

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard. It is clearly a stewardship parable. It is about a landowner who decided to lease his property and business. The owner of the vineyard has cared for his land with respect and sensitivity and he assumes that his tenants will do the same. So at harvest time, the landlord sends his people back to check on how things were going. The story becomes tragic at this point . . . they were beaten, stoned and killed. And then, tragedy of tragedy, the tenants were so brazen as to kill the landlord’s son!

The backdrop of this parable is not only about the right use of resources and the management of property, it is also about respect, ownership, authenticity and greed. It is about faithful living. In this parable, Jesus points out our human tendency to behave less like guests in God’s creation and more like management. The mistake made by the tenants was to confuse what belonged to someone else with what belonged to them! The tenant farmers were employees, not independent contractors. They are part of a lease agreement. They may behave as if they own the farm, but the truth is that they are accountable to the owner!

In the same way, in Paul’s letter to the Philippians 3, he talks about faithful living from this point of view . . . he says that “*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection!*” I want to know and live this experience of faith! This is not an end result. This is not something I can attain or make it on my own! This is about what the owner of my life as done to me . . . the reality that Christ Jesus has made me his own! And so faithful living means giving myself and all that I am and all that I have . . . 100% . . . in joy and thanksgiving to God!

The 4<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Mark Allan Powell’s book, *Giving to God* is entitled, “Faithful Living.” It connects so beautifully with this parable of Jesus and the words of Paul. Powell uses the phrase 100% stewardship? What does that mean to you? Does that mean giving everything I have to God? How is it that possible? Mark Allan Powell says it is possible, but you need to think in the acronym . . . . **A R M S**.

First of all . . . giving everything to God means SUBMITTING . . .

- Submitting our whole life to the rule of God
- Submitting our whole life to the lordship of Christ
- Submitting our whole life to the direction of the Holy Spirit

But who wants to submit? To submit means that someone or something else is in control of my life! I want to be in control of my life! But isn’t that where we get into trouble. Jesus had a totally different idea: “*For whoever would save his life, will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.*” (Luke 9:24)

The truth is that when we submit our whole life to the “*rule of God*,” we not only find new blessings in that relationship, but we actually discover our true selves and ultimately speaking we are saved from the slavery to ourselves, our wants and desires, our prejudices and biases, our misconstrued views of the world!

As a footnote, remember that the phrase “*rule of God*” is really what the Bible talks about when it talks about “*the kingdom of God*.” The “*rule of God*” over our lives is probably a more accurate translation.

Jesus reminds us that God’s kingdom . . . God’s rule . . . is not relegated to a certain place or time or focus. God’s kingdom is everywhere! When Jesus says in Mark 1:14, “*The kingdom of God has come near*.” He’s not talking about geography. He’s talking about the rule of God coming into people’s lives. **And 100% stewardship means living totally under this “rule of God!”** This also means that our finances are also placed under this rule of God as well!

One of the problems in considering 100% stewardship is that some people equate **Giving to God as the same thing as Giving to the Church**. In reality, there are many ways of giving our money to God, and giving to the church is only one of those ways. But 100% stewardship will never be understood . . . as long as those 2 ideas are equated. The truth is, that no one will ever give all of their money to the church, nor should we!

Over the years congregational leaders and pastors, including those of us here at St. John’s, have talked about tithing, and percentage giving. And the Bible has much to say about giving in terms of the support of ministry and the mission of the church.

But giving to the church is only one part of a much larger picture. When we think about financial stewardship, in terms of GIVING TO GOD, God doesn’t want 10%, not just a percentage. God wants it all. And so when we think about 100% stewardship, we are thinking in a much bigger picture . . . we are also thinking about all of our money and possessions. We are thinking about acquiring, managing and using our money in ways that will be pleasing to God.

So faithful living includes four basic concepts . . . **ARMS**

1. **Acquiring** our money in God-pleasing ways
2. **Regarding** our money in God-pleasing ways
3. **Managing** our money in God-pleasing ways.
4. **Spending** our money in God-pleasing ways.

**ACQUIRING** – How is it that we acquire our money?

The workplace today is filled with temptations and challenges. In many sales and business environments, it is not unusual to take advantage of a customer’s naivete, or to overemphasize a certain products potential, to put down other competitors or to cover up matters that are illegal.

We also live and work in a culture that shows it is OK to do certain things . . . it's part of doing business! Even though the decision may negatively impact an individual, there's nothing wrong with people wanting to make money. That's part of capitalism.

But living out our Christian faith in a non-Christian world is very complicated. We live in a business-dominated world. We live in a world that lives and dies with the economy. And that easily spills over into life in the church and being a Christian.

- Listen to the words from the Book of Proverbs . . . Chapters 15, 16, 28
- *Better is a little with fear of the Lord, than great treasure and trouble.*
  - *Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatten ox and hatred . . .*
  - *Better is a little with righteousness, than large income with injustice . . .*
  - *Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked and rich.*

Bringing an ethical perspective to our work, treating customers with respect, attempting to work with people as if they were members of our own family, working in occupations that benefit people, society and the world in which we live, all impact the way in which we acquire our money.

The DISCONNECT comes when people begin to disconnect their faith with the work. And the recent extreme examples are those like Kenneth Lay from Enron, who was a Sunday School teacher in his church, but in his work, he used unethical practices which impacted thousands of employees who lost their pensions and many investors who lost their investments.

#### **REGARDING** – How should we regard our money?

There is nothing wrong with wealth and affluence. What is dangerous with having too much wealth is what Powell says . . . that “*material abundance leads to spiritual amnesia.*” We have a tendency to forget where it all came from!

Remember the words of Moses . . . in Deuteronomy 18 . . . “*when you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied . . . Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth!’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.*”

When it comes to wealth, we must always have an attitude of gratitude. Whenever we begin thinking that we are entitled to what we have, that we somehow deserve our blessings . . . these thoughts are an automatic prescription for joyless living. Gratitude, on the other hand, is the true test of happiness.

The other perspective is one of trust. Jesus tells us not to be anxious, not even with the basic needs of life. St. Paul says “*Do not worry about anything, but with joy and thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*” (Philippians 4:6).

Think about the stress of this past week . . . I'm not talking about the Cubs or the Sox! I'm talking about the largest one-day stock market drop in decades, the economic crisis we are dealing with in terms of credit, borrowing, foreclosures, banks and investment corporations going "belly up." The financial world is stressful. The world of business is stressful. But both Jesus and Paul knew that the antidote for stress is TRUST. And sincere TRUST in God also brings contentment . . . that wonderful sense of sufficiency and satisfaction. It is also our best defense against greed, that insatiable desire always to have more.

For Paul the secret of being content is in an absolute assurance that God provides him not with everything he wants, but with everything he needs to be the person God wants him to be and to have the life that God wants him to have. And that is enough. It matters nothing if someone has more . . . because he trusts that God has provided him with whatever is sufficient for him to have the best possible life that he can have in this world.

**MANAGING** – How do we manage what we have?

Do you remember the parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:15-21, who had so many things, that his barns wouldn't hold it all, so he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. His reasoning was **NOT, I need less stuff**. His reasoning was , **I need bigger barns**.

How much is enough? Everything is relative. There is always someone who has more than you and always someone who has less . . . where is your balance? As in the parable of the talents, faithful stewardship involves wise management of our finances, whatever those happen to be. But doing nothing at all is not the best course of action!

I had a conversation with one of our members a few years ago about stewardship and giving to the church. His comment was that many people his age would like to give more, but their obligations, their debt and some of the poor choices made, in going into debt had a negative impact on their giving. Obviously the housing crisis and the high-interest credit card debt in our society today is evidence that mismanagement of our personal finances has reached epidemic proportions! Faithful stewardship means altering our spending habits, developing a budget and learning to invest and save our money wisely.

**SPENDING** – How do we spend what we have?

If we begin thinking about how we spend our money in ways we believe are pleasing to God, we will never miss out on the pleasures of life.

If anything, we will appreciate them more, because we know that God applauds our enjoyment of this world and much that it provides. How often to we, as parents, when our kids ask for some expensive thing at the store, "*We can't afford that!*"

The implicit message is that the parents would buy the costly item if they had the money (which may or may not be true!) But the kids are left feeling sad and deprived and with the idea that if the family had more money, they would all be happier!

Why not say, as John Westerhoff suggests in his book, *Grateful and Generous Hearts*, “*We don’t think that getting this would be a good use of our money*” . . . or . . . “*We don’t believe that God would want us to use our money in this way?*” You might get an argument from your kids on this one, but that discussion might be a very fruitful one to have in the family context!

Using our money as faithful stewards of God . . . 100% stewardship involves a lot more than just giving to the church to charities and other good causes. God encourages us to give, but God also is very interested in what we do with the rest of our money. As faithful stewards, we want to use all of our money in ways that are pleasing to God!

100% Stewardship is about faithful living – our whole life, not just part of it – recognizing that all we are and all we have belongs to God and is to be given to God as an act of worship, as an expression of faith, and as a spiritual discipline