

IX. Christian Stewardship in Biblical Perspective
Lifestyle Stewardship
“Found Faithful”
I Corinthians 4:1–2
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November 7, 2021 • Sunday Morning Sermon

This is the Word of God, inspired, inerrant, and infallible. I Corinthians 4:1–2 says [1] *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. [2] Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.*

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

I’m entering into my 22nd year here at Briarwood and it was not an easy decision for me. In fact, I turned down the privilege a number of times before coming and people have asked me why. There were a number of daunting things about coming here in 1999 as the second senior pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian Church that caused the previous ‘no’s.’ Yet some of those daunting things actually became the reason for my ‘yes.’ One of those daunting things was Briarwood currently had a pastor’s wife who was vivacious and whose finger prints were all over Briarwood, who has a son who would control the sound system while I would be preaching, has a daughter who is married to their premiere church planter and has a daughter who could be found anywhere her mother is not plus where her mother is as she vivaciously leads dramatic movements throughout the church. They also have another son in law who is an elder and would be involved in the deciding of how long I would stay there. Then I would follow the founding pastor ‘Saint Frank’ being there 40 years, a father in the faith to me as well as a mentor. As I thought of all of that I remember thinking ‘Who is going to do that??’ As I was saying all that to my accountability group Sandy Wilson looked at me and said “Well Harry, only a fool would do that and I think you’re the most qualified guy in the PCA.”

Another daunting thing was I knew and learned from Briarwood that they gave 50 percent to God’s people for church planting and revitalization, evangelism, missions, benevolence and mercy. In other words, they gave .50 cents of every dollar. At Christ Covenant where I was before Briarwood they were at 33 percent and that was daunting enough for me. Then I found out that Briarwood had an Every Member Commitment season and we did not have that at Christ Covenant so that was new and quite challenging to me. I cannot tell you what those two things have meant to me in my life. As of this last session meeting Briarwood is planting 18 churches in North America and 25 churches internationally. This is what we have the opportunity to do nationally through the Every Member Commitment and internationally through the Faith Promise giving. It is so exciting, encouraging and overwhelming that I have the privilege to be a part of that and that we have the privilege to walk through it together.

As I read this text from I Corinthians 4 some of you probably remember that I used this text to start us in a series called Lifestyle Stewardship Found Faithful. I didn’t get to finish the series but said I’d be coming back to it as I stopped the series two years ago when we had a mission’s conference. Then something interesting happened – COVID-19 hit. Ever since then I have felt as a pastor to address the preaching of God’s Word trying to help people in this season in the culture that has certainly invaded and presented itself to the church. I have also thought about how we would think through these last few months Biblically, not politically or sociologically, and respond in a way that would honor Christ as I have tried to say, faithfully

without fear, prudent without panic, not self-righteously but righteously and Godly in this present age and trusting God without tempting God.

There was a reason I went to the Apostles' Creed and focused on the intermediate state of what happens when we die during that pandemic season. Then there was a specific reason we went to that monumental, majestic text on the Gospel of God in the book of Romans after the creed series, which we will going back to in the first of next year (2022). Now, this becomes the opportunity for me to come back to thematic commitment to Lifestyle Stewardship that we have had as come to this Every Member Commitment Sunday and you are about to find out why in particular.

Personally, the doctrine of stewardship has been of inestimable value, the Biblical doctrine of stewardship in my personal life and here is why. I think personally and pastorally there is no other doctrine in Scripture that is more helpful, insightful and reliable for a Christian to find out where they are in relationship to Christ and the Gospel, than the doctrine of Stewardship. It gives you clearly what has your heart. It displays for us if we look in the mirror where our heart is, our life is, where Christ is in our life, where we are with Christ and it has all kinds of measurements out there for us. I just need to look at my calendar, my checkbook, what brings me joy in life and that begins to tell me where my heart is.

The first two years of my life, after I became a Christian, which coincided with the first two years of my married life, were spent trying to catch up with Cindy, my wife, Biblically, theologically and in so many different ways because she was so far ahead of me then. One of the areas was in stewardship and that was an area I saw myself so far short in. Every now and then I wanted to get ahead of her so I found out that really serious Christians in 1970 and 1971 had a life verse. I thought I would get ahead of my wife in this and while we were in Greenville, North Carolina I landed on a life verse which was Matthew 6:33 which says [33] *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.* When I got home from class that day, I couldn't wait till our family devotions to tell my wife I had a and ask her if she had one. Of course, she had one but my next thought was that my life verse was going to be better than hers and so I asked her what hers was and hers was the same as mine, can you believe that? She copied me and didn't even know it was my life verse (smile).

Then I found out something about my life verse for this verse is found in the middle of what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, which is the constitution of the Kingdom of God – how we live in the Kingdom in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. We are in the now – we're in the Kingdom – but not yet in its fullness because we're still in the kingdoms of this world. So how do you live for the Kingdom of God as His people, as royal ambassadors for Christ, while you are in the kingdoms of this world? I found this out from the verses right in front of Matthew 6:33 and it starts like this;

Matthew 6:19–21 says [19] *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, [20] but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. [21] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

Where you put your treasures not only indicate your heart but it also instructs your heart so I realized there are two life views and stewardship which one is running our life. We either see life and the resources as all about us or Him. I understand there is nothing wrong with an IRA or a retirement account, but the point is what are you doing with your resources and what is your point of reference, your focus, your fixed point? Christ says in Matthew 6 not to lay up for yourself, for it's not about you and me. We are to lay up our treasures in heaven. In other

words, instead of taking the things of this world, orienting your life using them for yourself, you seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness – God will not be a debtor to any man – and all these things will be added to you. It was that whole dynamic that took hold of my life.

Since I'm reminiscing here, I did a series back in the early 2000s titled "The Five Ships of the Christian Armada." The five ships were worship, leadership, fellowship, discipleship and stewardship and these were the dynamics of the Christian life and how crucial this is in our Christian life. So how do you embrace stewardship as a lifestyle?

How is it that Paul wanted to be identified in this world? Paul says in I Corinthians 4:1, *[1] This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.* He wanted to be identified with Christ – my identity is Christ – and when you see me (Paul) think servant – servant of Christ. The Greek word for servant/slave is *doulos*. Notice Paul doesn't identify himself apart from Christ but with Christ. Notice Paul doesn't identify himself with Christ from his sins before Christ. Paul doesn't say 'think of me as terrorist of Christ, Christian killer for Christ, church destroyer for Christ.' No, those things he had confessed and repented of, he left behind, nor did he say 'think of me as Pharisee for Christ.' Remember the adjective controls the noun. When Paul says to think of him as Christian he says 'don't put anything in front of it.' Paul says in Philippians 1:21, *[21] For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

As I grew in grace and have been growing in grace, whenever God shows me a sin and convicts me of its sinfulness, the last thing I want for people to do is to identify me with that sin. I want to ask God for the grace that forgives me of that sin and to help me kill that sin in thought, word and deed. I love my country and I'm like the Reformers who said 'Give me Scotland or I die' which I'm for but Paul doesn't say 'when you regard me think of me as a Jewish Christian.' No, his life is in Christ, Christ is his life and he is identified with Christ. Paul's calling is a servant of Christ. Paul is a saint for Christ but he wants people to see him as someone who is there to serve out of love for Christ because this Christ has served him. I love Him because He first loved me (I John 4:19) and when He loved me, He set me free so that now it is no longer about me. We don't lay up things for ourselves, now I'm a servant of Christ.

What is your vocation as a servant of Christ? You are a steward. Paul's stewardship was built around his calling as an Apostle. He had been entrusted with Divine revelation, the mysteries of God. He was part of giving us the fulfillment of God's Word. We are stewards in our servanthood. How do you know that you are making progress, that Christ is your life, you are a servant of Christ and you are living that out as a steward? There will be a verbal give away, a vocabulary indicator, for you quit referring to anything as yours. Stewards own nothing, they are owned. Servants own nothing, they are owned. We have been bought with a price and it is no longer we who live but Christ that lives in us (I Corinthians 6:20, Galatians 2:20).

Now the mind is replaced by His. It is not my business, it's His. We don't think of Briarwood as our church, it's His and we're just servants – stewards for we have been given gifts. I don't own my wife, Cindy. I have been granted the privilege to serve Christ as her husband. My children aren't mine, they are His. Our house isn't ours, it's His. There is your give away as to your progress in discipleship.

As we go into next year stewardship will stay with us but we are bringing a focus. When I started the series two years ago on stewardship, I said there were three ways I wanted you to think about stewardship. One is to be a steward of your relationship for Christ. Two, be a steward of your responsibilities for Christ and thirdly, be a steward of your resources for Christ. In this study we will look closer at three of those resources – time, talents and treasure – and I

want you to think bigger on stewardship. I want to be a Christ honoring servant who stewards my responsibilities in life, and where do I start? Every place you took a vow before God, prioritize that. For me, I took an ordination vow. We took church membership vows. There are baptismal vows. There are marriage vows and this becomes a stewarding responsibility and a stewarding relationship. Wherever you take a sacred oath, that is a priority – in responsibilities and relationships. I want to be a steward of my resources. We all have the same 24 hours in a day, now what are we going to do with it? Will we steward it as servants of Christ or will we use it for ourselves?

What about talents? There are two types of talents. In this coming year I want to do a deep dive on talents, one part of it in particular. Not so much your mental and physical talents that you have by virtue of creation, but I want to do a deep dive on what every single one of you have that is unique. We see this in I Peter 4:7–11 which says *[7] The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. [8] Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. [9] Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. [10] As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: [11] whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To Him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

God's grace has uniquely fashioned a spiritual gift for every single one of you. So, in the coming year we will focus in on spiritual gifts through our Lifestyle Stewardship series. I am calling it “3-D Body Life” in spiritual gifts. As Christians, we are members of the body of Christ and every one of us has a place that is non-duplicated by anyone else. You have a unique, sovereignly, designed gift that no one else has and every one of you are important. I want us to **discover** our spiritual gift, take steps to **developing** our spiritual gifts and then start **deploying** your spiritual gift either in ministry from Briarwood outside or ministries within. That will depend on your gifts.

There will be six passages of Scripture that I want you to be thinking about. One will be the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30). Another will be the parable of the minas (Luke 19:11–27). You will find out what a mina is, why it's there and it's not the same parable as the talents, although some think so. The other four texts will be I Peter 4:7–11, Ephesians 4:1–16, I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. Those will be the key texts for spiritual gifts as the first two texts on stewardship set us up.

This is very important to me because you can't discover and deploy your spiritual gifts without getting committed to discipleship. You have to get into not only large group but small group discipleship. Preaching as a large group triggers discipleship but small groups bring about life on life discipleship. This has to filter down into the communities and small groups. I know this will enhance our disciple making which is what the church is called to do – to make disciples until Jesus comes again (Matthew 28). That is where we are headed with this but I want to give some final thoughts in this study about basic principles of stewardship of time, talents and treasure.

The first thing is that your identification is Christ. You are in Christ, Christ is in you and you want people to see you as a servant. You carry that servanthood out by being a steward. We own nothing, He owns everything because He owns us and we have a metric to measure. We have an objective to achieve as servant stewards. Our objective is to be found faithful. Found is out there in the future when Paul writes, so what is he anticipating? He is anticipating the

coming of Christ – when we all appear at the Judgment Seat, as believers we stand with a stewardship judgment. Christ, who is our Judge and Savior, has already given us the verdict there as innocent, justified – saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – but we want to hear something from Christ at this point. Paul in this I Corinthians 4 text is sending us back to Jesus and at this stewardship judgment we want to hear from Jesus, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’ We want to be found faithful.

Let’s say you are at the school yard that your child is playing at but they don’t know you are there and you over hear a conversation between your child and another one that goes something like this; The friend says to your child “What kind of daddy do you have? What kind of mother do you have? Your granddad?” What do you want to hear your child say? What if you heard them say ‘Ah, mediocre.’ I understand that you don’t highly anticipate hearing perhaps something great till years later, but you want to hear them say you are a good and faithful parent. Perhaps you haven’t done well, then let’s start today.

How can you be a good steward of your time, your talents and your treasures? Here are three takeaways from this. One is what I call the principle of maximization. How do you maximize your stewardship? You do this through Gospel discipleship. When the Gospel gets hold of your heart, your stewardship flourishes. When you know what it means to be saved by Christ in the relentless, unstoppable, irresistible love of Christ then you love Him and when you love Him you keep His commandments. What doesn’t maximize stewardship is guilt. I have some good guilt illustrations, but guilt always minimizes for people do just enough to shut the preacher up. I think guilt does have a purpose for it gets our attention but it’s not motivation. Maximizing stewardship comes when you see the love of Christ for you, who gave everything, for He surrendered all to save you and me. All to Him I owe.

I praise His Name for what He has done and I know it is grasping the Gospel and I believe stewardship is a good metric to tell ourselves how much we understand the Gospel, in terms of how we are living with our time, talents and treasure. Lifestyle stewardship is the result of being laid hold of and disciplined by the Gospel of saving grace in Christ. Not only do I not own anything but you realize that you are not your own. Everything that I have is from Him. I Corinthians 15:10 says *[10] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*

If I Corinthians 6:19–20 which says *[19] Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, [20] for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body,* is true, which it is, then how in the world can I treat the things that He has entrusted to me as if I own them? I just need to go to His Word and be led by His Spirit as to how to deal with them rightly.

The second takeaway is the principle of maturation. God has given you some excellent instruments to help you maximize and these are what I call the Divinely designed training wheels of stewardship which are beginning points. A Divinely designed training wheel for the stewardship of time is the Lord’s Day. Jesus says in Mark 2:27–28, *[27] And He said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. [28] So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”* Why? It sets the template for every day. The Lord’s Day sets the foundation, the capitalization and the motivation for every day. Stewardship is worship and the Lord’s Day helps me govern every day. The opposite is true where if I can’t get the Lord’s Day right every thing else will be hit and miss. The Lord’s Day is an asset He has given to you.

A second asset for your talents is the cultivation of joy. When you begin to steward your spiritual gifts (by discovering, developing and deploying it) then you will find out at another whole level that it is more blessed to give than to receive. It's more joyful to minister than to be ministered to. It doesn't mean I can't have joy to have ministry in my life – Praise God! But when I really begin to get the joy is when I use the gift God has given me to serve Him in the lives of others.

A third asset has to do with the finances and it's simple – tithe. The tithe is the training wheels to get you started, not the pinnacle. God tells us in Malachi 3:8, *[8] Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions.* During our worship service in the context of worship, we are not going to rob God for we are going to bring into the storehouse, God's tithe and our offerings. God is teaching me that the tithe is His, setting up the training wheels where I can understand I live everything else to me as if it's His. How would He have me deal with the other 90 percent (the tithe is 10 percent)? People will tell me that when they make a little more money they will give more and my response is 'no, you won't for I am living proof of that.' If you can't be faithful in little you won't be faithful in much (Luke 16:10), you will just have more reasons not to be. Being found faithful in the tithe sets everything up as to how to be faithful in your home, retirement, car, bank account, etc. and how to use all of that in way that honors the Lord and in a way that is consistent with His Word.

The third takeaway is to avoid minimization. Here is the tendency – we get the training wheels and we think that's the end instead of the beginning. God gets 10 percent but the other 90 percent is mine – no! The tithe was set up to teach what to do with the 90 percent. The Lord's Day was there to teach us about the 10 percent. That's where we start not stop and that you have glorious movement that is growing year by year by year.

If we understand that stewards own nothing and the key to surrendering all is to surrender yourself then you will be growing consistently in Christ. We will never understand surrendering all until we surrender ourself. I love the hymn *I Surrender All* for we sang it all the time growing up but I won't surrender all and I haven't surrendered anything until I surrender to Him. Maybe you are reading this today and you haven't surrendered yet to the One who surrendered everything to go to the cross and laid it aside to save you from your sins. If you would like to pray with someone to commit your life to Christ, please call us at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 for we'd love to do this with you.

For those who have surrendered to Him, how is God leading you in this season as we grow in the grace of stewardship – getting insights to where we are in our life, growing by God's grace. I want you to not only consecrate your giving in prayer but I want you to consecrate yourself. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I love Your Word. I love to sing Your Word and I love the truth of Your Word when it's read, preached and sung. How we love that truth in Your Word that little is much when God is in it (Matthew 14:17). We see what You have done with the five loaves and two fishes. We see what You did with an alabaster vile. We see what you have done in the salvation of a tax collector. Father, we are a very ordinary people who live in an ordinary place and as much as we love it, we serve a God who is glorious and great and You delight to do extraordinary things through ordinary people in ordinary places, as they are found faithful – servants and stewards who belong to Christ and everything they have they know is Christ's. So now God, what these

brothers and sisters now place, we place with anticipation of what You are going to do in it, with it at Briarwood in Birmingham, Alabama, North America and the world and rejoice in the anticipation of it. Even now would You being to fill Your people with joy – O the glorious stewardship and blessing that comes with giving for it's even greater than receiving. So we who have received much now give what You have entrusted to us, looking forward to what You will do as You indwell it and as You use it, for I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.