

Christian Stewardship

Part 1 – Principles

Ownership is the cause of all sorts of disputes; George Harrison was sued over ownership of the song “My Sweet Lord” he supposedly wrote.

Britain went to war with Argentina over the Falklands, with China over Hong Kong, and with Spain over Gibraltar.

Little children will fight over the ownership of anything – my brother and I fought over whose side of the bed it was we were sleeping on.

Ownership is something that impacts us all, and so today I want to begin a series of messages on Christian stewardship; we’ll see the connection between that and ownership very quickly.

Definition – Steward – a person entrusted with the management of estates or affairs not his own [Webster’s Dictionary]

In other words, a steward looks after someone else’s property.

A person who has Power of Attorney is a steward. In that capacity, they may have access to another’s bank account and possessions, but ultimately, they are a steward. Those things don’t belong to them personally.

We’re going to begin with four premises which are essential to understand this whole issue of stewardship.

Premise 1 – Everything belongs to the Lord

Ps 24:1 The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein.

There is nothing on this planet that doesn’t belong to God; He is the true owner.

Premise 2 – We have no rights

Despite our 20th & 21st century obsession with personal rights, and legal rights, and marital rights etc, ultimately we have no rights with God.

Rom 9:18-20 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. (19) You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” (20) But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?”

Paul could have answered his rhetorical question and given a reasoned explanation, but instead he decided to tell like it is.

“You don’t have any right to question God.”

Job found this out the hard way. He suffered incredible loss. In one day he lost his oxen and donkeys, his sheep, camels, [all his possessions] servants and sons and daughters. Then he got boils all over his body. Then his wife says, “Curse God and die” [Job 2:9]. Then his three friends come and just to make him feel better, they start blaming him for all that’s happened to him.

And Job begins to question God; he thinks he has a righteous complaint.

Do you know what God says?

“You’re right Job. You’ve got your rights. Am I glad I’ve got you to give Me advice!”

NOT!!!

In Job 38 and 39, God asked Job a whole bunch of questions which he couldn't answer; and we wouldn't be able to either.

Questions like, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?"

"Who determined its measurements?"

"To what were its foundations fastened?"

"Have you commanded the morning since your days began?"

"Have you entered the springs of the sea? Or have you walked in search of the depths?"

"Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Or have you seen the doors of the shadow of death?"

"Have you comprehended the breadth of the earth? Tell Me, if you know all this."

"By what way is light diffused, or the east wind scattered over the earth?"

God asks question after question, and Job can't answer any of them.

And do you know what God is showing him?

That he has no right to question God, because his knowledge is far too limited.

No matter what happens, no matter how we feel we've been treated, we have no rights.

God is supreme.

On Judgment Day, when God pronounces judgment, no one will be able to say, "But listen God, I've got my rights you know."

Our having rights will be news to all of heaven.

Premise 3 – God has the final say

It doesn't matter what you and I think; ultimately what God says stands.

The universe isn't run as a democracy; nobody gets to vote God out or appeal against His decisions.

Because He is all-wise, all-powerful, all-knowing, He is the only one qualified to have the last word.

Premise 4 – We will all one day give an account of everything

Rev 20:11-15 Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. (12) And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. (13) The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. (14) Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. (15) And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

That's pretty heavy duty, but that's what it says in the Bible.

One day, we will all give an account of our stewardship to the Owner.

Everything that has been entrusted to us will come under His scrutiny.

These are the four premises we're basing this series on – if you don't understand them, you will never really understand stewardship.

Now, whenever you talk in church about being a steward, people almost invariably think about money.

But it's a lot more than that, so here are some other areas over which God has made us stewards.

Our talent, intelligence, money, status, power, possessions, our bodies, time, spiritual gifts, our looks.

Six Spiritual Principles Of Stewardship

Principle 1. Authority + responsibility + accountability = stewardship.

This principle shows us the three facets of stewardship.

1. Authority

Note this: it's *delegated* authority.

We have to understand the difference between ownership and stewardship.

Ownership implies that it's my property – stewardship implies that the authority I have has been delegated to me by the real owner.

What we humans call ownership is actually a stewardship; the real owner is God.

To understand this, we need to grasp the significance of delegated authority.

Delegated authority is where I pass on some of my authority to someone else for a specific purpose.

I have the key to the auditorium and the code to turn off the alarm. While I'm away, I can give the keys and the code to someone else. They are now doing something on my behalf. They have authority to enter the building and disable the alarm, but it is a delegated authority.

This same principle holds true with the things God has given us.

But from the day we are born, we instinctively try to claim things as our own. Babies don't have to be taught how to say, "Mine."

When we say "mine", what's important is the attitude behind it as to whether or not it's right.

For instance, if I say, "This is my house and I'll do whatever I like with it, whenever I like." I'm wrong.

But if when I say, "This is my house," I have a genuine sense in my heart that really it's God's property, that's different.

Everything I have – talent, intelligence, money, status, power, possessions, your body, time, spiritual gifts, my looks – ultimately they don't belong to me.

They have been delegated to me as a stewardship – and I have a delegated authority over them

Understanding the real significance of this delegated authority takes a lot of faith.

Mat 8:5-10 – the Roman Centurion understood how delegated authority applied to the spiritual realm.

2. Responsibility [the second part of the equation]

To be responsible means to be answerable for a specific obligation.

That's often very difficult for people to understand these days, because more and more we're being brainwashed with the concept that it's not my fault I did the wrong thing, it's someone else's.

There's the little rhyme: He wrecked his car, he lost his job, and yet throughout his life, he took his troubles like a man. He blamed them on his wife.

Kids blame their parents: "It's not my fault I shot 42 people. When I was 3 years old, my Dad took my Teddy away from me."

Of course, we do affect other people, but what are going to do?

Keep blaming my parents, and their parents, and their parents, till it goes right back to Adam and he's the only one responsible, while all the rest of the human race is innocent?

I don't think so – it doesn't work like that.

I was amused to find these instructions that have been prompted by the tendency to blame others for our own stupidity: **1.** Children's medicine – Do not drive car or operate machinery while using this product. **2.** On American hairdryer – Do not use while sleeping. **3.** Shower cap – Fits one head. **4.** Iron – Do not iron clothes

while wearing them. **5.** Christmas tree – For indoor or outdoor use. **6.** Nut packet on American airline – Open packet, eat nuts. [I was wondering why I was always hungry. I was doing it the other way around.] **7.** Heater – Do not immerse in bath. **8.** On a blanket from Taiwan – Not to be used as protection from a tornado. **9.** On the bottle-top of a flavoured milk drink – After opening, keep upright. **10.** On a British supermarket’s tiramisu dessert – Do not turn upside down (printed on bottom of box). **11.** On a Swedish chainsaw – Do not attempt to stop chain with your hands or genitals. **12.** On frozen dinner – Serving suggestion: defrost.

We get all this rubbish because there’s a big shift away from people being able to take responsibility for their own actions, so organisations have to spell out the obvious to protect themselves from litigation.

But the buck stops here – that’s responsibility.

Authority + responsibility + accountability = stewardship.

3. Accountability

I won’t dwell on this aspect right now because we’re going to look at it later.

But let me give you some words associated with accountability: a reckoning, an explanation, responsibility, liability, answerability.

Authority + responsibility + accountability = stewardship.

Principle 2. We are blessed to be a blessing

Gen 12:1-3 Abraham was blessed for the purpose of being a blessing to others.

The whole purpose of God’s blessing us – and we are so blessed – is that we may in turn also be a blessing to others.

God pours in so that we can pour out.

For instance, the Sea of Galilee is teeming with life because of the water that flows through it. In contrast, nothing can live in the Dead Sea, because the water collects there and its salinity is too high.

God has an expectation that whatever He’s blessed us with – let me remind you of the list: talent, intelligence, money, status, power, possessions, our body, time, spiritual gifts, our looks – we in turn should use them to be a blessing to others and to honour God.

Principle 3. Our character must be equal to or greater than our stewardship responsibility.

We have to ask ourselves the question: Why is it that so many highly gifted individuals – both men and women – have such incredible failures?

Very often it comes back to this principle: Our character must be equal to or greater than our stewardship responsibility.

To understand this, first I need to give you another definition.

Definition: character – the level of our personal integrity.

So for instance, if I have tremendous musical ability [10 on a scale of 1 to 10], I need to have a character rating of 10 to be able to handle that.

If I don’t, I will not be able to handle what God has given me.

And sometimes the very thing God has given us to be a blessing can end up being our downfall, or at the very least contributing to it.

Because with great abilities, comes the temptation to great pride.

Music is a perfect example – many of these people have suffered because they were unable to handle the attention that accompanied their talents – Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain, Keith Moon, Michael Hutchence [INXS], Elvis Presley, Liberace, Peter Allen, Tchaikovsky.

Most of these people died through suicide or killed themselves with STDs, drugs or alcohol.

Lack of character is not always the direct cause of death, but it can still damage your life in other ways.

God can put great abilities and callings in our lives, but ultimately if we don't deal with the character issues, those issues can be our downfall.

John 12:1-6 Judas Iscariot was called to be one of the original apostles, but loved money.

Matt 26:14-15 Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests (15) and said, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?" And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver.

What happened? (1 Tim 6:9-10) But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. (10) For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

He never dealt with his basic love for money, and eventually it came back to destroy his ministry.

I'm reluctant to name names because people can take it the wrong way, but I'm sure you can think of many Christians whose lives and ministries have been seriously damaged because of character issues, whether musicians, preachers, evangelists, pastors, or ordinary people in the church.

Many have been destroyed through sexual misconduct, the lure of riches or pride.

The big three: gals, gold and glory – for women that's guys, gold and glory.

So whatever the level of our stewardship, whatever God has put into our hands, we need to be certain that we are developing the kind of integrity and character that can actually handle it.

We need to understand that what really counts isn't what we do, but who we are.

This is why leaders are often such easy targets – and also why there are specific standards for Biblical leadership laid down in the Bible.

Leaders often have great and obvious giftings, but they don't always develop the integrity needed to handle those giftings.

More and more my prayer is: Lord don't give me any more than what I can handle, but give me the capacity to handle great things.