

## ***Ownership vs. Stewardship***

Luke 12:13-21

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There are two lenses with which we can view the world. One is ownership, an idea supported by our culture. Ownership says that each person has a certain amount of property, and you can do with it what you wish. The culture values extending your ownership to more and more goods and more and more money. The other lens is stewardship, an idea seen in the Bible and especially in the teaching of Jesus. Stewardship says that each person is entrusted with a life, with gifts, and with a certain amount of property. While we are given freedom to do with those what we wish, the truth is that those things are not owned by us. They are entrusted to us for a short time. They still belong to God. We are responsible to God for what we do with them.

So which lens do you see the world through?

Look around this room? Who owns all of this—the walls, the windows, the pews, the organ? You could say that we do; the church as a corporation is the legal owner. But since we're in church you know the right answer: it's God's house, it's Christ's church. It belongs to the Triune God and we are just the short-term managers, the stewards. And we are not just stewards because we want to pass the faith and the church on to the next generation, but because we understand that it belongs to God. We are not owners.

If you looked out from our front porch across the sound, who would you say owns all of that? We might get some debate as to whether pieces of land are owned by individuals and whether the water is owned by the state or the federal government, but since you are standing on the church porch you are still thinking theologically. Of course all of nature belongs to God. This is my Father's world.

Now let's say we go into the Washington Trust Bank and sit down with Barbara MacMullen. You ask Barbara to get all your money out of the vault and stack all the bills in front of you—you just want to see it, like Scrooge McDuck. Once the money is there in front of you, I want to ask you again: who would you say owns all of that?

We are so accustomed to thinking of our money as our own that when we talk about giving it back to God we forget that God owns our money in any case. We are just managers of it on his behalf. If he asks us to give a tenth back to him, how can we say no? If he demanded it all back, he would be within his rights. As Moses told the people of Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land, "Be careful, when you get lots of stuff over there, lest you say in your heart "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth" and you forget that it is the Lord who gave you the power to get that wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:17-18). When we start thinking about bank accounts we tend to shift from the stewardship lens back to the ownership lens.

The idea that human beings are stewards goes back to the very beginning, according to the Bible. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden as stewards, caretakers. They were not the owners of the garden. The owner gave them the freedom to enjoy all the plants in the garden, except one which was reserved for the owner. It was the first human's unwillingness to serve as stewards accountable to the owner that led to disaster.

The Old Testament makes clear who owns the earth. You probably know Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." You might not know Leviticus 25:23 in which the

Israelites are told, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” I’m just a poor wayfaring stranger. I’m just passing through. I’m just a sharecropper, working land that belongs to my Master.

Everybody on Block Island knows the difference between an owner and a caretaker. Of course it may happen from time to time that someone hired to be a caretaker in the winter starts to feel like an owner—using pay per view, drinking up all the liquor in the house, having a party while the boss is away. Jesus has stories about that: servants who engage in risky business because they think the owner will not come back anytime soon. That is what we are like in relation to God, he says.

Everything we have—natural abilities, degrees, good looks, houses, cars, cash—everything comes from God and has been loaned to us for a short time. Even our children—perhaps especially our children—do not belong to us but are on loan for a short time, and we are responsible to God for what we do with them while we have them. When we start acting like owners of things that have been entrusted to us, things get messed up. What would happen if you checked some books out of the Island Free Library and told Judy Mitchell, “Thank you! I’m so glad to own that book now! I might give it back to you someday, or I might give it to a friend, or I might let my dog eat it.” Judy would say, “That’s not how a library works!” You are just a steward of the book for a couple of weeks.

You brought nothing into this world and you will take nothing out. We all know that. But we act as if we own things in perpetuity when they are in fact just on loan. I love the example John Piper uses (in *Desiring God*, p. 161). He says that we are like people visiting an art museum. Suppose when Becca and I go to the MFA to see Degas’s nudes, I decided to take a couple off the wall and carry them around. Becca would ask me, “What do you think you are doing?” I’d say, “I decided to become an art collector. I like the thought of having these painting to hold.” Of course Becca would correct me. “But they’re not really yours, and besides, they won’t let you take them out of here. You’ll have to go out just as you came in.” That’s the way it is. You can’t take it with you.

The Old Testament teaches the general principles that we only have things for a short time and that everything ultimately belongs to God. But to get the lens of stewardship, you really need to go to the New Testament. It’s Jesus who talks about it all the time, and so the language is picked up by some of the letter writers later. Think about Jesus’ parables: stories about stewards who are entrusted with large sums of money (the word “talent” was the name of a coin), faithful stewards and bad stewards, mischievous stewards who write off the debts of others, a fearful steward who buries his money, sharecroppers who kill the landowner rather than give him what they owe him, servants who say ‘we have only done our duty.’ Jesus wants us to see ourselves as servants of God—even as Jesus sees himself as a servant.

We are not owners. We are not here to get things for ourselves. We are here to serve our Master, and whatever we have has been entrusted to us by that Master with the expectation that we will take care of it for him. We will be evaluated. There’s a line I recently noticed in Luke 16:11. Jesus says, “If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?” Why would God give you spiritual blessings, if you have not been faithful to God in the way you managed the material blessings you have been given?

One of the scariest stewardship stories Jesus told is the one we read earlier, about the man we call “the rich fool” (Luke 12:13-21). The thing is, this man doesn’t do anything we would consider foolish. His story is the American dream.

The story begins with Jesus refusing as a rabbi to settle a dispute between two brothers fighting over an estate. “What you need to worry about,” Jesus says to them, “is not how much money you’ll get from the old man but how much of your heart has been consumed by greed.” Then he told this story. A farmer had a bumper crop. Translate that to whatever is your source of income: he had a year when the stock market soared; he got a new job with a big raise; he got the commission on selling a mansion; he had a great summer with lots of tips under the table. This farmer has more than he needs. He has more than he really knows what to do with. His crops won’t even fit in his barn.

What’s wrong with that? Nothing. This guy has been blessed by God. He should be happy. But actually, he’s kind of worried. “What am I going to do with all this stuff? I’m going to need to rent a storage unit, or a vault, or get a bigger house.” Since he’s a farmer, he does something that seems sensible to us—or at least sensible to a certain class of rich people: “I’ll tear down the old house and build a bigger one. I’ll have enough to retire early. I’ll just enjoy my life.” Eat, drink, and be merry. But he forgot the last part of that saying: for tomorrow we die.

God said to him: “You are an idiot! Your life is on loan from me, and this very night I’m asking for it back. When you are dead, who’s going to get all your stuff?”

Here’s what the rich man got wrong: he looked at his life through the ownership lens rather than the stewardship lens. When he had a good year, he assumed that all his income belonged to him. He felt perfectly free to decide what to do with that income. He did not feel the least bit guilty in investing it all in his own future, because he was being responsible—responsible to Number One. Up to the point that God appears in the story, this man sounds like an American success story. He’s Donald Trump, or Herman Cain, or the guy who owns the biggest house on Block Island. We wouldn’t want to begrudge him the rewards of his toil. As Paul Ryan would say, that would be sowing envy and class warfare.

But Jesus does begrudge this man the rewards of his own labor. Why? Because it never crossed his mind that he was responsible to God for what he did with his wealth. When he knew that he had more than he needed, he did not ask himself, “What can I do with this wealth to do the most good?” He didn’t think, “Well, I could give it to Harbor Church, or Mary D, or Helping Hands. I could give it to people in Haiti.” He didn’t even think about blessing his employees. He just thought, “Now that I’ve got enough that I’m set for life, I’m just going to take it easy.” The sad part of this story is that most of us have that same dream.

But God says to him, “Your life does not belong to you. Don’t you get that? Someday you have to give your life back, and I’m going to ask you what you’ve done with it. I’m going to ask you what you’ve done with everything I’ve entrusted to you, with the bumper crop I gave you. Now that your life is over, what was it all about?” Jesus said before telling the story, “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

We all know that. We all know that one day we will be dead and all this stuff won’t amount to a hill of beans or a pile of dirt. We will face God and we will be reminded that we were never owners after all. That was an illusion we used to prop up our egos. We were managers, trustees expected to give account someday for everything under our control. It’s so hard in our culture to live that way—a culture that denies death, that thinks financial security is the goal of living, that says that passing wealth to your children is noble. Thank God that some of the richest people in America are reminding the rest of us that life is not about money. Warren Buffett and Bill Gates have signed up many billionaires to give away have their wealth to those in need. Maybe they understand, in a way we cannot, that no matter how much money you get,

money cannot satisfy. Only blessing others can satisfy. And, we would add, only serving God with everything you have.

Some of us do get it and make decisions by looking at life through the stewardship lens. Keith Lewis understood years ago that the land that he inherited was a trust. He was responsible to God, to his father, and to future generations for what happened to that land so he essentially gave away millions of dollars in land so that it might be preserved. Dave Roosa was offered millions of dollars by his father when he was a young man, and Dave said, “No, I don’t want it for myself, I’d rather put it all in a charitable foundation and give it away.” That only happened for one reason: the teachings of Jesus. Some people thought he was crazy, and some think that today, but he is trying to obey Jesus as a steward. More recently Ellen Jacke looked from her porch at the land between her house and the harbor and asked herself, “What would God want me to do with that land?” So she gave it to be used to build affordable housing for two island families, and has challenged other landowners to do the same.

Or maybe we shouldn’t say landowner, but land-stewards. It all belongs to God: our lots, our homes, our funds, our lives. We have a choice, Jesus says. We can be rich in things, or we can be rich toward God. We can succumb to the illusion that we are owners, or we can face the reality that we are stewards.