

Stewardship in Biblical Perspective
Every Member Commitment
“Giving and the Promise of Multiple Blessing”
Acts 20:31–35
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This text in Acts is Paul’s closing sermon in Ephesus after three years of ministry to the elders at the church of Ephesus and it starts in Acts 20:17 but to begin I will read Acts 20:31–35 which says [31] *Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. [32] And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. [33] I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. [34] You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. [35] In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how **he himself said**, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

There are many things I knew about coming to be the pastor at Briarwood Presbyterian Church over 20 years ago. I knew it would be a challenge for me. One of those things was when the elders and deacons told me about EMC (Every Member Commitment) which is a season of the year when the elders and deacons prior to budgeting for the next year, for the congregation to pray through their stewardship of their time, talents and treasure. At first this was a little intimidating because we didn’t do that at the church I came from but after the first two or three years if I could go back to that church we would be doing it there.

I want to tell you why for I have become very grateful for this season for a number of reasons. I know in the preaching of the Word we will deal with the issue of stewardship because it’s built throughout the Bible but when we take a couple of weeks to look at this issue it became personally gratifying for me. It became a joy to be able to sit down with my wife and talk about how we were doing with our time, talent and treasures. Are we starting at the first day of effectiveness, the Lord’s Day? What are we doing with the other days? Are we wasting precious time that we only get one shot at? Am I taking my time through my talents to extend the Kingdom of God as a steward? What can we do with our resources as well? I was also grateful to be able to teach this to my children.

The Apostle Paul in this text greatly convicts me. He talks about how he was selfless in the ministry in order that he might give to the spiritually poor and the physically poor. He talked about how he ordered his life according to necessities, not wants and not only his but those who were with him. He gives and calls others to give. Then he gives the statement from Christ that it’s more blessed to give than receive. So to be able to do this personally in my life, what are my priorities? Where am I at with my time and talents and how can we maximize our resources for the sake of the Kingdom? So I thank the elders and deacons here at Briarwood for calling for this. Now it’s a blessing to watch my children teach their children.

Not only personally but pastorally it’s a blessing. It’s a blessing because I know this represents something. The elders and deacons are calling us, every member to look at our stewardship and then as you give information to them they then, underneath the policies they have put in place which is not simply a church that tithes but over 50 percent leaves the church to

go to benevolence, mercy, missions, church planting and revitalization, evangelism and discipleship. The policy says 50 percent but it always is more than that which goes out to these things by the end of the year. I'm grateful we have learned to give as a church but we want to do so responsibly so they are wanting to plan this with the information you have prayerfully sought before the Lord to bring your stewardship of time, talent and treasures to Him.

Another reason I'm glad they have done this is because it gives us an opportunity to focus on one of the most challenging and rewarding dimensions of discipleship and that's stewardship. God gives us some identities as Christians and I have a series that I hope to give soon on this called the Seven 'S's' of the Christian. One is that He calls the Christian to be a soldier for Christ. You have a mission, a calling and weapons of the Spirit. Secondly, He calls the Christian a servant of Christ. Thirdly, the Christian is a sinner, but yes we are saved by grace. The Bible says in I John 1:8, *[8] If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* Fourthly, He calls the Christian a saint, by the blood of Christ that has cleansed us, the righteousness of Christ that has clothed us and the Spirit of Christ who has set us apart. Fifthly, the Christian is called a student for we are to study to show ourselves approved as a workman who does not be ashamed (II Timothy 2:15). Sixthly, the Christian is called a supplicants for we learn how to pray. Seventhly the Christian is called a steward.

It is my humble opinion that when we address the issue of stewardship there are two things I believe about this dynamic of discipleship. I left so much on the cutting room floor trying to work through this issue for this study but I will be doing more of this in the coming months. Stewardship is pervasive in every area of life. When you understand that God made everything then therefore God is the proprietary owner of everything, we own nothing but we're in charge then the last thing we want to be is the prodigal. When the father gave the prodigal son his inheritance he abused it and misused it in riotous living. God what does it mean for You to have made everything and entrusted some things to us and for us to use it as our steps are ordered by Your Word? Today I want us to think about these two opinions I have about stewardship.

The first one is other than worship, this element of discipleship, stewardship, brings more focus and more attention to the Gospel in our lives than any other dimension. Worship is dependent upon the understanding of the Gospel, being motivated by the Gospel and being changed from self-absorption to giving God glory. I think our giving is a reflection of what has been given to us in the Gospel. In other words, if you want to know what we really think about the Gospel then look at our stewardship. It is a reflection of it, it's framed by it and it's motivated by our understanding of the Gospel and what the Gospel means to us will show up in our stewardship and how we embrace it.

My second opinion is other than evangelism, there is no other dynamic in discipleship that is more challenging to begin and more delightfully rewarding once it has been embraced than stewardship. I know how hard it is to start sharing the Gospel with others in personal evangelism, but once you do, isn't it rewarding? All of the old man and cultural currents are headwinds against stewardship. Once you get started in sharing the Gospel there is very little that is more delightful in the Christian life than stewardship of this time, talent and treasure.

Let's see what Paul has to say about this as we look at this text. Paul's stewardship is selfless, giving, working hard, taking what he works not for self-promotion and he has a budget built around necessities. Then he gives us this quote from Jesus that it's more blessed to give than to receive. You won't find this quote in the Gospels, so where did Paul get this quote? I think we have three possibilities of where Paul heard this.

Number one is Paul heard it from the Apostles who heard it from Jesus and they communicated it to him. Paul had trips to Jerusalem in which he intermingled with the Apostles. It's interesting to note that none of those who wrote the Gospels were moved by the Spirit to include it. I know Jesus said it because Paul said that He said it in this Acts 20 text. If Jesus said it then the Apostles must have heard it. How would Paul have known about it? I would suggest that even though the Apostles were not moved by the Spirit to put it in the Gospels they were moved in the discipleship of Paul to give it to him and the Holy Spirit moved Paul to give it to us in Acts 20 as he used it in his teaching and discipling ministry. This wouldn't be unusual. Two times in the Gospel of John we're told that Jesus said many things and if we were to record them all the whole world would not be able to contain the books (John 20:30, 21:25) So Jesus had many quotes that were not recorded.

A second possibility is that this quote 'it is more blessed to give than to receive' is not really a quote but a distillation or summation. Jesus tells the Disciples as He sends them out to share the Gospel in Matthew 10:7-10 not to build their budget on what they want but to be ready to give up everything and then He ends by saying 'freely you have received and freely you shall give.' That is about as close to what Paul quotes Him saying on this that I can find. This tends to go along with Luke 6 where it says 'give and it shall be given unto you, pressed down overflowing.' So maybe Paul who is aware of Jesus' teaching has put them together in a distillation or summation by giving us this quote.

The third possibility is that the Bible tells us that part of Paul's training as an Apostle was done by Jesus with Him personally in the wilderness for three years. Maybe that is where He gave it to him. I'm sure some are asking 'Pastor, what do you think it is?'

I don't think it was possibility number two because it wasn't given as a summation or distillation for it's given as a direct quotation – the Lord Himself said...and then it's given as a quotation. Secondly, I don't think it's possibility number three which was given in the wilderness. Now it could have been but it seems as though the way Paul refers to it that some people must have been around to hear it because Paul says 'did not He Himself says...' In other words, it's not something that just privately came to Paul for the report of what Jesus said was out there. So I think it's possibility number one of something that Jesus said in His ministry that the Apostles communicated to Paul, the Holy Spirit then implanted upon his heart and it became a part of the way Paul discipled in the way of stewardship of our time, talents and treasures.

So what is Jesus saying when He says 'it's more blessed to give than to receive'? First, do you believe it's more blessed to give than to receive? You realize that Jesus Himself said this, so do you believe it? If you really want to know if you believe it then go look at your calendar, your priority of the Lord's Day and your checkbook and you'll find out what is more blessed. This is one of those things that's pretty easily measured. This is something that sometimes reveals a confessional faith but doesn't show up with an operational faith. It's an area that God has convicted me of throughout the years and was hard to get started but boy do we love it now.

There are three affirmations Jesus is saying with this quote. The first affirmation is that receiving from the Lord in your life is a blessing. Did you receive Jesus? That's a blessing. Did you receive salvation? That's a blessing. Did you receive the Holy Spirit? That's a blessing. Did you receive a paycheck? That was a blessing. One might say 'well I worked for that paycheck.' Who gave you the strength, the skills and the opportunity to work for it? It is the Lord, who in creation, redemption and providence gives and gives and we receive and receive.

This is probably more of an exhortation to me than to you but you have to learn to receive. It is usually one of two reasons why people can't receive. You don't receive because you don't think there is anything to receive for you think you're entitled to it to begin with. We don't have a catechism that starts 'what is the chief end of man' (which our Church Catechism starts with) but ours begins with 'what is the chief end of God' which would be to give us what we want, therefore we can't receive because we think we're entitled. You never know of thanksgiving if you think this way for it's the beginning point of stewardship – the giving of thanks.

Secondly, some of us don't receive or get the blessing of receiving and rob other people of the blessing of giving, because of our pride and arrogance. 'I'm not going to be beholden.' You are already beholden to a dad, mom, the God of glory, to Christ. I understand the issue of self-respect and that's another issue, but say 'no' to pride and arrogance so you can know the blessing of receiving. Learn how to receive to praise God from whom all blessings flow.

The second affirmation from the text is that giving is a blessing. The best illustration I know of this is when Jesus fed the multitudes and in each case He used fishes and loaves. We are talking about Him feeding about eight to nine thousand people. A little boy gave his five loaves and two fishes and the Lord blessed it. This always reminds me of the song my granddaddy taught me that said 'little is much when God is in it.' Five loaves and two fishes fed everyone and even had 12 baskets left over when Jesus blessed it. What an astounding blessing! Do you think the little boy went home and complained to his mother that they took his five loaves and two fishes? No, he went home and said 'Momma sit down because you're not going to believe what happened to those five loaves and two fishes.' That little boy was overflowing with joy. It is more blessed to give than to receive.

When we go through our National Missions' Conference and knowing our Every Member Commitment is coming, I'm listening through a certain filter. I'm listening to what those church planters are doing and I know they were blessed through your giving and you get blessed by hearing what is happening. Looking at the report of the over 1,000 professions of faith through our board directed ministries I get blessed all over the place. There are unbelievable blessings that come in giving and that leads me to the third affirmation.

The third affirmation is that giving gives blessings and brings more blessings. Because of you're giving to these churches that are being planted, campuses where we're going and medical and business communities that are hearing the Gospel, it's not only a blessing but it gives blessings to others who are receiving it and the consequences of it. Then the giving that is bringing a blessing brings more blessings because those who have been given a blessing start giving and the whole thing gets multiplied. It's geometric and it's astounding! This is why my little has much in it, because God's in it and is using it in ways beyond our comprehension. Every once in a while God will let us get a little report of it.

Here are a couple of blessings you get when you give and I'll just use the tithe for now. The tithe was not just something in the mosaic ceremonial law. It goes back to the creation, the patriarchs, comes to Moses, goes to the Prophets and then God says in Malachi 3:8, 'Will you rob Me?' If God asked you that question I am sure most of you would say 'no.' Then God says 'Then why will you not bring the whole tithe into the storehouse?' God is the Owner and when He brings something to me He gives me the way to start and it's called the tithe. I really appreciate Randy Alcorn's analysis – 'the tithe is God getting us started in the financial arena of stewardship and they are God's training wheels.'

I recently read a general survey that the tithe rate among Evangelical professing Christians is that 3.2 percent of them tithe. That means almost 97 percent of them rob God almost every Lord's Day. Am I saying that or did God say that? I have to be faithful to God's Word. You don't rob Peter to pay Paul, you don't rob God to pay Peter and Paul. That is what is before us. But now I want to go to the positive side of this.

When I'm giving and bringing the tithe to the storehouse I am bringing an act of worship before the Lord. Secondly, God even made it an element of worship. I understand online giving and why people do it which I'm grateful for but here's my problem with it. I know there is one moment in every worship service when you place that tithe before Him, stand and give praise to God, you are telling God that He has the first tenth because He has the other nine tenths and this tells Him that He has you. He not only owns everything but He owns you and you want to tell Him that. I am not my own for I have been bought with a price, so glorify God and this is one way we get to do that.

One time a man called me who was planting a church and said 'Pastor, we don't take up the offering during service because we don't want people to think we're there for their money so we let people give on the way out. What do you think about that?' I think I surprised him when I said 'I don't think much of it.' He said 'What?' I said 'That doesn't tell me their problem but it tells me your problem for how you see the offering for you see the offering as a way for the church to get money yet God sees the offering and says it's an element of worship to bring on the first day of the week what you have set apart to give. This is not a moment for you to get money.' This is why during our offering time you will hear 'let's worship God with His tithes and our offerings.' This is a sacred moment in the worship of God.

It is an act and element of worship. It takes preparation for you can't bring the first of your fruits if you have already squandered it. That also requires prioritization. It is given on the first day and it's the first of the offerings. This also requires conviction. This area was really challenging for me when I became a Christian but the key for me was this – it was love to Christ. It wasn't that I was just going to get blessed if I gave but it was I needed to give because of what I received and that was the love of God in Christ. So it was for me getting clarified with the Gospel that brought my stewardship. I realized my lack of stewardship was betraying my lack of belief that all that I had, I had received.

Then that led to anticipation of what God would do with it because this is the only area He says to test Him in. Then I started to hear of its effects and how and what the Lord was doing it. All of that began to get me pretty excited about it and that's what I long for you. So here are my takeaway from this study.

The takeaway is that lifestyle stewardship is a blessing from God that continually allows a Christian to be blessed by Christ through the Gospel and be a blessing for Christ with the Gospel. The Gospel gets more and more real to you as you exercise stewardship because it's only the Gospel that will motivate you, drive you, empower you and excite you to give. Because stewardship allows you with the Gospel to be a blessing to others I invite you look at your financial area. I don't want to show up on Sundays and sometimes tip God nor do I want to have a view that God owns ten percent and I own ninety percent. I want to understand that God is the proprietary Owner and He has entrusted this to me. I don't want to be like the prodigal son where it's all about me. I want to tell God with His tithe from the beginning that it's all about Him.

So I invite you to the stewardship journey. It's a hard dynamic of discipleship to start but once you do you will get excited. I would like to share with you from my life my profile in

stewardship. Maybe you will find yourself somewhere in these seven steps. This happened after I became a Christian and my wife would say to me ‘honey have you ever thought about the tithe?’ She came out of the womb tithing. My first response to her was ‘There is no way we can do this.’ This moved me to conviction over a period of time. Now I believe there is no way we can’t do it.

My first step was being moved to conviction to tithe. My second step was I going to start doing this but I’m really going to do something that looks like this. Maybe my wife will be quiet about this if I do something that looks like this tithe thing. I would give \$10 because I had rationalized 10 – tithe – tenth. Then she explained to me that was not a tithe. Step three was that I know God calls me to test Him in this area so we’ll just try it for this year. This led to step four which was ‘Wow!’ ‘Honey, don’t forget to tithe this year.’ Step five was incredulity – ‘honey I can’t believe how blessed this is! This led to step six – I am really enjoying this and seeing what God does with it. Step seven was ‘honey can you believe what’s happening?! Let’s make sure our kids learn about this tithe earlier than we did.’ By the way, what about that alms offering and faith promise? Oh the joy of stewardship!

It is hard to begin but it brings incomparable joy when it has been embraced. I invite you to see that the Lord is good. It is really more blessed to give than to receive. It is blessed to receive but it’s even more blessed to give. Take a few moments in prayer on this matter of stewardship. Consecrate your giving to the Lord. Many of you have come prepared. Pray over what you are giving. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Lord, how can I not waste my life but use my time wisely as a citizen of the Kingdom, a soldier, a servant, a saint, a sinner saved, and a student of the Word? God, help me take this glorious resource of time as a steward beginning with the Lord’s Day. Then help me with the talents You have given me and the spiritual gifts You have given which You have already uncovered in these passions in my life, where will my ministry be in the body of Christ? You could be a foot, a hand, a mouth or an ear. Put me in that body Lord, and I’ll bring myself to it. God here is the whole tithe in worship. I’ll trust You with it and I won’t try to do it by seeing if the tithe is left over for it will be first because You gave first to me that indescribable gift of Your Son, for we pray this in Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Power Point

THE QUOTATION

Three Possibilities

Three Affirmations

LIFE TAKEAWAY

Lifestyle stewardship is a blessing from God that continually allows a Christian to...

- Be blessed by Christ through the Gospel
- Be a blessing for Christ with the Gospel

The Stewardship Journey