

LIVE AS IF YOU ARE A STEWARD

GENESIS 1:26-28; LUKE 12:35-48

Hilbert Berger was a Methodist pastor who earned quite a reputation for giving talks on the subject of Christian giving or stewardship. On one occasion, he was lecturing on stewardship at a college in Taiwan. His interpreter was a friendly Taiwanese Christian who proved to be an enthusiastic translator. He and Berger worked well together. Berger emphasized stewardship in every possible way that he could in the time allotted. When his talk was over, he said to the interpreter, "I thought that went very well, didn't you?" "Oh, yes," agreed the interpreter, "very well indeed. There was only one word, however, that you used that I didn't understand. How do you say it – 'steward – sheep'?" Sometimes it's really hard to get your point across!

"Stewardship" is a word that we don't use a great deal in everyday language either. You might be a little fuzzy as to its meaning. But it is a word worth knowing. More importantly, it's a biblical concept worth understanding. Most importantly, it's an approach to life and living worth practicing. We're in the middle of a message series I've entitled *How to Have the Best Year Yet*. I'm suggesting that if you and I will grow in our understanding and practice of four simple, straightforward concepts we can have the best year of our lives yet. What are those four concepts? God is the owner. Jesus is the Lord. Today, you are a steward. Next week, you are a servant. You are a steward. If you're a follower of Jesus, that's a fact. At the end of the day, the question isn't "Are you a steward" but rather "What kind of a steward are you?" Are a good steward or a poor one, a responsible steward or an irresponsible one, a faithful steward or an unfaithful one?" When I think about stewardship, three concepts come to mind. Here's the first one:

YOU HAVE BEEN HONORED

When God makes you a steward, He is honoring you. Because the idea of stewardship is so close to the idea of being a servant, we can easily forget what an honor it is to be called a steward of the living God. It all goes back to the first chapter of the Bible. Let's turn to the first of two Bible passages today. What do those verses tell us? One, that human beings have been created in God's image. Two, as a result of that fact, we've been given responsibility to "take charge" of and over His creation. We're called to rule over it on His behalf and have dominion over it. In the ancient world, kings and emperors had different ways of reminding people who was in charge. On occasion, a king made statues of himself and placed them in every important town or city that was a part of his kingdom. Those statues – made in the king's image – reminded people who was the ruler. Now, the Bible makes it clear that you are the crown of God's creation. You are made in God's image. One result is that you become a living signpost, so to speak, pointing to God the Creator.

From Genesis we learn that God gave human beings a place of supremacy over the entire earth. He has made us His managers over every conceivable area of that creation: the natural environment, the animal population and all the world's natural resources. Can a Christian be an environmentalist? Absolutely! A follower of Jesus

has the best reason of anyone to be concerned about air and water pollution, about how natural resources are conserved and managed, about how animals should be treated. I know this is a highly politicized issue and may good, common sense prevail in the end. Nevertheless, Christians believe this world is God's world and that we've been placed in charge of it to manage it wisely and well – not to take advantage of it, not to ruin it, not to just use it up and spit it out.

What is a steward anyway? In Bible times, a steward was kind of a chief slave for a wealthy man and his estate. The steward was placed over other servants. He was given responsibility over the property owned by the man as well as the financial operations of the estate. You might recall that when the Old Testament character, Joseph, was sold by his brothers into slavery, he was purchased by an Egyptian named Potiphar. Joseph proved himself to be an able and skilled servant. Before long, Potiphar put Joseph in charge of everything. Joseph became a steward. He probably knew more about Potiphar's possessions than Potiphar did! A steward was a person with great authority and power that was also entrusted to make wise decisions.

Another place in the Bible brings out the honor of being God's stewards in this world. Psalm 8 begins by celebrating the greatness of God and – as a direct result – the value of human beings. Your value is derived from the One who created you. You have worth because God created you in His image. David, who wrote Psalm 8, wonders how God can trouble Himself with humanity when he observes the awesome majesty of the night sky – the moon, the stars, the immense universe. But then David remembers that God is the One who makes us significant. He says, "Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority." (Psalm 8:5-6 NLT)

So God has given to human beings the task of running His world – managing it, harnessing it, using it, conserving it, having dominion over it and enjoying it. You should feel greatly honored and privileged. God owns the world, but you are called to run it for Him. Now that's "macro-stewardship", to be sure. But He also calls you to "micro-stewardship" – meaning He calls you to manage your own personal world, so to speak. Your sphere of dominion starts with you. God has given you gifts to manage – your time, your personal talents and abilities, your material possessions. Another gift is the personal relationships of family and friends. Have you ever thought of the people in your life and the relationships that you have with them as something that should be managed wisely in a God-honoring way? Your sphere of dominion includes your spouse, your kids, your parents and your friends. Another aspect of your stewardship has to do with the message of what God has done for us through Jesus. Every child of God is privileged and honored to be a bearer of that good news to other human beings who haven't heard it or grasped it yet. What an opportunity! What an honor! What a privilege! God wants to use you as His channel, as His instrument, as His means to give eternal life to other people! The first truth you should know about being a steward is simply what a sheer honor it is to be one. Rejoice in it! Thank God for it! Enjoy it!

YOU ARE CALLED TO BE FAITHFUL

If you've ever been entrusted with something that actually belongs to someone else, you know the most important thing you can do is to be trustworthy – to be faithful. The Bible makes it clear that there's a spiritual application to that very basic truth. In one place, the apostle Paul, writes, "So look at Apollos (he was another Christian leader, by the way) and me as mere servants of Christ who have been put in charge of explaining God's mysteries. (In other words, that was part of their unique stewardship – helping other Christians understand God better.) Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful." (1 Corinthians 4:1-2 NLT) So, if Jesus is your Savior and Lord, you become His servant and His steward. As a result, faithfulness is one expectation or requirement. Think of it this way. God has given you a personal kingdom to rule over in His Name. He is the owner of it all. But He wants you to manage that kingdom for Him. That kingdom represents your time, your talents, your treasure, your relationships, your responsibilities, your opportunities – everything and anything that you have some control over. Everyone's kingdom is unique, but everyone has one. That kingdom is your personal assignment in this life. Because you now love to please Jesus, one way you express gratitude is by being faithful in managing that personal kingdom of time, talent, treasure, relationships, responsibilities and opportunities. You seek His guidance to manage that kingdom well. You ask for His direction. You desire to please Him in all those areas. You do what He wants you to do.

Jesus told several parables or stories that revolved around this theme of being a steward. Jesus paints this picture of a wealthy owner who takes off for an extended period of time to attend a wedding. He puts His servants in charge of his estate. Now they're stewards. Jesus suggests that a steward can do one of two things. He or she can act faithfully with the result being that he or she will be given more responsibility as a reward. Or, the steward can act unfaithfully and get punished for it. Now, who's the wealthy owner? It's Jesus Himself. Jesus has taken off for heaven, so to speak, but there is coming a day when He will return. Like the servants in the story, we have no idea when Jesus will return so it would be wise to live in a certain way. You can live faithfully or unfaithfully. You can live responsibly or irresponsibly. You can be a good steward or a poor steward.

How many of you here today believe that God is gracious and forgiving? How many of you believe God is patient with us? How many of you believe God is kind and tender-hearted? Well, I believe that, too! That's why this story makes me uncomfortable. All that stuff in there about being "cut in pieces" and being assigned a "place with the unbelievers" and "beaten with many blows." What's that about? And how about when Jesus says, "... When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required." (Luke 12:48 NLT) Or as another translation puts it. "... Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!" (Luke 12:48 MSG) Doesn't it sound like God expects you to be faithful or something? Doesn't it sound like God expects a return on His investment in you and me? Salvation is free; to be sure, and eternal life is free. But if you believe God requires nothing of you after He's made you His child and entrusted you with what belongs to Him, chances are you haven't heard the rest of the story yet.

The question isn't whether you're a steward but rather what kind of steward you are. You can talk about giving you time to the Lord. You can talk about giving your talents. You can talk about the importance of giving the tithe or even giving beyond the tithe. But talking about being a steward is not being a steward. How do we do that? We make rationalizations and excuses. Some of us are waiting for the proverbial ship to come in – be it time or money. “When life slows down a little, then I'll give more time to the Lord and His work.” No, you won't. If you don't decide to be faithful today, you won't be faithful tomorrow. “When I make \$10,000 more a year, then I'll tithe.” No, you won't. If you don't decide to be faithful today, you won't be faithful tomorrow. People assume that the more money you have, the easier it is to tithe. Not true.

That's why I was impressed with something football great – and now retired - Barry Sanders did. Barry won the 1988 Heisman Trophy as the most outstanding college football player in the country and was drafted by the Detroit Lions of the National Football League. He signed a five year contract for \$9.5 million and received a \$2.5 million signing bonus. Barry turned around and gave his home church – the Paradise Baptist Church of Wichita, Kansas – a tithe on his signing bonus. That's \$250,000! His agent at the time, David Ware, said, “Both of us are Christians. I tithe. Barry will tithe... not just on his signing bonus but his entire contract.” Barry and his family had attended that church for 30 years. His pastor explained, “I really think Barry's motivations for giving are the result of his parent's attitude about the church, as well as his own convictions.” In other words, Barry Sanders was already a tither before his ship came in. He didn't start to tithe when he became a millionaire. It just doesn't happen like that. But when his ship did come in, Barry was already in the habit of being faithful with what God had given him. It was natural and normal just to continue to be faithful. He was determined to be a faithful steward.

What's the message? Be faithful with what God has given you now... today... this very moment in terms of your talents, your time and your treasure. What are you waiting for? Touch the person's life who lives next door to you, who works in the next office, who sits at the next desk. Do it today! Invite someone over for dinner or out for lunch. Do all your projects have to be done to share friendship with someone? Find some places of meaningful service in the church. We need your time and talents today, not when it finally becomes convenient for you. The Bible says when you withhold the tithe, you rob God. Give God what belongs to Him today in terms of the tithe. Just do it! Does God need your money? No. You just need to be obedient. You need to be faithful. So do it – be faithful! A third and final truth.

YOU WILL BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE

Here's what the Bible says about accountability. “Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.” (Romans 14:12 NLT) What does that mean? It doesn't mean that you will have to give an account of all the good things you've done in the hope that there are more of those than the bad things you've done. This isn't about deserving heaven or earning eternal life. So what are we accountable for, then? You will answer to God for what you did with whatever you've been given in this life. There will be a day

of reckoning. How well did you manage the gifts of time, talent, treasure, relationships, responsibilities and opportunities God provided? How well did you run your personal kingdom for the real King? Did you waste the time God gave you or invest it wisely? Were you selfish with your talents or did you find ways to use them for Jesus' cause in this world? How about the money and the material stuff God entrusted to you? Did you hoard it, squander it or mismanage it? Or, did you share it, invest it and give it sacrificially to build His Kingdom in this world?

Here's a question for you. Does God entrust everyone with the same things? Simple observation will tell you that He doesn't. The constitution of our country says that all people are created equal. That's certainly true in terms of personal worth, value and dignity. But I like one person's observation who said, "All men are created equal, but some are more equal than others." The fact is that we aren't created equal when it comes to abilities, intelligence, possessions, the kind of family we grew up in, the kind of country we live in or the kind of opportunities and advantages we've been given. Have you ever thought to yourself, "Why did God allow me to be born in this great country instead of war torn places like Iraq or Afghanistan? Why am I able to get a good education and enjoy good health care when so many in the world have neither? Why do I get all the food I ever want when so many in our world go to bed hungry every day of their lives? Why did God allow me to get a good job, live in a nice home and have all the things I have?" I haven't been able to find satisfying answers to those questions yet for my own life. But what Jesus said rings in my heart and mind like a tolling bell: "... Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!" (Luke 12:48 MSG)

God expects a return on His investment in you and me. He holds you accountable. It's no one else's responsibility but yours to make sure you're a faithful steward of God's gifts to you. When you stand before God to give an account, excuses will sound very hollow and weak. Sure, we all get tired, or lazy or distracted along life's journey. So get up, knock off the dust and get started again! The Christian life is a life of new beginnings. But it's helpful for me to remember that I will be held accountable before God for everything that I've done, all that I've been given and all that I am. I need that reminder. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, guilt is a poor motivator. A sense of duty is poor motivation, too. It's only a sense of profound gratitude for the honor and privilege God has given you that will sustain you and help you to be faithful as His steward. You and I ought to get up every morning with this truth overwhelming our hearts, "Just think of God calling me to be His steward. Just think of God choosing me to belong to Him. Just think that little old me can get in on all this blessing. Look at what You've put me in charge of! It's wonderful. It's thrilling. Lord, I want to be faithful with everything You've entrusted to me. Dear Lord, help me to do it right!" And one of the great miracles is how God can not only use, but increase and multiply, what you do and what you give back to Him far beyond anything you could ever possibly imagine!