

Stewardship as Counterculture: Stewards of Time

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 November 2017

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] Well, again, let me welcome you to the Brooklyn Parish. If this is your first time with us, if you're normally a part of Columbia Heights, welcome.

If this is your first time with Advent, especially we'd like to welcome you. Every now and then we get an opportunity to gather all together. It's always very exciting to be in one space together for worship.

I want to ask you a question that may sound a bit unique. A lot of times we ask, where are you right now?

What are you doing? Or you might be on the phone with somebody and you ask, so where are you at this moment as we're talking? But I want to ask a slightly different question. I want to ask, when are you right now?

When are you? Are you here? You can be honest. Are you here, fully present in this moment?

[1 : 0 0] Or are you maybe still stuck somewhere in the past? When I have hard conversations, sometimes I will rehearse and rehearse and rehearse and rehearse and persevere and persevere on those conversations.

So, are you still stuck in an argument you had a week ago or maybe this morning on the way to church rather than here? Are you dwelling somewhere in a hypothetical future?

Are you anticipating all of the logistical challenges of the Thanksgiving week? Are you thinking about tomorrow morning?

If you have a lot of work waiting for you that you have to get done? Are you stuck somewhere in some hypothetical future? Some people live 10, 15 years down the road in the hypothetical world where all of their worst fears have come true.

So, when are you right now? I think if you're anything like me, you often feel not fully present here and now, but you rather feel like Bilbo Baggins who said, I feel thin, sort of stretched, like butter spread over too much bread.

[2 : 1 1] Are you open to the possibility that the reason we feel this way, the reason that we so often feel tired and overcommitted and overwhelmed and stressed out is because we have a very dysfunctional relationship with time?

We're in a series called Stewardship as Counterculture. And that's based on the truth that God owns everything and we are made to be stewards. And what we're seeing every week is that when we live like owners, that results in dysfunctional relationships with God and with the people around us.

And that when we live in a way that honors God as being God, when we live like stewards, we experience freedom and healing and wholeness. So, the question that we want to consider this morning for a little while is how can we cultivate a healthy stewardship of time, a relationship with the time that God has given us.

And we're going to be looking at Ecclesiastes 3, 1 through 15 and Matthew 11, 25 through 30. And we're going to see three things. It's stewardship of time requires that we relinquish our control to God, that we rest in the Son of God, and that we then restructure our lives around God.

So, relinquish control, rest in the Son of God, and then restructure our lives around God. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you again for your word.

[3 : 53] We thank you for the freedom to gather around it. We pray that as we open your written word, that you would, in the power of your Spirit, reveal to us the living word, Jesus Christ. Help us make good use of this time for your glory. In your Son's name, amen. So, the first thing we want to talk about is that stewardship of time cannot happen unless we relinquish control to God.

Ecclesiastes is a fascinating book. If you haven't spent much time in it, it's a cynical book. It's a book that very much fits with our modern culture. It's essentially about the secular humanist search for meaning.

And it's written around a central character called the teacher, although he's much more like a seeker. Because throughout the book, he's seeking the meaning of life, but he's doing it by looking only at what is under the sun.

That is to say, he's looking for the meaning of life apart from relationship with a personal God. He's only considering what is under the sun.

[5 : 04] And as you come to chapter 3, he's reflecting on the timing of different things that happen in our lives. So, in verses 1 through 8, we have all of these word pairs.

And you think of the song from the birds, you know. There's a time for birth and a time for death. There's a time for planting and a time for plucking up. There's a time for weeping and a time for laughter.

Everything has its time. And in Hebrew poetry, this is a literary device that is meant to convey totality. Right? So, he's saying there's a time for everything that encompasses human life.

It all has a time. And, you know, for years I read these verses. And for years I thought that this was encouraging us that we needed to recognize that it is sometimes appropriate to weep.

That it's sometimes appropriate to laugh or to dance or to plant or to pull up and so on and so forth. But that's not actually what it's saying. I had a kind of insight when I was looking at this again.

[6 : 10] That's not what it's saying. I was inserting those words. What it's actually literally saying is the time comes for these things. Whether we like it or not.

The time comes when these things happen to us. And the point of these first eight verses is simply this. Life happens to us and we cannot control the timing.

Things happen. So, you didn't get any say in when you were born. It happened to you. Likewise, you will not really get any say in when you die.

It will happen to you. Right? We don't get a say in when we weep. Things happen and we weep. We don't know the next time that we will be free to laugh.

Because we may be weeping. Right? It's like that old quote, life is what happens to us while we're making other plans. Right? We can plan the perfect wedding but then a breakup happens.

[7 : 24] Didn't see it coming. We can plan a great career path but then a pregnancy happens.

And you got to make hard choices. Right? We can plan to have kids but then infertility happens. We can plan to go to grad school but then a rejection letter happens.

And now what do I do? We can plan all kinds of things but then life happens to us regardless. And then what's more, verse 11 says that God has made us so that we cannot comprehend or understand all of his actions throughout history.

So it's saying in other words, we're never fully going to see the big picture of how it all fits together. How God weaves all of these things together for his purposes. It's saying clearly we're never going to get that big picture.

This side of heaven. So this is the first thing that we need to realize when it comes to time. That we are not in control of it. We don't control the times or the timing of our lives.

[8 : 30] So the question then becomes, do you trust God? Do you trust him enough to relinquish control of time to him? Knowing that you're going to be working with limited information.

Do you trust him? There was a play on Broadway some years ago called The Search for Intelligent Life. And it starred Lily Tomlin.

If you know Lily Tomlin, phenomenally talented. And it's a brilliantly written one-woman play. And the opening monologue is Lily Tomlin plays this bag lady named Trudy.

And it's hysterical. And Trudy goes on this whole riff about all, she says, you know, I think you should know I worry a lot. And I worry about this and I worry about that.

You know, she says, you know, if peanut oil comes from peanuts and coconut oil comes from coconuts, then where does baby oil come from? And she just goes on and on about all the things she worries about.

[9 : 33] And at the end of this kind of, you know, list of all of her anxiety, she sort of stops and she looks up and she says, I worry where today fits in the cosmic scheme of things.

And then she says, I wonder, I worry that there is no cosmic scheme of things. And that seems to be the pinnacle of her anxiety.

And I think it's brilliant because it's right on. That question really lies at the heart of most of the anxiety we feel. Is there a great cosmic scheme of things?

Is there a God out there orchestrating all of this in some way that makes sense? Or is it all just random and meaningless? As Ecclesiastes would say, emptiness, emptiness, all is emptiness.

Is there a great scheme of things? Is there a God in control? And can we trust that God? That's a foundational question.

[10 : 37] So in other words, when you look at your life, do you trust God's timing or not? You know what that means. If you trust God's timing, it means that you thank him and you praise him even when things are not going your way.

Because you trust his timing more than your own. It means, as the serenity prayer goes, having the courage to accept the things we cannot change. Because we trust God.

So this is the first thing we need to understand when it comes to the stewardship of time. We have to relinquish control of time to God. The next thing we have to do is we need to begin to learn how to rest in the Son of God.

To rest in the Son of God. Now the reason we need to rest, the reason that you need to think more about rest in your life is not just because you're tired or overcommitted or overwhelmed.

Underneath all of that, we need to rest because we are restless. Human beings are inherently restless. Think about your life for a second.

[11 : 39] Think about the stress, the urgency that you constantly feel, that sense of the tyranny of time always marching on, always being 10 minutes behind the next thing you need to get to.

What are the reasons for that? You know, you ask people and some people say, well, we live in a society that overvalues productivity and that's why we're all stressed out.

Yeah, that's probably true. Other people would say, well, our society rewards overachievement and so our bosses and our employers, they expect more and more and more from us and if I don't want to do it, there are 100 people behind me who would gladly take my job and that's why we are so stressed out.

That's probably partly true. Also, I think if we're honest, it has something to do with ego. You know, being busy conveys something about you and your importance.

There was an interesting article from Michael Bandon in Forbes earlier this year. Having no life is the new aspirational lifestyle. I think he's on to something.

[12 : 42] He says that displaying one's busyness operates as a visible signal of status in the eyes of others. Right? So status symbols are all about scarcity. You know, I show you my diamond because it's a scarce stone.

It shows my status because I have one. Or I have a rare car that only wealthy people can afford. It's all about scarcity. That shows my status. He says, no, no, no. Now, the scarcity, the scarce resource is me.

I'm scarce. My unavailability is a symbol of my status. So I think it has something to do with ego. But there's another reason why we are so profoundly restless.

And you see it in verse 11 of Ecclesiastes 3. Just listen to these words. God has put eternity into man's heart. I love that verse.

God has put eternity into man's heart. So it's saying we may not be able to comprehend it. We may not be able to understand eternity. If you try to explain it or map it out, it's beyond what our minds can get around.

[13 : 53] And yet we long for it. We long for it. There's a deep yearning for something greater, something beyond all this, what you might call an inconsolable longing for the eternal.

I've used this example before, but there was on NPR's Fresh Air, Terry Gross. One time interviewed the children's book writer, Maurice Sendak. And Sendak is talking about getting old and all that's changing, all that he's thinking about.

And then he's talking about how he's mourning the death of his brother. And he sort of reflects on that. And then he says this, I don't believe in an afterlife, but I still fully expect to see my brother again.

Isn't that interesting? I don't believe in an afterlife, but I still fully expect to see my brother again. And you see it right there. He may not believe in eternity in his mind, but his heart still yearns for it because God has put eternity into his heart.

You know, Louis C.K. has made the news this week for doing some pretty awful things to women. And he's sort of the latest in a string of kind of horrible revelations.

[15 : 11] But if you look at Louis C.K. years ago, there was this one time when he was on the Conan O'Brien show. And he said, underneath everything in your life, there's that thing, that forever empty.

He talked about that forever empty. And, you know, I think about him saying that and the level of insight and self-awareness that he had. And I look at what he has done and all these things that are coming out.

And I wonder maybe that's part of why he did what he did. Because the truth is that deep, inconsolable longing will gnaw at you and gnaw at you and gnaw at you.

And some people will do just about anything to escape it for just a few moments. You know, Bruce Marshall wrote, this is often misattributed to Chesterton.

It was actually Bruce Marshall who wrote, The young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God. Ringing the bell at the brothel, but actually looking for God.

[16 : 15] So the question becomes, what do we do with this inconsolable longing for eternity? And the teacher in Ecclesiastes, this is by the way why you have to know your context. Ecclesiastes is not meant to be prescriptive.

He's a cynic. He's essentially a secular humanist. The teacher in Ecclesiastes disregards God. And so he says, well, the best we can do is to just get the most out of this life while we can.

Let's live like there's no tomorrow. Let's do what good we can, enjoy what pleasure we can, because this is it. Live your best life now. And many people in our culture, I think, would agree.

You know, one of the reasons I think that we are so overwhelmed, let's just be honest for a second. I think one of the reasons that we're so overwhelmed is because we believe that it's possible to have it all in this life.

We want an amazing job, a great marriage, thriving kids, a healthy body, a rich spiritual life, great friends, financial security, and a sense of meaning.

[17 : 26] In one lifetime. And listen, we are all fighting for that. We're all striving to have all of those things. And we feel entitled to those things.

And if we're deficient in any of those categories, which, by the way, we all are, we feel like we're failing. That we're not living the fullest life we can.

And listen, the jig is up. That list is utterly impossible. Something has to go off that list. You cannot have a great marriage, thriving kids, a healthy body, an amazing career, a rich spiritual life, great friends, financial security, and a sense of meaning.

You can't have all that. Too many lifetimes. But I think that we are convinced that this is it. Get the most we can out of life.

Do it all. Maximize our time. We also, I think, perpetually distract ourselves. We fill up our times with smartphones and with social media.

[18 : 29] I just want to give you one illustration of how much time we spend. And there's this interesting piece written by a guy named Charles Chu on what it takes to read 200 books a year. He says that he started reading 200 books a year.

It's changed his life. How many hours do you think it takes, on average, to read 200 books? Well, he calculated it 417 hours. Now, if you're anything like me, you think about that and you're like, where in the world am I going to get 417 hours in a year to read 200 books?

There's no way. I'm way too busy. And then he says, well, average Americans actually spend 608 hours on social media. So you wouldn't even need to give it up entirely.

You could just reduce the amount of time by a little over 400 hours. You could read 200 books and still have 200 hours left over for Facebook and Instagram.

That's how long it takes. He says we watch 1,642 hours of TV a year. So if you total all that up, social media and television, that's 2,250 hours that we spend doing those kinds of things.

[19 : 39] And if we applied all of those hours to reading instead, you could read 1,000 books a year. If you gave up TV and social media and spent all that time reading. And by the way, reading is, I would strongly encourage that to you.

This is beside the point. But I would strongly encourage you read. And I know that sounds funny, but fewer and fewer people are reading long format anything anymore. And we're forgetting, I think, how to think.

And we're forgetting and we're losing the ability to have sustained attention. The only way I'm able to read anything is to put books everywhere. I have books in my bag, in my office, next to my bed, in the bathroom.

I have books in my car for when I'm just sitting in the car, not while I'm driving. But like if I'm waiting to pick our kids up at school, I have books in the car. And I'm constantly listening to audio books. You know, podcasts are great.

But there's something different about a long format book. I would strongly encourage that. But it requires rethinking how we use our time. So no matter how much we try, though, if we come back to our question, none of these things, distracting ourselves, trying to have it all, they're not actually going to satisfy that inconsolable longing for eternity.

[20 : 58] And the reason is simple. Our hearts have the capacity to fit eternity. Physically, it's small. But spiritually, it's vast.

And if it has the capacity to fit eternity, the only thing that will fill it is something that is eternal, something that is infinite. In Matthew 11, Jesus issues his famous invitation.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. You've got to understand, he's talking to Greeks who are exhausted over their endless search for philosophical truth that had gone on for years and years and years without resolution.

And then the Jews, their religion had become this endless effort to live up to innumerable regulations and standards. And then you have us.

[22 : 04] We live in a culture where it's an endless race to fill that void within. And to all of us, Jesus offers the same invitation. Come to me and I will give you rest.

I will give you rest. Through his death on the cross, Jesus makes it possible to give us what we cannot find on our own because of sin, which is a relationship with the infinite God of the universe, the one for whom our hearts were made.

But here's something I want to point out. A lot of times we read that verse and we say, come to Jesus, pray the sinner's prayer, and I will give you rest. And you pray, Jesus, please forgive me.

I want to be a Christian. And then no rest. And sort of wait. Because we think it maybe is some kind of divine peace that should just settle into our hearts.

And that's not, in fact, what he's saying. He's not saying, come to me, and the minute you believe in me, bam, rest, you're never going to be stressed again. He says, come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

[23 : 08] And then he goes on. He says, the rest comes when we take on his yoke and when we learn from him. So in other words, he says, when we follow him and emulate him and allow his teachings to shape our lives, that is what will begin to enable us to experience the rest that he offers.

So the rest is something that has to be learned. It has to be worked into our lives. It has to be, it's the fruit of obedience and following Jesus. So this brings us to the third and final point.

Stewardship of time means relinquishing control. It means resting in the Son of God. And finally, it means restructuring our lives around God. So following Jesus is much bigger than our time, but it involves and includes rethinking how we use all of our time so that our lives revolve around God.

And we see this modeled in the way Jesus lived his life. And I just want to give you three quick examples of how we see Jesus showing us how to steward our time better.

The first thing we see is the most crucial one. Jesus kept the Sabbath. He kept the Sabbath. I mean, he declared in the passage that we read, Jesus declared that he was Lord of the Sabbath.

[24 : 35] And he soundly rejected all of the regulations around Sabbath keeping. And yet at the same time, he taught that the Sabbath was made by God to bless human beings for our benefit.

It's meant to be a blessing. And I'll tell you this right now, just even from my own experience. When it comes to the stewardship of time, the single most important decision that you can make in your life is to begin keeping a 24-hour Sabbath every week.

It's the most important thing that you can do. By Sabbath, I literally mean a 24-hour period, not because you have to, Jesus has fulfilled the law, but because this is a blessing.

And we've seen God's people do it over the centuries. Even Jesus honored and kept the Sabbath, went to synagogue to worship and to teach. If you can't do a full 24-hour day, figure out some way to break it up in half.

Half a day here, half a day there. I don't think that it has to be on Sunday or Saturday. Ours, mine is sometimes on a Saturday, and it's sometimes on a Monday, depending on how the week is going.

[25 : 48] But by Sabbath, I mean it's a time to focus on your relationship with God, on your friends, on your family, on recreation, on creativity, on rest, whatever rejuvenates you.

If you have young kids, it's not going to be perfect. You have to get creative. Do the best that you can. I'll tell you this.

I mean, when we're able to keep our Sabbath, which begins on Friday night, begins Friday night. Whoa. Sorry about that. Begins Friday night, and it begins with family movie night.

And we sit down, we order pizza, get something that's totally easy to eat, and it requires no preparation on our part. And then we pick out some movie that our kids can watch, and our kids love it.

And then we go to bed, and we sleep in as much as we can. Normally, the boys let us sleep in until about 7.15. And we sleep in, and then we get up, and we make pancakes, and we have kind of a long, leisurely breakfast.

[26 : 50] And then we try to go and do something together as a family. And, you know, something outside, something away from the house, something away from our devices. I would strongly encourage you, if you keep a Sabbath, to rigorously enforce a no-device rule.

And I say rigorously, because from my own experience, it's incredibly difficult to do. No devices on the Sabbath. Make it a time for human connection and interaction.

And what you'll find that, if you make Sabbath a non-negotiable thing, that actually requires you to rethink and restructure all of the rest of your week. You have to rethink everything about how you spend all of your time to make Sabbath possible.

Because everything you've got to get done, you've got to get done in six days. So that's the first thing. Keeping the Sabbath. Stewardship of time. It's the cornerstone of good stewardship of time, in my opinion.

The next thing we see in Jesus' life is a regular rhythm of engagement and withdrawal. Engagement and withdrawal. If you read the Gospels, they show this clear pattern that Jesus would be fully engaged with the needs and the demands around him.

[27 : 57] But then regularly, periodically, he would fully withdraw. And he would go away to be by himself, to pray, to spend time with his father, to get re-centered in his identity in the father. And then he would engage.

And then he would withdraw. And sometimes he did it at very inconvenient times. But it was a priority for him. I think the problem for us is that we never fully engage because we never fully withdraw.

In other words, the boundaries are so blurred. And smartphones and devices make this way harder. You know, even when I'm disengaged, I'm still connected. I never fully disconnect.

And so I never fully engage. We always kind of live partially distracted. Never fully off, but never fully on. And that wears you down over time. So I would strongly encourage you to think of the stewardship of time as by prioritizing setting rhythms of engagement and withdrawal.

Clear boundaries so when you're at work, you're fully there. When you're with your kids, you're fully there. But also take time to regularly withdraw and re-center yourself in the gospel rest of Jesus Christ.

[29 : 11] Fully engage, fully withdraw. You know, Mother Teresa, people ask, you know, how did this, you know, white girl spend, you know, survive all those years in this, you know, dealing with the kinds of issues that she dealt with given where she was from?

And how's that possible? Well, it's because of her rhythm of withdrawal and engagement. You know, she says she would take, she and her team, they would take a day every week to totally withdraw.

They would take a week every month. And then they would take a month every year. And that enabled them, when they did engage, to be fully there.

So engagement withdrawal. And the last thing, the last aspect of stewardship of time that I think we see in Jesus' life is clarity of purpose. Clarity of purpose.

I've always been fascinated with the end of Mark 1 when Simon comes and he finds Jesus praying by himself and he says to Jesus, Jesus, you gotta come back. There are all these people, they're sick, they're demon-possessed.

[30 : 13] All these people are waiting, they've been waiting for hours. Where are you? Come on back. You got work to do. And what does Jesus say? He says, no. No, we gotta go to the next town because I need to go there and preach the gospel because that's the reason that I came.

And you can imagine Simon saying, well, you got all these people, all these needs, everybody wants to see you. And Jesus says, no. This is my purpose. He has a strong clarity of purpose. He knows what God has called him to do.

He knows what his priorities are. And he doesn't waver from them. He sticks to that clarity of purpose. And this is the key, even if it means disappointing people.

If you're honest and you think about your own life, how much of the chaos in our lives, the overcommitment, the exhaustion, is the direct result of our attempts to keep everybody happy, to do everything that is expected of us, to be unwilling to disappoint or let people down, almost every day of your life, if you are being clear and focused on what you believe God has called you to do, you will disappoint somebody.

So you might as well get up in the morning, look in the mirror and say some advice that I was given years ago. Look in the mirror and you say, who am I going to disappoint today? Who's it going to be?

[31 : 40] And that you pray that when you do it, you do it with grace and gentleness and humility, trusting in the Lord because it's going to happen. And if you live your life trying to prevent that from happening, you're going to be a nervous wreck.

So learning to steward our time well, learning to rest in a culture that rushes continually, I think is among the most countercultural things that we can do as a community.

You know, last week we talked about our bodies and sex and gender. If there's anything that is more countercultural than the Christian view of sexuality, it's the Christian view of time. I think it's among the most countercultural things that we have to offer this world because it says loudly and clearly that we are not bound and enslaved to the tyranny of time because we actually serve the Lord of time, the Lord of Sabbath, the Lord of rest, the God who was and is and is to come.

Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the fact that you not only created time and established the rhythms of day and night, the revolutions of the planets, but rather, Lord, you also give us a way to steward that time, to recognize that it is all a gift and you show us in Jesus Christ how to live our lives and structure our time in ways that are centered on you, that make you the priority and the object of our lives.

We pray that you would instill this truth deeply in us, that we would be enabled and free to be such a community. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[33 : 28] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.