



CALLED BY CHRIST GIFTED BY THE SPIRIT

To Share Christ in and through the Church

STEWARDSHIP

Caring for the Household of Faith

*“What identifies a steward? Safeguarding material and human resources and using them responsibly are one answer; so is generous giving of time, talent, and treasure. But being a Christian steward involves more. As Christian stewards, we receive God’s gifts gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly in justice with others, and return them with increase to the Lord” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*, Tenth Anniversary Edition, 2002, page 42).*

PART TWO: THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

INTRODUCTION

In the first part of the United States Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on stewardship, the emphasis is placed on the responsibilities we discover that accompany the appreciation of our personal vocation. Those in the parish come to new understandings of themselves as called and gifted by God, and are empowered in an extraordinary way to make a difference in the lives of others.

In the second part of the letter, we realize that Jesus not only taught the disciples how to be stewards, but more important, gave them and us a personal example of the pattern of stewardship that He preached. We understand that the call to stewardship is not just an ideal, but indeed is a motive and model for our total self-giving.

So often we might look upon our stewardship as a routine that becomes rote, and even done in a begrudging manner. We recover the roots of our call to greatness and stewardship in the very ministry of Jesus. As disciples of the Lord Jesus, we can discover a whole new depth dimension to our vocation as cheerful and generous stewards of the gifts of God.

SUMMARY OF THE UNITED STATES BISHOPS’ PASTORAL LETTER, *STEWARDSHIP: A DISCIPLE’S RESPONSE*

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from the Bishops’ Pastoral Letter, Tenth Anniversary Edition.

1. Jesus, the Supreme Teacher, embodying the message He preached.

Jesus not only preached the way of discipleship and stewardship, He was the model of stewardship, embodying the words He preached. In an ancient hymn preserved for us by Saint Paul, Christ shows us that the road to greatness in this life takes the path of self-emptying:

“Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2: 5-9).

Even when speaking of the ordinary realities of life such as nourishment, Jesus saw a connection with His mission — *“My food is to do the will of the One Who sent Me and to finish His work”* (John 4: 34). Jesus was concerned about the entire lifestyle of those who accepted His invitation to follow. In the Sermon on the Mount and particularly in the Beatitudes, Jesus sketched the outlines of a happy and blessed life (see Matthew 5:3-10).

In particular, Jesus portrayed the life of a disciple through the image of a steward. The steward is *“one to whom the owner of a household turns over responsibility for caring for the property, managing affairs, making resources yield as much as possible, and sharing the resources with others. The position involves trust and accountability”* (page 19).

2. Jesus portrays the steward as one who follows in His footsteps.

The Greek noun which is used in the Gospel and that is rendered as “steward” in English is *oikonomos*, which means one who has care for household matters. Stewards oversee day-to-day concerns of a person or a community which is much greater than themselves. The Spanish language does not have an expression that corresponds to the Anglo-Saxon word “steward.” Many words approximate the notion, and when the United States Bishops needed to make a decision on which word came closest to the Greek *oikonomos*, they chose *corresponsable* and *corresponsabilidad*. This, too, gives us insight into the image that Jesus taught and embodied. The steward cares for a household, not as an uninvolved or unimpassioned slave, but offers generous and trustworthy service as one who has a share in the responsibility for that household. All the actions of the steward reflect the intention of the one for whom and with whom he or she acts. Even if the master is away, the steward insures that the master’s style of leadership and service is preserved and fostered.

Jesus gives both positive and negative examples of stewardship in order to get to the heart of the matter. In the sixteenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus describes the cunning of a dishonest and unjust steward whose service was coming to an end. This squandering steward pondered:

“What shall I do, now that my master is taking the position of steward away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from the stewardship, they may welcome me into their homes” (Luke 16:3-4).

This irresponsible steward of a rich owner rewrote the promissory notes of the owner’s debtors, minus the steward’s usual commission, thus trying to win friends in the midst of his own demise. Jesus uses the story of a negative example of stewardship to recommend the prudent use of one’s abilities and material goods. Given the example of the shrewd steward, Jesus encourages trustworthiness in His disciples:

The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones (Luke 16:10).

As a counterpoint to the uncaring steward, Jesus points to a lifestyle of single-hearted service — *“No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other; or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth”* (Luke 16:13). Jesus certainly counseled the disciples toward the proper use of material things, namely to channel the goods of this earth to create a reasonable existence for oneself and, at the same time, be steadfast in serving the needs of others.

Jesus describes the steward as the mature disciple, one who knows how to use one’s personal and material goods. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus praises the servants who invest the wealth of their master for the betterment of the community in the famous parable of the talents — *“Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master’s joy”* (Matthew 25:21). *“Each will be measured by the standard of his or her individual*

vocation. Each has received a different 'sum'— a unique mix of talents, opportunities, challenges, weaknesses and strengths, potential modes of service and response — on which the Master expects a return. He will judge individuals according to what they have done with what they were given” (page 20).

3. Jesus assures us of the steward's reward — trust and hope.

Jesus teaches that the reward for trustworthy stewardship will be a hundredfold of “houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come” (Mark 10:29-30). Stewards live in hope that the vision of Jesus will be realized not only in heaven, but will begin to take shape in our lifetime. We share generously of ourselves and our resources, not because we are guaranteed something in return, not because everyone who benefits from our generosity will be grateful to us, or even deserving of our generosity, but, like Jesus, we trust in God's goodness and generosity toward us, and we share generously knowing that God will take care of us. Such is a life of faith, rooted in hope and expressed in love. In a spiritual classic of the sixteenth century which is still inspiring today, St. Ignatius of Loyola begins his *Spiritual Exercises* with a statement of “first principle and foundation” of the life of the steward: “*Human beings were created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for them to help them in attaining the end for which they are created. Hence, they are to make use of these things in as far as they help them in the attainment of their end, and they must rid themselves of them in as far as they provide a hindrance to them ... Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created*” (page 20).

SOME LEADING QUESTIONS

1. What are the qualities in the life of Jesus by which you live? In what ways do you find the teaching of Jesus on stewardship compelling and challenging?
2. If you were to preach a sermon on Christian stewardship, aiming to preach what you practice as did Jesus, what would be the main points of your homily? How do you feel it would be received?
3. What kinds of rewards do you expect for your life of faithful stewardship?

PAINTING A BIBLICAL PORTRAIT OF THE STEWARD

“Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Good stewards certainly recognize the presence of God in all of creation, but moreover, bear witness to God's working in the interiority of the human heart. Stewards sense the companionship of God not only in the events and actions of life, but believe that God dwells in them, and in every other human person. Stewards understand that God wishes to work from deep within them to renew the face of the earth.

“It is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:2). “*Stewardship is a uniquely solemn trust. If Christians understand it and strive to live it to the full, they grasp the fact that they are no less than ‘God's co-workers’*” (page 40). The attitude of a steward is one who realizes that God's gifts have been entrusted to him or her, but only for a while. We are the stewards, not the owners of the gifts, and we know that we will be held accountable for the gifts entrusted to us. We make every effort to multiply the gifts by investing them in one another.

DEVELOPING MODELS FOR HOUSEHOLD AND PARISH STEWARDSHIP

In your household: A growing custom among families and persons who share the same roof is to find time for household prayer and family meetings. Discuss the ways that Jesus' invitation for us to be cheerful stewards might call for changes in our daily lifestyle.

In your parish: Many parishes take annual surveys to invite parish members to offer their time, talent, and treasure within the many opportunities for service and leadership available. Some conduct these efforts in the Fall, others on the Solemnity of Pentecost, praying that gifts of the Holy Spirit might become more evident on the local scene. To be effective, every survey response must be answered. Consider creative ways to encourage more persons to embrace Jesus' way of stewardship.

REFLECTIONS ON STEWARDSHIP

Jesus was the ultimate steward. He knew His place on earth. He knew He came to establish a kingdom which was not of this earth. He keeps telling us to keep your eyes on the kingdom to come. *"There's another kingdom, another place that I've prepared for you, another castle, and remember that everything you have here in this life is temporary."* We are not going to take the things we have with us. And so the lesson that we take from that is how do we use the things we have? How do we share it? How do we let others enjoy many of the things that we have and, maybe even more important, the talents that we have, the resources that we have, sharing our lives? That's being a steward.

FINAL BLESSING PRAYER

Blessed are You, Lord, God of mercy,
Who, through Your Son, gave us a marvelous example of charity
and the great commandment of love for one another.
Send down Your blessings on these Your servants and stewards,
who so generously devote themselves to helping others.
When they are called on in time of need,
let them faithfully serve You in their neighbor.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.
Book of Blessings § 587.



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