

“Stewardship: A Disciple’s Path”

Luke 16:1-13

“Stewardship is everything we do after we say, ‘I believe,’” said Clarence Stoughton (1895-1975). An internationally known educator, Stoughton served as president of both Wagner College, New York City, and Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio.

His definition of stewardship, which has become something of a mantra for Christian stewardship leaders in North America, becomes clear when two key elements are understood.

First, a “steward” is a person of authority who is entrusted with the duty of managing and caring for another person’s property. More than a mere employee, a steward is endowed with a great degree of autonomy, trust, and responsibility.

For example, in Jesus’ parable in Luke 16:1-13, the steward misuses his power and changes the amounts due on his master’s accounts payable. Christians know him as “the dishonest” steward because he betrays his master’s trust but his master commends him for acting shrewdly.

Second, Stoughton’s definition relies on the biblical understanding that everything in creation, even our lives, belongs to God. No exceptions.

Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:15 describe how God created human beings in the divine image and put us in charge of what God has made. Thus, we are stewards— caretakers, managers, supervisors—given a high degree of authority and autonomy, but also responsibility. Our task as stewards represents a sacred trust and solemn duty. We carry it out in everything we think, say, and do after we say, “I believe”.

This idea of faithful stewardship should ring familiar to Lutherans, who hear the traditional offering prayer in the weekly worship liturgy of our standard hymnals, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) and the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978). An in-depth exploration of these prayers reveals the life-giving connection between stewardship, offering and discipleship. The wording is slightly different between the two hymnals, so what follows is a compilation of the best of both.

Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . .

The first verse of the Bible frames our foundational understanding not only of stewardship but also of reality itself: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). How did the world get here? How did we? What’s behind everything? It’s God, who is holy and blessed. Everything is filled with God’s holiness, and everything belongs to God.

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it,” reads Psalm 24:1, echoing the theme of God’s ownership. In case we thought it was only the “stuff” that belongs to God, this verse makes clear that we ourselves belong to God. Paul emphasizes this in Romans 14:8: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . . We offer with joy and thanksgiving . . .

The word “offer” captures the essence of faithful steward giving, implying free choice and a willing heart. By contrast, no one would consider a tax payment to the federal government an “offering.” Even if we consider our taxes a fair price for living in a free country, writing checks to the IRS is mandated by law and failing to do so carries harsh penalties.

That's not how God rolls. We offer freely, without expectation of reward, and withhold offerings without fear of punishment. And it's not just our money we offer to God, but the totality of what we are, as expressed in the hymn "We Are an Offering" (ELW, 692):

"We lift our voices, we lift our hands, we lift our lives up to you; we are an offering."

We offer as happy and contented people, knowing that God provides all we have and all we need. This knowledge fills us with gratitude. "God loves a cheerful giver," Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9:7, adding in the next verse, "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."

Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . . We offer with joy and thanksgiving . . .

What you have first given us . . .

God is the source of all our blessings. We cannot and should not take credit for anything we have. As Deuteronomy 8:17-18 warns people who are rich, "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth."

Similarly, remembering that God is the creator of all, we would be wise to avoid regarding our possessions and our lives as ours to use as we wish. God's people often refer to our blessings as "gifts," but this is misleading, says Charles Lane, a Lutheran stewardship expert, author, and speaker.

"With God, there is no transfer of ownership. God is still the owner," Lane writes in *Embracing Stewardship: How to Put Stewardship at the Heart of Your Congregation's Life*.

“We should quit using the ‘gift’ language in favor of language such as ‘trust.’ Everything we have is a trust from God, placed by God into our care and management.”

Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . . We offer with joy and thanksgiving . . .

What you have first given us . . . Ourselves . . .

“Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Psalm 100:3).

Because we are God’s holy creations, all our energies are designed for godly purposes in service to the neighbor. “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life,” Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10.

“I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last,” Jesus tells his disciples in John 15:16. Paul enumerates fruits of the spirit as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

This aspect of offering illustrates the magnificent paradox of true spiritual offering, where our giving doesn’t diminish what we have but actually increases it.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it,” Jesus says in Matthew 16:25. The more we offer ourselves to God, the more we are blessed.

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . . We offer with joy and thanksgiving . . .

What you have first given us . . . Ourselves . . . Our time . . .

From birth to death marks a finite span of days in which we live, breathe, and have our lives. Each moment is precious, as Psalm 90:12 makes clear: “Teach us to count our days, that we may gain a wise heart.”

How we spend our time may be the most crucial stewardship question of all. After all, income levels and talents differ widely by individual, but everyone is given the same number of minutes and hours in a day. How we use them says a lot about our priorities and values.

Rather than huge rooms filled with bunk beds, Bob Hollis, Linda Grand, and other volunteers have been building portable walls for pods at the Lakeside homeless shelter to help stop the spread of the coronavirus.

When we choose to give our time to church, to neighbor, to a ministry that works for God’s purposes, we are stewarding our time wisely.

Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . . We offer with joy and thanksgiving . . .

What you have first given us . . . Ourselves . . . Our time . . . Our possessions . . .

Paul Klemme writes... Bob, Jesse Hollis and I had a terrific evening last night. We picked up the washer/dryer from Divinity's own Jill Clark who donated her relatively new washer/dryer. Delivered it to our Afghan family (side note, the Afghan men are really strong), got them set up, and made sure they were working. Eileen said she will show them how to work them. While we were in the basement the Afghan men set up a clothes line Bob brought. We also got the furnace going, so they had no heat up until last night. The house was warming up nicely by the time we left. Jan Pierce was kind enough to donate the TV and antenna. We got that set up and had it on PBS Kids. Closed caption turned on to match sound and words.

The kids had many new English words and greeted us eagerly. They were practicing their ABC's and numbers. They are so eager to learn and see new things. They are adorable and are adapting quickly. They were disappointed we were leaving after 2 hours. Cautious optimism is how I would say they are at this time. Bob and I cannot thank Jesse enough for all he did. He is faster, stronger and smarter than us, which made it easier on us. A blessing to have him participate.

For those who don't have material possessions to spare, the church follows Jesus' teaching, made clear in the story of the widow's mite (Mark 12:41-44)—that all offerings, no matter how small, are treasured and valued. For those whose financial situation prevents them from giving monetarily, the church values and welcomes offerings of time and talent.

*Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . . We offer with joy and thanksgiving . . .
What you have first given us . . . Ourselves . . . Our time . . . Our possessions . . . Signs of
your gracious love . . .*

“God is love.” Though the loving character of the Almighty is revealed throughout the Bible, 1 John declares it plainly, twice (4:8 and 16). Moreover, the iconic Gospel verse John 3:16 begins “For God so loved the world.”

Since God is love, all that God does is done in love, and God's love permeates creation. Therefore, we can readily observe God's gracious love in all that we are, all that we see and all that we experience.

We would be misreading this line if we inferred that wealth is a sign of God's favor, because then the opposite would also be true—that poverty is a sign of God's disfavor.

In fact, the Bible is clear that God holds the poor in special regard and that wealth can bring spiritual challenges. In Luke 6, Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (20) and “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (24).

*Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . . We offer with joy and thanksgiving . . .
What you have first given us . . . Ourselves . . . Our time . . . Our possessions . . . Signs of
your gracious love . . . Use us and what we have gathered . . .*

As people dedicated – heart, soul, and possession – to God’s purposes, we put all we have and all we are in the service of God, trusting that the Spirit will give us direction and guidance.

The ELCA’s slogan says it simply: “God’s work. Our hands.” But author and mystic Teresa of Avila explained it beautifully in the 16th century:

“Christ has no body on earth but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassionately on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world . . . Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

*Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . . We offer with joy and thanksgiving . . .
What you have first given us . . . Ourselves . . . Our time . . . Our possessions . . . Signs of
your gracious love . . . Use us and what we have gathered . . . In feeding the world with your
love . . .*

The world hungers for so many things, including food, peace, companionship, clothing, education, safety, medical care, housing, and relationship with God and God's people. All these important needs fall under the umbrella of God's love.

These needs also fall under the mission mandate that our congregations are fulfilling across town and across the world. When we give to our congregation, our synod or our churchwide ministries, we feed the world with God's love.

Blessed are you, O God, Maker of all things . . . We offer with joy and thanksgiving . . . What you have first given us . . . Ourselves . . . Our time . . . Our possessions . . . Signs of your gracious love . . . Use us and what we have gathered . . . In feeding the world with your love . . . Through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Jesus models for us self-giving for the sake of others. It's through Christ and in his name that we joyfully and thankfully offer ourselves.

The offering prayers we say every week in worship help us understand afresh that stewardship is more than whether we give our money to God's mission in the world. It's how we use every good blessing that God has entrusted to us on our journey of faith.

Again, "Stewardship is everything we do after we say, 'I believe'".

May the peace of God . . .

#692 – We Are An Offering