

Stewardship in the Christmas Season (December 2020)

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Last month I explained the word “steward”: a servant or manager who takes care of the owner’s property. God is the owner of the earth, but God has asked each of us to be a steward of the earth. Everything we have is a gift from God. The only question is: what will we do with our gifts?

Christmas is a good time to think more carefully about gifts and stewardship!

For more than half a century, Christians in America have struggled with mixed feelings about Christmas. On the one hand, ours is a “Christian country.” More people come from Christian families than from any other religion. Christmas Day is a federal holiday. Even though we have official separation of church and state, you can’t avoid the Christian heritage of the U.S.

On the other hand, it seems like most people view Christmas mainly as an occasion for spending lots of money and eating too much food! Many faithful Christians regret the “commercial” character of Christmas nowadays. Pastors try hard to remind people that Christmas is about our Lord Jesus, not the newest iPhone or video game or luxury item. But most of the time it feels like a losing battle.

It certainly has surprised me what a big deal Christmas is in Japan! (But let me assure you that *nobody* in America eats KFC on Christmas for a special treat.) Of course, most people here don’t know anything about the Jesus part of Christmas. But I’m not sure they’re so different from the average American. If there’s one thing that American and Japanese society have in common, it’s that we’re both very materialistic cultures.

What does that mean? It means that our culture tells us that success in life comes from being rich and buying things. Now anyone who’s ever been poor can tell you it’s no picnic. There’s nothing objectively great about being poor. But there’s also nothing objectively great about being rich. Social scientists have shown again and again that having money only makes us want more money. No matter what income people have, they’re convinced that just a little bit more would make them happier... but if they reach that higher level, suddenly they’re convinced they need just a little more than that! It never stops. Or maybe you’ve had the experience of buying a product that you really wanted. The excitement you feel when you buy it or take it home lasts such a short time. Next thing you know, you’re bored with it—and look for the next thing to buy.

And sadly, this whole process is at its worst at Christmas! Everyone goes into a frenzy of buying. Even gifts lose a lot of their pleasure. We get mad if we don’t get what we want, or get something we don’t want. We solve the problem by creating a gift list, but then the gift is not really a surprise or even a gift—it’s just someone else paying for what we would have bought for ourselves anyway. After awhile Christmas can start to feel like a burden. Only small children, who receive absolutely everything from the people around them, really understand what it’s about.

It’s extra sad because the whole tradition of gift-giving comes from the Christmas story itself. Jesus Christ is our heavenly Father’s gift to the whole world, freely given, to people who didn’t ask for it or

deserve it. Jesus brings with him blessing, life, and salvation. In response, the three Magi—foreigners who didn't know anything about the promises God made to His people Israel—came to the baby Jesus and offered him the best they had to show their thanks. Free gifts, freely given, gratefully received, and inspiring the best in return. Our Christmases today, full of advertisements and consumerism, are a long way off from this.

So, during this month where the whole world is obsessed with buying more stuff, I have a challenge for all of us Christians:

Let's examine our lives and see if we can change from being consumers of products to stewards of creation.

A consumer is never satisfied. A consumer gets bored quick with the last purchase. A consumer is always looking for the next buy. A consumer wants to know, "What's in it for me?" A consumer is suspicious of getting ripped off. A consumer is always comparing herself to other people. A consumer is jealous of other people's stuff. A consumer can never rest content with anything.

That's how most people live. That's not how God wants us to live.

A steward knows that everything is a free gift from God. A steward is satisfied with what God has given. A steward wants to know, "How can I use this to serve God?" A steward is interested in sharing and partnering with other stewards. A steward thanks God for the gifts other people have received without becoming jealous. A steward is excited to make God's gifts grow, not to be better or look better than anyone else, but to show gratitude to God.

If you compare these two lifestyles, which one is free? Which one is joyful? Which would you rather live?

If you realize that your life is stuck in the consumer mode, then it's time to shift to the steward mode. I'll warn you now: it's not easy. Other consumers don't like it when someone stops playing the game. It exposes how shallow the consumer lifestyle is and makes them look bad. They'll try to pull you back into consumerism and away from stewardship.

But if you hear God calling you toward a life of stewardship, then answer in prayer: YES! Ask God for help. God always answers good prayers like this. If we all pray together this way as a church, God will bless us and help us support one another in new lives of stewardship.

That's the gift I'd like to get for Christmas this year!