

THE GOSPEL OF STEWARDSHIP

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These reflections are for those who dread the Every Member Canvass and the "Stewardship Sermons" which are supposed to climax in an outpouring of "full tithes into the storehouse" and a subsequent overflowing of heavenly blessing. It is written for preachers who must help "raise the budget" (and maybe also their salaries!) each fall. How do you preach Stewardship sermons to the people who pay your salary without abandoning your call to preach the gospel? Is there a Gospel of Stewardship? If there is, it might make an enormous difference in the way we approach the fall season this year. I believe there is such a Gospel. Here are some ways by which we might enjoy the season, maintain our integrity, and help raise the budget.

First of all, there is only one Gospel to preach. Our Good News is the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not only was Jesus always gracious and generous with his love, but God is like that toward us.

This means several things:

We can be gracious toward people with bad theology. There are those who give for all the wrong reasons: Some give because they want to get rich. They tithe because this obligates God to fulfill his part of the bargain. Stewardship can be a kind of religious gimmick. Such gamesmanship includes magic overtones, like fearing dire consequences from a failure to tithe.

The Gospel of Stewardship means God loves these people with magic theology just as much as those who give out of gratitude for God's grace (with more enlightened views).

Others give to the church in precisely the same way they give to the United Appeal, the college of their choice, or any other favorite charity or non-profit organization. They resist any theological grappling with Stewardship. They will use a Bible verse for a slogan, but the Gospel should not interfere with raising the budget and selling people on the programs of the church.

The Gospel of Stewardship means God loves these people with Madison Avenue theology, just as much as those who give out of thanksgiving for God's generosity.

Others don't give enough, don't give anything, or give but won't pledge. They don't like the National Council or World Council of Churches, or the denomination, or the preacher, or the Sunday School literature, or the hymns we sing (or don't sing), or the direction in which the church is moving.

These people are looked upon as untapped resources, babes in Christ, or the enemy by those who give generously.

The Gospel of Stewardship means God loves these persons who don't pledge just as much as he loves those who do. So we have an opportunity to represent the love of God in a very concrete, practical, down-to-earth way. The Good News is that God is not going to withhold his love from those who withhold their money.

This is not the message which the church folk in Jesus' day wanted to hear.

but this was his Gospel of Stewardship. Their response was predictable: Management unfair to workers in the Kingdom. We worked all day and the others only a few hours; besides we had to work when it was hot and they worked after it had cooled off" (Matthew 20:12). That everyone should get the same pay regardless of their stewardship was simply outrageous. It contradicted their reward system. The begrudging of God's generosity was at the core of Jesus' conflict with conscientious church people.

God's grace calls into question the creed by which most of us ordinarily live our lives. Jesus' Kingdom turned entrenched reward systems upside down. Jesus said to bad stewards like the despised extortioners and the collectors of taxes for Rome, "To you the Kingdom of God also belongs." In Jesus' Kingdom it is not fairness but generosity that prevails.

Stewardship Season offers us an occasion to risk teaching and preaching that kind of a Kingdom. What if, instead of demanding God's fairness we begin celebrating his generosity? The season might logically lead to Thanksgiving Season.

What if we could communicate that God is for us because he wants to be and not because we maneuver him into loving us; that our relation to God does not depend on our goodness but his; that God's generosity occurs freely and not on our merit system.

A young man in jail put the Gospel of Stewardship into his own words: "The Gospel means God treats us good cause of his love and not on account of how much stuff we do."

Stewardship Season is a golden opportunity to offer folks a fair deal. It is a grand occasion to remind folks of the demands of discipleship. But it is even more a chance to proclaim the Gospel. Moreover it is an opportunity for all of us to practice the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ--who gave, not because he had to, but because he chose to.