

Stewardship in the New Year (January 2020)

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At last 2020 is over! It was a very hard year, for us and for the whole world. Thanks be to God that we have come through it, and now in 2021 we have a fresh start.

Yet, for all the hard things about 2020, I've heard a common theme from many people: the challenges have caused many of us to examine our lives in a new light. Have we had the right values and priorities? Have we made the best use of our time and skills? Have we been wasting our lives on second-best goals? Is it time to make a fresh start?

The new year is always a good time for a fresh start—but it's very hard to make the change stick long-term. It's not enough to make changes on the outside. We need a change to happen on the inside. This can only come as God's gift to us. We can and should pray for such a change. But only God will make it happen and make it stick.

In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul describes two ways of relating to the world, to our possessions, and to God. One is good and the other is bad. He writes:

“The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (II Corinthians 9:6–8).

Paul's first point is our attitude. If we distrust God and are protective of our possessions, then we will find that God is untrustworthy and our possessions are at risk. We will be suspicious, reluctant, and self-protective—and we will get little in return. The world will be as ungenerous to us as we are to the world.

But if we trust God, if we let go of our tight hold on our money and possessions, if we decide to take real risks of trust and hope, then everything will change. Our generosity will be blessed by the generosity of God and of other people. Instead of getting a small return, we will get great gifts in return. These gifts will be more than material—they will be spiritual. Everything will change for us from the inside out.

You can't fake this. You can't pretend to be generous when really you are calculating every coin. As St. Paul says, you just can't give reluctantly or because you've been forced into it. (You shouldn't even be forced into giving by an article written by your pastor in Kizuna!)

God has given us everything freely, because He loves us. Therefore, whatever we give back to God *also* has to be given freely—because we love Him. God is not impressed by big gifts from cold hearts. Remember the story of the old woman who put a tiny coin in the temple offering: Jesus praised her above all the rich Pharisees who put in huge amounts, because she really loved God enough to give Him everything. The Pharisees only gave to look good in front of other people.

The result of cheerful giving, Paul tells us, is the new freedom that comes from living under God's grace. God doesn't just pay us back in exact proportion to how we give to Him. Actually, God gives us *more* than we can ever donate. God gives us every grace, all the grace He has to give. Once we see and feel God's grace in our lives, suddenly we realize we have everything we need. We don't need to compete or consume to be satisfied. In this new freedom, we "abound in every good work." Instead of taking from the world, we give back to it. We become forces for good in the world.

How can we become more like St. Paul describes?

First of all, we have to pray and listen to Scripture. This is always a good principle: before you try to change your life, open yourself up to God. Real change is God's gift. God is always waiting and willing to make the change inside of you. The only problem is the closed door of the heart. Open the door through praying, reading and hearing Scripture, singing and discussing these topics with other Christians whom you trust. Let God give to you first.

Then, listen to what your transformed heart tells you. There is no "right" or "wrong" amount to give. Whatever you give should be given freely and cheerfully. If you are living on a tight budget and really don't have anything more to spare, that's fine. God won't hold it against you. On the other hand, maybe your budget is tight because you spend money on unworthy things that you quickly forget, always racing off to the next purchase. Maybe then God's work in you will be to break you from this cycle of buying. Then you will have something more to give to God and His work. Or maybe you just never knew that giving to God's work was an important thing to do. Now is the time to learn more about how you can support the church and the gospel in Japan and in other places as well.

Pray, listen to God, listen to your heart, and then give—cheerfully and freely!