

ON STEWARDSHIP
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Mark Allan Powell has written an article in Rethinking Stewardship: Our Culture, Our Theology, Our Practices, (the Word & World Supplement Series 6 from 2010), entitled, *Stewardship for the Missional Church*. There he has a section called *From Faithful Giving to Faithful Living* (pp. 78-80). All of the quotes below are from that section of the article.

The section opens with him identifying two frequent complaints he hears from people in congregations on the topic of financial stewardship. One is that the church talks too much about money. He finds this complaint rarely justified and actually thinks that churches do not talk enough about money – certainly not as often as Jesus did. The second complaint he hears is that when churches talk about money, it is only regarding how much people should give to the church. He thinks this could be a more accurate complaint.

In preparing for his book, Giving to God, he read through the entire Bible and noted *every passage that spoke overtly about money and material possessions*. ... *Eventually, it seemed that almost everything would fit into one of four categories, and I labeled those categories with words that could be remembered with an acronym: ARMS, standing for acquire, regard, manage, spend. You may note immediately that 'giving' is not one of the four; rather, it ends up being a subset under the last category.*

The Bible has a great deal to say about how we acquire our money – for example, whether we do so with honesty and integrity (Leviticus 19:35-36; Deuteronomy 25:13-16; Proverbs 10:2; Jeremiah 17:11; Amos 8:5-6; Luke 3:13-14). He goes on to remind how these can be helpful guides as our people are at work in a world where honesty and integrity can have less value.

The Bible also says a great deal about how we are to regard our money and our material possessions. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (I Timothy 6:10); and serving wealth ... implies disloyalty to God (Matthew 6:24). Greed (Luke 12:15; Colossians 3:5) and anxiety (Matthew 6:25-34; Philipians 4:6) are rejected, while gratitude (Colossians 3:15; I Thessalonians 5:18) and trust (Proverbs 3:5; Jeremiah 17:7) are encouraged. ... In modern terms, we might say that the Bible cautions (sometimes rails) against any sense of entitlement, against the ownership mentality that views whatever one has as one's just deserts (Deuteronomy 8:12-14, 17-18). ... A missional approach to financial stewardship encourages people to view all of life as a wonderfully generous and completely unmerited gift of God.

Next, the Bible talks about how God wants us to manage our money, a topic that the church has often neglected to its own peril. ... the Bible does offer some general counsel, warning against three avoidable courses of action: (1) squandering: ...the parable of the Prodigal Son ... (Luke 15:11-16); (2) hoarding: ...the parable of the Rich Fool ... (Luke 12:15-21); and (3) preserving: ...the parable of the Pounds ... (Luke 19:12-26). ...

Finally, the Bible says a great deal about how we are to spend our money. ... The overarching principle ... is that money is to be spent in ways that exhibit love for God and neighbor (along with an assumption of responsible self-care). God prospered Abraham so that he could be a blessing to others (Gen 12:2) and Peter urges good stewards to use what God gives them in ways that serve others (I Pet 4:10-11).

Powell feels that taking all of this together can provide a congregation with a model for a year-long stewardship program. It is worth considering.

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The New Year is a time when we often decide we are going to resolve to do something new or something better or even to stop doing something that in some way is harmful to us or others. What might be some possibilities for this in the area of stewardship?

When it comes to the stewardship of our time – what if we would pick a new ministry or study or faith experience (like a daily time with God or a regular meeting with a Spiritual Director) in which to get involved? This can particularly be helpful with our priorities if it squeezes out something else that is less important for our lives so that we can accomplish this growth in our walks with God. Is there an activity or class that you have considered before, but have not found the time? Seize this day, this year and make this the time!

When it comes to the stewardship of our talents – what if we took the time to work through a spiritual gift inventory to learn what our gifts for ministry might be? Even if we have done this before, it can be useful to update it from time to time as we grow in our faith. This can actually be done online and have results provided to you right away. The ELCA's website for learning one's spiritual gifts is [http://download.elca.org/ELCA Resource Repository/spiritgifts.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA_Resource_Repository/spiritgifts.pdf). Prayerfully participating in this sort of inventory could change your life. Using this information can help you begin to be involved in ministries that truly reflect the gifts that God has bless you with. Or, you may find that you are already involved in ministries for which you are gifted, but this provides affirmation that enables you to go deeper in your expression of these gifts. Resources like *Lifekeys: Discover Who You Are* by Kise, Stark and Hirsch have also been used by individuals and congregations to learn about talents and spiritual gifts.

When it comes to the stewardship of our treasure – what if we took the step of Growth Giving? The average Lutheran gives to their congregation for its mission and ministry less than 2% of their income. What if we intentionally discerned the percentage at which we give to our congregation? Then commit to raise that amount by 1% for this year. This could be done even if we have already made a commitment for a particular amount to our church in the Annual Stewardship Campaign. What a wonderful thing it is when the giving for mission actually is more than anticipated for a particular year! Growth in giving can be an important way for God to confront the financial priorities of our lives. Too often we are investing in things the world has encouraged and lose sight of the ministries that God would have us support. Growth Giving changes the focus of investment and forces us to think differently about how we use our finances.

New Year's Resolutions. Sometimes they can bring changes that become turning points in our lives.

May 2019 be one of those years?

STEWARDSHIP and HOPEFULNESS
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I don't know where we will get the money. We can't possibly do that right now. We have no one who could do this? It's too bad we don't have some younger people to do this. It's too bad we don't have some more experienced people to do this. If only we had started this sooner. If only we had waited a little longer. I'm already over committed and can't possibly do another thing. We always used to have someone who could help with this, but no more. What are we going to do? We just don't have the money. It's hopeless. It's too much.

Genesis 7:6, 7: “Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.”

Deuteronomy 31:6 : “Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the LORD your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.”

I Samuel 17:39, 40: “David strapped Saul’s sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, ‘I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.’ So David removed them. Then he took his staff in this hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd’s bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.”

Isaiah 6:8: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘here am I; send me!’”

Isaiah 40:28-31: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Habakkuk 3:17-19: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.”

Luke 1:37, 38: “For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.”

Luke 12:32-34: “Do not be afraid, little flock, [Jesus said] for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Luke 24:1-3: “But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.”

I Peter 5:6, 7: “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”

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Often stewardship is discussed in terms of the three “T’s” of Time, Talent and Treasure. In fact this particularly comes up as we often try to emphasize that stewardship is about more than money.

Stewardship IS about more than money. Stewardship is recognizing that all we are and all we have actually belongs to God. This is why, as Christians, we are not *owners* of all that we are and all that we have, but we are *stewards* of all these things. We are responsible to God for how we oversee our lives because we belong to God.

This is why the issue of time comes up as an important aspect of stewardship. A helpful verse regarding time and its use would be Ephesians 5:15-16: *Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.*

Time is a gift. It is limited and for most people the limitation of how much time we have is unknown. Since many of us are pretty good at procrastinating until we get close to a known deadline, working with an unknown deadline can leave us doing many “unwise” things for a pretty long time!

In James 4: 13-17 we hear: *Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.*

“If the Lord wishes” reminds us as to *Whose* we are.

A possible picture of how we could see our lives would be as a pie chart. Each slice represents an aspect of our lives – family, work, friends, church, recreation, etc. A center circle should be cut and God should be at that center so that God is at the center of each aspect of our lives. How we prioritize each aspect – how much time each aspect receives and what activities we are involved with in each aspect – should be prayerfully guided by the Lord.

The Bible is teaching us that there is wisdom in looking for God’s guidance in how we use each day, each hour, each moment. It matters to consider God’s will in how we live. It makes a difference in who we are when we remember *Whose* we are.

When was the last time you asked God for guidance as to how to spend your day? How committed are you to making more and more decisions by bathing them in prayer? It is an important stewardship principle to remember that our time is not our own.

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What follows is a selection from *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life* by Mark Allan Powell, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 2006, pp 52-54. (An excellent book to read regarding stewardship):

Furthermore, of all the spiritual disciplines that are presented in the Bible (and in the teachings of various churches), stewardship is special in that it is the most directly connected to the status and condition of our hearts. This is significant, for religion that does not come “from the heart” is rejected in the Bible as mere “human doctrine” (Mark 7:6-7). Even a cursory reading of Scripture indicates how important it is that our hearts be right with God and set on God. “The Lord does not see as mortals see, “the Bible says. “Mortals look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (I Samuel 16:7). And, as Christians, we all want to be “pure in heart” (Matthew 5:8). But how do we get there? How do we change *within*?

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” Jesus says. [Matthew 6:21] I have noticed over the years that seminary students and pastors often get this backwards. I recall one sermon in which the preacher asked us to consider this text. What it means, he said, is that we can tell what people *really* care about by how they spend their money. People put their treasures (their money) where their hearts are. How much do you spend on entertainment? The preacher asked us. How much do you spend on your family? How much do you give to the church? This reveals what your true values are.

I think he had it backwards. He was thinking, “Where your *heart* is, there your *treasure* will be.” But Jesus said it the other way around: “where you put your treasure – that’s where your heart will end up.” The point isn’t that how we spend our money *reveals* what sort of people we *are*, but that how we spend our money *determines* what sort of people we *become*.

Let’s remember that “treasure” is not necessarily “money.” Our treasure is whatever we value – our money in many cases, but also our time and our possessions and our families and our physical bodies. Whatever we value – that is our treasure. And Jesus says that what we do with our treasures affects our hearts – it determines who we are inside. It determines what sort of people we become.

This may sound scary, but it is actually very good news! ... We *can* make our hearts feel what they don’t. We can control our hearts, direct them in ways we want them to go. We can do so in a very practical way, by deciding what sort of people we want to be, and then giving our treasure – our time, our talents, and our money – to those things that we want to care about.

Jesus was not a fund-raiser. He talked about money a lot, but not because he wanted people to give to any particular cause. He talked about money because he cared about us and because he knew that what we do with our money affects who we are spiritually.

Just some solid food for thought around stewardship!

(7/10)

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Mark Allan Powell has many helpful insights regarding giving in his book, *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life* (Eerdman's Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 2006). Following is a list of giving principles on pp 116-117 gleaned from Paul's letters:

- 1. Giving is both a duty and a delight, something we ought to do and something we are pleased to do (Romans 15:25-26).**
- 2. Giving is to be regular and systematic, according to a plan (1 Corinthians 16:2).**
- 3. Giving is a demonstration of God's grace (2 Corinthians 8:1; 9:14).**
- 4. Giving need not be hampered by difficult circumstances, for even those who suffer affliction and experience poverty may exhibit generosity (2 Corinthians 8:2).**
- 5. Giving is to be voluntary, not under compulsion (2 Corinthians 8:3; 9:5, 7).**
- 6. Giving should be proportionate to one's income and circumstances, as each is expected to contribute according to his or her means (2 Corinthians 8:3, 11-13).**
- 7. Giving can also be undertaken as a sacrifice, as some will feel inspired to give "beyond their means" (2 Corinthians 8:3).**
- 8. Giving is a privilege, something we appreciate being able to do as a result of God's grace (2 Corinthians 8:4).**
- 9. Giving involves more than financial contributions – we first commit *ourselves* to the Lord and to the church at large (2 Corinthians 8:5).**
- 10. Giving is a witness to the gospel, demonstrating the genuineness of the church's love (2 Corinthians 8:8, 24).**
- 11. Giving may involve making a pledge that the giver is committed to fulfilling over time (2 Corinthians 8:10-11).**
- 12. Giving is to represent a personal commitment – each person is to make up his or her own mind about how much to give (2 Corinthians 9:7).**
- 13. Giving is not to be undertaken reluctantly but cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7).**
- 14. Giving is conducted in faith that God will provide for those who give (2 Corinthians 9:8-11).**
- 15. Giving brings glory to God and leads people to give thanks to God (2 Corinthians 9:11-13)**

This list struck me as more than just an interesting journey through Paul's letters and his thoughts on giving. It carries a powerful effect upon one's sense of stewardship as these fifteen insights are read one after the other. There is a certain grace that is experienced as one considers the privilege of being able to give because of God's great blessing of our lives.

The list reveals the deep truth of the quote of Jesus from Acts 20:35 "It is more blessed to give than to receive."