

Introduction to Stewardship

SESSION 1

Stewardship: It's not about the budget.

A Loving Invitation

What is your earliest memory of money? I remember picking up jars of pecans and getting paid a dime and wondering why my male cousins got a quarter for their identical work. I remember sitting cross-legged on the bed in my “summer-of-love” room decorated with huge crepe paper flowers and peace signs, trying to figure out how I could tithe my 25-cent allowance without giving God more than God was due. I remember the palpable tension that sometimes floated free in our household when, despite everyone’s best efforts, ends didn’t quite meet.

Over the last twenty-five years I have led workshops on stewardship issues around the church, and whenever I ask people for their first memories of money, I usually get some variation of “hiding behind a door while parents argued about the bills.” Money is potent stuff and that potency spills over into the ways that we deal with and talk about money in the church. Money raises deep uneasiness in us, now perhaps more than any time in my lifetime; coupled with the fact that there is a growing disillusionment and distrust of institutions in general, including the church, church leaders are often stymied and embarrassed to talk with their flocks about the deeply spiritual reality of giving.

Once, a few years back, a young woman burst into my office at the church clutching a handful of crumpled papers. She was red in the face from the inner tirade that had propelled her from the parking lot into my office. Before I could get up to greet her, she threw the stack of bills on my desk, some of which appeared to be tear stained, and said, “Eugenia, what does God expect of me? Don’t expect to see me back at church until stewardship season is over!” She turned on her heel, stalked from the room, crossed the parking lot, and peeled out in her car, apparently oblivious to me running behind her and waving my arms. All of our joyful talk about where the church was going and what we needed to get there was just one more demand than she could handle, and her anger was pure, raw, and humbling. Most of our parishioners



The way to ensure that what we “own” doesn’t own us is to give it away. The beginning point for giving, that idol-strangling practice, is the tithe.

are not quite as upfront or in touch with their feelings as that young woman, but beneath all of our rhetoric and pie charts, many of us have just missed the point.

Stewardship is not fundamentally about raising the church’s budget; although faithful stewardship is our *method* for raising the church’s budget. It is not fundamentally about purchasing mission; although purchasing mission can be a wonderful motivation for giving. It is not fundamentally about acquiring needed funding to renovate the building and pay the staff; although both of those things are sacred trusts that we hold. It is not fundamentally about volunteering our time to the work of the church; although faithful stewards do volunteer. It is not fundamentally about using our talents or serving in the community, as worthwhile and necessary as those things are for spiritual growth. Stewardship, rather, is the faithful living out of God’s claim, God’s unassailable right to rule, over human life and the entire created order. The word “stewardship” simply means “oversight” and “responsibility for the use of” a resource that does not belong to oneself. It is activity taken on behalf of another who has a greater claim on that being stewarded. Stewardship is a deeply spiritual concept that is not so much about our fair share of the budget as it is about God’s claim on “our” resources. It is, as is everything about God, about freedom and not bondage, about gratitude and not burden.

The Myth of Individual Ownership

Many of us live with the inner lie that what we own belongs to us. The truth of biblical faith is that there is no such thing as individual ownership. Everything that exists in the universe was created by God and belongs to God. In God's lavish generosity we are provided with the means to provide for our families and ourselves, but that provision is always derivative. It is God doing the providing. It is God doing the creating. It is God's house that we live in, God's car that we drive, God's children that we raise, God's being we inhabit and which inhabits us. It is God's church that we administer and God's earth over which we have dominion. When we become confused about that truth, then we become much like grown-up versions of that 12-year-old me who tried to figure out how to tithe a quarter and resented how much longer it would take to save the money for the polka-dot hair ribbons that I wanted and believed would make my life perfect.

Here is the bottom line: It is not *our* stuff we are talking about, not *our* checking account, not *our* 401(k), not *our* new Subaru; all of these belong to God. It is our hearts that we are talking about and how much of them really belong to God. In stewardship God asks the questions, "What are you doing with my stuff? And what does that say about our relationship?" God asks these questions not because God needs our resources as if somehow God does not already have them. God asks because God wants our hearts, our first commitment, and surely God knows that one of the most potent rivals in our hearts is money. Jesus certainly recognized this dilemma: more than two-thirds of all that he is recorded as saying in the New Testament has to do with money, possessions and power, and how we use them.

How did we become so confused and begin to think that we somehow owned things, were entitled to them, and could find our security in them? Perhaps the roots of that confusion go all the way back to our beginnings. In the first creation story in the book of Genesis, God creates humankind and gives humankind dominion over the other creatures of earth (Gen. 1:26-28). The word "dominion" in this context does not mean to rule as one sees fit; neither does it simply mean to rule over, either by design or whimsy. It means to be responsible for the good of the other. In other words, it means that we, who are created in the image of God, are to treat everything under our charge just as God would do. That is a far cry from the idea that the one who dies with the most toys wins.

What about the Tithe?

The Bible always gives us very practical help for moving into the most countercultural claims of the faith. Dealing with

money is no exception. Recognizing the great potential that possessions have to become our gods, the Hebrew Scriptures give us a way to begin to deal with the siren song of money. The way to ensure that what we "own" doesn't own us is to give it away. The beginning point for giving, that idol-strangling practice, is the tithe.

The tithe refers to 10 percent of that over which one has control, given to the faith community, off the top. The original purpose of the tithe was to support the Levites who were responsible for the tabernacle and worship (Num. 18:20-24). These funds also came to support the various feasts and sacrifices that the community shared, some lasting for a couple of days (Deut. 14:22-27). Finally, tithes were used to establish a pool of resources to help the poor, widows, orphans, and foreigners (Deut. 14:28-29). So, just like we do with our giving today, our ancestors paid the pastor (priest), paid for the program of the house of worship, and gave to missions. Offerings were given on top of the tithe to meet specific needs or to give thanks for specific blessings.

As with so many gifts from God, people very quickly turned the tithe into a burden or a tool. The tithe became a duty that was taken on, not always out of a sense of God's ownership and human gratitude, but as a way to "purchase" God's favor and thus assure affluence. Rather than seeing 10 percent as a beginning point of a life of gratitude, the tithe became both a floor and a ceiling of giving.

Don't Our Taxes Do What Tithes Used to Do?

Once after a stewardship workshop, an earnest elder came up to me and said, "Eugenia, I know the Bible speaks about the tithe, but I pay a lot of taxes now to take care of these things, so I don't think the tithe applies today." Just like us today, our ancestors struggled to meet their religious obligations as well as their civil ones.

Taxes may have originated with the custom of giving presents for protection from harm (Gen. 32, 33, 42). In Egypt, Joseph warned of seven years of famine after seven years of abundance. Pharaoh put him in charge of raising funds for the hard times. Joseph leveled a 20 percent tax to store up food and buy land. During the Exodus, Moses asked for voluntary contributions to construct the tabernacle. The Law required that every male over the age of twenty give a shekel for the use and maintenance of the tabernacle. When Israel asked Samuel for a king, the prophet warned that heavy taxes would be the result. Under David and Solomon several new taxes were established including 10 percent on produce and livestock; import duties; and tributes paid by subjects to their king. Taxes were so high



Gratitude makes it impossible to feel deprived, impossible to feel entitled, and impossible to feel that if someone else gets something, then there is less for us. Gratitude makes it a little easier to deal with the affluenza of our age, a disease that has been chastened by recession, but lurks still in our feelings of fear and deprivation. Stewardship disciplines allow us to develop our gratitude and vice versa.

under Solomon that they contributed to the split of the kingdom after his death.

With the Persians came a new system. Instead of paying tribute, each province was required to collect its own taxes. Persian rulers collected these taxes for use in their provinces and then paid a portion into the royal treasury. These taxes were so crushing that many were forced to mortgage their fields and in some cases sell their children into slavery to pay them. First under the province of Egypt and then under Syria, the business of collecting taxes from the people went to the highest bidder. Contractors charged double that required by law in order to make hefty profits. They were given military assistance to enforce their demands. New taxes were added, a poll tax, a salt tax, a crown tax, and sometimes as much as one-third of a person's grain and fruit, and even a portion of the tithes taken in for the support of the Temple. By the time the Romans took over the holy land, Israelites paid more than 40 percent of their income in a combination of religious giving and taxes.

What Did Jesus Say?

In the New Testament, Jesus rarely mentions the tithe specifically and then only to highlight the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Still, that does not get us off the hook. Jesus specifically endorses the Law on numerous occasions even going so far as to say that he himself came to fulfill the Law.

The core of the matter for Jesus was not the principle of the tithe but the fact that it was applied without interior spiritual alignment to its deep truths and benefits. Unless a tithe represented a life totally dedicated to God's service and submitted to the truth that all belongs to God, it was just a farce. For

Jesus, the appropriate percentage of giving was 100 percent. Remember his encounter with the rich man (Mark 10:17-31) who wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life? Jesus reminds him to keep the commandments, and he replies that he has done so since his youth. Whereupon Jesus tells him he only lacks one thing: he must sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. What Jesus recognized so clearly was that if God does not rule over everything, God does not rule. The tithe was, and is, a powerful discipline to remind us of God's ownership of all and to accomplish the practical realities of love, worship, and justice in the world. It is a way of training the heart, not just another obligation to check off the to-do list.

How Has the Church Understood Giving?

The early church took Jesus' admonitions to heart. In the book of Acts we see that giving was both at the center of community and played a significant role in forming community. Believers held their goods in common, which resulted in meeting the needs of the poor and eliminating the oppressiveness of poverty, freeing them from the constant struggle of survival, and allowing those in need to experience the joy of faith. To give without reservation was simply what they had seen Jesus do, and they could do no less.

The Reformed tradition gives a place of primacy to the doctrine of stewardship in this broad sense. Stewardship is both about responsibility and transformation. It is the stance we take in the world. God has gifted us with lives, families, congregations, communities, and the whole earth, and God invites us and trusts us to do what is right for them. It is that discipline of responsibility that leads to our personal transformation, the loosening of our clutched fists and hearts, the opening of our eyes of compassion. I have never yet met a person who gives generously to the church who would ever dream of not giving.

It's All about Gratitude

For us in the Reformed family, gratitude is always our fundamental stance before God. It is our first response to everything that happens. When wonderful things happen, we are grateful beyond measure for the gift of them. When grief or challenge happens, we are grateful for God's grace, comfort, and guidance. Every prayer begins with it and every action mirrors it.

Gratitude is more than our stance, however. It is a way of being in the world that has the power to change us, and ultimately to redeem the world. Until the word "stewardship" can be reclaimed from its captivity to the one-month annual fund campaign, perhaps we could substitute the word "gratitude." November is "Gratitude Month."

Gratitude actually does things. It is the antidote to greed and is the food of peace and harmony. It is always directed toward God and inevitably results in a sweet and deep giving to God for the needs of God's children. Gratitude produces giving; giving produces generosity (not the other way around); and generosity shapes us more and more in the image and likeness of Christ.

Gratitude, as the fuel for our stewardship, allows us to see God's goodness and God's guidance as pure gift, gift without which we could not face our days. Gratitude allows us to live in the present and to deal with all of those subtle and not-so-subtle errors of ego and need that can turn our lives from joy to despair. It allows us to deal with the potent foe of the fear of scarcity and lack. Gratitude makes it impossible to feel deprived, impossible to feel entitled, and impossible to feel that if someone else gets something, then there is less for us. Gratitude makes it a little easier to deal with the affluenza of

our age, a disease that has been chastened by recession, but lurks still in our feelings of fear and deprivation. Stewardship disciplines allow us to develop our gratitude and vice versa.

Stewardship is a deeply spiritual process—a loving invitation that calls us into the depths of our own hearts to ponder what actually rules us, what God's claim is on us, what we really need and how gratitude can transform our lives. It is not a dreaded month of uncomfortable sermons and sheepish requests to dig a little deeper this year. It is foundational to our faith. We were created for it. Without giving we cannot be all that we were meant to be. To embrace the stewardship challenge, its joy and its mystery, is to live abundantly.

About the Writer

Eugenia Gamble is pastor of Nipomo Community Presbyterian Church in Nipomo, California.