

Enter Into The Joy Of Your Master

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The elders have asked me to talk about the subject of stewardship. At the end of September we distributed information about the close of our fiscal year. Two weeks ago we had a congregational meeting to discuss the needs and financial position of the church. We've talked about new procedures that we're trying to adopt to be more faithful in the way we spend money as well as receive it. Talk about the church may leave the impression that we're more concerned about our needs than we are about what the Lord is doing in these matters. So my purpose here is to consider what it means to be a steward of that which belongs to Christ. What is a word from the Lord on this subject? Second Corinthians 8 and 9 contain a thoughtful discussion of giving to the work of the Lord. I will make some references to a few verses from this passage, but I will not teach the entire two chapters.

Recently my nineteen-year-old son who is away at college had to come home for some dental work. During the visit he said, "Dad, I want to show you something." He pulled out his wallet and took out a Visa card with his name on it--his very own personal credit card. A local bank had gone to his school attempting to drum up business, and apparently assuming that students might some day be responsible, was plying them with credit cards.

A number of things came clearly into view at the moment I held the credit card with his name on it. When our children go to college, they enter a world where our influence is less than it used to be and our control is zero. They know the values of their parents, but they are on their own when making decisions about relationships, time management, money, school work, worship, etc. Like the steward in biblical cultures modern college students are not independent of their parents, but have significant responsibility to make choices.

JESUS' STORIES ABOUT STEWARDS

There are a number of figures of speech in the New Testament for what it means to be a Christian. We're likened to seeds, saints, soldiers, and servants. We are also stewards. This image is one of the ones that Jesus turned to most often in his teaching when he wanted to describe the life of a disciple. The best known of all the parables, that of the prodigal son, is a story about stewardship, about sons making decisions with regard to the wealth of their father.

In addition, Jesus told a parable about an unrighteous accountant, a steward of a wealthy man's estate who acted shrewdly, attempting to feather his own nest with his master's goods. He told a story of a landowner who went on a journey and left behind vine-keepers to take care of his vineyard, sending them messengers and finally his son whom they killed. He told the story of a nobleman who was on a journey to be made a king, who left behind ten responsible agents, stewards of his goods.

In Matthew 25:14-30 Jesus told another story about a traveler leaving three stewards to take care of what was his. That story ends with the master's twice repeated statement, upon his return, to the stewards who loved and served him, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master."

All of these stories of good and bad stewards have three elements to them. The first is that responsibility is given to the steward. "You shall be in charge of these things that matter to me," says the master. "You make decisions; do what you think is best with what is mine."

The second element is that the outcome depends on what the steward believes about the master: Does the servant love his master? Does he trust his master? Does he value what his master values? The stories all come down to that. Jesus is not interested in details about market forces, interest rates, or crop failures. The heart of each story is discovering what the servant believes about the master.

The third element in each of these stories is that there is an accounting made at the climax of the story when the master returns.

So we have an opportunity to think of ourselves as stewards, to imagine ourselves as nineteen-year-olds with our first credit cards. What do we think of our Master, what do we believe about the One who really owns everything? And what will be discovered at the end of the story, the climactic moment when the evaluation is made upon the Master's return?

Let me describe four measures of financial stewardship. Two of them are vertical, that is, having to do with relating directly to God; and two of them are horizontal, having to do with relating to one another. God is concerned about both; he wants our decisions made about what is his to relate us to him and to each other.

WHO OWNS US?

The first of the two vertical ways of thinking about stewardship is to note that by it we express ownership. We declare who owns both us and what is ours. We make a statement about allegiance, about lordship. We are declaring by what we do with the things we control, who is in charge. That is really the concept behind tithing in the Old Testament. We'll come back to that in a moment.

The high school which my younger son attends and where my wife works, Palo Alto High School, had Spirit Week (homecoming week) recently. The four classes--freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors--were competing for class prizes. Each class had a color they were supposed to wear throughout the week: orange for freshmen, red for sophomores, yellow for juniors, and green for seniors. By wearing their respective colors they were making a declaration of who they were, where they belonged, the allegiance that they claimed.

In the Old Testament God owned the land of Israel. It was his own personal property. He commanded his children, as we have studied in Joshua, to take possession of the land that was his (see Discovery Papers 4454-4460). So each family was given a plot of land, and every year, as the produce of the land came forth, they were to give a tenth of it to the temple and its service as a way of saying, "Yahweh owns this land. I'm a steward."

The New Testament doesn't teach that giving ten percent, or a tithe, is a way of declaring ownership for Christians. We are not residents of a promised land. However, all that is ours--assets, abilities, time, energy--belong to him. He may direct us to give away significantly more than ten percent at times in our life, and for various reasons to do with our circumstances give less than ten percent at other times.

An observer could look at the house I live in, the office I occupy, the car I drive, the clothes I wear and draw conclusions about me. You can easily discern what kind of music I like, what teams I root for. But is it obvious by the way I live, the decisions I make, the things I do, the oversight I have of the wherewithal God has given me, that I'm owned by another; that I'm not my own, I've been bought with a price?

Briefly, our family uses the notion of giving ten percent in the following way. We set aside money every month to dispense for the Lord's use. And there are times when it is perfectly clear to God and me that ten percent is more than we can give during a particular month. There are times when we are called to give more. But we use ten percent of each month's income as a starting point for making decisions about giving. Then I can say, "Okay, Lord, where do we go from here?" For us it has proved to be a good way of asking the question, "Does my stewardship declare who owns me? Do people know I'm a Christian because of the way I handle my Master's possessions?"

Consider 2 Corinthians 8:3-5, where Paul is writing about the Macedonians:

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.

Verse 5 makes the point that they didn't just respond to a human appeal. They gave themselves first to the Lord, and then made decisions about his possessions. They made it clear by the way they made decisions that they were owned by someone.

SAYING THANK YOU

The second of the two vertical ways of thinking about stewardship is that we can use our wherewithal to say thank you. Perhaps you've been to wedding receptions that were miserable because you knew that the people putting on the reception were doing so from a sense of duty. On the other hand, hopefully you have been to wedding receptions that overflowed with joy. The love between bride and groom and the delight of their families was so great that a party inviting others to join in the thanksgiving was completely natural.

An example of that sort of response is the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Zacchaeus, who was the Ebenezer Scrooge of his day, hard-hearted and lonely, realized that Jesus loved him, and he said instantly, "Half of everything I have, I give to the poor." And there ought to be times in our life when we are overcome by an awareness of gifting by God, when we see clearly as we have not seen before how much he loves us, how much his poverty has worked to our riches, when we are moved and almost cannot help but respond with a gift to the Lord as a way of saying thank you.

SHOWING COMPASSION FOR THE NEEDY

Now let's look at two other motivations for stewardship that are more horizontal in nature, more to do with entering the lives of our brothers and sisters. One is charity or compassion, having something that another needs and being moved to give it to them. First John 3:17 says this:

But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

If you see someone who has a need, and you have what they need, and the love of God abides in your heart, then nothing more needs to be said. How can you not give to the one with needs?

Let's look back at 2 Corinthians 8:13-15. The offering that Paul is talking about here was a gift from the churches in Greece being taken to Jerusalem for believers who were victims of a famine that had afflicted Judea.

"Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

There is nothing in the Bible that suggests paternalism or condescension in the body of Christ, about those who have much giving to the poor with a sense of superiority. The point is that some day you may be needy yourself; if you are rich now, that's by the grace of God, but there are no guarantees. You may have needs that another can fulfill, and it's your generosity now with time, money, hospitality, or whatever that will make likely the generosity of others when you need it. We're part of each other, and if I have been given something that can meet your need for the moment, I want to give generously so that generosity reverberates everywhere in the body of Christ. The day will come when I will be the one in need.

Even if the exchange is not financial, even if I am well-to-do and I never become financially needy in my life, I am going to have other needs. I am going to be a recipient. I will not always be a giver, no one is. People who are insulated by wealth often need people who are poor to teach them about love, faith, joy in the Lord,

community. Very often those who have little of this world's goods have better relationships than those who have a lot of this world's goods. So our gifts to others allow for the rebound of something being given to us.

Yesterday I had the great experience of being hugged by Lovie Lewis, the founder of Bread of Life in East Palo Alto. This organization exists for Jesus' sake to give food, clothing and hope to very poor and homeless people. Lovie Lewis is a rich woman, although not financially. She directs an organization that is barely making it. But to be hugged by her is one of life's great experiences. She is a big, enthusiastic woman, and her heart is bigger than she is. Anyone who gives a gift to that organization and receives a hug in return is better off. We are all in this together--those who give need to receive as well.

SHARING IN MINISTRY

The second way we share horizontally in the life of others as stewards is in ministry. We can enter into the spiritual gifting or the ministry call of other people. For instance, we can be part of the translation of the Bible into a language that has never been written before, even if we never leave our familiar environs. We can be part of that ministry if our gifts have made it possible. Our giving to ministry allows us to go where we cannot physically go, to experience the blessing of spiritual gifts that we don't have ourselves. It allows us to enter into another person's experience, to hitchhike on their walk with the Lord, to be part of what they're doing. Both the Old and the New Testaments are very clear that those who work in God's service full-time have the right to be cared for by the rest, whether it's the priests of the Old Testament or the apostles of the New Testament, those who are called into ministry: "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and, "The worker deserves his wages" (1 Timothy 5:18). The motivation for us is to be part of something we couldn't otherwise be part of.

I've performed many weddings in this church over the years. There are times when I rejoice at what the Lord has used our auditorium for. It's amazing! Your gifts have allowed for this building to exist. New marriages, conversions to Christ, worship, exposition of great truths, restoration of relationships have all taken place under this roof.

Perhaps you have been to Young Life camp and have counseled kids who are questioning the faith for the first time in such a setting. But if you can't do that, you are still part of it if your gifts open doors for ministry to kids. When you hear the stories of their new faith, your stewardship makes you a partner in the good news.

You may not be able to sing in the choir. But when people are moved to worship God by the music of those who can sing, when their hearts are changed by openness to the Lord because of that ministry, if you helped make possible the music and the worship, you are part of the choir whether you can sing or not.

You may not be able to teach the Bible and see lives changed as a result. But you're part of those changed lives if you're supporting the ministries of those who have been gifted to do that.

DOING RIGHT IN THE EYES OF MEN

I want to make one last observation from 2 Corinthians 8:21. This verse is part of a paragraph about how the gift of money is going to be handled. Titus is mentioned by name, but others travel from Macedonia with the gift. Still others will be picked up in Corinth as the gift goes forward. The point is that no one is put in the difficult position of distributing money alone, because it's very tempting. That's why Paul makes the following point:

For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.

As those who are responsible to dispense gifts that have been given, we want our decisions to be right in the eyes of the Lord. We want to look at our motives, not just our actions. We want to know what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar. We want to treat people equally. We want to listen to the Spirit of God, to be guided by the Scriptures.

But we also want to do what is right in the eyes of men. We have a responsibility not to discredit the gospel by slipshod accounting, or by thumbing our nose at IRS regulations.

At this church we never let any decision regarding finances be made by just one person. There is always multiple oversight of the dispensing of what has been given. There is accuracy in keeping the books. There is thoughtful decision-making by a group of people seeking the mind of the Lord. One of the reasons we're trying to move to new budgeting procedures here is not only to free people to minister, but also to make sure that in the eyes of men, if anyone were to examine us, we're doing what is right, because we don't want the gospel discredited. I've been here more than twenty of the nearly fifty years this church has existed, and there has never once been a hint of any kind of financial scandal or impropriety. That is to God's glory.

The purpose of all of this is not to talk about PBC, but to urge you to pay attention to God. You are his steward. You are owned by him. It is to him that you are to express thanks. It is his people whose needs you are to meet. It is his people with whom you are to join in ministry. You have a responsibility. You are much like a nineteen-year-old with a credit card. My son is going to be my son no matter what. If he blows it, we may have long discussions, but he is not going to cease to be my son. What is at issue is what he will discover about himself in making financial decisions. God's call for you is to oversee what is his, and you're going to learn a lot about yourself in the process.

The last phrase in the parable of Matthew 25 is, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." Your life has been lived purposefully and well--what a great thing to have God say to us, that all of these years we've been given really amounted to something! And the Master says to the steward, "Not only have you done well, but you are good and faithful. Character has been developed in you that will last forever."

And then the glorious invitation: Enter into the joy of your master--not joy that you might experience even between human individuals, but the joy of God himself. The learning that takes place as we are stewards allows us to think more and more like God, to see the world from his perspective. It makes us ask over and over again, "What is my Father's will? What are his interests? What is his purpose? What I have is his--how can I represent him?" By learning to think that way, we become more and more like him, and it is his joy--eternal, boundless, immeasurable--that we enter into.

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