

“Account Ability”

Dear Friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in the third (and final) week of our series on stewardship. We've taken on the topics of our time, our money, and (today) how we use our abilities. In the process, we've been holding up the challenge (for each of us) to being praying about where it is God is leading.

What does God want me to do with my time? How does God want me to use (and manage) my money? And how do my abilities, the gifts I've been given, play into what God wants me to do with my life?

Those are the questions we've been asking. And we've been asking them for four basic reasons. One, because beginning here today and, then again, next week, we're being challenged to make commitments in how we will use what we have been given (in this coming year) for the sake of Christ and his Church; in particular, in the areas of worship and how we're planning to use our material blessings.

Two, because (beginning here today) we're also putting in front of you a list of the opportunities there are (here are at the church) for getting involved, as well as ways you might be able and willing to serve. (We'll say more about that in a few moments.)

Three, because beginning next week we'll be kicking off a “40 Days of Prayer” challenge, where we'll be seeking God's will not only for our own lives individually, but also for our shared life together. Next week's message will help shape what those 40 days are all about.

And four, we're doing this series on stewardship (and here's the bottom line), because how we live as stewards of the things God has given (and entrusted) to us has a direct connection with and impact upon how faithful we are as disciples of Jesus.

That's what we're doing in these three weeks, what this series is all about. And that's why (when it comes to stewardship), how we use our time, our money, and our abilities, we need to be in prayer. We need to be seeking God's will. Rather than (sitting down) and telling God what we're going to do, how we're going to serve him, we need to be (stepping up) and asking God what he wants us to do, where and how he wants us to serve...and there's a big difference.

You see, stewardship, in its truest sense, and I think this is where (so many) people get confused. They hear the word “stewardship” and their minds immediately go either to their wallets, or to the things the church does or is (trying to do), or to whatever else they think the church needs, and that's where it stops.

But that's not stewardship. That's not what this is all about. In fact, I'd go so far as to say (here this morning) that I honestly don't care (as far as St. Timothy's is concerned) about what you do with your time, your money or your abilities. (I really don't.) What you do (or choose not to do) is not up to me to decide, to figure out. It's your life. What happens in your life as a follower of Jesus is between you and Jesus. That's not mine to decide. Nor is it the ultimate question.

What I do care about and what is the ultimate question, and why we're spending the time we are (in these three weeks) is because of the connection there is between your own personal stewardship, the way you manage what you've been given, and what God has saved you for and designed you (from the very start) to be about. That's stewardship. And that's why we're spending the time we are.

Today it's about our abilities, about our “Account Ability”, about the account we will all be (called to give) to God, when it comes to the gifts God has given to us.

Let's start today with a simple question. As you think about your own stewardship, about what you think God wants in your life more than anything else, what do you think he wants, more than anything else? Is it your time? Is it your money? Is it that you use the abilities he has given you for his purposes?

That's what this series is about: Time Management, Money Matters, and (today) Account Ability. Certainly there must be something in those three that matters to God? What do you think he wants more than anything else?

Now, before you answer that question, let's take a step back (from this series) and think about the calling each of us has been given. Before looking at our abilities and how we're going to offer what we have (in this coming year) to what God wants to do in us and through us, let's start with our calling. What was it that we

were called to do, before we consider what we are called to do? What do you think Jesus wants more than anything else?

Let's talk (for a moment) about what he said. Our gospel reading today, from the gospel of Mark, it's a familiar passage; one we've heard (many times) before. Perhaps so often that we miss what it says. Do you remember what it says?

It's the story of the calling of the first disciples. Mark, chapter one: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent (Jesus said) and believe the good news." In other words, there's no tomorrow. The time to respond is today. You can't put off what can't be put off. When God is calling, it's time to respond.

And that's exactly what happens. Jesus calls; by the Sea of Galilee, Simon and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the lake. "Come, follow me (Jesus said) and I will make you fishers of men." At once (it says) they left their nets and followed him.

And then again, it happens. This time with James and John, out in a boat. "Without delay" (it says) "they left their father Zebedee in the boat and followed Jesus."

Now, let's go back to the question. As you think about your own stewardship, about what you think God wants in your life more than anything else, what do you think he wants, more than anything else? Is it your time? Is it your money? Is it that you use the abilities he has given you to use? Or is it something else? Is it something more?

What did Jesus say? He said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." He said, "Come, follow me, and I'll teach you (and show you) what you are to do."

Do you know what I think happens for (far too many people) when it comes to stewardship, and why they get so confused about what it's all about? It's because they've misunderstood the calling. They've never (finally) understood what Jesus wants.

They hear the word stewardship and immediately their minds go to their wallets or to paying the pastor's salary, or to teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir. Whatever it is, that's where it goes. But it's not where it starts, and it's certainly not what Jesus wants.

I'd be the first to tell you that those are good things. Singing in the choir, teaching Sunday school, paying the pastor? Why would I argue with that? I wouldn't. I'd be a fool. But that's not what Jesus wants. It's not what you've been called to do.

What he wants, what you've been called to do, is to follow him. That's what he wants. That's the calling he has placed on your life. "Follow me (he said) and I will help you catch people." Follow me (he said) and I'll show you and teach you (and even empower you) to do what I want you to do."

Do you know what I think happens, what so many good-intentioned followers of Jesus do? I think what happens is that they read those verses, they hear the calling, and then, instead of responding to the calling, they jump straight ahead to the task. And maybe not to the task of "catching people", (it might not be their gift), but to whatever it is they think God has gifted them to do.

(The rational goes something like this.) "I'm a Christian. I belong to St. Timothy's. Here comes the offering plate. I'll put in my fair share, maybe a bit more. The lights are still on, pastors look happy. It's all good." (And that's stewardship.)

Or maybe something like this: "I'm a believer. I know God wants some of my time. I go to church, some of the fellowship events, once in a while to class. That about covers it." (That's stewardship.)

Or how about this: "I'm a Christian. This place is my home. We all do our part. I'll sing or I'll teach or I'll serve as an usher (whatever it is); bring a turkey or two next week. If not, at least sit next to one." (That's stewardship.)

Now, I want to be careful here, because the approach I just described was a bit flippant. I'm not (in any way) suggesting (here this morning) that any one of us takes a less-than-serious approach to what we're doing. Nor am I implying that the things I mentioned aren't important. They are. Stewardship involves everything we just said...and more.

It's the more that I think gets so often missed, and that's what I want you to hear. Our calling (as Christians) is to Someone and not to something. Your calling (as a believer) is to be a follower of Christ, and not to serve (in a ministry) or to give (your money) or to offer (your time) for his Church. That's not your calling. (It's not what you're called to do.) Your calling is to follow Jesus. My calling is to commit my life to

Christ. To do everything I can (with everything I have) to be as faithful as possible (in my life) to the One who gave his life for me.

That's my calling. That's your calling. "Come, follow me (Jesus said), and I will make you into what I want you to be." And that leads to stewardship. That leads to the wide variety of gifts (we've been given) and to the wide range of ways there are to offer our lives to Christ.

But you need to square up the first before you tee up the second. You need to make following Jesus your first (and highest priority) and then (from there) pay attention to whatever the specific calling might be in your life.

But if you haven't figured out the one, you'll never be at peace with the other. Stewardship is a response to what God has done for us. Stewardship is the result of a life that's given to Christ.

Give your life to Christ and everything else falls into place. It really does. When Jesus is first, it's not a question how much time I'm going to give. My whole life is his. That's not the question. It's more a question of how he wants me to use it and to spend it.

When Jesus is first, I don't need to figure out how much I think I can give. I look at what he says, start with a tithe, and go from there. That's not a legalistic approach to the Christian life. That's a life-giving approach in response to his word. If he's my Lord, I trust what he tells me. If he's my Lord, I do what he says.

And when Jesus is first in my life, it's not so much a matter of looking at what the church needs, ways there are to serve, as it is a matter of looking at what Jesus wants, how I've been gifted, and using what I've been given for him.

Get the one right and the other is automatic. Put the first first, and the second falls into place. And if it's hard, you can't figure out (the task), what Jesus wants you to do, then stop looking at what he wants you to do and go back to what he first called you to do.

Just over a week ago, Pastor Judy and I, along with three others, Joe Hill, Elizabeth Selbo, and Michael Stamos, we attended an NALC Mission Festival in Columbus, Ohio. It was an encouraging time. It was a fruitful time. There were a number of things that reinforced how (as a congregation) we're on the right track. This whole discipleship thing, we need to keep it going.

One of the speakers was talking about our calling, what Jesus ultimately wants. Do you know what he wants? (Do you know what he said?) He said that Jesus wants us to be FAT. Jesus wants us to be FAT.

I thought, "This is Cool! I'm in! What time's lunch. Go Jesus!" That's not what he meant. What he meant was that Jesus wants us to be FAT: (F-A-T) Faithful, Available, and Teachable.

Faithful: we're called to be faithful in our following. Every day, every moment, whatever we're doing or saying, all throughout life, our calling is to follow. And so we follow. We go to church. We read our Bibles. We spend time in prayer. We serve others. The goal isn't church or the Bible or prayer or even serving. It's Jesus. It's following him. We're called to be faithful.

Available: we're called to be available to Jesus. What do you want me to do? Where do you want me to go? How do you want me to live? And not just on Sundays, when we're here, but all throughout the week when we're out there. We're called to build and to schedule and approach (how it is) we use our lives around what Jesus wants to do in us and through us for the sake of those for whom he died. We're called to be available.

And then we're to be teachable: we're called to be teachable. That means that we can't sit back and think that we have no talents or abilities, there's nothing we can offer. (It's not true.) Every one of us has been gifted. Every one of you is gifted. And even if you weren't (which isn't the case), then Jesus promises to teach us what we need to know (which is). We're called to be teachable.

That's what Jesus wants: FAT people. He wants people who are faithful, available, and teachable. Make yourself faithful, available, and teachable for Jesus, and you won't ever have to worry about how and where you might serve.

So, here's what I want you to do. I want you to ask yourself one simple question and, then, based upon how you answer it, ask yourself a second, and then respond accordingly. Here's the question. Is Jesus first in your life? Is Jesus first in your life? Are you following him? Is he your first priority? Is he number one in your life?

If he is, then ask yourself a second. Have you prayed about what he wants? Have you spent time in prayer around the commitments you are planning to make? If you have, then make them. If you haven't (and even if you're ready today), then take them home (your financial commitment, your worship commitment, the

insert that offers a number of ways to serve) and pray first. If he's first, then first ask him what he wants. And then move ahead.

If he's not first, if there's still something or someone else ahead of him (in your life), then spend time praying about what needs to change (in your life) to make that change in your life.

This isn't about paying the bills, singing in the choir, making sure the pastors get what they need. It's about Jesus. It's about following him. It's about putting him first. Because when he's first, and we follow, everything else follows.

One final thought. As you consider your commitments for the coming year, it doesn't matter: our time, our money, and our abilities. It's all the same, with all three. Don't spend your time worrying about what you don't have, but focus (your attention) on what you do. Because what you have, the world does not have. Don't ever forget who it is we follow...and why.

Let's pray. Gracious God, we give you thanks for the calling we have in Jesus and for the many ways in which you have gifted us. We ask for you to guide us and lead us and show us what you want for us to do. Lord, more than anything, we want to follow. Enable us to follow that we might also be empowered and ready to serve. In your name we pray. Amen.