

What Is Stewardship? (November 2020)

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Last month I let you know that I'd be offering a monthly article in Kizuna about stewardship, but I didn't explain exactly what it is! That's my topic for this month.

A "steward" is a servant or manager who doesn't own property himself, but takes care of it for the owner. In Jesus' time, most of the wealth belonged to a very small number of people, but the wealthy people did not directly manage it themselves. They hired a steward to take care of it for them. Obviously, a steward is a person you have to trust. A steward has access to everything that the owner has access to, and if he's dishonest, he can quietly steal or mismanage the property. The owner might not find out until it's too late. On the other, a steward who takes good care of the owner's property is praised and rewarded. Such a steward proves that he is trustworthy and gets promoted. This idea has historical roots in Japan, too—the *jitō* (地頭).

Jesus liked to use the image of a steward in his parables. He used both positive and negative examples of stewards. In this parable from Matthew 25:14–29, we see both good and bad stewards handling the owner's property:

"Jesus said: For the kingdom of heaven will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather

where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

A good steward accepts what has been given to him, and uses it to put more good in the world. Whether a good steward receives a lot (five talents) or a little (two talents), he does his best with it and presents the fruit of his efforts to the owner. The owner is pleased and rewards the good stewards. They get charge over even more—but better than that, they have filled the owner with joy. By contrast, a bad steward does nothing with what he’s been given. He hides it away (not even in a bank where it can earn interest!) and then dares to criticize the owner. The owner is not impressed at all, and sends the bad steward to punishment.

In ordinary human life, we experience not only good and bad stewards, but also good and bad owners. There are good and bad employees, but also good and bad employers. However, we have to understand Jesus’ parable correctly: he’s really talking about God (the owner) and us (the stewards). We should have no doubt in this case that the owner is good! There’s no question about that. The only question is whether we are good stewards of our good God.

Here’s the point: God is the owner of the earth and everything in it—all the natural resources, all the land, all the people, all our lives. But God places His creation in our care. It’s amazing! Despite our sinfulness, God places His confidence in our management of His creation. Whether we get five talents, two talents, or only one, God has been generous to us and only asks us to make good use of what we’ve been given.

God regards all human beings as His stewards, but we Christians know this truth in a powerful and special way. We know that God created each of us. We know that God gave His own life for each of us in Jesus Christ. We know that God has sent His Holy Spirit to dwell us. So the responsibility falls to us, more than to anyone else, to show with our lives, our money and property, and our time that we are God’s stewards. Good, faithful, responsible stewards, ready at any time to meet God the Owner of all things and give an account of how we have used our talents.

May God find each of us ready and willing to give an account!