

Stewardship Comments
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Rev. Charles, Rev. Jeffery, Dear Friends and Guests: I thank all of you for allowing me, the lay person that I am, this opportunity to say a few words about myself and my personal feelings on the subject of Stewardship. Many of you don't know me very well; so, I should hasten to tell you that the personal journey I traveled from my boyhood home in Columbus, Georgia in 1958 to the podium in this historic and magnificent sanctuary in 2005 was long and arduous. My favorite American president, Abraham Lincoln, might have said: "The journey was piled high with difficulty", taking me to exotic and dangerous places. However, I don't want anyone to sympathize for me because the entire journey was underwritten by the good grace of God, most especially his many mercies. Indeed, I have been blessed; of this I am certain! In fact, the part of my journey that led me to this faith community was a wish to combine the overpowering thanks to God I felt in my heart with a more active and overt manifestation of my love and spirituality. In common parlance my former habits could be described by saying: "I knew that I owed God big time; but I kept my efforts to pay the debt close to my vest", so to speak. I am certain that many in this sanctuary today perhaps feel as I once felt. I could spend a lot of time discussing the details and reasons for my feelings of love and gratitude to God; but that would take much more time than I'm now allotted and, frankly, would be more appropriate for another speech at another time. Today, I choose to focus on stewardship.

My life's experience has taught me that effective communication happens when a common understanding exists regarding the meaning of the symbols or words used in any communication process. This speech would be a great exercise in futility if I were to spend the next eight to nine minutes discussing stewardship, without first addressing a definition. Consider if you will, the contemporaneous use of the words "judicial activism" and "affirmative action". Because there is no common understanding or definition, these words mean many different things to all of us. I choose to be clear and unambiguous. So, in a biblical sense what is this thing called stewardship?

According to my research, the first recorded uses of the English word "steward" are from the 11th century, referring to an official who controlled the domestic affairs of a household. Thus, a steward was an official with control over the domestic affairs of a house, and stewardship was the exercise of that function. Used by Christians in relation to God, then, the term suggests that we are servants or officials given charge over God's house. God's "house" is the world and all that is in it, and we are His caretakers. Incidentally, I believe that all sin is poor stewardship, and the gospel restores us to good stewardship. "Stewardship" is a wonderfully biblical word, provided we know what we mean when we say it.

During the past three Sundays we have discussed several aspects of stewardship: Personal, Communal and Financial. Today I want to build on those themes and argue that generosity is the highest form of biblical stewardship. I believe that stewardship is a lifestyle based on the biblical principle that God is the rightful owner of everything and that we are stewards (that is, "caretakers") of His stuff, responsible to do with it what he wants done. So the key stewardship question is: "What does God want me to do with His stuff?" Fortunate for us the bible gives a number of answers to this question, including saving (Proverbs 6: 6-8), investing (Matthew 25: 14-30), providing for family (Proverbs 13:22) and more. But the bible gives special attention to one use of God's stuff in particular: giving. To give (especially to the poor) is equivalent to lending to the Lord (Proverbs 19:17). To give (especially to the poor) is equivalent to saving

your money in heaven itself (Luke 12:33). Giving is the fitting response to God's gift of His Son to us (2 Corinthians 8:7-9). Giving (especially to our enemies) is a way of imitating the redeeming love of God (Luke 6:35). Stewardship includes many things, but giving stands out from other aspects. Therefore, it is my personal belief that any concept of stewardship that does not give a special place to generosity is not fully biblical.

I believe that God measures our gifts with a measure different from that of the world. He is not impressed with large numbers. Rather, He measures according to (1) the giver's capacity (because he knows what we possess), and (2) the giver's attitude (because He knows the state of our hearts). Jesus spoke to this question directly when he compared the temple gifts of the rich men with the gift of the poor widow (Luke 21:1-4). In Jesus' view, the widow gave more than the others because she gave all she had to live on. Her capacity was prohibitively little, but her attitude was extravagant. The rich men, on the other hand, had so much wealth that even large gifts required little devotion to them. Biblical generosity is not any given dollar amount. Nor is it even just a given percentage rate (although percentage of income and assets is an indicator of attitude). I believe to be biblically generous is to recognize God's infinite beneficence toward us in Christ, and to give extravagantly in worship to Him, relative to what one has in time and assets. Put another way, biblical generosity is best gauged by asking not "How much am I giving to God?" but "How much am I keeping for myself?"

William Carey, a Baptist missionary to India, once said: "I was once young and now I am old, but not once have I been witness to God's failure to supply my need when first I had given for the furtherance of His work. He has never failed in His promise, so I cannot fail in my service to Him".

I leave you with this thought.