

Maturity in Stewardship

2 Corinthians 8:1-15, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

As we move further into our Stewardship month I want to talk about maturity and stewardship. Whenever the word steward or stewardship is mentioned, we usually think of money and giving, but giving is only a part of stewardship and the tithe is only a part of giving. Let's look at some marks of a mature Christian steward this morning. This is a Christian who has the qualities Paul mentioned in II Corinthians 9 and which Jesus mentions in Matthew's Gospel.

The heart of all stewardship is that mature Christians make Christ Lord of their life, for we are moment-by-moment, day-by-day deciding the question, "Shall I live for God or for myself?" This was the dilemma Adam and Eve faced in the garden and every person faces. Human beings must worship something. If we do not let God be God, then we will make something else into our God. It may be ourselves, our possessions, another person or some ideal or institution. Something will rule over our lives.

Our way is not God's way. Our way often leads into difficulty and heartbreak, but God's way leads into life and peace and joy. God's way involves our letting Christ control and direct us in all things. God becomes the center of our lives and the One we worship.

Making God the center of our lives means using our possessions, our time, talents, influence, and property for God's glory. When God is the center of our lives we recognize that we are stewards of everything not just our possessions. We are stewards of life itself and all of life's experiences.

Psalm 24:1 tells us, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." Scripture tells us that God is the creator of the world and that all creation belongs to God.

Because that is true, you and I have no right to say, "That's mine." Humanity's sin involved denying that God owned all things. We are renewed in our relationship to God and others when we recognize that we belong to God and that all we have is but a gift from God. "You are not your own: you are God's and wonderfully made by your creator.

The Christian steward knows they are only a trustee. Genesis 1:28 tells us that after the creation God said to man, "Be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth and have dominion." We're not owners but trustees. Jesus in the parables of the talents showed that God has given us the resources of our world and expects an accounting for them. Paul in Romans 14:12 says plainly, "So each of us shall give an account of himself to God."

Some of us will be like Adam, though, and seek to avoid taking the responsibility God places on each of us. Adam tried to place all the blame for his sin on Eve. Adam could not imagine that the responsibility for his own sin lay at his own door. So, it is with us. We are held responsible for our stewardship of all of life.

The key scripture for understanding the Christian view of material things is Colossians 1:16 where Paul says, "All things were created by God and for God." God made us for Himself and gives us material things to fulfill God's purpose and plan for the world. God's purpose is that all persons come to know Christ and find fullness of life through Christ and in the church. Whatever we have should be spent ultimately to that purpose.

Christians must discover and follow God's purpose in getting and spending. We have let materialistic values squeeze us into their mold.

Completely unaware of it, we are in danger of being poisoned by a materialistic outlook. We can be tainted by materialism, that is all about us without being aware until it is too late. The Bible says we are not to covet, not to be greedy, not to live just for wealth alone.

By and large we have followed the world's values regarding wealth. "We assume," says A. R. Fagin, "that everything is all right with God as long as we make an honest living, pay our debts, give our tithes and offerings and spend what's left as we please."

When Americans, with some six or seven percent of the world's population, have one-half of the world's income and one-seventh of its food, plus a lead in almost every category, it's time to look again at our Christian responsibility.

"Is it right," asks Cecil Rhea, "for every family to reach the highest level of abundance it can reach? Is it right to give the highest priority to profit in all our dealings? Should every person make all that they can and buy all that they can? Is it right for us to have all that we want? Does the Bible really teach that the reward we get for being a faithful Christian is increasing material prosperity?" All these questions take on a new light when we remember what Paul said about Jesus: "For your sake He became poor so that by His poverty you might become rich." Here Paul is speaking of our spiritual enrichment. If this is what Jesus did for us, and He is our example in all things, how do we stand with our fellow human beings? Are we willing to do with less so that Christ can do for them what Christ done for us?

Following God's purpose in material possessions certainly involves giving through Christ Body, the church. We may argue about the tithe. The New Testament simply assumes that a redeemed person will start with the tithe and go beyond that. If those that lived under the Old Testament law gave up to 25-percent of their income to God's work, can we who know the eternal love of God in Christ, who live under Grace, do less than the tithe? "Freely we have received, freely we are to give." We give out of love and thanksgiving to the glory of God.

"Our giving and our lifestyle ought to reflect," says Dr. Rhea, "that Christ is Lord." Our lifestyle should reflect that we can tell the difference between necessities and luxuries. A Christian steward's lifestyle and giving will reflect the responsibility one feels for the blessings God has bestowed upon them. And their lifestyle will show that they seek contentment in doing God's will and fulfilling God's purpose for the world.