

Servants & Stewards

THE GOSPEL | GOD'S WILL | TIME | WEALTH | SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Sample Sermons

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Servants & Stewards

How to Use these Sample Sermons

The principal purpose of these sample sermons is to give you an example of how to introduce each week's theme. They aren't given with the expectation that you will read them verbatim; though of course, you are welcome to use as much of them as you feel would be helpful. The outlines can be useful, but also look for themes and helpful phrasing.

Your Sunday messages are designed to help your members get off on the right foot. They will provide approaches for setting the tone for your members for the following week as they read the devotional guide and discuss passages in their small groups.

There are reasons you may not feel led to preach the passage used in the sample sermons. Perhaps you recently preached on that passage. Maybe the sample sermon simply won't fit your style of delivery. The Spirit might lead you to another passage. Or some other reason. Nevertheless, you still might find a quote, or an idea to spur your own creative juices.

One could easily get the idea that a sermon or two will be enough. "Our people believe the Bible and love the Lord; they'll get onboard," the reasoning may go. If you are trying to raise, what is for your church, a small amount of money, that may work. But if this is a major project, it will take a major effort. Neither a single sermon, nor a sermon series, will be enough. If that's all you do, then it will be perceived as "the preacher's project." Instead, such projects need to be perceived as the shared goal of the congregation.

Involving a significant percentage of your members, in itself, communicates that this is important. Failure to involve your people in the emphasis will rob your people of a meaningful opportunity. Congregations need the experience of doing big things together. So, a sermon or two isn't enough. Nevertheless, a sermon series will help set the tone, clarify what you are asking members to do, explain why giving to this offering is important, and challenge them to action.

In your messages, set the table for the upcoming week of devotionals. You will want to read ahead. Perhaps, in your message will say something along the lines of, "Day 3 in our devotional booklet will explain this in a helpful way." Create a sense that we are all going to be reading them this week. Not everyone is a reader and not everyone will read the devotional booklet. However, we are trying to encourage as much participation as possible.

If you use live testimonies, as opposed to videos, be prepared to abbreviate your message for time. Sometimes, inexperienced speakers will be emotional or not sure how to "land the plane." You and the worship leader both will need be ready to make adjustments on the fly.

Servants & Stewards

Stewards of the Gospel

A Sermon and Theme Interpretation on 1 Corinthians 4:1-2

*This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.
Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.*

— 1 Corinthians 4:1-2

There are two key words in today's passage, *servants* and *stewards*. In many congregations when they hear the word stewardship, the members all have this sudden urge to make a run for the door. Their entire understanding of stewardship is "Give more money to the church!" However, Christian stewardship involves vastly more than money.

Seeing ourselves as *servants and stewards* should be a part of our self-image, a fundamental part of how we see ourselves. That is what verse one in our text says, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."

What is a Steward?

A steward is someone who manages and cares for property and resources which belong to someone else. A modern example would be the manager of a chain store. The manager doesn't own the store. He doesn't set the store policies. He probably doesn't decide the store hours, when there will be sale, or set the return policy for the store. He is merely responsible to operate the store according to the policies and guidelines of the owners.

During this special emphasis, we're going to review what the Bible says about stewardship — in regard to the gospel, to know God's specific will for our individual lives, the time which makes up our lifetimes, our spiritual gifts — and yes, our wealth, too. Because Jesus is Lord of all. He owns it all and he has entrusted to you everything you have and everything you are. You are not the owner; you're the steward, responsible to manage each aspect of your life according to his ways. That's how every Christian believer should see himself.

Now, we need to understand that...

A Stewardship is a Serious Responsibility

For example, in Exodus 22, we see the biblical principle for when someone entrusts property to the safekeeping of another. If someone had to leave his farm to go on a trip and he was afraid someone would steal his money or his tools. They didn't have the locks we have today, so it was a big risk then, even as it would be today. So, asks a neighbor to keep it for him. What happens if he returns from his trip, but his neighbor tells him, he's sorry but his tools have gone missing? He has entrusted his valuables to his neighbor "to keep safe." Well, they look for the thief. The Bible says, "If the thief is found, he shall pay double."

If no thief can be identified, they investigate the neighbor to whom the money or property was entrusted. "The case of both parties shall come before God." Did he take it? If it is found that he did, then the Bible calls it a "breach of trust." In that case, "he shall pay double to his

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neighbor.” (Exodus 22:7-13)

So, a stewardship is a serious responsibility!

One might reason: Then I won’t accept a stewardship. If I don’t accept the responsibility then I can’t be held accountable. But think about it. It would be illogical to say we can choose not to be accountable for the stewardship of our time on this earth. Are you married? Do you have children? Marriage is a responsibility you entered into soberly and deliberately. God has entrusted your family into your life as a stewardship. If you are a Christian, then God has imparted to you spiritual gifts with which to serve him, through his church. Such gifts are said in Scripture to be a *stewardship*. Nope, stewardship is not optional.

This is the theme we are introducing this week, and which we will be examining throughout this emphasis we are calling *Servants & Stewards*. Each week will develop a new aspect of stewardship. I hope you will faithfully read the devotional guide, as we consider this biblical principle from several angles. You will have seven days each week to read five devotionals. They aren’t too long or too complicated. And this is something we are doing together as a church family.

This week, we will more specifically consider how...

Our Main Stewardship is the Gospel

We see this concept in multiple places in the New Testament.

- 1 Corinthians 9:16-17 “...Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ...I am still *entrusted with a stewardship*.”
- 1 Thessalonians 2:4 “Just as we have been approved by God to be *entrusted with the gospel*, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.”
- 1 Timothy 1:11, ISV “... The glorious gospel of the blessed God, *which he entrusted to me*.”
- Titus 1:3 refers to “...The preaching with which *I have been entrusted* by the command of God our Savior”
- And here in today’s text, 1 Corinthians 4:1: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and *stewards of the mysteries of God*.”

How do you see yourself? Paul said, “This is *how one should regard us*, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Do you see yourself in that way? As a servant and a steward? Is this a significant part of your self-image?

The Great Commission is the one over-arching, everyone-involving mission of the church. It’s called the *Great* Commission because it’s a great, big deal! It’s not just the preacher’s job; it’s our job. Until Jesus returns, it is the main work of the whole church. It is why we plant new churches and start new classes. It takes all kinds of churches and all kinds of classes to reach all kinds of people. It is why we start new ministries, to put us into contact with hu-

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man need and to minister God's grace. It is why we expand our buildings... to make room for more. It is why we support missions and why we generously give.

There are those who think something along the lines that they didn't sign up for anything, and haven't made any kind of commitment. That they're simply a member of the audience at the church show. It is true that a lot of lost people attend church services. Is that what you're trying to say about yourself? In contrast, if you have been made alive to God in the new birth, then you will have an understanding of what the Great Commission is all about.

Life is multi-faceted. The Father has blessed us in many ways. In verse 7 of today's passage, we are asked "What do you have that you did not receive?" God "richly provides us with everything to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17). So, *all of life* should be *enjoyed* as we live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, spreading the gospel, both locally and globally, is the grand cause of our lives. And we bring every resource with we have been entrusted to bear in service of this great Cause.

God has entrusted us with multiple blessings, which we hold in stewardship. We should take into consideration therefore how...

In Stewardship, Faithfulness is Required.

Verse 2 says, "Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful." As we already said, stewardship is not optional. You *are* a steward. You may be a faithful steward or an unfaithful steward, but a steward you are!

Are you faithfully using the spiritual gifts the Lord has given you to serve him?

Are you being faithful with your time, to set aside time to spend with the Lord?

Are you being faithful in your life-time, to make it count in eternity?

Are you faithful in managing the financial resources he has entrusted to your care and investing a portion in eternity?

Are you faithful in keeping in step with God's special plan for your life? Do you know how to hear his voice and obey his promptings?

Are you being faithful in regard to that sacred entrustment, the gospel? Is it your personal life mission to help people come to know Christ? Both locally and globally?

You may not be the most gifted. You may lead from the middle and not from the front of the room. Yours may not be largest sphere of influence. You might not have the most money to give. But are you being faithful with what the Lord have entrusted to you?

Servants & Stewards

Stewards of God's Will

A Sermon and Theme Interpretation on Romans 8

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

— Romans 8:14

Someone wrote, "If you talk to God, you're religious, but if God talks to you, you're crazy." We can understand how someone could get this impression. Some sick, evil things have been done by people who said that "God told me to do it." So, it is fair to ask if these terrible things prove God *ever* speaks to us or leads us.

So let me say upfront: in our emphasis, we are affirming that God has a personalized plan for each one of us. We maintain that God has entrusted to us his will and plan for our lives. This plan isn't about doing something kooky. The Lord wants to use us in the world and in his church. Therefore, we are each responsible to know God's plan for us and to do our part.

In this week's devotionals, we will be reading about how to recognize God's will and how to follow his leading. So, this will be a very helpful week. This is an important life skill for every believer in every aspect of life.

So, today we are looking at Romans, chapter 8, one of the mountain peak chapters of the Bible. It's been observed the chapter begins with "No condemnation" and concludes with "No separation." And in the middle, between *no condemnation* and *no separation* is, enumerated, the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life.

The living God has a living church, made alive by the Holy Spirit, and whose members he leads by the Spirit who dwells within. And that is the place to start; with:

The Indwelling of the Spirit.

In verse 9, Paul speaks of this indwelling, and then warns, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." Thus, everyone who is truly saved is indwelt by the Holy Spirit... or he is not a Christian.

We don't have time to cover everything in Romans 8 concerning the Spirit's ministry, but let's quickly list those, which for lack of time, we cannot develop today:

Verse 10 says we have been made alive by the Spirit. A spiritual vitality has entered our lives. He brings a new power and a fresh dynamic.

Verse 12 says the Spirit gives us the power to overcome sin in our lives. The life-giving Spirit gives us sin-killing power.

Verses 15-17 describes how we have been adopted by the Father and the Spirit works in our human spirits to assure us that we have. He is "the Spirit of adoption."

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Verses 23 refers to the “first fruits of the Spirit.” He means that, we aren’t in Heaven yet, but with the Spirit’s indwelling, there is a little of Heaven in us. We don’t have to wait to experience any of it; the Holy Spirit is giving us our first tastes of Heaven now!

Verses 26-27 talks about those times when we aren’t sure how to pray. The Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us, translating our heavenly groanings into the heavenly language.

And finally, verse 11 tells us about resurrection day. God “will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” — the same Spirit who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will raise you!

Those are the things we don’t have time to discuss in more detail today. Pastors preach entire series on this chapter! So let us begin by saying, the Holy Spirit indwells every true believer in Christ, and is makes a huge difference!

So now that we have seen his indwelling, please look with me at those matters of the Spirit related to the leading of God and his plan for our lives.

Walking According to the Spirit

In verses 4 and 5, he speaks of those who “walk according to the Spirit.” Paul is talking about that life-long project of aligning ourselves with the holiness of the Holy Spirit and his will.

The unbelieving world aligns their lives “according to the flesh” (vs. 5). What does he mean by *flesh*? Flesh is “me minus God.” The unbelieving world operates out of their own human resources. It’s me doing the best I can. Me, living apart from any supernatural work of God, without the new birth. Me, living my life according to my own ideas. Me, not relying on the Spirit’s power. Like the man who says, “I’ve got to work this out my own way.” Flesh is what we are without God actively involved in our lives.

In contrast, those who live, as he puts it, “according to the Spirit” live lives of dependence, empowerment, obedience... in alignment with the Spirit.

This is not some kind of involuntary thing, where puppet strings drop down from Heaven and, involuntarily, control us. Believers willingly align themselves with the Spirit.

As the Holy Spirit works within us, renewing us, and empowering us, there develops within us...

A Set Mind and a Mindset

Look at verses 5 and 6.

Verse 5: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.”

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They “set their minds.” When unbelievers sets their minds on the flesh, it is by birth, by nature, and by choice. When believers set their minds on the things of the Spirit, it is due to the new birth, their new nature, and by choice. Either way, a choice is involved — a voluntary act, a commitment. Our minds are *set there!*

And what does he mean by saying one sets his or her mind on “the things of the Spirit”? Whereas, the Scriptures are inspired by the Spirit; they enjoy learning about God’s Word. Their eyes don’t glaze over when you talk about the personality and attributes of God. They are alert to how God is moving around them, answering their prayers and working to bring people to Christ. They have eyes and hearts for God.

Setting one’s mind on the things of God is a conscious choice, involving interest, thought, and study. And as we sets our minds on the things of the Spirit, there will develop within us a mindset. Verses 6 describes and contrast two mindsets:

“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

Until we are born again, until there is the divine spark of delight in the things of God, we are endeared to death — unable to respond to God, disinterested, alienated. Not merely separated, but as verse 7 explains, “hostile to God” and unwilling to “submit to God.” Some unbelievers would deny being hostile to God. They consider themselves to be nice people. But I ask, “So, why are you turned off when someone talks about more spiritual things?”

In contrast to this internal rage and rebellion is “life and peace.” Within the believer is an animation, an invigoration, a powerful dynamic at work. Instead of rage and hostility is peace. Peace with God and peace from God.

Finally, verse 14 says that “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” So, let’s talk for a few minutes what it means to be...

Led by the Spirit

Notice how following the leading of the Spirit is standard equipment for believers. It isn’t an optional upgrade. “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” The corollary is that if you aren’t led by the Spirit, you are not a child of God.

Pick up on the word, *led*. The Shepherd leads; we follow.

God doesn’t usually provide us with a detailed travel itinerary. God won’t talk our heads off, but as we need guidance, the Lord directs our steps. Admittedly, in a career choice there is often a career path which is baked in, for example with education requirements. We concede also that there are “signpost moments” in our lives, key life-defining moments. Overall, however, the Spirit leads us one step at a time. God continues to prompt us regarding our next stage of spiritual growth... or for a new avenue of service.

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Not to say that the Lord isn't interested in the details of our lives, hopefully, we aren't restricting our dependence on the Lord's guidance to things like convenient parking spaces. We should focus, instead, on matters related to spiritual growth and opportunities for significant service.

As you have been reading the information we've provided for this special emphasis, you've probably noticed how every church member is being asked to give the amount the Lord leads them to give. No one is going to try to tell you how much or suggest an amount to you that you should give. There will be some who won't even try to engage in this process. They'll just give what's left over after they spend everything they wanted to spend on themselves. But if you are willing to try and follow God's leading, allow me to offer three quick words of reassurance:

First, being led by the Spirit is a part of normal Christian living. Being led by the Spirit is neither kooky nor an optional premium upgrade. It is a normal thing for believers. You aren't a fanatic if you try it. And it certainly shouldn't come as a shock to others to be asked to give as God leads them.

Second, his leading isn't only for stewardship emphases and building programs and pastor search committees. Hearing God is a life skill for every disciple for every aspect of life.

Third, carefully read the material in the devotional guide this week; it will be very helpful. If this *is* your first time to seek the Lord's definite leadership about anything, then this is a terrific opportunity that will be a blessing to you for the rest of your life.

"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." — Romans 8:14

Servants & Stewards

Stewards of Our Time

A Sermon and Theme Interpretation on Acts 13:36

For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep...
— Acts 13:36

There is a story of three friends visiting the funeral home. They got to talking and one asked the question, “What would you want them to be able to say about you when you’re gone?” One replied, “I’d like them to say that I was a loving husband and a great Dad.” A second added, “And in his business dealings, he was always honest.” The two turned to the third guy who hadn’t spoken yet and asked, “What about you, Bob? What would you like for them to say about you?” “Me? I want someone to say, ‘Hey look, he’s moving!’”

In today’s passage, we can see what was said about King David, as we consider the question:

What Will They Be Able to Say About Us After We’re Gone?

Some have referred to this verse as *the obituary of David*. And it is indeed a fantastic, one-verse summary of the man!

Interestingly, Charles Spurgeon’s message on this very verse was already on the schedule to be printed when he died. It was to be distributed only a few days following his passing. Mrs. Spurgeon felt comfortable in proceeding with the plan, explaining that the famous preacher of the 1800’s couldn’t have chosen a more suitable message for “his own funeral sermon.”

These words of verse 36 come from the mouth of Paul, who is speaking in a synagogue. He is offering proof from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He quotes Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3, and Psalm 16:10 — “You will not let your Holy One see corruption.” Then he asks of whom these verses speak. And he answers his own question: it can’t be David. Though one of the passages speaks of the sure promises of David... though David wrote many of the Psalms... he is long dead and his body decayed. So, the context of the passage concerns the resurrection of Christ. It’s not a biography of the life of David. However, as we read it, in the midst of the passage, lies this golden nugget. A succinct summary of King David’s life impact.

So, what would you want them to be able to say about you after you’re gone?

- He had a great bass boat?
- He had a shelf full of aging golf trophies... till his widow threw them out.
- She left a lot of money. How much, you ask? ...All of it!
- Their family had a wonderful connection with the travel ball families. How many attended the service? No one could make it, of course, they had a game.

They tell of an old man who used to ask people this question: “What have you done that you

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believe in and are proud of?" Some of the best answers were simple. "I'm a cabinet maker and I work hard to provide good craftsmanship." One mother said, "I've done a good job of rearing my three children." Let's replace a word in his question: "What have you done that you believe in and *has eternal value?*"

To get the right answer to that question, we have to have the right answer to this question:

How Do You See Yourself as You Relate to God?

We are told, "David... *served* the purpose of God." The word for *served* in this verse is the same one found in 1 Corinthians 4:1. It comes from a term meaning *under-rower*. The rowers on a ship acted upon the commands of superior officers and synchronized their rowing in time to drums or pipers. They were *under-rowers* because they were under the authority of another who told them when to go, when to stop, and where to turn. The word came to be used in a wide variety of ways for attendants and assistants of all kinds — a valet, a body guard, a synagogue attendant — someone who serves the purposes of another, attending to their needs. This person was not a bond slave; but rather had freely accepted the role and, often with the role, had some measure of authority.

Here's the point... We sometimes get the idea that God exists to make us happy. However, we exist to please him. "David... *served the purpose of God.*"

The next idea concerns...

The Purpose of God.

It says "David *served the purpose* of God." The word refers to a purposeful plan with foresight and intentionality. This is the same word used in Acts 2:23 when we are told that Jesus went to cross and died for our sins, carrying out "the determined plan" of God.

Not only was there a plan for Jesus, the Father has a plan for each of his people, a plan made in eternity past with assignments for each of us to fulfill. Hear Ephesians 2:10: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Before he created the world, God already had on his calendar app, divine appointments for you to meet and service assignments for you to fulfill.

This isn't something about which we can be vague. Every believer should be clear on his God-given purpose in life and his God-given gifts for service. You should be clear enough on this to be able to put it into words.

Further, this verse impresses upon us the importance of when we serve. David served...

In His Own Generation

There are two significant factors in our service: *the Lord's purpose* and *one's own generation*. We don't get to serve a past generation. We wouldn't be effective with methods that worked in previous generations. And in regard to future generations, we can bless them most by ef-

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fectively making disciples of our own generation. It's the only generation we've got! By definition, our lifetimes are made up of... time.

We can each see the urgency in fulfilling our life mission, because...

Life is Short.

David fell asleep. Only those who live in light of the brevity of life are prepared to live. Twice, in the book of Psalms we see this insight being sought in prayer.

- "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:12)
- "O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!" (Psalm 34:2)

Since time is short, how should we approach life? During the '60's, Schlitz Beer ran commercials with the slogan, "You only go around once in life; go for the gusto!" Life is short; play and party now. In contrast, C. T. Studd wrote: "Only one life 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last!"

We have a definite number of days and our time is tight. So, we should remember that...

While We Can be Replaced, Our Opportunities Cannot.

Popping up among the moments and days which make up our lifetimes are opportunities to make our lives count in the Kingdom. How many times have we bumped our foreheads upon the sudden realization that we had been oblivious and missed an opportunity.

I'll serve the Lord someday.

But I'm just a kid.

There's nothing I can do; I'm only in fourth grade.

When I'm old enough I'll serve the Lord.

I'll serve the Lord someday.

Right now I'm in high school.

I play three sports, sing in the show choir, and I'm trying to build a college resume.

But one day, I'll serve the Lord.

I'll serve the Lord someday.

But, hey, I'm in college.

These are the best years of our lives and I love the freedom.

I'm going to have my fun and I'll serve the Lord when I graduate.

I'll serve the Lord someday.

But I've taken my first job in my career.

You have to work hard and put in the extra hours.

But after I'm established, I'll serve the Lord.

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I'll serve the Lord someday.

But we just got engaged.

There's a lot of planning and so much to do.

When we get back from the honeymoon, we can think more about this.

I'll serve the Lord someday.

But the kids are all in school and have all their activities

We have to take them to practice and attend a lot of school events.

We want to give them a good childhood; but after that,

we'll have more time for the church

I'll serve the Lord someday.

But we just retired.

We bought a great new camper and want to travel

We'll fulfill all those dreams and then, after that, we'll focus more on the good Lord.

I'll serve the Lord someday.

But our health isn't good right now

We both have to spend a lot of time in doctor's offices

But we hope to get in church when the weather gets better

I'm in the hospital.

I can hear my children in the hall talking to the doctor

It doesn't look good

But Lord, you know, I always said that

I would serve You someday.

At this very moment, I am passing into eternity

There is the judgment

Where I will give an account.

Oh! How I wish I had served the Lord!

We can waste our lives. We can spend our lives. Or we can invest our lives. We can count in the Kingdom. We can lay up treasure in Heaven. We can live our lives before the Lord. We can spend time alone with the Lord, devotionally. We can be a witness. We can be an encourager. We can be blessing in the Lord's church. But we must act now!

Servants & Stewards

Stewards of Our Wealth

A Sermon and Theme Interpretation on Proverbs 3:9-10

*Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce
— Proverbs 3:9*

As we come to this point in our emphasis, let's stop and get our bearings. Again, one of the reasons we've looked at similar ideas from multiple angles is that not everyone can be present every Sunday. And some new things take time to absorb. So, there has to be some reinforcement of ideas, though we're trying to avoid being repetitive. Let's clarify where we are:

We are "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God," the mysteries being the gospel. So says 1 Corinthians 4:1.

We are servants. God doesn't exist to make us happy; it is our responsibility to please him.

As stewards, God has entrusted to us life, abilities, and resources. These are a stewardship. That means they are God's, but God has entrusted them to us, to use them according to his purposes. The main thing of which we are stewards is the gospel.

The Great Commission is the great cause of the church and of every single member. Jesus, with all authority in heaven and on earth, said so. So, if you are a believer, this is your great cause and it isn't up for discussion.

God has an individualized plan for each one of our lives. God formed this plan in eternity past. It is our responsibility to understand that plan and to fulfill the mission the Lord has entrusted to us.

Our lifetimes are a stewardship from God. In fact, a lifetime *is time*... of which we are stewards. But our lifetimes are short and time is fleeting. Opportunities come and go so quickly, they are easy to miss.

The gospel cause is so great and so urgent, that every resource is to be martialled into its service. This is the overall context into which each week's theme has fallen.

Which brings us to this week's theme, that we are stewards of our wealth. As we begin our consideration of this aspect of stewardship, let's look at Proverbs 3:5-10:

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not
wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to
your flesh and refreshment to your bones. Honor the Lord with your wealth and
with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.*

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Verse 9 is our key verse. Again: “Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce.”

Wealth is a Means to Honor God.

That is, it can be used as an expression of worship. It shows respect. It is a statement that you recognize the source of your blessings and your dependence on the Creator.

The word, *honor*, means “to give weight to.” We use the word in similar ways today. We might say an influential person “carries lot of weight in this town.” When someone is considering multiple options in making a decision, we might refer to some factor in their thinking, saying he gave a lot of “weight to that in his consideration.” We use a similar word these days, *gravitas*. It refers to someone who commands respect. In the Old Testament, when used of a human, this word meant that the person was worthy of *honor*. When used of God, it is often used to describe his *glory*. Here we find it as a verb, and it means *to honor*.

Giving of our wealth is a way to honor God, an expression of worship. But the failure to do so means we take him *lightly*. That we regard him as unworthy of respect. That we have failed to see and recognize his glory.

Giving honors God by placing more value on God than we do on our money. It honors God by joining him in his mission... being interested in what interests him — instead of being solely self-interested. Giving honors the Lord by seeking first the kingdom of God. Giving is an expression of appreciation, a recognition that our blessings come from the Father.

One man had a strained relationship with one of his sons. However, there came a breakthrough. Not everything was fixed overnight, but it was a huge step. So, the man gave a “thank offering” to the Lord to express, in a tangible way, his deep gratitude for this answer to his many prayers. He wanted to honor the Lord.

Notice, that....

It is *the LORD* We are Told to Honor

You see the word “LORD” appearing in small caps in the verse. This is the specific name for the one true God, the sacred name he revealed to Moses. It doesn’t refer to God “as you understand him to be,” but exclusively to the God of the Bible.

During the Jesus movement of the late sixties and early seventies, believers would hold up one finger. It didn’t mean “we’re number one,” it meant “one way.” That Jesus is the one and only way to God. The gospel can be offensive to many because it makes exclusive claims.

Further...

We Told to Honor God with *Our Wealth*.

We are not all equally rich. Some of us have less than others. However, there are people in the world who would gladly trade places with the poorest of our poor.

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One church was in a building program. On one Sunday during their campaign to raise the needed funds, quarters were placed in advance of the worship service to every pew. It was explained that when the new building was complete there would be a dedication service... and that as the members enjoyed the use of the new facilities... they would want to feel like they had been a part. Some could give a lot. Some could give only a little. If someone could afford to give only a little, they shouldn't be embarrassed to give what they could. But everyone can give *something*. If all you can do is put a quarter in an envelope, do that and be a part — that was the challenge. Just placing a quarter in the envelope would make you a part. Then, to help everyone get started, members were asked to write their names on an offering envelope and place the provided quarter inside. See how easy this is?! Well, at the end of the three years, the pastor asked the financial secretary if there were some whose only offering was that one quarter. The reply was *several*. There's an attitude that will look you in the eye and say, "I'm a taker."

When a church emphasizes giving, there are often members who will *bow up*, some might even *blow up*, but then there are those who will *grow up*.

There is no substitute for honoring God with our wealth. Certainly, it is important to give our time to the Lord. And volunteering our service and offering our prayers. But there is something about money. It seems the debit cards in our wallets have a Bluetooth connection to our hearts. If God doesn't have access to your wealth, he doesn't have all of *you*. You are withholding something for the Lord — not honoring him.

The verse says to honor God with the firstfruits of all your produce. That is...

Giving to the Lord Means Giving *from the Top*.

In biblical times, "firstfruits" were the choicest parts of a crop, the first-harvested, and given to the Lord as an expression of worship.

It used to be that among Christians it was common to say that our tithe should be "the first check written." Nowadays, we pay bills online. A newer saying is, "Automate your priorities," which we can do by scheduling automatic offerings on our church giving apps.

If we aren't giving firstfruits, we're merely giving "leftovers." In Malachi 1 God tells us how disrespected he feels when we offer him leftovers. Verse 6: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor?" The Lord then goes on to explain how their sacrifices of "leftovers" show him disrespect:

When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the Lord of hosts. (verse 8)

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Some object, saying they can't afford to give like this. However...

You Can't Outgive the Lord.

Faithful givers always testify to this fact. What happens when you "Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce"? Verse 10 goes on to say, "Then your barns will be filled with plenty."

We have to take the faith-step to experience the "then." We say, "God, you bless and then I'll give." But God says, "You first."

God blesses faith. Many Christians have testified to the fact that when they started by faith, God blessed their faithful obedience. God is generous to those who are generous with him.

Perhaps you are thinking, there is no way we can do that. Giving anything is simply impossible for us. Well, back to Proverbs 3, verses 5 and 6:

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

The Banquet: Building Campaign

A Sermon and Theme Interpretation on Isaiah 55:2-3

“Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left....” — Isaiah 55:2-3

In the film, *Field of Dreams*, the promise is given, “If you build it, they will come.” That’s not quite what we’re saying here. We are saying three things: First, if we don’t build it, we won’t have room for them. Second, if we don’t have room for their families, they won’t come back. And third, they *are* coming, and we need to make room for them!

That is exactly the situation in Isaiah 55:2-3. The prophet foretells the period of “time-out” in which God would place his children. Then, he foretells how after their punishment is over they will return, and how God will bless and multiply his people. And he tells them how, at that time, they will need to get ready.

“Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left....”

To make room for more, a bigger tent will be needed. With bigger curtains walls. Bigger curtains weigh more, so longer cords and stronger stakes will be needed. To provide for growth, we will have to “spread abroad to the right and to the left.”

A biblical vision comes from God and answers four basic questions:

1. How will we reach lost people?
2. How will we care for those we reach?
3. How will we train them in biblical doctrine and for Christian service?
4. How can we deploy them into the world?

In a great church, individual members see the vision, rally around that vision, and everyone personally assumes responsibility for its success.

At our church, setting more places at the table is one part of the whole process. That’s why we’re building — to set more places at the table and make room for more.

Our challenge has been to plan the right building — as a tool to do the job that needs to be done — without wasting money on one hand or building too little on the other. I believe we’ve done that. And I am inviting you to join me in this venture of faith. Because the best way to have a good offering is for everyone to give something. Some can give a little. Some can give a lot. But everyone can give sacrificially. And, as we give over the course of the next three years, all of our gifts will add up. We can enlarge our tent and make room for more!

The Banquet: Missions Campaign

A Sermon and Theme Interpretation on 3rd John 5-8

*Therefore we ought to support people like these,
that we may be fellow workers for the truth.*

— 3rd John 5-8

In the days before mission boards, and travel by plane, and hotels, missionaries would walk to the places on their assigned destinations. As they traveled, they would try to find lodging with Christian believers in the towns and stops along the way. These small congregations may have, at times, been in a bit of a stretch in caring for these guests. One can imagine hearing, “That is the second team this month!” However, this short letter is addressed to a man named Gaius, who is highly commended by the Apostle John. John tells Gaius it “is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers.”

In contrast to Gaius, a very different individual is named, Diotrephes [Dī ōt' trə phēs] strongly opposed this participation in world evangelization. Diotrephes didn't think the church ought to help these traveling missionaries. He probably said things like “Missions begins at home.” John, who outranked this self-appointed know-it-all — the Apostle John, one of the five-star generals of the faith, said, “*We ought to support people like these.*”

“People like these” — who are they? They are described in verses 6 and 7, as “brothers, strangers as they are.” These people are our brothers and sisters in Christ, even if we don't know them well. Even if we had never met them before. So, often, we are asked to give to support a missions offering, and we are tempted to feel like we are supporting a nameless, faceless system, not friends.

So, John tells us why these people are worthy of our generous support. Verse 7: “They have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.” They have gone out. They are going to places away from home and from family. They have accepted inconvenience “for the sake of the name” of the Lord Jesus. Well, any friend of Jesus like that should be a friend of ours!

Verse 7 goes on to say they are “accepting nothing from the Gentiles.” Well, of course, you can't expect the people on the mission field to fund your ministry! So, who else would? John says it “ought” to be us!

And when we support such people, we become “fellow workers for the truth.” We are part of a cause greater than ourselves. We are part of a movement that matters in eternity. We are sharing in the cause with each other, working with missionaries, and are tied together in the cause of the truth.

What a great opportunity this is! To be “fellow workers for the truth.”

Servants & Stewards

Stewards of Our Gifts

A Sermon and Theme Interpretation on Colossians 4:7-18

And say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.'
— Colossians 4:17

Across all of Paul's epistles, he expressed appreciation for 79 brothers and sisters in the Lord — 62 brothers and 17 sisters. In Romans he mentioned 39 fellow Christians. Here in Colossians 4, ten are enumerated.

Even Christians who underline or highlight key verses in their Bibles may have un-marked verses in these passages. The main reason would be that many of their names are difficult to pronounce. Another reason is that, at a glance, we see only the greetings and miss the descriptions. So, it is easy to decide to get a running start and skip over these parts. However, in so doing, we can miss some great insights.

So, let's look at Colossians 4:7-18, and consider

"The Roll Call of the Lord's Army"

The first name we encounter is **Tychicus [Tik-i-cus]**

In verse 7, Paul describes him as "a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord." In the Lord's church we have multiple nuances of relationship. Paul says Tychicus is our "brother in the Lord," a beloved brother — that is their relationship to each other. As Tychicus serves the Lord, Paul says he is "faithful" — that refers to his relationship to the Lord. When Paul calls him a "fellow servant in the Lord," he means they both share a common master. That's what the church is: a people with a common master and a common message and a common mission.

On this occasion, Paul has asked Tychicus to be a messenger between the Colossian church and himself. Paul cannot go personally; he is in prison at the time, quite possibly in Rome. He is therefore dependent on the help of other believers. He tells the church, "I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts" (verse 8). The church cared about Paul and would want to know how he was doing and how he was able to minister from jail. Tychicus was also sent to "encourage your hearts." Two things many churches could use a lot more of: communication and encouragement.

Onesimus" [Ō' nēs' ĩ mūs]

Notice verse 9 "and with him Onesimus." Paul sent them as a team. Because two is better than one, safer than one, and often more effective than one. This is the same Onesimus who had been saved as an escaped slave in the book of Philemon. He has grown in the Lord, and

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is described as “our faithful and beloved brother.” He has the added advantage of being “one of you.” He will know the people in the church. Paul adds, “They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.”

Aristarchus [Âr·is·tär' kūs]

Next comes a “hello.” Verse 10: “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you.” Aristarchus traveled with Paul on multiple occasions. He doesn’t have a reputation as a preacher or anything. He’s just always there. Paul’s in jail; so is Aristarchus. He’s what one Marine would refer to as “foxhole material” — if you’re going to be in combat, he’s the kind of guy you want with you in the foxhole. No matter what may come. No matter what it costs. In it together.

Mark

Verse 10 also mentions “Mark the cousin of Barnabas.” We are immediately reminded how the gospel flows most naturally through the webs of our family relationships and friends. This is the same John Mark who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. You will recall there had been a falling out concerning taking Mark on the second journey, as he had bailed out on the first. Mark has grown and is earning significant standing in the church. The same Paul who had been unwilling to take Mark on the second missionary journey has already instructed the congregation to show him respect — “If he comes to you, welcome him.” In the Lord’s church, the leopard does change its spots. It happens all the time. People often come to Christ through family relationships. They get on the job training in ministry. They grow in the Lord. And the next thing you know, Mark has authored the second Gospel.

Justus

Verse 11 tells us about a Jesus (or Joshua) who is also known as Justus. Justus and the others Paul has already listed are fellow Jewish believers. “These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.” They shared a common background with Paul, whose primary mission was to Gentiles. Surely, it was good sometimes to be around other believers who grew up in an observant Jewish home.

Paul calls Justus and the others “My fellow workers for the kingdom of God.” They weren’t those who tried saying, “Preacher, that’s your job.” They were all kingdom-oriented and they were all willing to work.

Paul adds, “They have been a comfort to me.” In many places Paul went, the Jewish people could not see Jesus as Messiah. Paul often felt their rejection. Their companionship in Christ had been like a tonic to him (which is what the word for comfort here means). Some members in a church are uniquely gifted to encourage and refresh ministers in their churches.

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Epaphras [Ĕp' à frās]

Next up, in verse 12, is one of the intercessors in the church. “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.”

We see his *consistency* in intercessory prayer — “*Always struggling on your behalf in his prayers.*” Epaphras isn’t merely saying a little prayer... having a quick word of prayer. He is constantly praying for them.

We see his effort in prayer — “*Always struggling on your behalf in his prayers.*” This is the word from which we get *agony*. It means to strive, to struggle. Prayer is indeed a struggle—within our easily distracted minds, the striving to focus. Yet, when we do so, we battle enemies in the unseen realm. And God answers in ways we may not see.

In the next verse, verse 13, Paul doubles down: “I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis” (he is speaking here of local churches in other cities in the same region). Those words, *worked hard*, speak of intense exertion in prayer.

We see also Epaphras’ *goals in prayer* — “*That you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.*” He prays for their growth, that they may move toward maturity, enabled to stand faithful. And he prays for them to be “fully assured in all the will of God.” God’s plan for our lives is a stewardship about which we need to be clear and to which we need to be committed.

Epaphras is a hometown guy, “one of you.” Sometimes, a local person, who knows all the people involved, knows best how to pray. Since Epaphras is in prison with Paul, he cannot be there personally. However, his prayers are there and powerful at work among them!

Luke

Verse 14 provides yet an example of what will be to us a familiar contrast. “Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.” Luke will author the gospel which bears his name and the book of Acts. Possibly, he is serving as Paul’s secretary in writing this letter to the Colossians. Luke is a well-known leader in the church, who would finish well. On the other hand, Demas traveled with Paul’s entourage for some time, but he would not finish well. Later, in Second Timothy 4:10, Paul would say “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.” Jesus had told us the wheat and weeds would grow side by side.

Nympha [Nīm' fa]

The churches in the New Testament period had no buildings and hadn’t yet fully developed an organizational structure. Possibly, the church in a region or a large city would be a net-

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work of home fellowships, each led by an elder, but organically close. (The Bible doesn't prescribe this as permanently normative; it merely provides evidence to describe that this was like at its early stages.) Without the use of temple courts or local synagogue or their own buildings, where would believers meet? The solution was to be found in people with the gift of hospitality, like Nympha. Verse 15 says to greet "Nympha and the church in her house."

Archippus [Are-kip-pus]

And finally, Paul has a personal word of challenge for Archippus: Verse 17: "And say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.'"

We are not told the exact nature of Archippus' ministry assignment, whether it was a long-term position or a short-term mission. We know this: He is crisply told to "fulfill" his ministry. Sometimes, we're tempted to round the corners because it seems like too much work. Sometimes, we want to avoid an unpleasant task or a constructive confrontation. Regardless, it is our assignment from the Lord, and we are told to "fill it full."

What about you? Has the Lord given you an assignment. You have a gift from the Holy Spirit. An assignment from the Lord. If you aren't quite sure how you fit in the Lord's church, this week's devotionals discuss how to recognize your spiritual gift. Or you know your gift, but you would rather play? Take an easier approach? Round the corners? The Lord says to us all: "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."

This passages gives us a sense of how a New Testament church operated. We see brothers in the Lord and fellow servants of Christ. We see messengers facilitating a communication network. We see those with a ministry of intercession struggling in prayer on behalf of others. Some show hospitality and host assemblies of believers in their homes. It was an environment of mutual concern and of bracing others up when they grew weak. We see some whose names were well-known and some who worked behind the scenes. We see some who led from the front and some who led from the middle. Yet, each one was focused on the kingdom of God.

As we review this list of names and saw how each person is described, we see they didn't all have the same abilities or spiritual gifts. That will be our theme this week, as we consider spiritual gifts, and how to know our gifts, and how to use our gifts as faithful stewards. For, we all sing in the same choir, but we don't all sing the same part.

Ephesians 4:16 speaks of Christ as head of his church and tells us how it's supposed to work: "He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love" (NLT).

Servants & Stewards

An Acceptable Sacrifice

A Sermon and Theme Interpretation on Philippians 4:10-20

*I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent,
a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.*

— Philippians 4:18

Note to Pastors

Some pastors may feel led to preach a full message to conclude this emphasis. Others may feel it more appropriate in their situations to simply receive the commitments and then conclude this portion of the worship service with a biblical promise that God will honor every sacrifice and with a prayer of commitment. However, if you feel led to preach a full message, this sample sermon is offered for your assistance.

* Biblical Promises: Hebrews 6:10; 1 Corinthians 15:58

We have today turned in our commitment forms to the campaign for a great cause. And today I would like to bring a word of encouragement to all of you who are participating. Let's look together at Philippians 4:10-20.

The Background of the Passage

In prison, Paul has received from the church at Philippi a very generous care package. Paul acknowledges this gift in this passage, saying in verse 18, "I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent." As we read these verses, it becomes clear that they sent more than a few of his favorite snack foods and a small gift card. Paul says, "I am amply supplied" (NIV).

The theme of the book of Philippians concerns Christian fellowship and unity. The word for fellowship — *koinonia* — a Greek word with which many believers are familiar. Each use is rooted in the idea of a relationship based on things held in common. The word appears six times in Philippians, though it is used with various nuances of meaning:

- ◇ 1:5 "Your *partnership* in the gospel from the first day until now"
- ◇ 1:7 "You are all *partakers with* me of grace"
- ◇ 2:1 "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any *participation* in the Spirit..."
- ◇ 3:10 "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may *share* his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,"
- ◇ 4:14 "Yet it was kind of you to *share* my trouble."
- ◇ 4:15 "No church entered into *partnership with me* in giving and receiving, except you only."

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Notice how their financial gift was a part of their partnership in the gospel and their participating with Paul in his work. It was a real part of their Christian fellowship.

When it comes to giving...

Not Everyone Can Handle It

Verse 15: "You Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only." Some congregations resent giving so much, it would be better neither to request nor accept anything from them. They aren't going to offer their support. That was the dilemma Paul faced. Rather than having to deal with resentment or having to overcome begrudging attitudes of other churches, he simply didn't expect gifts from them. It is often better to "go with the goers and to be pray-ers for the stay-ers." In contrast, the Christians in Philippi were "goers" ...serial givers. As verse 16 tells us, "Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again."

Not everyone wants to be a giver, but know this:

God Rewards Faithful Giving

Paul is very clear in explaining how he is grateful for their generosity in meeting his needs. However, he is not trying to accumulate wealth or possessions. He lives in a prison, not in a mansion. He didn't even ask for this gift; the Philippian Christians took the initiative. But Paul is grateful for the gift, and even more grateful for the way they have decided to "lay up treasure in Heaven" (Matthew 6:19-21). Verse 17, NIV: "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account."

Some of you have made choices which will impact your family over the next three years. You have set priorities and made choices. Some may be thinking that you are embarrassed about the small size of the amount. The dollar amount you will give may be less, but your sacrifice could be much greater than others. God knows. He will not only count the amount you have given, he will know how to weigh your sacrifice.

We can't all give equal amounts, but we can all give sacrificially.

Sacrificial Giving Means Doing Without Something

A generous gift means somebody went without something in order to give it. Paul could tell by all they had sent, the Philippians had given sacrificially. He called it "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (vs. 18). He means by this, their gift was a sacrifice to give. He is saying that he knew the Philippians wanted to help Paul, but more than that, they were giving to the Lord. And he is saying that the Lord knew what they were doing and received it as an act of worship. That God was pleased with their sacrifice and would remember.

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Not only do our offering go to God, they come from God.

God Provides the Offering You Give

You may have doubts that you can pull this off. Some of you may have felt led to take a huge step of faith. Now, remember this emphasis provides a safety net: “As part of my commitment, I promise to notify the church financial secretary and revise my commitment amount should my financial circumstances change.” However, there is another safety net better than that — verse 19: “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

And finally, a word about our motives.

It's All About God's Glory

In verse 20, Paul concludes this passage this way: “To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.” That was the motive of the Philippians’ giving. That is the greatness of God’s promise to supply our needs. That is the ultimate result of pouring our lives into the gospel cause... the glory of God. The glory is rightfully his and belongs to him eternally!