

Leadership Qualities: Stewardship

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Consider for a moment that everyone on earth has the same amount of time in every day. President or paper boy, housewife or executive, farmer or financier – they all have exactly 24 hours in each day, 168 hours in each week, 525,600 minutes in each year. Some people take that time and build relationships, dream dreams and make plans, cultivate their walk with God, develop new skills and live lives of adventure. Some people watch a lot of TV.

What differentiates people isn't the amount of time available to them, but the manner in which they exercise their gifts and talents within the available time. We can waste time; we can spend time; or we can invest our time wisely. That's what stewardship is about: faithfully developing and using our gifts, talents and resources within the amount of time God has allotted to us.

In every stewardship relationship there are two parties involved: the master who hands out the resources and will one day ask for an accounting; and the steward who is entrusted with the resources and must eventually answer for how they were invested. God is the master; he distributes gifts at his discretion. We are stewards, accountable to him for all that we do with all that we have. Michael Novak puts it like this:

We didn't give ourselves the personalities, talents, or longings we were born with. When we fulfill these – these gifts from beyond ourselves – it is like fulfilling something we were meant to do.... The Creator of all things knows the name of each of us – knows thoroughly, better than we do ourselves, what is in us, for he put it there and intends for us to do something with it – something that meshes with his intentions for many other people.... Even if we do not always think of it that way, each of us was given a calling – by fate, by chance, by destiny, by God. Those who are lucky have found it.¹

¹ Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 18, 38.

Do not rush through this thought. Herein lies the fundamental principle of biblical stewardship – the fundamental principle of all Christianity, in fact: We own nothing. God owns everything; we are simply managers. The Bible says, “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:17-18).

As humbling as this sounds, we don’t bring anything to the table. It’s all God’s. This principle carries some heavy implications. First, since God owns it all, he holds the rights that come with ownership. Since we only have what we have been allowed to have, then we operate primarily in the realm of responsibilities. Hear that clearly: God has rights; we have responsibilities.² God has entrusted us with certain resources, gifts and abilities. These things rightfully belong to him. Our responsibility is to live by that trust by managing these things well, according to his design and desire.

Another implication is that since God owns everything and expects us to manage things according to his plan and purpose, every decision is a spiritual decision. Whether it’s buying a new car or going to the movies, how we use our time and money matters a great deal to God. God demands to be in the loop on every investment, purchase and decision.

The Parable of the Talents

When Jesus taught about his second coming, he drove home one important lesson: Only faithful stewards will be prepared for his return (Matthew 25:14-30). The parable he used to make this point involved three servants who each received a dizzying sum of money from his master before that master departed on a long journey. This is not just an act of generosity; this is an act of

² On this, see Ron Blue, *Master Your Money* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), pp. 17-24.

trust. The master gave each of these servants the opportunity of a lifetime. This was their chance to prove themselves, test their skills and possibly rise to positions of greater influence and responsibility.

Upon his return the master discovered that two of the servants had invested the money, and that one had buried it. He took the greatest gift he would ever be given and buried it in a field, forgetting – or choosing not to believe – that the master would return.

There are a couple of variables in this story. First, the master does not give each servant the same amount of talents. We don't have to look too closely to see that this is just the way things are. Some people have gifts that are publicly celebrated. Others have gifts that are quiet and unseen. Not everyone is gifted in the same way, and that needs to be okay with us. It would be foolish for the one-talent man to pout that he was only given one talent. A talent was equivalent to 15-years' salary! In a day when most people lived day to day, he ought to rejoice that he was given such a great gift.

Jesus makes it clear that the size of the gift is not the important variable. The variable that matters is what each servant does with what he's been given. While the first servant is given more than double what the second servant is given, they are both commended with the exact same words: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness" (vv. 21, 23). In the final analysis, on the day of reckoning, the master will not ask why you didn't invest someone else's gifts. He won't ask what you did with what you didn't have. He will only be concerned with what you did with your gift.

When the servant who had buried the money began offering excuses, the master refused to accept them. Instead, he rebuked the lazy servant and punished him severely. Meanwhile, the

faithful servants enjoyed the rewards they had received for their diligent labor. The master is generous beyond belief, but he is also going to hold his servants accountable. He will reward diligence and faithfulness; he will punish laziness. Here is perhaps the most sobering point of this parable: The third servant is not judged for doing bad things; he is judged for doing nothing. He did not lie or cheat or steal; he simply sat on his hands.

For some reason, we have gotten away from the idea that laziness is that bad. Historically speaking, however, sloth was listed as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Solomon Schimmel points out that sloth is a uniquely Judeo-Christian sin – the only one of the seven not considered a vice by Greco-Roman standards. This is because the Judeo-Christian worldview understands human beings to be responsible to God. Our lives are not merely concerned with self-preservation and self-promotion; we are stewards of what God has given us. To fail in this is a form of stealing from God.³

Leaders are stewards. They manage multiple resources because they direct others in using *their own* resources.

Ownership Has Its Advantages

Let's get this straight: God has no needs, and he did not create the cosmos because he was lonely or bored. Instead, the created order is the overflow of the fountain of love that has always existed within the triune Godhead. As stewards, we participate in a world that derives its being and sustenance from the infinite, personal Creator.

Psalm 104 is a rich poem, extolling the manner in which the created order displays the beauty and glory of the living God. It's filled with expressions of praise, wonder and adoration.

³ Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 193.

All things find their origin and nourishment in the mind and power of the personal and inexhaustible God:

Praise the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty.... He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved....

He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work. He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate – bringing forth food from the earth; wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart. The trees of the Lord are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted....

You bring darkness, as it becomes night, and all the beasts of the forest prowl. The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God....

How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.... These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.

Psalm 104:1, 5, 13-16, 20-21, 24, 27-30

The Lord's splendor and majesty are displayed in the heavenly bodies, as well as in the clouds, winds and lightning. God formed the earth with its oceans and mountains, and the water he provides sustains the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Earth's stately forests and lush vegetation sustain humans and animals; and the sun and the moon differentiate day from night and mark off the seasons. The incredibly rich diversity and abundance of creatures both large and small are a continual source of awe and amazement. All things look to God for their existence, and when he takes away their breath, they die and return to the dust. "Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?" (Psalm 113:5-6).

Paul employs parallelism for emphasis when he says that “For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Corinthians 8:6).

He further addresses the Corinthian believers: “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Jesus owns us both by virtue of creation and of redemption. He is the source of both our biological and spiritual lives. Humans are the apex of God’s created order, but we are still part of that created order. The practical implications of this truth should be evident.

As we mentioned before, the creator has the rights of ownership. God is presented throughout the Bible as the Creator. In fact, the whole book starts with this simple statement: “In the beginning God created” (Genesis 1:1a). He owns everything that he has made, and he made everything that is. This has tremendous ramifications for how we live.

If human life is simply an accident arising from millennia of human history, then we are free agents, accountable to no one but ourselves. But if we were created, then our Creator has full rights of ownership over our lives. These are mutually exclusive propositions. Either we are merely an accident of history and therefore completely at liberty to do whatever we want with our lives, or we are intentionally created beings who will be held accountable to our Creator.

If we buy into the very first sentence of the Bible, we must acknowledge that we are not our own. Our life is a trust given to us by God. We are not worthless or aimless. God has chosen to bring us into being. He did this in purpose, and we can only discover true meaning and fulfillment as we get to know the One who created us. John Calvin was right when he said that no man can know himself unless he first knows God.

When people start believing that they are meaningless accidents, human life becomes cheap. And if human life is cheap, it becomes disposable whenever that's convenient. First the unborn, then the elderly, then the handicapped or others who are viewed as a drain – if they become bothersome, they become expendable. Where does that lead? Where does it stop? History has shown that it progresses to people who are the “wrong color,” the “wrong race” or the “wrong religion.” The most monstrous evils of our time have been built on the assumption that human life happened by accident.

When we open the Bible, we are confronted by God. He is the Creator, and he has the absolute rights of ownership over all things. Missing this is like misaligning the top button on your shirt – nothing else will ever line up. Nothing else in the Bible will make any sense or have any relevance if we miss the fact that God is the Creator and has full rights of ownership.

The Cultural Mandate

God has entrusted to us the dignity and responsibility of being stewards of the resources and creatures of this planet. When we shape, refine and creatively utilize the minerals, plants and animals that God has placed at our disposal, we are accountable for the results. Genesis 1:28-30 contains God's stewardship mandate for the newly created man and woman, whom he had formed in his own image:

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

Here is the first “Great Commission” in the Bible, also known as “The Cultural Mandate.” This is God’s idea for the human race: a call to establish human society all over the world. We are not to be subject to creation; we are to hold dominion over it.

God’s command to “fill the earth and subdue it” (v. 28) has been realized to a far greater extent during the past century than ever before. For the first time in human history, we face the crisis of global pollution and wholesale destruction of irreplaceable resources (e.g., the rain forests). Much of this is due to human greed and presumption; people have assumed that the supplies of earth are inexhaustible and that we are free to use them for personal gain. Greg Johnson warns us:

Industrialization and the environmental crisis that accompanies it have given us a negative image of dominion – one divorced from our God-given calling. Dominion means more than filthy strip mines and smog. Dominion doesn’t mean rape and pillage. It does mean, however, that God’s world is incomplete without humanity in its proper place.⁴

As we have previously mentioned, Scripture cautions us that we really own nothing, that “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). And again, God reminds us in Psalm 50:10 that “every animal of the forests is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills.” The creation is not here for our amusement. Its calling is the same as ours: to bring glory to God in heaven.

A steward manages the possessions of another. We are all stewards of the resources, abilities and opportunities that God has entrusted to our care, and each of us must one day give an account for how we have used them. The basis for reward is faithfulness: “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2). Our God-given dominion over nature is not self-regulated. We exercise our dominion under the watchful eye of

⁴ Greg Johnson, *The World According to God* (Downers Grove, IL: InverVarsity Press, 2002), p. 87.

the one who created everything. The mandate to establish civilization on the earth is for God's glory, not our own.

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Stewards are expected to realize the maximum possible return on the resources which the master has entrusted to their care. In preparing his followers to be steward-leaders, Jesus told a parable that really caught their attention:

“There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’

“The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg – I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’

“So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

“‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied.

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’

“Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’

“‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied.

“He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

Luke 16:1-9

This perplexing parable appears at first glance to encourage dishonesty. But Jesus enjoins us to mimic the steward’s *shrewdness*, not his *dishonesty*. Jesus commends the man’s ability to use his present and temporary power and resources to make preparation for what was coming.

In Jesus’ day there were two primary words for “wisdom.” One word was *sophia*, which had a spiritual, pious ring to it. This is the wisdom which comes from above, resulting in godly

character and conduct (cf. James 3:17). This wisdom comes through the grace of God (Ephesians 1:7), and is a beautiful thing. But the word Jesus uses here is *phronimos*, which meant cunning, cleverness, street-smarts. Jesus uses this word in Matthew 7:24 about the “wise” man who builds his house on the rock. It takes no special revelation from above to know that Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount form perhaps the greatest ethical platform known to man. It only makes sense to apply these teachings to our daily lives, thus the “wise” man is also shrewd.

We often see pictures of Jesus looking as innocent as a dove. But we never see pictures of Jesus looking as shrewd as a serpent. This reveals our failure to grasp his true nature. We tend to confuse being spiritual with being gullible or timid. But, in the Gospels, we find that Jesus had an earthy streak that didn’t look spiritual to people. This is one of the things that caused people to misunderstand him. There was nothing naïve about Jesus. He was completely realistic without a trace of cynicism. And he was totally innocent without a trace of naïveté. That still confuses a lot of people today, because we’re not accustomed to seeing that combination.

No parable can be interpreted correctly until its purpose has been identified. Before asking what a parable means, the reader must ask why it was told. The situation which prompted this parable is recounted in Luke 15:1-2. The Pharisees were attacking Jesus for eating with the wrong people. His answer to their charge came in the form of four separate parables, the first three of which are recorded in the previous chapter (Luke 15:3-32). In the parable of the steward (16:1-9) Jesus drew his conclusion. Stewards work hard and “smart” to please their master. But some go the extra mile and work “shrewd”! While it appeared to some that Jesus was working contrary to the Father’s wishes, he and the Father both knew that Jesus was working judiciously

and discerningly (synonyms for *shrewdly*) on precisely those things which the Father wanted accomplished (notice the first sentence of 16:8).

Jesus made it clear that we are his stewards. We manage his resources on earth. Since leaders manage multiple resources, the stewardship role is especially applicable to them. Verses 8-15 contain the application of this extended passage. Read carefully from the standpoint of your role as a steward of God's resources. The point of stewardship is that we manage what God owns (and he owns everything). He expects maximum return on his investment. Stewards work hard and smart. The best stewards are also shrewd. They look for the "extra" possibility to serve God well.

We who are children of light must use our power, resources and abilities to prepare for eternity. We do that in at least two ways. Primarily, we use our resources and abilities to make investments into eternal things (Matthew 6:19-21, 33). We win friends (specifically God and the people we love and serve) who can help us when we are helpless (e.g., judgment) so that we will have a comfortable place when we lose our job (i.e., when we die). Secondly, we spread God's message, using whatever resources and skills we have so that others can prepare for the future as well. In this way we leverage the temporal resources of this world for the eternal treasures of the next by investing them in people.

The children of light (Ephesians 5:8) can be so naïve! We are afraid that if we are shrewd, we are being unchristian. We feel we should not use secular abilities or procedures in the work of the kingdom. But Jesus said, "Be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). We ought to be impressive examples of sagacity to this world.

This “shrewd use of resources” must also include our money, especially for Americans who have been entrusted with so much of it. The wisest use of money is not temporal pleasure, but eternal security. Present investments in the poor will be honored by God in eternity.

Stewardship in All Circumstances

In Genesis 39:1-41:57, Joseph provides us with a classic example of stewardship. His life is the ultimate good news/bad news story. He is his father’s favorite son, but that makes his brothers jealous. His father gives him a beautiful coat, but his brothers tear it off and sell him into slavery because of it. He finds a job working for a wealthy man who puts him in charge of his household, but his boss’ wife tries to seduce him. Joseph resists, but this makes her angry enough to falsely accuse him and have him thrown into jail. In prison, Joseph meets a royal official, interprets a dream and receives a promise of parole, but the official forgets and Joseph languishes in prison for two more years. Joseph’s life has more plot twists than an Indiana Jones movie.

We want to rush to the end, where Joseph is large and in charge, reconciled to his brothers, enjoying luxury, and they all live happily ever after. But Joseph models something more important for us. Stewardship happens in the meantime. Regardless of his circumstances, whether he was on an upswing or a downturn, Joseph utilized the resources available to him for great good. God was with Joseph, he was always put “in charge” (Genesis 39:4, 22; 41:41). From Potiphar’s house to the prison ward to Pharaoh’s Egypt, Joseph built others’ fortunes by managing their resources and managed situations well regardless of his own comfort. That’s what stewardship entails; and that, according to Matthew 25, is what leadership is all about as well. But of what, exactly are we stewards?

Peter Drucker asserted in *Post Capitalist Society* that knowledge is fast becoming our most valuable asset. Karl Albrecht (*The Northbound Train*) tells us that, in this emerging post-capitalist society, “one of the main jobs of leadership is to help people understand the contributions they can make.” Leif Edvinsson and Michael Malone’s book *Intellectual Capital* is subtitled, “Realizing Your Company’s True Value by Finding Its Hidden Brain Power.” In *Stewardship*, Peter Block consistently equates stewardship with a leader’s commitment to develop the human resources placed in his or her charge. This representative, and by no means exhaustive, listing demonstrates that today more than ever before leaders-as-stewards must cultivate their human resources. People are a leader’s major stewardship focus.

Joseph, Jesus and contemporary leadership gurus tell us that, as leaders, we are stewards of our greatest resource – people. A view of leadership that is consistent with the Bible will focus on what God deems important. And again, that is people. Whatever else biblical leaders feel responsible for in the name of stewardship, they *must* accept responsibility for the people God has entrusted to their care.

Biblical stewardship touches every area of our lives. It requires a basic commitment to present ourselves completely to God as his servants, with no strings attached. The real issue of stewardship is whether we are administering our affairs and possessions as if they are ours or as if they are God’s. Our lives are shaped by the decisions we make, and there is no greater choice offered to us than surrender to the one who created us and knows us better than we know ourselves. The ultimate question, then, is this: Am I the lord of my life, or is Christ the Lord of my life? We will either labor under the illusion that we can control our own lives, or we will submit to the reign and rule of God. This is the difference between the great *I will* and the great *Thy will*. Whether we realize it or not, we face this decision many times in the course of each

day. Our answer to this question will determine how we manage the time, abilities, money, truth and relationships God has placed under our care. A wise steward will treat things according to their true value, treasure the things God declares to be important and hold with a loose grip the things that God says will not matter in the end.