

Sermon Subject: WHAT IS CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP?

Scripture: Doctrine and Covenants

A commandment I give unto you, that ye shall organize yourselves, and appoint every man his stewardship, that every man may give an account unto me of the stewardship which is appointed unto him; for it is expedient that I, the Lord, shall make every man accountable, as stewards over earthly blessings, which I have made and prepared for my creatures. I, the Lord, stretched out the heavens, and builded the earth as a very handy work; and all things therein are mine; and it is my purpose to provide for my saints, for all things are mine; but it must needs be done in mine own way; and behold, this is the way that I, the Lord, have decreed to provide for my saints; for the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made law; for the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things, and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves. Therefore if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor, and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment.

Let no one deceive himself that he shall not account
for his stewardship unto me.

The word "stewardship" occurs only three times in the Bible, all in three consecutive verses of the sixteenth chapter of Luke, in the parable of the unjust steward. In none of these three verses, however, does the word mean exactly what it has come to mean today when Christian people speak of stewardship.

The interest in Christian stewardship is a comparatively recent one. It is a subject largely or completely ignored and neglected in many standard Bible reference works and encyclopedias. Even the Bible itself has very little in the way of specific instruction about stewardship, and yet the doctrine of stewardship is inherent in the teachings of Christ, and is implied to a greater or lesser extent in all the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

When Adam and Eve were created and placed in Eden, the word stewardship was not used, but stewardship was implied in all that God said and did. The garden of Eden did not belong to Adam and Eve. They had had no part in the creation of it, or the establishment of the earth on which it stood. They had had no part in the creation of the rivers of water by which it was revived, or of the soil in which it grew, or of the sun by which it was quickened and nourished. They had had no part in the creation of the plant life which abounded therein. They had had nothing to do with the creation of fishes, fowls, or animals. They were not even responsible for the creation of their own bodies, of their own spirits. All these things were God's creation, not theirs -- loaned to them for a time for their use and benefit and his glory.

There was a principle of stewardship implied in the charge God gave them concerning his garden. They might eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden save one. If it had been their garden, God would have had no right to make such a prohibition; but it was still God's garden and God's trees and God's fruit. They could use and enjoy the garden as much as they liked, subject to the rules laid down by the owner. As stewards, it was also required that they contribute something to the beauty and the fruitfulness of the garden by dressing and tending it, by working with God and for God in his garden, that they might earn their right to enjoy his blessings and benefits.

The fall of man came about through a failure of man to make proper and faithful and obedient use of the agency given him in the management of this stewardship. Adam and Eve went into the garden as if they were the absolute owners and could make their own rules concerning the use of it. They disobeyed the rules and commandments of the real Owner and Creator; and the result of this violation of stewardship responsibility was the loss of their stewardship. They were driven out of the garden; its blessings and privileges were denied to them. Their dominion over the earth was curtailed and restricted. They now were forced to wrest their living from the earth by the sweat of their brow in the midst of thorns and briars instead of in a pleasant garden. The dominion which man enjoyed over his own body, which made him potentially immortal, was also curtailed, and though he could enjoy a limited dominion during life, eventually he had to surrender that body to death.

Although stewardship was in some respects curtailed by the fall, in other ways its significance was enhanced and increased. Thanks to God's plan of salvation, and the atonement of his Son, Jesus Christ (which were planned from the beginning, and preached to Adam and Eve long before the physical advent of Christ) life itself became a time of probation -- a time in which man might prove by his wise stewardship over time and the mortal life, his worthiness to receive eternity and immortality. If he chose to accept God's redemption, and if he showed by his use of God's gifts of life and the facilities and wealth of this world that he was capable of using more and better things, he would be granted eternal life, plus an increase in the blessings which he had proved himself capable of using as a wise steward during his earthly mortal life. On the other hand, if he had shown during mortality that he was utterly incapable of using life and its blessings, if he had continued in rebellion and wickedness and sin, then there would be no point in continuing his stewardship; even that which he had enjoyed in time would be taken from him in eternity. That is the principle laid down many times in Jesus' parables. It is the principle inherent in all the teaching about a final judgment, when men shall be rewarded or punished according to their works done in the flesh.

We are stewards during this life, then, over life itself, over our own bodies, over our mental and spiritual and physical powers, over time, over talents and gifts and abilities, over our families and our children, over our nation, over our religion, over our rights and freedoms, over the natural resources of the good earth -- and over many other things. Not one of us can honestly say that one single material, physical, mental, or spiritual possession in his own.

Are you proud of being a self-made man? There are no self-made men. We all receive our life from someone else; no man ever created himself. We are born into a world we did not create, filled with natural resources which were prepared for us millions of years ago, and with which we had absolutely nothing to do. We fall heir to accumulated wisdom, knowledges, and skills which others have acquired at infinite pain and trouble, and handed on to us free. We occupy and enjoy cities, buildings, homes, and other facilities which we had no part in building. We enjoy institutions, such as the church and the nation, which we had no part in creating. We enjoy freedoms which other men have won for us. No matter what we invent or create in our own right, we are forced at every turn to draw upon the creative work of those who have gone before, and to use the raw materials which God -- and not we -- has provided. It is a humbling thought which Paul expressed long ago to the Corinthian saints, but nonetheless a true one. Paul heard that the church in Corinth was separated into factions, and that the people were quarreling with each other as if they and their faction were the sole owners and proprietors of the earth, as well as the church. Whereupon he wrote them, saying, "What hast thou that thou didst not receive?" In other words, what do you have that you created for yourself? What do you have that was not made for you -- at least in

part -- by someone else? Which one of you is not a beggar, dependent on God's mercy and bounty for all you enjoy?

What are some of the indications or signs that a man recognizes God's ownership and man's stewardship over material things? First, man must show some appreciation of the nature and purposes of God, or he cannot use his property as God wills. The Good steward will know that God is love, and he will manifest love to fellow man in the administration of his stewardship. A God who loves all men equally, cannot be pleased when some of his children who have greater strength or greater cunning, or who happened to get there first, hoard the resources and potentialities and the wealth which God has created, and deny an equality of opportunity to their brethren. For the good steward will also recognize that God is the Father of all men, and that he loves all nations, races, and conditions of men alike. Therefore the good steward will recognize the rights of others to a share in God's world. He will be generous, unselfish, free with his substance. He will not administer his property in such a way that one race or class or nation of men is highly favored, while another race or class or nation of men lacks even the bare necessities of life. He will not administer his property as if it were his, but as if it were God's.

There is another obligation of stewardship which should be mentioned immediately, lest some of my listeners get the idea that we can all be rich by simply sharing the wealth. A good steward is obligated to work, to be diligent in improving, enlarging, and expanding his stewardship to the limit of his capacity, by every legitimate means. God has created the potentialities of wealth, but man has wealth only as he joins his efforts with God's efforts, and works to improve and enlarge his stewardship. The Lord has a right to expect that the good steward will have an increase to show on the investment which is made in him when the final accounting is called for. The good steward will earn his own bread by the sweat of his own brow. He will make his own way, insofar as that is physically possible; he will refuse to be a complete burden on someone else. He will develop his own God-given talents, abilities, and gifts; he will develop the natural laws and resources which God has entrusted to him, that he might have the skill and the resources to serve and bless his fellow men, as they serve and bless him in an exchange of goods and services.

The good steward will be progressive, willing to venture, to experiment, to study, to search out new ways of improving his stewardship and serving his fellow man more efficiently, more economically, more productively. He will be unwilling to tolerate waste of time or money or material wealth in any form. He will know how to control his own wants, so that he does not spend money needlessly or profligately, on frivolous, foolish, wasteful, harmful, or unnecessary things. The good steward will know how to budget his expenditures of both time and money, so that he will know where and how his assets are used. The good steward will refuse to allow his properties or his talents to be used in any way which will degrade or debauch or exploit or harm another of God's stewards. The production of things which destroy men's bodies, enslave their minds and their wills, and shrivel their souls, is not good stewardship.

The good steward will be not only willing, but eager to give an accounting to God of his stewardship -- not only a final accounting in eternity, at the end of life when it is too late to correct any mistakes, but by regular, methodical methods during life. He will render his accounting to those officers whom God has set in his church to receive such accountings of individual stewardship, thus recognizing, not only God's rights to receive such a periodical accounting, but the right of the other men and women of the community who have shared with him in the creation of wealth to have an accounting of the way in which he has used their share as well as his own.

And last of all, the good steward who thus recognizes God's rights and the rights of his fellow men to a share in what the combined efforts of God, the individual, and his fellow men bring forth, will make some sort of willing, methodical, orderly, and periodical dedication of a stated part of his increase to the support of God's church, God's work, God's kingdom on earth. Such methodical, orderly payment is impossible without an accounting. A good steward does not simply toss God a five dollar bill occasionally as one would put a dime in a beggar's tin cup. We are the beggars, not God. We are the dependent ones, not God. The good steward takes God into the firm as a senior partner, and renders to him a complete accounting and his full due.

Sinful, stubborn, rebellious, unregenerate men cannot be good stewards. The beginning of stewardship is individual regeneration, through the merits and the mercies of the atonement of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Faithfulness in stewardship will bring expanded opportunities in eternity, and greater responsibilities to be cheerfully and joyfully discharged for our Lord through use of the wisdoms and skills obtained in managing the stewardship of this life. Malfeasance in stewardship will bring loss of even those responsibilities and privileges which we have, for all eternity.

There are many other aspects of stewardship, and many explanations of what we believe about the practical application of stewardship principles in an organized, methodical way, which we shall have to save for another time. We invite you particularly to hear the next three sermons on this subject under the titles, EQUALITY THROUGH AGENCY, IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS, and THY KINGDOM COME.