

Stewardship: From Grace to Gratitude

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Human beings tend to be fairly predictable. We like our lives to manifest a certain orderliness. Therefore, we stick to schedules, agendas, and calendars to keep us efficient and methodical. The same holds true for the church. We observe seasons of the church year to insure a rhythm to our religious lives and to guarantee that we honor all the times, Scripture passages, and doctrines important to our faith.

As Christians, our practice proclaims that “for everything there is a season.” Thus, Advent initiates the church year. The old has passed away; everything has become fresh and new, except for the regularity and predictability with which the life of the congregation moves. Every year, with Advent, more is retired than just the familiar paraments of the season after Pentecost. With the new season preparing us for celebrating the coming of the Savior into our world, another observance in the life of the church is retired until the appropriate time next year. The average person in the pew knows this as “Stewardship Season.” A congregation may observe the seasons of the church year with great care but for many in the congregation, one of the easiest seasons to recall has to do with the annual campaign to raise the budget. To my knowledge, no traditional church calendar includes “Stewardship Season.” Nevertheless, no traditional congregation fails to accommodate this unofficial observance each year sometime between All Saints’ Day and the first Sunday of Advent.

In reality, there exists a valid reason for the absence of an official season of stewardship observance. Stewardship is not a season, it is the life-style of the Christian. Stewardship molds our response to the grace of God. The way we live out what God desires for us and our world is stewardship. Stewardship means changing a life-style from that which our culture encourages to life lived according to the gospel. That is not a seasonal concern, but a daily concern for anyone who seeks to live a responsible Christian life. Why then do we confine our preaching about stewardship to one or two Sundays each year?

The Problem of Preaching About Money

Stewardship means one thing to many members of our congregations. Stewardship means that phase of the church’s life observed by an every member canvass or another similar program and one or two sermons on supporting the annual budget of the church. Most of us have worked hard to change this very limited definition for stewardship among the people. We have appropriately broadened the definition to include the commitment of time and energy, mission concerns, the protection and conservation of the environment and our natural resources, population growth, the simplification of life-style, the

problem of the hungry and the homeless, economic justice, and the use of power and influence. This is good if we include the broad range of stewardship themes in the regular sermon schedule. But in the process, preaching about the use of our wealth, including the financial support of the program and mission of the church, has secured a very limited place in the annual cycle of the church's life. Perhaps we need to examine our traditional practice and consider the alternative: preaching stewardship (including funding the program and mission of the church) is appropriate at any time. Money is a major concern in each of our lives. Thus, how we use it in response to God's claim upon our lives is a pastoral concern. This pastoral concern arises with much more regularity and less predictability than we ordinarily assign it by limiting our stewardship preaching to two sermons in the fall.

There exists a twofold danger in broadening our understanding of stewardship beyond the traditional concern for raising funds. First, it may mean that our preaching could lose its focus. Several years ago it was popular to define evangelism as everything the church does. That may be true to a large extent, but it is not a very helpful definition to encourage and motivate the activity of evangelism. The same problem can exist in broadening the definition of stewardship to include so much of our Christian life. The sense of urgency of dedication to each particular aspect of stewardship commitment could be lost in the details. The second problem with so abundant a description is that in the name of stewardship, the raising of funds for the program and mission of the church may take a back seat. Thus, in some pulpits this aspect of stewardship has received even less emphasis than before. However, an increased knowledge of the total meaning of stewardship can only support the fund raising activity of the church, so long as that fund raising activity is theologically and ethically sound. A fuller understanding of stewardship means we appreciate God's claim upon the totality of our life including our finances.

Fund raising for the mission of the church has received some bad reviews of late. That need not be so. Fund raising is a biblical activity. Paul supported the idea among his churches (II Cor.8:1-9:14). But preaching about money is never one of the preacher's favorite activities. The congregation has come to expect only one or two sermons a year concerning this topic and we would rather not disappoint their limited expectations. We fear the traditional comment that "the church talks too much about money." But in reality, I rarely hear that concern expressed. More often I hear comments from parishioners across the country like, "I really don't hear much about stewardship." If we allowed Jesus to set the agenda for our preaching, that latter comment would never be heard. A quick reading of the parables proves how important money and property were to Jesus' preaching.

A strong excuse for not preaching about financial matters is that it is controversial. Money plays such an important part in our lives. A major commitment among most North Americans today is life-style, either maintaining the present one or reaching for a grander vision of what our lives could be. In our world we are not often judged by our moral character or our theological integrity. More often, we are judged by the size and luxury of our homes, the elegance of the car we drive and the country of its manufacture, and the size of

our stock portfolio. Stewardship confronts such commitments with the gospel and that is a strong reason for avoidance behavior.

The fact of the matter is that often our congregations need and even want to hear about the stewardship of our material possessions. Many people honestly seek to lead lives of responsibility and desire some guidance from the pulpit. Those who are not so dedicated cannot be expected to change such a major commitment in their lives without access to the full resources of the church including preaching about stewardship. It is not reasonable to expect a change in commitments as dear as life-style and success measured by accumulation from only the lightest of treatments from the pulpit.

Preaching about money offers the congregation a special opportunity for response, a very concrete response to the call of God. It means we may devote one of our most prized possessions, our financial resources. Money plays an important part in our lives, no question. It can play a meaningful and important part in our lives of faith. Christ calls us to total dedication of our lives. To ignore the dedication of the financial aspect of our lives would be a distortion of the commitment to which we all are called.

The Biblical Basis for Preaching

It goes without saying that the Bible provides the content for preaching. The ancient method of using the Bible to support fund raising consists of developing a program, deciding what needs to be said and then dragging in a text to support the objective. For instance, if the issue to address is the current concern for the life-style of accumulation, you might develop what you want to say and support it with "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Or you might turn to the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) and use it in the same way. That is tempting, to be sure. It has the added advantage of saving the preacher a lot of time. If a passage is chosen to support a preconceived idea, one does not have to consume precious effort in the study exegeting to discover what may be the real meaning of the passage. The problem is that it amounts to nothing less than proof-texting and eisegesis. I am convinced that stewardship programs have been the excuse for most of the proof-texting and distorted interpreting of the biblical material that sometimes happens in churches today. Encouraging sacrifice when considering stewardship is to be commended; however, the integrity of the pulpit is not one of the precious items to be given away.

The Bible is so rich with material that can legitimately be used to fund the preaching of stewardship that we need not resort to the old method of developing the homiletical material first and deciding on biblical support for it later. Certainly parables such as the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30, Luke 19:11-28) or a story like that of the widow's mite (Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4) come readily to mind from the Gospels. Paul's support for the so-called "Great Collection" in I Cor. 16 and II Cor. 8 and 9 has always been near the forefront of favorite stewardship texts. But be careful. There may be a problem with these favorite texts. First, it's too easy to assume what they mean. They have so often been used as vehicles for stewardship sermons that they may

have been misused. Old interpretations are hard to discard, but depending upon them is not good stewardship of the wealth of biblical scholarship available to us today. Careful study may reveal what we would rather not preach instead of what we have always been led to believe was the perfect stewardship text. But there is good news too. New possibilities from the Bible can always be considered. Even the parables may have more to say to us about our response to God in stewardship than we have been led to believe in the past. Discarding the old rule of interpretation that the parables each have a single meaning is liberating. Careful exegesis may mean we cannot use some of the old favorite pericopes for supporting the budget, but it is more likely that careful study will reveal even more possibilities for educating and inspiring the congregation in Christian stewardship.

Considering the possibility of preaching about stewardship of money and material possessions means that there is much work to be done with the biblical material in preparation for preaching. It may mean that the congregation gets to hear all the old familiar stewardship texts. I would hope, however, it would mean that the congregation would have the opportunity to hear texts unfamiliar in the context of the annual stewardship drive. An understanding of the biblical basis for a theological understanding of stewardship will feed the task of preaching. Exploring Scripture with an awareness of the theological foundation for stewardship means that even the lectionary need not be abandoned when considering stewardship within the program of the church.

Perhaps a look at some of the foundational components that help to shape a theology of stewardship can be of some help. Stewardship is always our response to God's prior activity. Stewardship moves from grace to gratitude. Just as we love because God first loved us (I John 4:19), so we give because God has first given to us. Logically then, stewardship begins with Creation. In the Creation stories we can see that God is the Creator and Giver of the gift of a good Creation. Everything that exists belongs to the one who has created it. We are part of that Creation, but we have a very special place within it. Humanity is created with a special capacity to reason and to care for this created order. That means responsibility and obedience play an important role in our stewardship. God has given us the responsibility of dominion, the wise management of God's gifts. In addition, we are created in the image of God. Therefore, our response to God's gifts results in the same concern for this Creation which God has revealed to us in the first pages of the Bible. We are created in the image of One who begins by giving and continues to give throughout the history of the divine-human encounter. By living out this image of God, we may become more fully what God intends us to be by giving of ourselves. Stewardship begins with an appreciation of Creation.

The initiative of God does not end with Creation. God continues to reach for us in redeeming love. Forgiveness is similar to the gift of Creation in that it establishes a totally new situation and opportunity. It also calls forth a new response from us as well. Stewardship may naturally form part of our grateful response to our redemption by God. Note that our redemption results from sacrifice. The sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf forms the strongest motivation for our grateful response to God. Thus the biblical material witnessing to

Jesus' sacrificial gift on our behalf can call us to sacrificial giving as well. Please note, however, the sacrifice of Christ evokes a response of sacrifice. Too often we are more than willing to respond with simple charity.

Our response to redemption is sanctification. Our good works grow from our justification by God. This opens up the possibility of preaching about sanctification. Remembering that stewardship is our grateful response which begins with God's redeeming love can help maintain the Pauline assertion that we are justified by grace through faith. Our good works of stewardship constitute our faithful response.

Another possibility within the realm of stewardship is our response to the obedience of Christ. God continually calls us to obedience and Christ sets the prime example of the obedient servant. For Jesus obedience to God takes priority over everything else, even the sustenance and preservation of life itself. Through the example of the obedient Christ (Phil. 2:8, for example) the priority of selfless obedience takes us far beyond the cultural priorities of selfish life-style and accumulation.

Preaching about election opens up possibilities for related themes within stewardship. God's prior election elicits our grateful response. It should be noted that election always brings with it a call to responsibility. God's call to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) for instance proclaims the reality that through him the rest of the world is included in the blessing. Through our election and our being blessed by God, we too are called to be a blessing to others. It is selfish to think of our election as only granting us private blessings. We are not just elected to special privilege, we are elected to special responsibility. Part of our responsibility may be expressed in the response of stewardship.

These possibilities are only suggestive, not exhaustive. I hope considering stewardship as our response to God's prior activity will spark other possibilities within the vast witness to God's grace which Scripture provides. But one other interpretive possibility bears consideration. Lately the use of the image of the steward as a symbol for explicating an understanding of stewardship has gained a measure of popularity. Certainly those texts within the Gospels in which Jesus uses the image of a steward often appear most frequently among the traditionally favored stewardship texts (the parables of the wicked steward, the faithful and unfaithful stewards and others that echo the recurring theme of the absent landowner, for instance). Using the figure of a steward as a symbol for our own response to God opens up new possibilities in understanding the biblical witness with regard to stewardship. Basically, a steward in biblical thought is one to whom a householder grants authority and responsibility for the daily welfare of the household. A steward is left with many of the household duties and entrusted with the obligation of ruling the household responsibly in the absence of the householder.¹ Exploration into using the steward as a symbol or metaphor which helps to interpret a wide range of biblical material and apply them so that we may imagine ourselves as stewards or caretakers has been well supported by Douglas John Hall in his book, *The Steward: A Biblical Image Come of Age*.² Exciting possibilities for preaching stewardship may be opened up through the appropriate use of this interpretive metaphor.

A few caveats may be in order, however. No one image or metaphor is

expansive enough to encompass the reality which Scripture is meant to unfold. Even the image which underlies our term “stewardship” can not be all-sufficient in investigating the totality of meaning stewardship can have for our lives of faith. For instance, the image of steward is primarily that of manager or caretaker which does not ordinarily include the idea of giving. More importantly, perhaps, the role of a steward is grounded upon a hierarchical structure of society.³ Promoting such an image may implicitly support inequalities within our social structure. The danger lies in unintentionally promoting an image of God as dictator, stewards as second in command, and everyone else as subjects to be ruled or managed. At the very least we need to be aware of the limitations and dangers involved.

Practical Considerations

Allow me to state two practical concerns with regard to preaching about stewardship in general and about the stewardship of our money and material possessions in particular. Be explicit with regard to stewardship. In preaching, it is always a danger to assume people know what we are talking about and not give them enough specifics to hang on to. I know a pastor who proclaimed that whenever the time came for a stewardship sermon he preached about commitment. That is well and good. Commitment and stewardship go hand in hand. The problem was the congregation never understood he was preaching about specific concerns with regard to stewardship. The second consideration goes along with my plea for specificity. It is extremely helpful to give the congregation a goal to reach. In regard to fund raising the challenge of a monetary goal is appropriate. People appreciate a concrete suggestion for their consideration. Ordinarily this is attempted by passing out an enigmatic line item budget for the congregation’s consideration. In reality, few people understand budgets and even fewer understand their personal responsibility with regard to them. Instead, consider challenging them with a goal of a percentage of their income. The biblical ideal is the tithe. That is a worthy goal, but not one which everyone can meet right away. Consider challenging the congregation with a lower percentage that they may be allowed to grow in faithful stewardship. Remember also that as Christians we are freed from the tyranny of the Levitical prescriptions. But the law of the tithe may still function to challenge and guide us in our faithful response to the benevolence of God.

Conclusion

Stewardship is our response to God’s many gifts to us. Our response, however, is never easy. Stewardship in its broadest or most narrow terms always calls for us to change our behavior and give of what may be very dear. Stewardship challenges us to change. Because our world encourages seeking lifestyles worthy of the rich and famous, the preacher has hard work cut out for her or him. Because stewardship calls us to change something we all hold so

dear, it is doubtful that the one or two sermons a year scheduled for "Stewardship Season" will be enough. The good news is that the wealth of the biblical material provides ample opportunity to present the challenge of stewardship as often as is necessary. Then we are faithful to the needs of our congregations to be so challenged, faithful to the witness of Scripture, and faithful to our responsibilities as stewards of the mysteries of God.

NOTES

¹ Theophilus M. Taylor, "Motives for Giving in the New Testament," *Stewardship in Contemporary Life*, ed. T. K. Thompson (New York: Association Press, 1965), 47-48.

² Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (New York: Friendship Press, 1982).

³ Eugene F. Roop, "The Steward in Biblical Perspective: Possibilities and Problems," *Journal of Stewardship* 41 (1989), 43-45.