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INTRODUCTION

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If we wish to adopt a distinctively Christian approach to the stewardship of material resources, what is the right starting-point for our thinking? We must surely begin not with ourselves but with God.

Since God created all that exists (Gen. 1, Heb. 11:3), then clearly everything belongs to him. In the words of the psalmist, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it...” (Ps. 24:1). This was acknowledged by King David in his prayer of thanksgiving for the people’s gifts towards the building of the temple: “... everything in heaven and earth is yours...Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand...” (1 Chron. 29:11,14). True Christian wisdom recognizes that our wealth and possessions are “a gift of God” (Eccl. 5:19). Yes, it is God “who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17). Our response ought to be one of gratitude (1 Tim. 4:3-5).

But how is this gratitude to be displayed? If we aim to express it through our Christian stewardship, will it mean a firm commitment to tithing? Or does the Bible point us in a different direction?

These are key questions. We cannot consider them properly without first setting them in a broader biblical framework. We must therefore spend a few moments thinking about the basic structure of the Bible.

When God chose the nation of Israel as his own special people, He made an agreement with them. This agreement is usually called the old covenant. It was embodied in the Law of Moses, which is recorded for us in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It contained many commands and detailed regulations which the Israelites were required to obey. Some of them were concerned with tithing. Paul’s teaching in Galatians 3:19-25 and elsewhere tells us that, once the law had fulfilled its purpose, it gave way to a new order inaugurated by Jesus Christ. This is known as the new covenant. It is the covenant under which we as Christians live today.

Of crucial importance for a true understanding of what the Bible teaches on a wide range of issues, including Christian stewardship is the relationship between the old covenant and the new. This can helpfully be compared with the relationship between engagement and marriage. When a couple decides to marry, they normally express their intention tangibly in the form of an engagement ring. The ring indicates a commitment which, though significant and real, is incomplete. Only marriage will make it complete. As soon as the marriage takes place, the engagement period ends, never to be revived. The engagement ring will nevertheless be kept as a permanent reminder of a promise now fulfilled.

Such fulfillment is symbolized by the wedding ring. The movement from engagement to marriage shows clear continuity; but there is also discontinuity in the sense that the engagement terminates when it is superseded by marriage. Both continuity and discontinuity can be seen in the relationship between old covenants and new. Numerous examples could be given; but we will confine ourselves here to the example of tithing.

CHAPTER ONE

STEWARDSHIP OF CREATION

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STEWARDSHIP OF CREATION

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it”.

Genesis 2:15

Stewardship is here understood as the ability to exercise moral responsibility to care for the environment in a sustainable manner. Significant aspects of this stewardship include the right to private initiative, the ownership of property, and the exercise of responsible freedom in the economic sector. Stewardship requires a careful protection of the environment and calls us to use our intelligence *“to discover the earth's productive potential and the many different ways in which human needs can be satisfied.”*¹

¹ John Paul II, *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (Centesimus Annus)* Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991, no. 32.

Stewardship is a Christian principle that relates to the use of God's creation. The earth does not belong to us to use selfishly, but as Scripture says in Psalm 24 verses 1-2; *"The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters."*

Biblical Stewardship includes the preservation of what has been entrusted to us (I Corinthians 11:2); wise use of what we have been given (Mathew 25: 14-27) and teaching and showing others to do the same (2 Timothy 2:2).²

God expects human people and their descendants to serve and *keep* the garden (Genesis 2:15). The word *keep* also means God's blessing, a blessing which nurtures all of our life-sustaining and life-fulfilling relationships—with our family, our neighbours and our friends, with the land that sustains us, with the air and water, and with our God. When we *keep* the Creation, we make sure that the creatures under our care and keeping are maintained with all their right linkages with members of the same species, with the many other species with which they interact, with the soil, air, and water upon which they depend.

We must show in our behaviour that all things created on earth are of concern to God and not just the spiritual realm. The fall of Man did not just affect spiritual things, and in the same way, redemption is not just a question of spiritual matters. Stewardship of creation is particularly good for Human Development because it relates to the use of land and thus agriculture, livestock and trees. It also relates to people's physical, emotional and spiritual well being.

1.1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND NATURE

At the very beginning of the biblical account we are told what the relationship between God and nature is. At each stage of God's creating the material world and the plants and animals in it, we read the words "And God saw that it was **good**" (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25). It is important to see that God expressed appreciation of the creatures already, **before** the creation of human beings. This shows that God loves the creatures and enjoys them, that they have great value to God **in themselves**, even apart from their relationship to humanity. We see another beautiful expression of this love God has for the creatures in Psalm 104:26. The Psalmist, awed by God's creation of the seas, says "there go the ships, and Leviathan which thou didst form to sport in it." Leviathan

was some form of great sea creature, and most of the actions of such creatures are never seen by human beings. But God takes delight in them, having even created them to "sport" or **play** in the sea! Imagine how their playing delights God, even apart from their being seen by humans, though of course it delights us too when we get the chance.

It is a sad fact, however, that historically Christians have usually overlooked this aspect of God's creating work, while tending to overemphasize the idea that God made it all for the benefit of human beings. In Gen. 1:26-28 humanity is made the culminating work of God's creation, and is given dominion over all of creation. This dominion, however, does not mean that the creation is of no value. For we have already seen that God loves the creation and we are to imitate God's love of creation: this is part of what it means to be made "in the image of God." We who call ourselves Christians are under the mandate given to all humanity:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Gen. 1:26 NRSV).

This mandate cannot be a mandate to rape, pillage and plunder the earth's resources with no thought for tomorrow. No, God gave us all **responsibility** with that high privilege. This is made clear in Gen. 2:15, where we read: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."(NRSV) Other English versions more helpfully read "to cultivate," and "to guard" the garden. The Hebrew word *shomrah* strongly conveys the idea of protecting and **safeguarding**. Thus we must be responsible to take proper care of the garden of this earth, for God put us here to do that very thing.

1.2. HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY IS EMBEDDED ALSO IN THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE OF WISDOM.

Proverbs 3:19 tells us "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth." The biblical idea of wisdom, *hokmah*, means at its broadest level, "skill" - skill in living life the way life ought to be lived. A look through a concordance at all the places skill/*hokmah* is used shows that true joy comes through attaining this skill, while disaster awaits those who reject its teachings. In Prov. 8, this wisdom is portrayed as a woman, who exhorts us: "Take my instruction instead of silver..."

One example of the outworking of ecological wisdom/*hokmah* is in Deut. 20:19: "When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them; for you may eat of them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field men that they should be besieged by you?..."

God knew that humanity would tend to disregard the responsibility to care for nature, and so gave us warning. Although the specific context here refers only to fruit-bearing trees in time of war, Hebrew tradition rightly understood that this does **not** mean it applies only to times of war: the context of war is mentioned only because it is the most likely situation where people, under extreme pressure, with their own lives at stake, would be most severely tempted to violate the usual law. Here, and in several other biblical passages, an underlying principle of God's order is re-emphasized so that people will see its applicability even under the most severe testing: if the law still applies under these extreme situations, then how much **more** should it apply in times of peace when human lives are not seriously threatened. This, then, as in the Sabbath year legislation and the law of debt release, is a call to faith, a challenge. This law is called *Bal tashit* (meaning "you shall not wantonly destroy").

1. **The oral law** included the destruction of food, clothing, furniture, and water as violations of *Bal tashit*. The principle called upon here is that we must preserve all life. This means that all species of animals must be protected. This was the intention of the law against slaughtering a cow and her calf on the same day (Leviticus 22:28), and the law against taking a bird with her young (Deuteronomy 22:6).
2. **The Wisdom literature** further reinforces the importance of caring for animals. Proverbs 12:10 tells us: "A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel." and Psalm 50:10 says: "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. . .".
3. **In the Prophetic writings**, the expression of God's love and care for His created order is drawn out further by Hosea, who speaks of a covenant between God and the creatures: "And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground." (Hosea 2:18). It is helpful for us to ponder the meaning of such a covenant, remembering God's love for the creatures as good for their own sake, which we have already seen in Gen. 1. Hosea speaks of the consequences of disregarding the covenant loyalty towards God which the people of God have promised. He says that when humanity deals faithlessly, through stealing, adultery and bloodshed:

"Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are dying." (Hosea 4:3)

The relevance of this scripture passage comes into stark relief with the recent collapse of our fisheries on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, once the most prolific fishing area in the world. On Dec. 20, 1993, Canada's Fisheries Minister called this "A disaster of biblical proportions." There, the immediate and direct cause was the introduction of huge factory trawlers in the 1970s. Behind the immediate cause is the **underlying** cause of the continued abuse of Creation: human faithlessness, greed, sin.³

The Lord further expresses care for all creation in the law concerning the reservation of a "*migrash*," a kind of "green belt" around the Levitical cities. This "*migrash*" is legislated in Numbers 35:2-5. It was to be an "open land," or "common land" ("pasture land" in the R.S.V.) one thousand cubits wide around the cities in all directions, to be maintained free of all construction and cultivation.

The many regulations of the law commanding care for the creatures cannot be seen as a contradiction of the Gen. 1:26-28 mandate to "have dominion" over them. Rather, it is better understood as an outworking of the specific ways of "having dominion" - by being wise stewards of all that God has created. While this does not support the more extreme versions of the current "animal rights" thinking, it does say that humanity is responsible to insure that every species God put on this earth must be maintained and preserved, as was the purpose of Noah's Ark. After all, why should animals be made to suffer because of human wrong doing?

God promised the human race many blessings if they would keep the covenant which God established at Sinai. Deuteronomy records a list of these blessings, as well as a list of curses which would befall humans if they habitually break the covenant. The curses listed in Deuteronomy 28:15-24 read more and more as relevant to today's situation. For example vs. 18 mentions increased frequency of miscarriages, vs. 22 "fiery heat and drought." Verses 23 and 24 are ominous when read in the light of modern day air pollution and acid rain. Vs. 35 speaks of "grievous boils of which you cannot be healed." This was, according to historians of medicine, a way of referring to what we today would call "cancer."

³ John Paul II, *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (Centesimus Annus)*
Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991, 10

There are many more passages in the Old Testament which point out a direction for human attitudes towards God's creation.

1.3. EXPRESS THE THEME OF RESPONSIBLE LOVE FOR CREATION

So much love and concern for creation are expressed in the Old Testament that one would hardly expect the New Testament to reverse or reduce that love. Christians have always held that the message of the gospel is one of "love fulfilling the law." We find much in the New Testament to confirm an ethic of responsible love towards creation. Our Lord expresses the theme of responsible love, for example, in this parable:

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, "My master is delayed," and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Matthew 24: 45-51)

This parable should be instructive to us, for concerning ecological awareness; we are very much in the position of that wicked servant. As stewards we are to act responsibly; we can understand this in the light of Jesus' saying "Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required..."(Luke 12:48).

Key to all Christian witness are Jesus' words in Matthew 5:13: "You are the salt of the earth..." Salt is that which preserves and enhances human life, giving it a certain essential "bite." In the same way, it is our calling to preserve and enhance life. This is a key to understanding how we are to relate to each other individually, and how to translate our Christian faith into political terms which those who do not share our faith could still understand and participate in. Also, the calling to preserve and enhance all life on this planet may take us beyond some of the more narrowly conceived notions of responsibility into a deeper understanding of God's joy in creativity. For if we cannot be joyful and creative in our mission then all we do will seem a deadening legalism to others and to ourselves, "as tinkling cymbals and sounding brass."⁴

St. Paul tells us in Romans 8:19: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" and in vs. 22: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail

⁴ Ibid , 12.

together until now." Surely at least one part of what the creation groans in travail about is the desecration of the earth which God gave humanity, which humans have ruined by rebelling against God's order. For we are told (in John 1) that it was Christ who created the universe, and Paul reiterates this in Col. 1:16: "...for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth..."

Vs. 17 adds: "He is before all things and in him all things hold together." The creating and structuring roles of Christ here are identical with that of Wisdom in Proverbs. From this we may deduce that the creation wisdom is Christ, and therefore ecological wisdom is of Christ and is Christ, whom we are called to imitate with our lives.

1.4. THE LIFE-PRESERVING QUALITY IS PART OF THE CHRISTIAN MISSION IS CLEAR.

So then it is not surprising that we find ominous warning concerning those who destroy the earth in Revelation 11:18: "The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth." The threads which hold together all of the biblical testimony concerning our relationship to creation are responsibility, stewardship, the preservation and enhancement of all life.

Pollution, global warming, destruction of habitats, massive extinctions, desertification--God's creation is being degraded and destroyed at an alarming rate, threatening not only the environment itself, but the future of humanity as well. Americans, most of whom claim to be Christians, are some of the greatest offenders in environmental selfishness as the desire for comfort strains and damages the planet.

Evangelical Christians have so far done very little to speak out for protecting God's creation, leaving environmentalism in the hands of our more liberal brethren, or those actively antagonistic to the Christian faith. On the one hand, Christians have a much higher calling than protecting the planet. Our primary purpose is a heavenly one--preparing ourselves and others for a right relationship with God here and through eternity. The Bible tells us that "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17)..

On the other hand, we do have obligations to be good stewards of the earth. God created the

world and takes pleasure in it (Psalm 104). He has left it up to humanity to rule over it and take care of all creation (Gen. 1:28). The Psalms tell us that creation is not only given for our use, but that all creation--animals, plants, hills and sky--is intended to praise and glorify the Lord (Psalm 148). When humanity, through greed and short-sightedness, weakens and damages the earth, we are guilty of wasting not only a precious resource, but of defacing a beautiful work that God has made.

Almost all environmental insult can be traced back to greed--greed of people like us who want our luxuries and comforts and don't care (or don't want to know) what damage we do to the earth in the process. What's more, too much desire for comfort and things not only hurts the environment, it takes our mind off God and leads us into sin.

The devil likes to get us hung up with our selfish desires, making us think that what we want is really what we need. Our worldly appetites threaten not only the physical environment, but, more importantly, the spiritual environment of our souls. As Americans, most of us are guilty of confusing wants for needs, whether it's our favorite food, fashionable clothes, or a music CD that we just "have to have."

If we can learn to avoid the temptation to satisfy our every desire, we not only preserve God's creation, we heed the words of Jesus when he said, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"

CHAPTER TWO
THE STEWARDSHIP OF TIME

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We often act as if we had an unlimited supply of time. If we shortchange the time we devote to our families, it is not because we intend to harm those relationships: we just have more pressing things to do. We assume there will be plenty of time to take care of our relationships. Sadly, we too often end up like Chelsea, reaching middle age with broken commitments and unfulfilled relationships, chasing dreams that do not matter in the long run, and all the while ignoring the blessings all around us.

2.1. TIME IS A GIFT FROM GOD

(1) Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.(2) Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God(3) You turn us back to dust, and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”

For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.... (12) So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Psalm 90: 1-4, 12

Time is a gift we dare not take for granted. James reminds us,

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.” Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that” (Jas 4:13-15).

Like every other good and perfect gift (Jas 1:17), time is something God gives. Every day—every hour—is ultimately a gift of God’s grace. The first chapter of Genesis records, among all the other creative acts of God, the divine ordering of time: “And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the

dome of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and for years” (Ge 1:14). The sun, moon, and stars exist at least in part so that humans will know what time it is.

The creation story offers some additional insights into time as a gift from God. In his book, *Working the Angles*, Eugene Peterson pointed out that in the Bible a day does not begin with sunrise; it begins with sunset.

Therefore, the day begins when we go to sleep and God works. At sunrise, we wake up and join God in the work of the day he began while we were sleeping. The day does not begin with us. Rather, we wake up and step into God’s rhythm of grace—a day already in progress.⁵

This idea that day begins when we go to sleep is a vital worldview concept. Life, success, and productivity do not ultimately depend on us. They depend on God. This understanding allows us to rest, both in our daily cycle of sleep and wakefulness and in our weekly cycle of Sabbath rest. Trusting in God’s providence, we can dare to believe that we have enough time. In this faith, we can receive each day as a gift.

2.2. TIME IS FALLEN

(3) Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, (4) who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, (5) to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. Galatians 1:3-5

Walter Wink has described how otherwise good elements of God’s creation can be twisted into dark

“Principalities and powers” that exert a degrading influence over individuals and whole societies. The things that give order and structure to life can become the very things that hold us back. Time is certainly one of God’s good gifts that have the potential to turn against us. We can invest it with power or influence over us to the point that it becomes a burden rather than a gift. ⁶

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Eerdmans, 1990), p 25

⁶ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Augsburg, 1983), p.67

The Apostle Paul would have said a hearty Amen to idea of “time out of joint.” He had much to say about “the present evil age” (Gal 1:4). Many English translations render the Greek term *aion* as “world,” but it is as much a reference to time as to space. In Paul’s thought, the present age is a time of rebellion against God. Principalities and powers, defeated in principle by Jesus’ death on the cross (Col 2), still hold sway until Christ’s coming ushers in “the age to come.”

Translated literally, we can see time out of joint in verses like the following:

- Do not be conformed to *this age* (Ro 12:2)
- Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of *this age* or of *the rulers of this age*, who are doomed to perish.... None of *the rulers of this age* understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Co 2:6, 8)
- In their case *the god of this age* has blinded the minds of the unbelievers (2 Co 4:4)
- ... to rescue us from *the present evil age* (Gal 1:4)
- ... in which [transgressions] you once lived, *following after the age of this world*, following the ruler of the power of the air (Eph 2:2)
- ... for Demas, in love with *this present age*, has deserted me (2 Ti 4:10)

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes described the passage of time as meaningless drudgery: being born and dying, planting and plucking up, killing and healing, loving and hating, war and peace, all following one after the other in a depressing litany (Ecc 3:1-8). He despaired of finding any meaning or significance in life:

So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity (Ecc 2:20-23).

Rather than a good gift from God, the Preacher perceived time as a meaningless hamster wheel of existence, with much toil but nothing of value to show for it. It is a view of time that is not much different from our own. In our global economy, time never slows down—there is only productivity, 24/7. This kind of time has the relentless beat of commerce as its only rhythm. This is not the way time was supposed to be!

2.3. TIME CAN BE REDEEMED

(15) Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, (16) making the most of the time, because the days are evil. (17) So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Ephesians 5:15-17

Many Christians remember Ephesians 5:16 as it is phrased in the King James Version: “redeeming the time, for the days are evil.” “Redeem” is a term from the world of business that implies getting the most out of an investment.

Time is the ultimate gift, and it is what we have most in common. We each get an equal daily allotment of this precious gift, and despite our metaphors to the contrary, we cannot save it, kill it, or even waste it. All we can do with time is spend it, but we can spend it either wisely or foolishly. That is what the stewardship of time is all about: How can we spend our time in ways that are fruitful, enriching, and wise?

Since time is ultimately a part of God’s good creation, we can live in faith that time can be redeemed. The Christian hope is that this present evil age will give way to the transformed age of the kingdom of God. Our current experience of the kingdom is both “now” and “not yet.” We experience some of the realities of God’s kingdom, but only “in a mirror, dimly” (1 Co 13:12).

Against the cyclical view of time that is prevalent in many Asian cultures (and which is familiar to us from the book of Ecclesiastes), the predominant biblical perspective is that time is linear: it is proceeding toward a goal. We await the Day of the Lord and the consummation of all things, when times and seasons will be made right.

Between now and then, we must heed the biblical call to “redeem the time”—to make the most of every opportunity, to seize the day. Since time is a fallen “power” in our world, redeeming the time is somehow related to the theme of spiritual warfare. Paul urged Titus to live reverently in “the now age” (Titus 2:12, literal translation) precisely because “the now age” is the context of our spiritual struggle. Time is something we must master in Jesus’ name, or it will surely master us. Or, to state the matter more positively, redeeming the time is a way of extending God’s kingly rule in this world.

Christian stewardship of time, however, is more than mere “time management.” To redeem the time, we need richer language than that. We need biblical language that reflects the God who grants us life hour by hour and minute by minute.

We can begin by noting that there are at least two different biblical terms for competing concepts of time. In the New Testament, time is sometimes denoted by the word *chronos*. This is time as it is measured out in minutes, hours, days, etc. It is the time of clocks and calendars, proceeding at an unchanging pace day after day. For most of us, this sort of time, and the work-weeks and time-clocks that go with it, moves too slowly.

But there is another way to conceive of time. Another Greek word for time is *kairos*. This is fitting or opportune time; we might even call it “existential time.” It is also the Greek word for “opportunity.” *Kairos* is time measured not by the clock or the calendar but by the quality of what is experienced in that time. If *chronos* says, “Nine months have passed,” *kairos* says, “I’m going into labor.” *Kairos* is our perception of the natural rhythms that God has built into the world and into human existence.

While *chronos* tends to drag, *kairos* often passes before our eyes in a blur. But the existential quality of our existence is wrapped up far more in *kairos* than *chronos*. When Charles Dickens penned the famous opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times,” he was describing *kairos*.

The most fundamental biblical strategy for the stewardship of time is the Sabbath. One day out of seven is meant for rest and spiritual renewal. It is, in Jewish thought, a time to refrain from using God’s creation in any way: not by lighting lamps, plowing fields, or working animals. Keeping the Sabbath is a silent testimony to certain biblical truths:

- We must honor our bodies by keeping sensible schedules and getting the rest we need.
- We must make time to attend to our spiritual needs as well as our physical and emotional needs. Prayer and meditation on the word of God must be built into our schedules.
- It is permitted to say No, and sometimes it is mandatory. Overscheduling our lives is unhealthy and dishonors God.
- God will provide enough time to work, rest, love our families, and attend to all of our other responsibilities.
- We can enjoy the freedom of the Sabbath as a foretaste of our eternal rest with God.

Stephen Covey has discussed something similar to this Sabbath principle through the memorable word-picture of “sharpening the saw.” Covey told the following story to make his point:

Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree.
“What are you doing?” you ask.

“Can’t you see?” comes the impatient reply. “I’m sawing down this tree.”
 “You look exhausted!” you exclaim. “How long have you been at it?”
 “Over five hours,” he returns, “and I’m beat! This is hard work.”
 “Well why don’t you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw?” you inquire. “I’m sure it would go a lot faster.”
 “I don’t have time to sharpen the saw,” the man says emphatically. “I’m too busy sawing!”⁷

Like the Sabbath, “sharpening the saw” is about taking the time we need for self-renewal—physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. Of course, this can be done legalistically, but that defeats its very purpose. Some observe Sunday as the Christian Sabbath; others do not. Some people such as nurses, fire fighters, and police officers work odd shifts and cannot set apart same day of rest every week. Some, such as doctors, have to be on call and run the risk that their day of rest will be interrupted. And obviously, Christian ministers are expected to work every Sunday! Remember: time is fallen—it is out of joint—and if we are not careful, we will make it into a god. That is why Jesus reminded the Pharisees that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27). It is a gift—though a gift we neglect at our peril.

We become wise stewards of time by honoring the rhythms for which God created us:

- A daily rhythm of prayer, work, and rest.
- The weekly rhythm of Sabbath (whenever and however we observe it) and ordinary days.
- The yearly rhythms of our economic and spiritual lives: the school year, the busy season at work, the celebrations of the liturgical calendar, etc.
- The lifespan rhythms of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age.

Submission to these rhythms helps clear some space in our schedules for things that, although not as urgent or pressing as some of the things on our calendars, are nevertheless almost infinitely more important.

⁷ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 1990), p. 34

CHAPTER THREE
STEWARDSHIP OF TREASURE

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In the previous section, we looked at what God calls us to concerning Stewardship. We learned that everything belongs to Him, and that we are the caretakers of His property. As Christians who take the Bible seriously, we also need to take to heart the seriousness of being a wise steward. Stewardship is an act of worship and gratitude by the Believer, in response to His grace. In so doing, we acknowledge God's power and authority over our lives. This leads us to realization of and response to His love, by caring about what He brings into our lives. This includes everything-our relationships, spiritual gifts, time, material goods, our monies, and even our very being. This act of stewardship is in response to the marvelous gift of His amazing, wondrous Grace given to us. We begin by being thankful, and our thankfulness leads to the care of everything in our lives. Thus, our gratitude for what we have leads us to faithfully take care of the business of life. Gratitude is also worship, and our response to God for first loving us.

In my experiences and observations, I have observed, with sadness, that most people in evangelical circles do not see stewardship as important. A common response to the subject of stewardship is that all we need to have is a good heart, or be sincere in our faith. Our money, and how we manage life is irrelevant. But, is this true? Is God only concerned with our heart? If so, what does that mean? Well, when you read the Bible, you can see that it has a totally different definition of stewardship than what is popular in the church today!

God is concerned with what is in our hearts, and a good heart has responsible character assigned to it. That is what being a good steward means. This is shown

to us by our role in taking care of creation, the testimony of the Law, and the Psalms, to name a few. *Stewardship*, in Hebrew, means “house law and rule.” It means that the person who is hired is to manage the affairs for the owner. This means that the property, resources, money, and provisions are under the steward’s control and responsibility. They belong to God, and are entrusted into our hands. 8

Thus, all dimensions of management are under the word and theme of stewardship! So, all that we do in the affairs of our daily life is under stewardship too! Is God concerned with what is in your heart? Yes, He is, and being a good steward will show that you have a good heart!

Thus, as good stewards, we cannot be wasteful. Being a bad steward was under penalty of death in Biblical times. Fortunately, we are under grace, and Christ’s atonement covers us from God’s wrath when we mess up, but that does not mean we are to be careless. We are not to go around thinking all we need to do is think we are good, just as we cannot think we are good at our job or school, and be late all of the time, or slack off. We have to think carefully about the most prudent way to allocate and manage the gifts and resources He puts in our care! This is in response to what He has given to us--abundant grace and love, and His mercy and care. We must understand that being bad at stewardship is wasting what God has given, and even wastes our lives, and opportunities, too! We are just to have a good heart? If you are not responsible, chances are, no, you do not have a good heart.

One of the key principles I want to get across to you is the difference in what we have, and what God has. We basically have nothing; we own nothing, we earn nothing, we gain nothing. God is the true owner of all things; He is the One who owns it all. Consider this. When you die, will there be a trailer with all of your stuff following you to the pearly gates? The answer is, no! After all, your eternal reward is far, vastly superior to what you have here. Even if you were Bill Gates, with billions of dollars, and were able to take it all with you, once you got to Heaven, you would not want to even look at it, much less keep it. As it would just be like rotting stinky junk! Would you rather pick a nonworking rusted car from a junkyard, or have a brand new luxury car? What God has for you is far better than what you would want to take! All you would end up bringing is trash (Deuteronomy 8:18; Psalm 24:1; Haggai 2:8; 1 Corinthians 6:16-20)!

The Egyptians believed that they could take it with them, but if you go to the Museums in Cairo you will see all of their grand stuff still there, here on earth! We have to see life as a training ground for eternity; we are given property,

8 Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word Publishers, 1997), p. 24

material possessions, gifts, abilities, and most importantly, relationships. It is what we do with these, what we learn from them, and what we impart to others that will become the true treasure. It is not the deed, title or pink slip; it is not the bank statement, or our brokerage account that matters. It is what we do with what is temporarily given to us that is important. That is where the treasure is earned, and learned. God is the owner; we are the managers. Let us use and manage His goods wisely, to prepare us for what is still to come (Psalm 49:16-17; Matthew 16:27; 25:21-23; Luke 19:12-19; 1 Corinthians 6:3; 2 Corinthians 4:16- 5:10; Revelation 20:6). 9

When we give, we are giving what is not really ours to begin with. It is not ours to keep, nor is it something we would even want to bring with us to eternity. *We give what we cannot keep to gain what we cannot lose!* This is authentic stewardship in action, and the real practicing of our faith. It is the practicing of our faith that is inseparable to the exercise of what we are given. These two combine synergistically to build our maturity, and our standing before our Lord. You cannot build your faith while ignoring your responsibility, just as you cannot build your faith by just focusing on material goods, even if you are doing it faithfully. Material things are not wrong to have when viewed rightly. It is when we think of them as important that is considered stupid in God's eyes (Proverbs 23:5; Matthew 6:19-21; 19:21-30).

3.1. TITHE AND THE SCRIPTURE OCCURRENCES FOR THE IT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Here are some key verses for your consideration: Leviticus 27:30; 27:31-32; Numbers 18: 21-26; Deuteronomy 12:6-17; 14:23-28; 26:12; 2 Chronicles 31:5-12; Nehemiah 10:37-38; Amos 4:4; Malachi 3:8-10.

The term *tithe* that is found in Scripture (*maser / asar*, in the Hebrew and *dekate / dekayth*, in the Greek), translates into *the tenth*; thus, the notion that one should give ten percent of one's monies to the church comes from the meaning of these words. The Scriptures tell us that God does not want us to do whatever we want or what seems fit. Obviously, that was not working then, just as it does not work today. So, He laid out principles for the running of the new country Israel that would provide care for the priests and those in charge. We, of course, do not live in a theocracy today, unless you live in Iran. The tithe may have been for a different purpose in the Old Testament than for the church today, but we do get key principles from these passages that translate into how best to provide for the church today, and how we can exercise good Biblical stewardship.

9 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 82

Giving a tithe, as history tells us, was a common practice among most, if not all, ancient Near East cultures, such as Babylon, Persia, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, and even as far east as China. For them, it was for a royal tax, and service to their gods. For the Jews, it was a sacramental tax (1 Maccabees 3:49; 10:31; 11:35, an apocryphal book). Abraham was well acquainted with it when he migrated from Ur (Gen. 14:17-20), so he gave honor and tribute to Melchizedek who was a priest of the Most High, and a mystery to us, as we do not know the details of who he was. It is almost certain that Abraham's tithes would also have been recognized as a holy deed (Heb. 7:4). 10

The giving of a tenth of our goods to the church, what we call "tithing," is a seemingly good concept, or, is it not? First, I need to point out that nowhere in the New Testament does it advocate tithing, and the Old Testament has only two narrative passages on it, along with scores of other texts that most people take out of their *time context*, hence, why there is so much misunderstanding on this topic. (We are never to build doctrine just on narratives—stories—because stories are illustrations and histories of the journeys of our ancestors, such as Abraham and Melchizedek. They do not necessarily represent the character or doctrine we are to follow; sometimes they do and sometimes they do not. If a guy comes up to you and says he is Melchizedek, will you empty out 10% of your savings and hand it over? Or, such as in the case with David and his affair, because David sinned, does that mean it is OK for us to have an affair? It is in the Bible, you know, to have an affair! But, the story/history of that incident is about David's actions, good, and bad. So, be careful how you interpret Scripture; always do it in its context! In the case of tithing, we have to look at the timeline of events too! Hence, a lot of people proclaim crazy and unbiblical doctrines by arguing their viewpoint from passages out of their *time context*, or from silence. However, as we already saw last month, the Bible is clear as it admonishes us to be stewards, especially in the handling of our money, and it gives us a blueprint for action (1 Corinthians 9:7).

Personal offerings:

1. Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, and tithes of a tenth of 'the heap,' which he took from the kings with whom he fought in battle (Gen. 14:20; Heb. 7:2-6).
2. When Jacob made his covenant with God at Bethel, he also made a vow, and gave a tenth of all his property to God (Gen. 28:16-22).
3. Samuel warned Israel that the king whom they were demanding from God, would exact
4. Further examples of free-will offerings are found in Gen. 4:1-7; 8:20; Ex. 25:35-36; Deut. 12:6; 16:10-17; 1 Chron. 29:1-17; and Heb. 7:4-10).

10 Oswald Sanders, *Enjoying Intimacy With God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 155.

Tithe Offerings:

Mosaic laws instructing the Jews how to provide for the nation and church/Temple Deut.26:12-15.

1. The First Fruits offering: Ex. 23:16-19; 34:22-26; Lev. 2:12-14; 23:10-20; Num. 18:12; 28:26; Deut. 26:10; 2 Kings 4:42; 2 Chron. 31:5; Neh. 10:35-37; 12:44; 13:31; Prov. 3:9-10
2. The Levites' Tithe for the priests: Lev. 27:30-33; Num. 18:21-29; Deut. 12:6-18; 14:22-29; Neh. 10:38; 18:21; Heb. 7:5
3. Temple Tax: Ex. 30:11-16; Neh. 10:32-39; 2 Chron. 31:11-12; Mal. 3:10; 12:44; 13:5, 12; Matt. 17:24-27
4. Sabbath Tax: Ex. 23:10-11; Deut. 15:1-9
5. The Poor Tithe: Deut. 14:28-29
6. Farmers' Tax: (leaving crops un-harvested for the poor) Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:19-21; Ruth 2.

3.2. WHAT THE JEWISH HOUSEHOLD WAS REQUIRED TO DO:

1. The Jewish household was obligated to share ten percent of their income in whatever form that would fulfill the Levites' tithe (Lev. 27:30-32; Deut. 14:22-23; Num. 18:21).
2. Every Jewish household was obligated to make a declaration of honesty before the Lord with their giving (Deut 26:13-15). The Temple was the place to which tithes were taken (Deut. 12:5-17).
3. A fine of twenty percent had to be paid if they withheld or refused to pay what was required, in the form that was required, such as if they were required to give a sheep and they gave coins instead. Or, an extra tithe, a fifth of the sum, was demanded from those who sold their tithes, such as if you were required to give a sheep, but you sold it to your neighbor, and then refused to use the money to pay for a substitute (Lev. 27:31-33).
4. The Levites, in turn, gave a tenth of their share (not all were priests, as some served as government officials and such) to provide for the priests (Num. 18:25-32).

The tithe was gathered once a year, and then an extra tithe was gathered every third year for those in need locally (Deut. 14:22-28). (Controversy exists about this among Hebrew scholars, as some say this only happened when the need for funds increased because of the building and expansion of the Temple.) Then over time, the people in charge would overtax the people, adding

extras that were not required by God, but by man's greed (recorded in the Talmud, an ancient Jewish commentary).

1. The Jews tithed (paid taxes) to their government, whether Babylonian, Roman or whoever were the invading rulers at the time (again a historical reference). Sometimes, evil kings took over and hoarded the funds for themselves, such as Manasseh. At other times, tithes were withheld (2 Kings 18; Neh. 13:10; Mal. 3:8). Tithes resumed in Hezekiah's reign (2 Chron. 31:5-10) and under Nehemiah (Neh. 13:12).
2. Extra sacrificial offerings were sometimes required (2 Sam. 6; 1 Kings 6-8; 12: 25-33; 2 Chron. 31:5-12; Ezek. 45:17; Amos: 7:13; Luke 18:12)
3. The payment of an extra governing tithe/tax, as Samuel had warned would happen, and then was practiced (1 Sam. 8:15-17).

By the time of Christ, the Romans and over-eager tax gatherers greatly affected the economic life of the Jews; so, most were unable to tithe to the Temple. However, the laws regarding the tithe were still observed as shown here by Jesus (Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42).

3.3. RECONSTRUCTION OF A TYPICAL TITHE FROM THE OT

For the most part, it is difficult to give a precise reconstruction of a typical tithe from the OT, since over time the practice changed, from the desert wandering under Moses, to the period of the Judges, then the Kings, the captivities, the different localities of Judea vs. Israel, local governments, and invading governments. In addition, there was abuse by the Pharisees (they were not fair, you see) and other leaders in charge by over-taxing. However, from Scripture, we do know what was required.

First, every year, a Jewish household gave ten percent of all of their goods or produce; this was the "Levite's Tithe."

The Levites did not have land as the rest of the twelve tribes did (Joseph's cut was split in two with Ephraim and Manasseh to make twelve). So, the rest of the tribes were called to support them. This was the *tax* to the government in order to run the office of the priesthood. Remember, Israel was a theocracy, a government run by the Church--or in their case, the priests, the Judges, and then the Kings, all of whom were under God. The countless thousands of priests were the teachers, rabbis/pastors, and government officials!

Second, the Jewish household would give another ten percent every year for the festivals and the religious sacrifices.

This is what the people were doing by dropping in coins, or bringing animals to the Temple when Jesus was there teaching. Because the leaders abused the system by selling what they were not supposed to, Jesus drove them out with a whip! Thus, the running of the Temple/church, Sabbaths, holy days, and each one's personal offering to God accounted for ten percent (the percentage, exact amount, and how often this was practiced is a matter of debate).

Third, the Jewish household would pay another ten percent every third year to the poor and the widows locally.

So, if you were an OT Jew, you definitely would pay ten percent of your income, in whatever form was required to the Levites and/or the local government, to support them and the operation of the priests, Temple, and government. Then you could pay, depending on where you were in history, another ten percent to provide for the Temple, festivals, and such, plus your personal sacrifice for atonement. Then, you might be required to pay another ten percent every third year for the needy.

3.4. A LOOK IN CHURCH HISTORY

The early church prescribed a tithe for all of its members who were able to pay. They saw ten percent owed to God as the absolute minimum from a person's total income, the least anyone should be able to do. Even Monks had to pay.

Later on in Church history, it was believed and practiced that one was to live the most modest life possible, sell his possessions, and give to the poor based on the passage in Matthew (Matt. 19:21; Gal. 5:1).

They saw tithing as law, but we were not under law. In addition, they believed that since everything belonged to God, we should just give Him everything. By the time of legal Christianity, the ideas of tithing had changed so much that the application of giving ten percent was accepted and practiced in all the provinces and nations that were Christian. By the Eighth Century, the Holy Roman Empire took over and the tithe became the tax to Rome, in addition to any governing tax. In the twelfth century, the Monks got a reprieve,

so, not only did they not have to pay tithes, they also were able to receive them (before it became the obligation of families to care for them). 11

At this time, controversies over what a tithe is, how much the Christian was to give and the Church was to receive, was highly intense. The main opponents to tithing were those who did not want to give versus those who did; between those who wanted the tithe for themselves versus those who did not want their money wasted on corruption. By the Middle Ages, tithes had become as complicated as those in Jesus' day. With specific regulations, twisted out of the context of the Scripture and levied on the poor, such as tithes to the church, the priests, vicars, and personal tithes-- were extracted from their produce, for which each category had different regulations (just like our IRS tax code today), different from hay, to corn, to wood, to monies. Then in the pre-reformation, intense conflict arose with tithing; it then escalated during the Reformation. Just a generation after the Reformation, more controversy arose, especially in England where there was a state church. This escalated into the English Civil War. What was the issue and why there was a civil war? A whole county fought over tithing! This was one of the reasons that led the Puritans to flee. The Puritans desired the tithe to be voluntary and not mandatory, just as Scripture prescribes. The state tithe in England lasted up until a few decades ago-- to support the state church!

3.5. IS TITHING FOR TODAY?

The answer is no--*as a forced obligation*. The answer is also yes--*if it is a response from the heart*. We are not obligated to give any amount. But, when we have the right mindset, based on the Word of God and a heart that flows with gratitude for what He has done, yes, we will want to give all that we are able to. I believe that in the debates, occurring over the centuries since the early church, and now to the classrooms in seminary, and to the message boards I pursued, money and religion have always gone together. Money and religion have always fought each other in people's pride and inclinations. Just as Jesus' anger with the money changers in the temple and Luther's outrage with the selling indulgences in the pre-Reformation period, to the TV preachers we have today saying, "if you give to me, God will give to you ten times as much," it all comes down to motivation, greed, and the idol of money. We will bow to money or we will bow to God. The question is what do you truly worship? Where is your motivation? Where is your heart?

11 Ibid. 77

And, so the controversy continues, as the presumptions and feelings of men take over sound reasoning and dialog. I call you to search the Scriptures and see for yourself what God requires of you. As for my family and me, we will give all we can with our *time, talents, and treasures* for His glory. What about my opinion of ten percent? I agree with the Puritans and the early church. Give what you can, but not as an obligation; it all belongs to Him for His glory! Ten percent is a good place to start! Good stewardship is where we start! Sometimes you may not be able to give much. When I was in school I could not give most of the time, so I augmented more volunteer time. Today I am a missionary and struggle day to day. God has provided for my family, but not in any kind of abundance or what we call in the US, “discretionary income.” So, I volunteer in areas in my church outside of my pastoral responsibilities and give what I can of the treasures the Lord has given me. Even in my poverty, after doing my taxes, I realized I did give just over ten percent, and I do not know how I did! He provided!

CONCLUSION

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How's your Stewardship this morning? Are you managing your Time, Talent, Temple (your body), Testimony and Treasure with a focus on Christ, or is the focus primarily on self? Only you and God can answer that question, but I challenge you to answer it honestly. This morning I am calling every child of God to the following things:

1. To acknowledge God's Ownership of all things.
2. To an honest assessment of how you've been managing God's property.

3. To a Commitment to be a faithful steward.

When it comes to Biblical stewardship there is no middle ground. You are either managing God's resources with your focus on Christ, or you're mismanaging God's resources with your focus on self. One promises God's blessing and favor; the other promises God's curse and disfavor. A question that can and has been raised: Pastor, why preach on Biblical stewardship? Many have assumed to gain more resources for the church. I say, NO! I preach on Biblical stewardship because I want you to be blessed. I want you to be blessed !

I know by the truth of God's Word and by personal experience that when you focus the stewardship of God's resources on self, it is a dead-end road. But when you acknowledge all that is in your hand is from the Lord, and purpose to manage it as God directs in His Word, it's a road filled with blessing that opens new opportunities to serve the Lord in ways you never imagined. You are a steward – choose the blessed path of Biblical stewardship instead of the dead-end path of normal stewardship.

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