

Celebrating Stewardship

Luke 16:1-13

Introduction

The New York Times has a column that addresses questions of ethics as submitted by its readers. The column is titled "The Ethicist," and is written by a man named Kwame Anthony Appiah. Over the past several months, this column has addressed such questions as:

- My birth father and siblings don't know that I exist. Should I contact them?
- The elderly man I am helping is a bigot. What do I do?
- Can I legally fire my unvaccinated babysitter?

I have read a few columns and by and large the responses given seem to be solid. They don't come from any spiritual perspective of course, but they do seem to be good advice.

Another recent column is the one that really caught my interest. It was an inquiry about a cat. The person with the question writes:

Driving home late one night, I saw a cat run into the street and get hit by a car. I stopped and picked him up. He had no collar or tag. Our local emergency vet pronounced him in stable condition but wouldn't keep him because he was a stray: no collar, no tag, no microchip. All local shelters were closed until noon the next day, so I took him home. I posted photos on a Facebook "lost pets" page the next morning. When my regular vet's office opened, I took him in and dropped him off.

When I spoke to the office later that afternoon, they said the cat had been a victim of neglect. He was recently neutered, but he was filthy and covered in fleas; it appeared from his condition that he had been living outside for quite some time (probably both before and after the neutering).

The next day, two different people responded to the Facebook post and claimed that the cat was theirs. I have been thinking long and hard about the right thing to do. A few of the things I considered were the cat's condition (indicating neglect), as well as the fact that he had no collar, no tags and no microchip.

I decided I didn't want to send the cat back to a neglectful environment, so I have not yet replied to the Facebook inquiries. Do I owe either claimant an explanation? If so, how should I respond to the two claims of ownership?

Clearly, the cat can only have one owner. Somebody is lying. Maybe both. But again, at best, that cat can only have one owner.

When King Solomon was reigning over Israel, two women came before him with one baby. There was a similar dilemma. Both women claimed to be the mother of the child.

This was years before there was any DNA testing, yet Solomon was asked to decide which Mom was the real Mom. Because a baby can't have two moms.

Our text today addresses the same dilemma. Look again at verse 13:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Luke 16:13)

The translation here is a little weak. The word we read as "serve" actually has to do with ownership. It might be better translated like this:

No one **can be owned by** two masters... You cannot **cannot be owned by** both God and money."

Your life cannot be consumed by more than one thing. Something wins out. Biblically speaking, whatever wins is the thing that owns you. For some people ...

- It is family
- It is the internet (Facebook)
- It is an addiction
- It is anger or depression or some other controlling emotion
- The Scriptures want us to be owned by God.

How you live, the decisions you make, all is tied to this issue of "who owns you?" The term that describes all of that is "stewardship." And today, in this month of intentional focus on stewardship, we celebrate the stewardship of our lives.

The teaching in our gospel text reminds us of three stewardship principles that every person needs to know.

STEWARDSHIP PRINCIPLE #1: GOD OWNS IT ALL

This isn't new. If you have been around any church for any significant length of time, you have heard that principle many times. If you have read your Bible even occasionally, you will see that the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that God is the owner of everything that is.

Let me share two verses to illustrate my point, both in the Psalms:

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. (Psalm 24:1)

(E)very animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills... the world is mine, and all that is in it. (Psalm 50:10, 12)

You and I can buy things and sell them. We can modify them and rearrange them. But there is nothing in this entire world where any of us can rightly say "This is mine." At best we can only say:

This belongs to God, and He graciously has allowed to use it for a while.

One day a small child was walking with her grandmother through a beautiful flower garden. The little girl was enamored by one particular flower. She thought it was the most beautiful flower she had ever seen, so she asked her grandmother "Do you think God would mind if I picked one of His flowers?"

In the simple question of a child, we find the heart of a faithful steward. It all belongs to God. That is at the heart of our church's approach to the use of our facility. Most of you know that we make any space available to any Christian nonprofit ministry at no cost. Why? Because it is not ours. Everything you see belongs to God.

And that is true of our lives as well. My time, my treasure, my talents, my testimony are not really mine. They are God's. He owns it all.

STEWARDSHIP PRINCIPLE #2: WHAT GOD ASKS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHAT I WANT

In my daily devotions now, I am working slowly through the early chapters of the book of Exodus – the Moses story. I'm at the part of the story where Moses is standing before the burning bush. God tells him:

Go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."
(Exodus 3:10)

That's what God wants. But Moses doesn't want to do it. He might be bored tending his father-in-law's sheep in the desert, but even that boring job is preferable to facing down Pharaoh. So Moses objects

- I don't communicate well, God. We'll send your brother Aaron to speak for you.
- What if the people don't want to follow me, God? Tell them I AM sent you.
- What if they need a sign to prove it? Throw your staff on the ground and I will turn it into a snake.

Objection after objection, but nothing worked. Because what God wants is significantly more important than what I want. And since He owns everything, His wishes trump the wishes of Moses. So Moses went just as God had asked. And we know him today as one of the greatest leaders in the history of the world.

- Jonah didn't want to go to Ninevah but in the end an entire city was saved
- My Grandpa Chivington was called by God to be a minister, and he refused to do it. Frankly, he was more interested in making money and achieving status in the community. And he was a grumpy curmudgeon his whole life because of that decision. So much so that when my dad – his son-in-law – announced that God was calling him, Grandpa told dad "Do it, no matter what. You will hate yourself if you don't."

Part of the challenge of a stewardship month like this one is looking at the list of options for service, and then asking the right question.

- One question is: What do I want to do?
- The better question is always: God, what do you want me to do?

Because what God wants is always better than what you want.

STEWARDSHIP PRINCIPLE #3: WHAT GOD GIVES IS TO BE INVESTED FOR HIM

The parable that leads into today's focus verse describes a servant who was unfaithful in his stewardship.

There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer. (Luke 16:1-2)

Bad stewardship always leads to bad consequences. Eventually the owner calls for accountability.

In another parable Jesus tells about an owner who gave his stewards various amounts of talents. Ten, five and one. The stewards with the ten talents and five talents used those talents wisely. And they were rewarded.

Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness! (Matthew 25:21)

APPLICATION

As citizens of the United States, we Americans don't easily think of ourselves as being owned by someone else. In fact, that evokes in mind images of horrible practice of slavery in the early days of our union. But as citizens of God's kingdom, it is an image that we need to understand and embrace. The Apostle Paul puts it rather clearly:

You were bought at a price. (1 Corinthians 6:20)

Jesus died on the cross as payment for us. By His blood we have been redeemed. Prior to that, we were slaves to sin, but now we have been purchased by Christ.

And the really cool thing about my current state is this:

Even though God owns me, I serve Him out of admiration and gratitude, not obligation.

That is the attitude of my heart as I approach this Stewardship month. I pray that it is yours, too.

Amen.