

**Seed-Planting Followers**  
**Luke 16:1-13**  
**November 6, 2016**  
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What do you think of when you hear the word “stewardship”? I think of Andy Williams singing, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year!” Of course, Andy had jingle bells, toasting marshmallows and singing Christmas carols in mind when he belted out those now-infamous lyrics. But, I believe that if we really grasp the generosity of God, there is no more joyful act than giving of ourselves—all that we are and all that we have—to the One who made us and breathed into us his very divine life that we might live with abandon and abundance.

People sometimes wonder why we in the church need to talk about money, and the very simple answer is that we talk about it because Jesus talked about it—and he talked about it *a lot*. Do you know that Jesus spoke about wealth and possessions more than any other single topic? According to *Preaching Today*, an online resource for clergy, there are less than 500 references in the NT to prayer and faith is also mentioned less than 500 times. But, there are more than 2000 verses about money and possessions, including 16 of Jesus’ 38 parables.

Last week we were reminded that we all have decisions to make about how we’re going to define our relationship with Jesus—are we followers or are we fans? Being a follower impacts our lives in practical ways, including our relationships, our work, our time, our priorities, our talents and our health. It also impacts our attitude about money, wealth and possessions. First and foremost, it challenges us to have a right perspective, to understand the difference between ownership and stewardship. For followers, we know that we are not owners of anything. Everything we have belongs to God, and God graciously loans it to us, asking us to be stewards of his belongings. That is absolutely crazy talk to a lot of people, probably the vast majority of people. What do you mean I don’t own anything? This is my house, my job, my retirement account, my paycheck. I work hard and I *earn* the money I get.

But, we’re wrong. The truth is that you’re living in God’s house paid for with God’s money, earned with the health and strength and skills that God has given to you. None of those things are guaranteed, and many of us know from personal experience that it can all be gone in the blink of an eye. That intellect that

enables you to do the job you do? That's a gift. You didn't do a single thing to earn your basic intelligence. The strength you have to get out of bed each morning and get ready and go to work? That's a gift. As my family has very painfully been reminded over the past 3 years, one minute you may be perfectly healthy and leading a "normal" and "successful" life. The next minute you may be in the floor, unable to get up and life will never, ever be the same.

God gives us talents, gifts, people skills, aptitude, drive and passions, and our first response ought always to be profound gratitude. God knows us and loves us. God calls each of us by name. We are blessed with God's presence, God's mercy and forgiveness, God's grace, God's peace and joy. We are rich beyond measure in all the ways that are eternal and cannot be taken away from us—of course we are grateful! We live out that gratitude by being good stewards of what God has entrusted to our care. We are to be responsible managers. We are not the owners, but we are given the essential and sacred work of actively attending to God's resources, using them wisely for God's kingdom purposes. We are still Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. We are given dominion over our little corner of the universe not so that we can strip-mine it bare for our own pleasure, our own wants and greed, but for the good of the whole creation, the good of all the peoples of the earth. That is what stewardship is really about.

So, we receive the intellect God gives us and we study hard, learning and growing and honing the gift that has been entrusted to us so that we can employ it for holy and useful purposes. We receive the health God gives us and we protect and sustain it to the best of our ability by eating right, exercising, getting regular check-ups and the like so that we can live and work to the glory of God. We receive the financial resources God gives us, and we act in ways that are fiscally responsible and extravagantly generous. We take into account the poor of our community, the immigrant, the disabled, the homeless and the hungry, the stranger, the lonely, the addict, the grieving. Our financial resources are entrusted to us not so we can spend everything on ourselves but so that we can embody the love and generosity of God to others.

As such, every financial decision becomes a spiritual decision. I realize that's a pretty bold statement that may well make us uncomfortable. But, I'd like to suggest that this is precisely the place that exposes our true intent to live as followers or fans. There is almost no area of life that is more sacrosanct than finances. In some families, you can talk about anything except money. It is "that which shall not be named." And, in other families, people talk about nothing more

than money. Every major conversation touches on it—the lack of it, the need for it, how to get more of it, and how it is used for or against people.

From a strictly accounting point of view, money is a piece of paper used for transacting business. Nothing more, nothing less. But, that's not how we experience money, is it? Money is layered with all kinds of meaning. It has all sorts of power and a staggering amount of emotional and relational baggage. I think Jesus knows this, which is why he talks so much about it.

The parable of the shrewd manager is a parable that bothers a good many people and much of the confusion is created because we forget that there are two kinds of parables. One kind of parable is the “go and do likewise” type of parable. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example of that. Jesus' point in that story is for us to emulate the man who acts with kindness towards the stranger in need. We are to “go and do likewise.” But, there is a second type of parable and that is the “how much more” type. The parable of the shrewd manager belongs in this category. If a dishonest manager can look ahead, assess his future situation and prudently ensure that his future is secure by acting shrewdly, *how much more* should we as Christians behave shrewdly in advancing the cause of God's kingdom? If in the business world cleverness and risk-taking are recipes for success, *how much more* should the church be creative and willing to try new things as we work towards God's realm?

God entrusts to us a sacred privilege by making us stewards over the kingdom's treasures. The more faithful we are with God's storehouse, whether it is with skills and abilities, opportunities or possessions, the more we will be given to oversee. It's not unlike how we train our children to be wise with money. We start them with an allowance that is small, then increase the amount as they prove they can responsibly handle what they are already receiving.

In addition to seeing ourselves as stewards and embracing stewardship as a sacred privilege, the final change to our perspective is understanding that money is not the harvest, it is the seed which is directly opposite to our normal way of seeing it. We usually see money as the goal, as the objective, as what we're trying to reap. Jesus captures all this in a great story recorded in Luke 12. A farmer had a bumper year for his crops, so much so that his barns weren't big enough to hold the harvest. So, what does he do? He tears down his barns and builds bigger ones. Leaning back in his Lazy-boy, watching his barns being filled to the rafters he says to himself, “Self, it is good to be me. I have ample goods laid up for many years; now it's time to relax, to eat, drink, and be merry.” But God said to him, “You

fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be then? So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:19-21)

This farmer saw his blessings as a harvest that he was entitled to keep and to do with whatever he wanted. We might well wonder why he didn't fill the barns he already had and then give away the rest, share his largesse with those who didn't have enough. It's easy to be critical of him, but the truth is that we do exactly the same thing. We fill our houses then, we fill our basements and attics and garages with things we seldom, if ever use, and when we run out of space, what do we do? We rent a storage unit and fill that up, too. We could be a blessing to so many people if we would just let go—but our nature is to hoard, sometimes out of greed, but I think more often it is out of fear.

Fear leads us to see the world in terms of scarcity and abundance—and we need to hold on to all that stuff of ours for those times when we're on the short end of the abundance stick. Our fear looks at our unknown and possibly scary future and says, “just in case, you better hang on to that.” When it comes right down to it, we're afraid to trust that God will provide for us, either because we don't trust that God is really up to the task or because we're not sure we'll like God's version of abundance. So, we hoard, usually unconsciously, and equally unconsciously, we don't even realize how we have become enslaved by fear and anxiety. Money has become our master.

Jesus wants so much more for us. God is opening wide the storehouses of heaven saying, “Hey, I'll share! I want you to have the thrill of a harvest that is going to change everything. There is nothing to compare to sowing seeds that have eternal impact. There is nothing better than life free of fear and worry. There's a grand adventure called the Kingdom of God, and I'm inviting everybody to take part in it, to partner with me to change the world by impacting peoples' lives one at a time.”

Friends, that's why stewardship really is the most wonderful time of the year. This is our opportunity to say a big, fat “yes!” to God, to being part of what God is up to. It's our chance to say, “Count me in. I want to be a follower, not just a fan. I want to plant Kingdom seeds by sending Presbyterian young adult volunteers all over the world. I want to plant seeds by providing shelter for abused women in Mississippi and a youth training program in Rwanda, and a women's agricultural program in South Sudan and a life skill training for at-risk teens in Kansas—all of which we directly support through our mission giving. I want to

fulfill our baptismal vows to the children of this church, to hand the next generation a legacy of faithfulness that they will want to continue. I want to plant seeds of worship, the kind of worship that creates space for people to have their hearts broken open to God. I want our Be the Kingdom Sundays to spread, to unite us with other churches in service to our community.

Friends, is that not better than opening another sweater on Christmas morning? Planting seeds that will generate a harvest that has eternal impact—that's what we're about; that's why we talk about money. And, that's why Jesus talked about it and why it's his invitation this morning to make your pledge to his kingdom.

To God alone be all praise and glory and honor. Amen.