himself. How we exercise our stewardship in all areas of our lives should show people that Jesus is *real*, he is *alive*, he is alive in *us* and is changing our lives. And, by God’s grace, as they see that in us, they will be drawn to him, too.