

GODFIRST:

Kingdom Priorities for Christian Living 8;

“Making GODFIRST in our Stewardship”

“Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.” Mt 6:33 NLT

This morning I want to consider what our primary role as human beings is; in the Kingdom of God. I remind you of the little phrase I coined earlier last fall: Salvation is what we have received...Servants are what we are...Stewardship is what we do. Our primary role as Christian disciples is stewardship, and is defined for us in two primary scriptures. In Gen. 2:15 God places Adam in the Garden and tells him to “have dominion” over all that God has created. That “have dominion” has been misunderstood, and misinterpreted to allow for all kinds of abuse and misuse of God’s creation, including how we care for the earth, how we treat animals, how we relate to other members of the human race, and even how we look at our money. Stewardship is not just about money, but it does include money. Here is another translation of Gen. 2:15 from Young’s Literal Bible; that better gets at the heart of Kingdom Stewardship than “having dominion”:

And Jehovah God taketh the man, and causeth him to rest in the Garden of Eden, to serve it, and to keep it. Gen. 2:15 Do you see that?

There is another verse in the NT that more clearly defines the expectation God maintains of all who call themselves Christians; those who want to abide by Kingdom Priorities in the Stewardship area:

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. I Pet. 4:10 NASB

We as human beings are created, and called to be good, Godly Stewards; managers, trustees, helpmates, caretakers, nurses, parents; of all God has made. Stewardship is defined as “utilizing and managing all the resources God provides, for the glory of God, and the betterment of all God’s creation”. “Stewardship is overseeing every resource of life...for God.” Stewardship is what happens when we live out...GODFIRST in our lives.

So why is it that most countries of the world are at war between the “haves and the have-nots”? Why is it that our country has grown accustomed to living under the illusion of prosperity (no matter which party is in office) while we maintain trillions of dollars of national debt? Why is it that even as great a state as ND, which had a \$500 million dollar surplus just a few short weeks ago, dismissed our legislatures for the “Crossover” with an anticipated shortfall of somewhere around \$30 million? And why is it that in most Christian churches across this city (including this one) 20% of the people give over 80% of the money needed to operate the church, and in this one, fully 1/3 of our people give less than \$5 dollar a week. And why is it that individual and personal debt is at an all time high as the average American citizen, even the Christian ones are spending \$1.21 cents of every dollar they currently earn? It’s because we are poor stewards.

I want to explore with you today what Godly, GODFIRST, Kingdom Stewardship looks like, and we’ll do so by considering the basic causes of illegitimate Stewardship:

1. CONSUMERISM HAS REPLACED GENEROSITY

In our world, and in our churches, and in our lives, consumerism has replaced generosity as the accepted mode of operation. Living has become all about getting; and less and less about giving. For a people who take their name from the Christ, “who gave his life on a cross for us”...we ought to be ashamed!

We can blame the mess on advertising, and living in the midst of a ‘perverse and crooked generation’...but did you notice the billboard...there in the Garden? In flashing neon lights was the slippery one tempting Adam and Eve with the most beautiful air-brushed, curve enhanced, and lacquer polished apple they had ever seen. Suddenly “everything else in the Garden” (which was theirs to enjoy) was forgotten as the focus became possessing what they thought they didn’t have. As long as we believe that more is always better, we will never have enough.

We live in a consumer-oriented society. This popular culture promotes two common myths (1) people's happiness is related to buying new things and (2) escalating personal debt is a reality of life. As a result of this orientation, most Americans are spending more money than they earn every week, and consumer debt continues to escalate to new, all-time highs; and we are still, basically unhappy! With the rise of consumerism and increased personal debt, smaller amounts of money are now available for personal giving.

In addition, many church members have shifted their understanding and expectations of their membership in the church and in the Kingdom; from being stewards to being consumers. Many church members now view their giving as a “fee-for-service option”, rather than a biblical / missional / stewardship imperative. Many members would rather the hired help do the ministry for them, than become engaged in discovering, and exercising their gifts in the adventure of ministry within and without the bounds of the church.

The Christian view of Kingdom Stewardship ought to be that we give our resources (including time, talents, and treasures) to God first, and then we regulate the expenditure of the remainder of our resources according to what is left over – NOT, first, satisfying our wants, and giving only if there happens to be anything left over. See the difference? The basic difference between consumerism and generosity.

2. THE SCARCITY MINDSET HAS SUPERSEDED THE ABUNDANCE MENTALITY

I believe there are three primary causes of what I call the scarcity mindset. They represent a past, a present and a future perspective on this reality. The Great Depression is a past reality that causes for many a hording, saving, “you never know” outlook on life. I know that there is merit in saving for a rainy day, but there are also faithless abuses of this mindset that restrict how we “steward” God’s creation!

The present realities; are Disasters of many kinds. We are living in the middle of a drought here in the Midwest; they are living in the middle of rebuilding from hurricanes in the south, and a tsunami in the Far East. All of those realities have helped to create a mindset of scarcity, but all of those realities are temporary in the scope of God’s eternity; and ought not restrict how we “steward” any of God’s “entrusted to us” resources. Our giving ought not be governed by the weather!

The future reality has to do with Debt, and I’m sad to report this. So much of our mindset of scarcity has to do with debt, and this is the most manageable of the three realities. It’s hard for me to listen to a person whine and lament not having enough money to give to God, while they are making credit payments on their Big Screen TV and home entertainment center! Those things aren’t bad, but buying them on credit and cheating God in the meantime reveal a more ‘spiritual’ problem.

The Abundance Mentality is founded on God as a gracious, generous, gregarious, glorious GIVER! God gives...therefore we give. If any of the nature and character of God has been passed on to us as His Creation, and claiming to be His followers, we must be GOOD Stewards of ALL God’s resources entrusted to our care! I am not a proponent of any of the “big hair” nonsensical understanding of ‘abundance’. I reject the notion that all faithful people will be healthy, wealthy and wise. That’s heresy.

But I can not be true to God's Word and ignore the reality that God is an abundant God; God is an extravagant giver; God has given us way more than we deserve. Our STEWARDSHIP ought to better reflect this reality of God? We do God a disservice when we sit around the finance committee and wring our hands assuming that we can't do this or that ministry, that we can't pay our apportionments in full, we can't add this necessary staff person, that we can't eradicate AIDS in Africa, we can't accomplish in the city of Bismarck what we clearly believe God is calling us to do; when the average American Christian is giving less than 2.7% of their annual income to God, and paying 20% interest on their credit cards. I'm not sure that is GODFIRST Stewardship.

3. STEWARDSHIP HAS BEEN DISCONNECTED FROM DISCIPLESHIP

Clarence Stoughton said, "Stewardship is everything you do after you say, 'Yes' to Jesus." In other words, stewardship is a lifestyle choice that recognizes that everything is a gift from God. Our responsibility as Christian stewards is to manage all the gifts that we have received from God. God is the true owner of all that we have in life. This concept is very difficult for postmodern Americans to grasp. Our culture implies that we deserve the things that we claim as our possessions. We have earned our money, and any decision that we make about our money is strictly our own decision. The writings of the Old and New Testaments teach us something different. Jesus talked about money and possessions more than any other topic. In fact, he mentioned money and possessions four times more than the second most popular subject; prayer. Jesus consistently taught that our responsibility as his disciples is to recognize that God is the provider of all that we possess and that our call is to be generous givers of all our resources; gracious stewards, of all God's creation.

Here is really the bottom line: Christian, GODFIRST stewardship begins not with an inventory of what we have, or longing for what we don't have; GODFIRST Stewardship emerges from recognition of WHOSE we are! Somehow in recent centuries we have disconnected Discipleship from Stewardship and made discipleship about prayer and Bible Reading, and growing our faith. All the while we have separated and shielded and relegated Stewardship to at best a 'once a year' preacher begging for money, and worst; something some rich people are supposed to do. Stewardship and Discipleship are synonymous...or should be!

Stewardship is never a matter between you and the church; it is between you and God! Whether the church budget gets balanced is not a matter of ultimate importance...whether our lives get balanced is! An annual pledge of ten percent does not make us faithful, healthy stewards unless we discover the unadulterated joy of managing faithfully the other ninety percent of our possessions, gifts, and time!

Jesus told a parable in Matthew 25 about a master who went on a long journey and entrusted his resources to three servants (stewards). You remember this? Two servants invested wisely in the financial markets of the day, and returned the master's principal with 100% interest. A third servant, who was fearful of making a poor investment, and of a misunderstood Master; hid the money and returned only the principal to the Master. When the Master returned he became outraged with this third servant. This servant had failed to make his master's resources useful, so he lost his Masters respect, and his entrusted entitlement, and in Luke's rendition of this same parable...his life! You think Stewardship is a laughing matter?

This is obviously a parable about God entrusting to you and me (stewards) gifts, talents, resources, time, wisdom, expertise, abilities, experiences, and individual personalities; with a specific expectation. To do the absolute best we can to invest our resources wisely, to cultivate our opportunities for maximum growth, to manage His creation, even to risk significant loss by doing what God would and could do without us. I'm not sure why God gave us this hard job...I think it's because He loves us, and He knows we are up to the task...if we only make, put, and keep GODFIRST in the STEWARDSHIP of our lives, and of all God's creation!

Where has God revealed to you that your stewardship is broken down? Are you wasting a gift by refusing to be engaged in your ministry? Are you squandering His resources fighting your way out of debt? Are you hoarding your assets while refusing to invest in His Kingdom? Are you wasting your time with trivial pursuits? Are you abusing the creation in some disrespectful way? It's time to make GODFIRST again. Let us pray.

GODFIRST:
Kingdom Priorities for Christian Living 8;
"Making GODFIRST in our Stewardship"

"Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." Mt 6:33 NLT

And Jehovah God taketh the man, and causeth him to rest in the Garden of Eden, to serve it, and to keep it. Gen. 2:15 Do you see that?

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. I Pet. 4:10 NASB

Salvation is what we have _____

Servants is what we _____

Stewardship is what we _____

1. _____ **HAS REPLACED** _____

2. **THE** _____ **MINDSET HAS SUPERSEDED THE** _____ **MENTALITY**

D _____

D _____

D _____

3. _____ **HAS BEEN DISCONNECTED FROM** _____