

Stewardship as Counterculture: Stewardship by Design

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- [0 : 00] Well, good afternoon to all of you. Every few months, Dan and I, Dan Bielman and I, sit down and we plan out the preaching for the coming months.
- And when we do this, we take a couple of things into account. On the one hand, we want a balanced diet of Scripture. We want to make sure that people are being exposed to the whole counsel of God. And on the other hand, we take into account current things that are happening in the world, issues that are relevant to our lives right here and now in Washington, D.C. and around the globe.
- And so we try to bring those things together and then pray and ask the Lord where we should be focusing our time and energy in our preaching on Sundays. And there are a lot of issues we could focus on.
- There's the whole issue of environmental degradation and climate change. There's our work, our jobs, and how we think about those. There's the whole realm of sexual ethics.
- There's the whole realm of finances. There's stress and the busyness culture that we live in. There's relationships and friendships and parenting.
- [1 : 09] All of these things would be worthy topics. But as we thought about this, we realized that there's actually a theme in Scripture that runs from Genesis to Revelation that touches on all of these issues.
- It actually runs under and shapes how we think about all of those things that I just listed. And that theme is the theme of stewardship. Now, I know that might not strike you as a profound topic to spend several weeks thinking about because normally when it comes up in a church, it's capital campaign season and it's time to raise some money.
- And that's really the only time most churches talk about stewardship. But if you look at Scripture, it actually is a central theme. It's much bigger than money.
- It's a theme that encompasses everything about what it means to be a human being and then shapes how we think about our lives and the world that we live in. And so over the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at this in more detail.
- We're going to ask, what does it mean to be stewards of creation? Stewards of our bodies. Stewards of time itself. Stewards of the grace and the gifts that the Lord has given us.
- [2 : 27] Stewards over our wealth and our privilege. All of these different ways we'll apply it. But this evening, what I want to do is just to spend a little time on the principle itself.
- What is stewardship? How do we understand it biblically? And normally, for those of you who aren't a regular part of our church, our practice is to preach expository sermons.
- So we'll take a text and we'll walk through it and unpack it. Every now and then, we do something a little different. Tonight's going to be a little different. We're going to do more of a survey.

So we will actually draw from all four passages that we read. And from time to time, that's helpful when you're tracing a big theme like this, just to see how all different parts of Scripture speak into and inform such a deep theme.

So that's what we're going to do. So we're going to draw from all of those passages, and we're going to see three things about stewardship. We're going to see the foundation of it. What's the basis for the whole concept of stewardship? And then we're going to see the calling of stewardship, and what that tells us about what it means to be a human being.

[3 : 32] And then lastly, the promise of stewardship. There is a promise woven into stewardship and an end toward which we all strive. So foundation, calling, and promise of stewardship. Let's pray. Our Father, we will marinate in this truth that all of this is by you and for you.

And that includes this time. And Lord, I thank you that we can gather around your written word and rely not on the wisdom of human beings, but on your promise to speak to us and ultimately to reveal to us your living word, Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we hope and pray. Amen. So the foundation of stewardship, this is the first thing we want to consider together. The whole idea of stewardship is based on one central premise.

And that premise you see in Psalm 24, verse 1. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.

[4 : 36] The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. What is that saying? Well, it's pretty simple. Everything that exists belongs to God.

He made it and it's all his. Every single thing. So just think about that for a second. Every molecule that exists.

Every drop of water. Right? Every grain of sand. Every hair on your head. Every breath you take. Every thought you think. Belongs to God.

It all belongs to him. Abraham Kuyper, the touch theologian, famously said, There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine.

It's all his. And of course, if everything belongs to God, if all of this belongs to him, then logically, that means nothing belongs to us.

[5 : 46] Right? There is nothing over which we can say, Mine. Because Jesus has already claimed it as his. So we live in a country, thankfully, that protects your right to own property.

Right? Some countries don't. We live in a country, free market capitalism is built on the idea of property ownership. We can own personal property. We can own the means of production.

That's the basis of our economy. Right? John Locke, Adam Smith, they talk a lot about this. So legally, we can own stuff. But spiritually, on a more fundamental level, what this is saying is that we cannot own anything.

Because it's all God's. Now, you may feel like I'm overdoing this a bit, but there's a reason for that. And that's because I think that this is a very easy concept to understand, logically.

But I also think it's just as easy to forget it. So it's impossible for us to own anything, because it all belongs to God. Paul takes this a step further in Acts chapter 17, during his speech at the Areopagus.

[6 : 57] He says in verse 24, What's this saying?

God can't be manipulated. That's what it's saying. You can't manipulate God. People who say, you know, well, I made a deal with God. If God will do this for me, and I'm going to go to church and pray and spend the rest of my life reading the Bible.

No. You can't make deals with God. He can't be manipulated. Because He made everything, and because He owns everything, He doesn't need anything. And I hate to break it to you, but He doesn't need us.

At all. In fact, He doesn't need creation. At all. It's not as though God was just sitting there in eternity, bored. You know? Or lonely.

You know, saying, I need some distraction, diversion. You know? Let there be light. Something. No. God was perfectly whole, self-sustaining, complete, lacked for nothing.

[8 : 12] There's no reason that He needed to create anything at all. And so what does that mean about all of this? In a word, it's unnecessary.

To God. It's unnecessary. Now, I'm not trying to make you feel insignificant. In fact, if you really think about it, it's the unnecessary of creation that makes it so absolutely, breathtakingly wonderful.

people. Because God is the kind of God who would do this. But He doesn't need it. Right? So I just want to sit with this for a few minutes and let it sink in.

Why does this matter and why would we spend time talking about it? Well, here's the thing. C.S. Lewis, if you've ever read his book, Mere Christianity, he says that unless we understand this concept that God doesn't need us, we can't really come to understand the gospel.

He says, you cannot come to saving faith if you don't get this idea. And I say, what in the world? What's the connection there? Well, in order to understand the gospel, we have to understand and come to terms with this fact.

[9 : 28] No matter what we do for God, no matter what we give God, no matter how much we might try to serve God, God will never owe us anything.

He doesn't need it. He will never be in our debt. Lewis says, every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from moment to moment is given you by God.

If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to his service, you could not give him anything that was not, in a sense, his own already.

Right? So if you spend all day helping your friend move, God bless you if you do that. It's amazing. It's a common need in D.C. as people shuffle around from place to place.

You spend all day helping your friend. You're giving your time. You're giving your energy. They're not entitled to that. It's yours, but you're giving it to them. They're in your debt. They owe you. I hope they admit that.

[10 : 28] I hope they at least got you pizza or told you thank you. Right? But they're in your debt. It's not like that with God. Because God already owns all of your time and all of your energy.

It's already his. Right? So Lewis says, it's kind of like a little girl borrowing \$20 from her dad to go buy him a birthday present. You know?

I mean, it's sweet and nice and he opens the present and I'm sure he appreciates it. But nobody would argue that he's just gained \$20. Right? That's his money.

It just did a big circle. Right? And just came right back to him. And he says, all of our time, all of our energy, if we spent the rest of our lives serving God, that's like we just borrowed \$20 and then gave it back.

That's all it is. It doesn't work that way with God. So, here's how this connects to our faith. If we want to think about it.

[11 : 24] First of all, just kind of a side point, this is one of the reasons that the medieval Catholic doctrine of indulgences just doesn't hold up. Because that's based on the idea that I can do works of super irrigation.

Right? I can go above and beyond what is required of me and earn credit with God and then I can use that to bring about supernatural results. I can kind of cash it in.

Right? It doesn't work that way. Because you could spend your whole life going above and beyond and you're just giving to God what is already God's. You can't accumulate credit.

Now, to get a little more practical for the rest of us who are not kind of mired in medieval Catholicism, how does this touch our lives right now? Well, let's just think about this for a second.

I think that most of us, whether we admit it or not, I think you sit in church and we talk about the gospel and the amazing grace that is on offer to us and I think most of us just kind of say, eh, alright.

[12 : 27] Yeah, God forgives. I know. And preachers like me stand up and we say, isn't it amazing that God forgives sin? And we say, yeah, I guess. But if I'm really honest, you know, I've just been hearing that for years and it's kind of boring.

Yeah, God forgives. I know. And we just sort of feel numb to it. We feel apathetic to the gospel. And honestly, I think one of the reasons that we may feel that way when we think about forgiveness is because I think deep down we kind of think we're entitled to forgiveness.

You know, as though it's a kind of contractual obligation. Right? We've set up this contract with God. As long as I come and I say that I'm sorry and I do my part and I promise to do better, then of course God is going to forgive me.

In fact, God is probably ethically bound to forgive me. In fact, you know, if God's in the business of forgiving people, He probably is going to forgive somebody like me. I'm not nearly as bad as a lot of people out there.

Of course He would forgive somebody like me. And I think what we need to understand is God does not owe us anything. There's no reason why God should forgive us. He's not bound by anything to forgive us.

[13 : 37] And here's the hard thing that we need to wrestle with. It's not a popular thing to talk about these days. But if God's response to our sin and our rebellion was to cast us into, as the parable says, the outer darkness of hell where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth and turn His back on us, He would be perfectly justified in doing so.

Perfectly justified. If I fell on my face before God and said, I repent of everything and I spent the rest of my life outdoing Mother Teresa in goodness and God cast me into the outer darkness, He would be perfectly justified in doing so.

He has no obligation to forgive us. The only reason that God chose to send Jesus, chose to make a way to be reconciled to Him, extends the grace of forgiveness, is because He chooses to.

It's simply a matter of His willingness to suspend justice and extend mercy. He doesn't owe us anything.

So the Gospel says that even though God owed us nothing, He gave us everything. But until you understand the nothing part, the everything part is not going to really mean a whole lot.

[14 : 53] So this is the first aspect of stewardship. The foundation of stewardship is that everything belongs to God, nothing belongs to us.

God doesn't owe us anything or need us for any reason. Now that's what makes the second point so amazing because even though we're completely cosmically unnecessary, God still chooses to give us a central role in the cosmos, which is an amazing thing to think about.

So this brings us to the second point, the calling of stewardship, that stewardship is a calling. And so we're going to shift our attention away from Psalm 24 and Acts 17. We're going to look briefly at Genesis 1.

Genesis 1 says this. It shows us that human beings are created by God and then it essentially shows us the mission statement that God gives human beings. Here's why you're here.

Verse 28. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

[15 : 58] So here's humanity's purpose. Have dominion. Here's why you're here. Have dominion. Exercise lordship. Now God is not saying, I created this world, here you go, had fun with it, I'm out of here.

God says, no, this is my world but I want you to rule over it. I want you to have dominion in my name. Right? So this is by definition a call to stewardship.

You know, in the Greek, the word steward is made up of two words. Oikos and namos. And oikos means house or household. Namos means rule or ruler.

So a steward is literally the ruler of the house. And in ancient times and biblical times, the steward had dominion over the house. They had dominion over all of the family affairs.

They had dominion over all the family finances and investments, the family business. They had dominion over all of the servants and all of the slaves and all the personnel connected to the oikos.

[17 : 02] They had total dominion, total say. And yet, rarely if ever, was that steward the owner. In fact, the vast majority of the time the steward was a slave who belonged to the owner, the master of the house.

And in the same way, when we look at Genesis, it's as though God is creating this great cosmic house, a temple. All of creation is like a great household. Oikonomia, right?

Economy, right? He's creating the whole cosmos and he's saying, I want you, my servants, to be stewards and have dominion over all of this. So this is the calling that he gives to human beings.

And a good steward is marked by one central characteristic. What makes a good steward? What would you think makes a good steward? A good steward uses all that's been entrusted to her in ways not that advance her own self-interest, but rather in ways that advance the interest of the owner, right?

So she's not about advancing her own self-interest and agendas and pet projects. She wants to use everything that's been given to her in ways that advance the interests of the owner. That's by definition what it means to be a steward.

[18 : 19] And I hope you understand that stewardship as a mentality is radically counter-cultural in our society. Because we live in a society where there's a high focus on ownership.

And yet the ownership mentality and the stewardship mentality are radically opposed to one another. I mean, just think about the difference. I'll just give you a couple of differences between these two ways of thinking and living in the world.

An ownership mentality focuses on rights, first of all. So when you're thinking like an owner, you're focused on your rights. This is my time, my home, this is my money, this is my body, this is these are my resources, right?

And I have a legal right to do whatever I want with my stuff. And that's how an owner thinks. Now by contrast, a steward says, I may have a legal right to some of this stuff, but they don't think really in terms of rights, they focus on responsibilities.

What is my responsibility with all that's been entrusted to me? And for our purposes, how am I responsible to God for how I use all that's been entrusted to me?

[19 : 37] And so you have to ask, what are God's priorities? What's God's design for this? What was God's intention in creating this and giving it to me? What are God's values?

What is the end that God wants to bring about? And then how do I use all that's been entrusted to me to serve that end? It's a very different mentality, rights versus responsibilities. Another way that owners and stewards are different is people with an ownership mentality assume they are completely autonomous.

I can do what I want with my stuff, it's my stuff, nobody can tell me how I can, what I should or shouldn't do with my stuff, nobody has a right to do that because it's mine. And there's an assumption there that there will never be an accounting.

I can do what I want, live how I want, no problem. Nobody will ever have a right to speak into that. But stewards recognize that we're not ultimately autonomous.

We may have a functional autonomy here and now, but one day just like in the parable of the talents, the master will come and ask us to give an accounting. So stewards live every day knowing that one day we will be called to give an account.

[20 : 47] There's a passage in the New Testament that speaks specifically to pastors and church leaders, not just pastors, church leaders in general. people and says one day you will be called to give an account for how you stewarded God's people.

That should be chilling if you're in church leadership. One day you'll have to give an account. Were you a good steward? So there's a sense of accountability.

So rights versus responsibilities, autonomy versus accountability, radically different mentalities. So human beings are called to be stewards who are responsible and accountable to God rather than owners who think only about their rights and their autonomy.

Now again, let's just ask why does this matter? Why are we talking about this? Well, on the one hand, we're going to talk a lot more about this in the weeks to come. We're going to focus, as I said, on applying this idea in lots of different ways.

But I just want to make one brief overarching point that we'll come back to in the weeks to come. Here's the overarching point. Let's just use logic. If human beings were created, to be stewards, that means that a stewardship mentality is inherently humanizing.

[22 : 03] In other words, the more I live and think and act like a steward, the more truly human I become. And I just want you to think about what that looks like.

I mean, just imagine the world if everyone lived with a stewardship mentality. If we all assumed I'm responsible to God and I'm accountable to God with how I use everything that's been entrusted to me.

And I want to live in ways that advance his interests over my own. What's a great summary of God's interests and priorities? We just said it earlier. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Right? So imagine if that ethic shaped how we used our money and our homes and our time and our bodies and our jobs and our privilege and our wealth and everything that we could list.

Imagine that world. It would be a world of sharing. It would be a world of generosity. It would be a world of interdependence. It would be a world of closeness and community.

[23 : 05] It would be a world of justice and mercy. That's the kind of world we want to live in. What an amazing world that would be if that was the dominant ethic, if we all lived like stewards.

See, it's radically humanizing to live as a steward. Now, if that's true, then the opposite is also true. If a stewardship mentality humanizes us, then an ownership mentality dehumanizes us.

It's destructive to human life and potential. Now, that may not be an immediate connection. Let me just give you a concrete example. Harvey Weinstein.

Great example. Current example. But by no means unique. See, the whole Harvey Weinstein situation is not just a case of sexual addiction or a failure of sexual assault laws or the result of too many people keeping quiet.

I mean, it's all of those things, but it's not just those things. This is a great portrait of what it looks like when a human being lives with no sense of responsibility or accountability to anything outside their own desires.

[24 : 23] This is what it starts to look like when we live for too long unchecked like we own the place, like we can do whatever we want, whatever our heart puts into our minds to do.

This is what it looks like. And it dehumanizes. Right? So you have a man who has power, and yet he doesn't steward that power. He doesn't see it in terms of responsibility or accountability.

And we see what it does. It doesn't just begin to dehumanize him, it begins to dehumanize other people in his perception. Right? So other people become bodies to be owned and used however we see fit.

It's literally inhuman. Right? So as we think about this mentality, it's much more than just an esoteric concept. The more we live like stewards, the more we're being true to our design as human beings, the more we live like owners, the more twisted and distorted we become.

So the premise behind stewardship is that everything belongs to God, and yet humans by design are called to be stewards. What's all this for? As we move to the final point, what's the point of all this?

[25 : 39] What's the hope? And here's where I think stewardship is really fascinating. We get a glimmer of this in Matthew 25. Jesus tells the parable of the talents, and as you just heard me read, the parable is essentially this, that the master is going to go away on a business trip, and he brings his three trusty servants to him, and he disperses his wealth, and don't worry about how much a talent is.

Essentially, imagine he says, I'm going to give you five million dollars, I'm going to give you two million dollars, and I'm going to give you one million dollars. A lot of money, and he goes away on a business trip, and the first two double their money, they double the investment, and so when the master returns and finds out what they've done, he says to each of them, well done, good and faithful servant.

You've been faithful over a little, I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. See, this is pointing us towards something that the Bible teaches in a number of places, faithful stewardship is rewarded, that those who are over little in this life will be set over much in the life to come, and even more than that, that they will be able to enter fully into the joy of their master.

Now, what does that mean for us as we think about God? All of this that we're stewards over now will one day be ours to enjoy forever.

forever. It will be ours. The Bible says that we are co-heirs with Christ, and so we're stewarding that which will become our inheritance that we gain alongside Jesus Christ, which is an amazing thing to think about.

[27 : 21] But it's not the world that it is now. We're just over a little now. This is the world as it will be when Jesus Christ makes all things new.

Imagine this world, the healing of all creation, justice filling the earth, all humanity united as one, no more racial division, the end of all disease and decay and death.

The Bible says that as we're co-heirs with Christ, one day we will inherit the world that Christ has remade. So then you ask, okay, well, what's the point then of stewardship now?

Well, stewardship is the way that we as Christians offer a preview to the rest of the world of what new creation will be like.

Here's what families will look like. Here's what relationships will look like. Here's how wealth will be distributed. Here's how time will be spent. Here's how all of these things will be used.

[28 : 25] Here's a kingdom vision, a preview. Right? So Christians are called to be a radically countercultural community and we're called to use things like sex and money and power not to advance our own self-interest but in ways that advance the interests of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's stewardship in this world and it's a living preview. Right? And of course as we think and we reflect on this, the greatest example of stewardship in history is of course Jesus Christ.

If you want to see a good steward, look to him. His entire life was one great act of stewardship. How do we know? Because it was defined by this.

Not my will but thy will be done. That's the essence of stewardship. So he was willing to give up glory and honor. He was willing to give up comfort.

He was willing to become essentially homeless, to be rejected, to ultimately be tortured and suffer and die to be rejected by his father. All for the sake of doing his father's will.

[29 : 41] His father had a plan, had an end and Jesus said my entire life, earthly life, I will devote to the father's end. That's stewardship. And he didn't withhold anything.

And I think this is our great hope as we consider the calling of stewardship in our own lives. I mean the fact is we're going to constantly slip back and forth into an ownership mentality.

I'm going to do it all the time. I do it, you know, I'm at great risk. The greatest risk in terms of my time is Sunday night. I have a great day. We have church in Brooklyn in the morning and I normally have lunch and hang out with people in midday and then I come here and we worship together in the evening and then after that I go home and I'm so prone to say this is my time.

This is my time. You know who needs me then? My kids who haven't seen me all day. My wife who's been taking care of our soon to be 12 week old by herself all day.

They need me. Right? But I'm so prone to go home and say this is my time. It's not my time. There's no such thing as my time. It doesn't exist as a concept.

[30 : 48] It's totally meaningless. But I do it anyway. And again and again and again we're going to fall back into that ownership mentality again and again and again. And so our hope ultimately is not to get it right.

Right? One day we'll get it right. It's to try. But then to know that when we fail, guess what? Jesus, the perfect steward, is our hope. Because he was the steward in his father's house.

He was the son in his father's house. And yet he was willing to be cast out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Why? To guarantee that we always have a place in the father's house.

That no matter how much we might screw up, how unfaithful we might be with our investment, that we will always have a place. Not just as stewards, but as sons and daughters who will one day inherit the earth with Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. children's choice Claus Extremis details like this is policial finding talking about news orRAP face possono mouvements frustrations even with the workgruppnell face