

Stewardship: A Call to Discipleship

This series of resources will explore the biblical roots of stewardship. It can be used alone or with others. Used with others, read the reflection aloud, pausing between paragraphs. Invite each member of the group to take a turn reading, or prepare readers in advance. If you are studying with others, discuss the questions; if you are using the resource alone, share your thoughts with another in the coming week.



Opening Ritual and Prayer

Light a candle. Open the Bible to Mark chapter one and set it beside the candle.

Leader: Let us trace on our bodies the sign of the cross:

All: (in unison) In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Leader: Jesus said, “Come and follow me.”

All: Lord, help us to follow your lifestyle so as to become your disciples.

Leader: Gracious Master, you have called us each by name.

All: Help us, Lord, to hear and listen to your challenges so as to be better stewards of the kingdom of God.

All: Amen.

Read aloud Mark 1:16-20

In all four gospels, Jesus invites people to follow him and become his disciples. Discipleship, the following of a master teacher, can take on a wide variety of forms depending on how, why, and in what way the disciple follows.

Call Stories in the Gospels

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke begin their accounts of Jesus’ mission with dramatic calls to discipleship (see Mark 1:16-20; Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11). Jesus inaugurates his ministry by encountering two sets of brothers plying their fishing trade at the Sea of Galilee and inviting them to follow him.

These call stories give us a description of the major elements of



gospel discipleship. First, the *initiative* in the stories is all on the side of Jesus. Second, the call is a call to *follow* Jesus. Third, discipleship means *empowerment for mission*. The disciples are not called to learn the art of interpreting the law (the *Torah*)—as disciples who followed the rabbis of the time were called to do. The Christian disciple is summoned “to catch people alive,” to be involved in Jesus’ own decisive mission of salvation. Fourth, the call demands a *response*. The disciples are called to leave the known for the unknown. This is a call to conversion. Finally, the call includes the *cross*. The would-be follower of Jesus must be prepared to take up the cross as Jesus did (see Mark 8:34; Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23).

The people whom Jesus called to be his disciples left everything when he summoned them. They abandoned all their security, possessions, and loved ones and followed Jesus in his mission toward a better future. This required a radical change. The disciples knew how to catch fish; they did not know how to catch people alive for the kingdom.

Demands of Discipleship

Jesus’ call to his disciples to “Come, follow me” is the same call made to us today. We, too, are to put aside all that separates us from oneness with Jesus and, thus, oneness with God. We are to place our relationship with God in the most sacred and primary position in our lives and to use it as the focus of our lives. It will require a *change* in our attitude and posture — a *change* in our thinking and response to one another. Being a disciple of Jesus will necessitate that we become new creations in our thinking and in our behavior. It will oblige us to reduce the chaos in our lives and in the lives of our families.

Discipleship requires that we understand and welcome this new attitude that claims that the kingdom — the radical indwelling of the presence of God — is, in fact, in the midst of the busyness and confusion of our lives. The kingdom will be present when we reach for and attain justice and right order in our relationships.

For reflection and discussion: How does your faith lead you to follow Jesus no matter the cost to yourself? When have you been called to make a decision that reflects your acceptance of discipleship? What happened as a result?

Images of Stewardship in the Gospels and the Parable of the Talents (Read Matthew 25:14-30)



According to the gospels, once you become a disciple, then you are challenged to be a Christian steward. Stewardship is an aspect of every would-be disciple of Jesus.

The gospels were written in Greek. The Greek word for steward is *oikonomos*. The term is used for 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.

The parable of the talents (see Matthew 25:14-30) gives insight into Jesus' thinking about stewards and stewardship. A "talent" in Jesus' day referred to a huge sum of money. It would be comparable to the huge sums of money managers on Wall Street are in charge of today. The parable is the story of "a man who was going on a journey," and who left his wealth to be tended by three servants. Two of the servants respond wisely by investing the money and making a handsome profit. Upon returning, the master commends them warmly and rewards them richly. But the third behaves foolishly, paralyzed by fear and anxious pettiness, squirreling away the master's wealth and earning nothing; he is rebuked and punished.

The gospel understands that all temporal and spiritual goods are created by and come from God, and that one day God will require an accounting of the stewardship each person has made of the particular portion entrusted to her or him.

The Cost and Reward of Stewardship

It is human nature for people trying to live as stewards to wonder what reward they will receive. This is not selfishness but an expression of normal human hope. Peter raises the question when he says to Jesus, "*We have given up everything and followed you*" (Mark 10:28).

Jesus' response is more than Peter or any other disciple could reasonably hope to bargain for: "*There is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for*



the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: 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).

The meaning of this passage requires focusing on receiving more from God, including more responsibility as a steward. Among the consequences of living this way will be persecution; and even though discipleship and stewardship set the necessary terms of Christian life in this world, such stewards have the ultimate reward in another life.

This whole process is somewhat tricky, because if we pass everything on into the next life, then people here on earth would *not* work to better the earth, but only to gain reward in heaven. The gospels recognize that human activity is valuable both for what it accomplishes here and now and also for its relationship to the hereafter. In other words, there should be no discontinuity between behavior on earth and participation in the hereafter.

For reflection and discussion: How would you describe the balance between living for the reign of God that is right here, right now, and for life in heaven with God for eternity? How do you use your God-given talents for the reign of God?

New Testament Portraits of Stewardship

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks of the “*faithful and prudent steward*” as one whom a householder sets over other members of the household in order to “*distribute the food allowance at the proper time*” (Luke 12:42; see Matthew 24:45). Good stewards understand that they are to share with others what they have received, that this must be done in a timely way, and that God will hold them accountable for how well or badly they do it. If a steward wastes the owner’s goods and mistreats other household members, “*that servant’s master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful*” (Luke 12:46).

Christian stewards are conscientious and faithful. After all, the first requirement of a steward is to be “*found trustworthy*” (1 Corinthians 4:2). Stewards are “*God’s co-workers*” (1 Corinthians 3:9), with their own particular share in God’s creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work. In this light, stewards are fully conscious of their accountability. They



neither live nor die as their own masters; rather, *“If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s”* (Romans 14:8).

Stewardship and Generosity

The New Testament also reveals that Christian stewards are generous out of love as well as duty. They dare not fail in charity and what it entails; and the New Testament is filled with warnings to those who might be tempted to substitute some counterfeit for authentic love.

The fundamental pattern in every case is changeless: *“Serve one another through love . . . bear one another’s burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ”* (Galatians 5:13–6:2). This includes being stewards of the church, for, as we are quite specifically told, *“the church of the living God”* is *“the household of God”* (1 Timothy 3:15), and it is essential to practice stewardship there. *“As each one has a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace”* (1 Peter 4:10).

Stewardship: It Is Better To Give Than To Receive

Our culture is very materialistic and we are products of that culture. Any time we talk about stewardship, we are talking about a behavior that is counter-cultural. Stewardship is a difficult concept for people living in our materialistic culture.

Sometimes, we are like children. We are like the boy who walks next door and claims that the neighbor’s toy tractor belongs to him. The fact that he’s trying to claim it as his does not make him the rightful owner. No matter how often he says, “mine,” he still goes home without the tractor—unless he steals it. Even then, the stolen goods in his possession are not his. That is the way it is with the gifts God has given us. No matter how often we say, “These are my gifts, and I can do with them what I want,” it doesn’t change the truth. They are God’s and we are the stewards. The big question is, “Are we good stewards?”



If we think that our own time belongs only to us, then we will not share it with others. If we think that the material resources we have generated with the time we have available for work are only ours to hoard, then we will not be

stewards. Stewardship, as a Christian way of life, will result in the whole notion that it is better to give than receive.

Stewardship is universal. It addresses the needs of all society. Once we fully understand that God owns it all, we can make decisions about the use of our time, talent, and treasure accordingly.

God Owes Us Nothing

Good stewards recognize that God owes us nothing for living good Christian lives. God's presence, favor, and blessing are matters of pure grace. They are gifts that cannot be earned. As disciples we can never assume that we may deal with God on the basis of what God owes us. To do so is to reject the gift of grace as the basis of our relationship with God. Grace, by definition, is a gift, freely given by God, freely accepted (not merited) by us.

Our real challenge as people of faith is to be sure that, as the people of God, we realize that good and faithful stewards care for one another, the universe, the environment, the fragile garden we live in, as well as for ourselves. Stewards are gracious receivers of all God's gifts, sharing them as freely as they were given to us.

For reflection and discussion: What does it mean for you to be a disciple of Jesus? How are being a disciple of Jesus and stewardship connected? What demands are made of you as a disciple and steward?

Closing Prayer

Leader: God, help us to better follow Jesus as his disciples.

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: God, help us to be good and faithful stewards of all you have given us.

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

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