



More Than
STONE SOUP

A Stewardship and Giving Emphasis Program for Congregations

Stewardship: The Basics

WHAT IS STEWARDSHIP?

Stewardship is a mind-set whereby we live our lives daily. More than just giving, it is a way of life that shapes how we approach the management of all our assets, including our time and intellectual gifts. The practice of stewardship can be broken down into two disciplines: Management Stewardship and Giving Stewardship.

Management Stewardship involves caring for and preserving all our blessings. This includes not only our fiduciary assets, but also other tangible commodities. More than money, Creation in its entirety is included among the tangibles for which we are to be responsible. What we do with Creation—and what we do to Creation—is a matter of stewardship.

The management aspects of stewardship also include what we do with our personal assets, for ours is a Calling from God to appropriately manage all that we have been given. That said, Management includes how we spend and save all that comes our way. The very process of allocating our resources, setting aside for living expenses, recreation, education, saving and investment and what we invest in the Gospel, are all to be considered peculiar to Management Stewardship. This same notion applies to our time and intellect, as well. It is from within the aforementioned stewardship mind-set that we make these asset management decisions.

Giving is the deliberate process of providing and distributing our assets in support of good things, good causes, and giving to God, typically through our local church. Giving, too, can be broken down into two disciplines: Our Need to Give; and Our Giving to Needs. Although both are valid and worthy disciplines, one MUST take precedent over the other.

The first and most compelling discipline for giving stems from a basic, but dominating, Need to Give to God. This almost subconscious urge for giving is seemingly built into the psyche of the believer, and is a response to our understanding of God and recognizing his love for us. In his love for us, God provides abundantly for all our daily needs. Moreover, God's love for us and all of Creation was expressed in the sending of his Son. From our knowledge of God and his love springs the compulsion to give. It is from within our relationship with God that we find the impetus and life long commitment to live out this stewardship discipline.

Not surprisingly, the stronger the relationship, the greater is our generosity. The stronger the relationship, the greater is our trust in God.

Only after the Need to Give has been satisfied can we approach the Giving to Needs aspect of stewardship. This is because our resources for all giving is limited to what was allocated from the sum total of all our resources during the Management Stewardship process. So, our Giving to Needs is limited to the residuals of that particular allocation minus what was given already to satisfy our Need to Give to God. For this reason the aspect of allocation is important to giving.

Obviously, the key to generous giving is in the management of our assets. Some advocate for a 10-10-80 ratio allocation. In this model, ten percent is set aside for giving, ten percent is set aside for savings and investing, and the remaining eighty percent is distributed across all remaining categories. This seems a good place to begin a life of generous giving. So bold an allocation for generous giving, however, requires a strong faith and trust in God for all things in all things. The bottom line, then, is this: Christian stewardship is no more and no less than an outward expression of one's Faith in God. Our stewardship rests on the relationship and the trust that develops as a result of knowing him.

A THEOLOGY FOR GIVING

To be faithful stewards we must draw from Scripture a theology, or God-driven rationale, to guide us in the management and distribution of our assets. Without consulting God's word, any theology we might suggest would most likely be little more than conjecture on our part. The question becomes, "What does Scripture say to us that would seriously influence the management, allocation and giving of the blessings God has given us to manage?" As we search for answers in the "Manual for Life" we know as the Bible, we find Scripture replete with thoughts, information and instructions from Creator God.

From as far back as the 4th chapter of Genesis we have been aware of God's expectation that we should give sacrifices to him. However, from the story of Cain and Able we begin to realize some of the complexity that seems to permeate his expectations: Sacrifices from some are more acceptable to God than are the sacrifices from others. The Old Testament writings are rich with examples of God's people giving and sacrificing. Likewise, we are offered models for when and how much. We find God's will for who should be suitable recipients of our giving, and of God's reaction when we fail to give. But, what is it that determines the acceptability of our offerings?

When we examine the Gospels and epistles of the New Testament we again find an abundance of information on the subject of stewardship, especially where our finances are concerned. Jesus spoke of money in sixteen of the thirty-eight parables. One in seven verses in Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels deal with money issues. Jesus spoke about money and possessions almost twice as much as he spoke about prayer, faith and love combined! He referenced prayer in 361 verses, faith in 398, and love in 478. But Jesus mentioned money and possessions more than 2,172 times. Many of these teachings are summarized in the 6th chapter of Matthew:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
Matt. 6:21

Does, in fact, the condition of our hearts have any relevance on the acceptability of our offering to God? At first, it seems difficult to make a connection. None-the-less, this quote from a discourse contributed to Jesus would suggest that very thing. One would think that money is money, right? The church treasurer could not care less about our attitude, and the bank certainly didn't scrutinize the deposit for a prevailing holy attitude before concluding the funds were legal currency and spendable. But, it would seem that God does place some value on attitude, and knowledge and understanding of God's will must impact any understanding of his expectation for our giving.

The Apostle Paul, in his letters to the believers at Corinth, provides a sound theological foundation for stewardship and giving. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians:

“Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.”
1 Cor. 16:1-2

From this we understand that giving is to be carefully planned, and not left to chance. We are to consciously decide upon a regular amount of our income that is to be allocated to giving. The amount allocated should be proportionate to our income, and it should be pragmatically set aside each time our paycheck arrives. Our calling is to be “first fruits” givers, giving to God first, and then managing the remainder to our benefit. This is so contrary to our current culture's teaching to “spend the best—and hoard the rest.” Paul teaches that God comes first. What is given to God must come off the top. Sunday morning is not the time to quickly determine the amount we will give. What goes into our offering envelope is far more serious an issue than to be left for a spur of the moment decision. Our giving to God must never be decided by the amount of our “leftovers.”

In his second letter to Corinth, Paul tells of the attitude with which the Macedonians approach giving—and the joy that was theirs in giving. Paul writes:

“And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”

“I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

“And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.” 2 Cor. 8:1-12

The Macedonians had nothing. Paul described their poverty as extreme. Yet their Need to Give prompted them to give well beyond their means. Paul speaks of their eagerness in giving, and suggests their eagerness to give is something we should claim for our own. For within the eagerness is found sufficient grace to set standards high for ourselves, and then the grace to follow through by matching our eager willingness with completion of this work of giving, a work that, without completion, would otherwise amount to no more than good intentions. A road paved with good intentions is not a road we should be eager to travel.

The theology of stewardship and giving is one of many dimensions. We are to be eager, cheerful, faithful, committed, responsible, grateful and generous in our giving to a point of self-sacrifice, putting God first, never looking back, and trusting our amazingly generous Creator for all we need. It calls us to a discipline of asset management that is almost beyond our human capacity to deliver. Paul calls it a “...test of the sincerity of our love.”

Truly we can trust in God for all things in all things. His grace is sufficient to the task. From the abundance he provides we can afford to be generous in our management allocation to giving. When we give ourselves first to the Lord, as did the Macedonians, then giving of our assets comes more easily. It is a lifelong process, our living out this theology of stewardship. As our relationship with God grows and matures, so grows our faith and our capacity for commitment to a faithful steward lifestyle. In our commitment we take our place and do the works which were assigned to us before the beginning of time. For in our giving we advance the coming of the Kingdom “...on earth as well as in heaven” so that all may know the love of the Father and the deeds of his Son. So we commit ourselves to telling the story of a generous and loving God. When all is said and done, may God’s name forever be glorified. Amen.

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” 2 Cor. 9:6-8