

**“Stewardship: Opening the Possibilities”**

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in the second week of a series on stewardship, what it means (for us), as Christians, to be stewards (or managers) of the things God has entrusted to us.

Now, we're doing this (in part), obviously, in preparation for our annual stewardship commitments beginning next week, where we'll be committing ourselves to the work of Christ's Church (through St. Timothy's) in the year ahead. We're also doing this as a way (as we do every year) of remembering and reclaiming our calling to be faithful with what we've been given. We all need encouragement.

The topics we're taking on (in these three weeks) are nothing new. This is not the first time we have talked about how God has called us to use our time, talent and treasure. This isn't some (new idea) this year. At the same time, we are coming at it (this year) from a different direction. Instead of talking about time, talent, and treasure, we're talking about priorities, possibilities, and possessions.

Now, it could easily be argued that these three, from either direction, are not much different. Ultimately, they're going after the same bottom line, right? What we do with our time has to do with the priorities we set. How we use our talents is not much different from what's possible for us (as God's people) as we use our lives for him. And certainly, you could make the argument that treasure and possessions are pretty much the same thing. It's just a different word to talk about what we do with our money.

Now, I don't want to get into whether or not that's the case. Potato, patato, tomato, tomato; you say it differently, but it's all the same. Maybe so. Point well taken. It may well be.

At the same time, as subtle as the differences are, in their subtlety, they truly are different. How we use our time is one thing. Aligning our priorities with God's (in the use of our time) is another. How we use our talents can be rather straightforward. (We are all gifted people.) Discovering the possibilities (God has in mind) for us (as we use our gifts) for him is a whole new thing.

And treasure versus possessions? I'll leave that topic to Pastor Jonna next week. (I don't want to step on whatever might be coming.) But (I will say) that it's one thing to have treasure and to use it for God's purposes. It's another to have possessions and, in spite of what we might be doing with them, to be possessed by them. I see it happening all the time...and it's never good.

I'd encourage you in these next weeks, if not challenge you, to set aside time to pray about your stewardship. (Set aside time to pray.) For all of us, we need to be in prayer. We need to be seeking God's will. We need to be finding out and figuring out what God wants us to do when it comes to how we are to use the gifts we've been given.

Rather than (sitting down) and telling God what we're going to do, how we've decided to (give back to him) in the coming year, what we need to be doing is asking God what he wants (from us), and where and how he is calling us to step up...and there's a big difference.

You see, stewardship, in its truest sense, (and then I want to get to our topic for today), I honestly 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. For many, that's stewardship.

Let me tell you something. That's not stewardship. That's not what this is about. What this is about is how serious we are in our relationship with Christ. How trusting we are when it comes to using what he has entrusted to us for his purposes.

That's what he's done. Everything you have (in your life) is a gift from God. Everything you are (in your life) is a result of what he has given to you. What you do with it, how you use it, how you manage it (as a steward) for him, says worlds about how serious you are and how trusting you have become.

The stewardship question is not a matter of what you have. (Set that question aside.) It has nothing to do with what you have. It has everything to do with what you do with what you have, how you manage it, how you use it, and whether you are managing it and using it for him.

Today it's all about what's possible. It's about what's possible when we use what we've been given, in ways that open up the possibilities God has in mind.

Let's turn to our story. The story we read today is one of those stories of Jesus (those parables), that is about as practical and straightforward as it gets. It's easy to follow and one to which (almost anyone) can relate.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man going on a journey," (Jesus says), "who called his servants together and entrusted to them his property." To one, five talents; to another, two, and to a third, just one; not equal amounts, but with equal responsibility. And then (it says) the man leaves, and when he leaves, he leaves his servants to take care of that which they had received, and so they do.

Then (it says), "After a long time, the master returned to settle accounts." (And what happens?) Exactly that: he settles accounts. One at a time, the master calls his servants to show him what they'd done with what they had been given.

To the first, his five talents had become ten, and his master was pleased. To the second, his two had become four, and his master approved of what he had done. But to the third, the one who had buried his talent, (stuck it in the ground) and failed to use what he had been given, the master took it away, gave it to the servant with ten, and then threw him out "into the darkness, (Jesus says), where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." In effect, the master said, "You didn't use it. Now you lose it." (End of story.)

The stewardship of our talents: what's "possible" when we entrust them to God. In the story, (in Jesus' day), a talent was a measure of weight, a fixed amount of silver or gold, representing a significant amount of wealth. It was a financial measure. It was a materialistic sum, worth (some have estimated) as much as 20 times the annual salary of the average person. It was a lot of money.

But the "talent" in Jesus' story represents far more than our money. It includes our money, but it goes much deeper. In the truest sense, it represents us. It represents you.

Think of it this way. God has made an investment in your life. God has made an investment in you. And not only has he made an investment, but his investment is substantial. It's worth more than you might think.

Your gifts, your talents, your abilities – who you are and what you're able to do. The person you've become. The person you will one day be. Your personality, your sense of humor, your way of thinking, how you come at life – they're all investments God has made in you. Everything you are is an investment of God. Everything!

And, one day, he's coming back. (One day, the master will return.) And when he returns (just like in the story), he'll be asking for an accounting of what you've done, of how it is you and I have used the investment he's made (in our lives) for him.

I don't know about you, (but for me), this is one of the most challenging stories Jesus ever told. It challenges me in every area of life. My time, my talents, my treasures, my family, my faith, the way I speak the name of Jesus with my friends. If I listen to what Jesus says in this story, there's nothing in my life that is left untouched, nothing in (your life) that is not included.

And it doesn't matter how much you've been given, how talented you are. (We already said that.) Are you a five-talent person? (That's not the point.) Each one received "according to his ability." Are you a two-talent person? (Jesus doesn't care.) There's no favoritism shown to the ones who'd been given more. Are you that one-talent person who wasn't given as much as the others? It doesn't matter.

Jesus isn't rating you on your talents. He simply wants to know how you're using them, how you're managing them, what you're doing with the investment he has made in your life.

The stewardship of our talents: what's "possible" when we entrust them to God. Have you ever thought about that question, about what might be possible (in your life), if your life was (completely) in the hands of God? Have you ever considered (how different it might be), than where it is, if your life was actually given (and belonged) fully to him?

Think of it another way. What would God do with your life, if your life were his to live? What would God plan for your life, if your life were offered (completely and fully) for his plan?

Have you ever thought about that? (If you haven't, you should.) After all, God is the one who put you here in the first place. God is the one who planned your existence from the start. It was God who gave you gifts. It was God who entrusted you with what you have.

Do you think God had a plan when he made his plan? Do you think God knew what he was doing when he did what he actually did? Do you think your gifts are by accident, that it was nothing more than a random choice? Or do you think God was actually thinking about (what he was doing) when he did it? Do you think God actually knew what was possible when he entrusted you with what (might be possible) if you were willing to trust?

I think back on my own life; where I've been, what I've done, the experiences along the way. I think about my high school years and my college years and about the opportunities I had.

I think about getting married and about how that (new chapter) opened up new possibilities. I think about my family. I think about the years when (Mary and I) were raising our kids.

I think about my work, even as a pastor, all of the challenges and opportunities that were there. I think about the relationships that have been developed, the people who have come and gone. I think about where I'm at today, the things I'm facing, and where my life will be in the next five to ten to (God-willing) twenty-five or more years.

It's one of those questions we'll never fully be able to answer, because (in this life) all we can ever see is what we've actually done. There's no way of knowing or finding out what's possible, if (what's possible) doesn't ever happen. We may never know.

What we do know is that God did have a plan when he created us, and he did know what he was doing before and after and while he was doing it. And his plan was not random, but well-purposed and thought out. And so, what's possible (for God) with our lives, all depends on how willing we are to give him control.

It goes back to what Pastor Brian preached on last week, with getting our lives in order and aligning our priorities with his. If our priorities are out of line, then we limit the possibilities. If our priorities don't match with God's, then what's possible (for God) through us, will most likely never happen (in us). In other words, if we don't take what God has given us (and invest it) for him, it's not going to happen.

That's (exactly) what happened with that one-talent servant. He buried what he'd been given in the ground. As a result, nothing happened. He ended up with the same thing (when the master returned) as he had when the master left, even less, because (what he had) was taken away, because he failed to trust.

Do you know what (I think) that means (for us) in this parable? Do you know where I think (that lands) for us in what Jesus is saying to us? I think it lands in whatever place we choose for it to land. I really do.

For example, if I trust God in my marriage and let that trust impact the relationship (I have) with my wife, it'll play out much differently (in our marriage) than if I don't. But I'll never know, unless I trust.

If I put God first in my family and allow the possibilities of what might happen (within my family) to be open to him, all of a sudden, the possibilities open up in ways that never would have been possible had I not. But if it doesn't happen, it's not going to happen.

If I invest my life for God at my school; if I use my life for God at my place of work; if I take what I've been given, if I use what he has entrusted to me? Whatever it is: my retirement, my friendships, my witness for Jesus, the legacy I (one day) hope to leave? Take any area of your life. Put that (area of your life) in the hands of God, invest (the possibilities) you've been given with him, and what's possible (with him) will far exceed what might have otherwise have happened.

We'll never know what's possible, if we stand in the way of the possibilities. We'll never see what God might have done (with our lives), if we never allow him (in our lives) to have control.

But if we get out of the way, and give our lives to him? If we trust his investment and pray for his will to be done?

Do you know how my life has (played out) over the years? Do you know how my decisions have (been made) looking back? The same as yours. One day at a time. One moment and decision at a time. That's all we get. That's all we will ever have.

But when we use what we have, one day at a time, and when we act on what we've been given, one moment and decision at a time, (with our priorities aligned with his), what's possible (for God) in us, goes far beyond what's possible for us on our own.

My challenge to you today is to forget about what's possible for you, and to pray about what's possible through him. Those people (in your life) you've prayed for, keep on praying as you have. (You never know what God will do.)

Those situations about which you've worried, stop worrying and give them to Jesus. He can work in ways you never thought possible. Those places where you've been hesitant to be more open about your faith, try opening up (in ways you never have) and see what God might do. Those gifts you've held back, those abilities you've kept to yourself (in your stewardship); don't hold back; it's time to let go. In all of those areas, in the hands of God, the possibilities are wide open.

One writer has said, "Our life is God's gift to us. What we do with our life is our gift to God." Jesus says, "It will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them."

My friends, we are those servants, and God has entrusted us with what we have. Let's open up the possibilities, by truly opening our lives (and our gifts) to him. Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for the many ways in which you have gifted us, for the many gifts you have entrusted to us. We thank you for our families and our faith, for this church and for the ways in which we are called and gifted to serve.

Lord, we pray that you would work in us to be open to you, that through us you might open new possibilities for us. Help us to trust. Help us to let go of control. Help us to invest what we've been given (individually and together), not for our own personal gain, but for the building of your kingdom, that we might begin to see (in new ways) the possibilities you have in mind. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.