

Sermon- Stewardship in the household of God

Scripture: Luke 12:35-48

Sunday, February 23, 2020

Last Sunday we looked at Article 18 Titled Christian spirituality. I had mentioned that this article was a description of what a Jesus-disciple relationship looked like. To do that I had mentioned two German words, Gelassenheit and Frömmigkeit. Gelassenheit is an “serenity” that comes from being “yielded” to Christ. Frömmigkeit is the piety or spiritual disciplines that a disciple practices to know the will of God and to do it. The more you execute the will of God in your life, the more yielded you are to Jesus and the more God is glorified in your life. Today we are going to move to another Article, Article 21 that is titled Christian stewardship. Now in the New Testament the focus on stewardship is “stewardship of the Gospel”. Yes the church is entrusted with the stewardship of the Gospel but it is only going to be able to fulfill its external mission if it gets its internal workings right. And that is where much of the trouble lies. So today, I am going to focus on what Article 21 describes as stewardship but I will only focus on the internal workings of the household of God. Now when I put this series together I had not realized that we will be talking about stewardship on the same day as the Annual Meeting of the church. God works in awesome ways. Doesn't he!

Now before we get ahead I want to address what the Bible means when it uses the word “stewardship”. Well the idea is this. Everything that we have belongs to God. That includes our life, our abilities, our resources, our salvation and our responsibility to share the Gospel and make disciples. It is all God's. Now when we look around us, we do not see Jesus standing and watching over our shoulders. What he has done instead is that he has made us his servants, put us in charge and gone to heaven. Of course he is

aware of what we are doing, but we are not as aware of His presence. So we tend to goof off in our responsibilities. But Jesus promises that he is coming back physically. The timetable of that will be a surprise. But when he comes back, He will see how we have been handling the things that he has put us in charge of. If he finds that we are doing well, we will get a reward. But if his servants have not been doing their job, then he says those servants will be banished like the unfaithful. Ouch! That is the worst case scenario. So obviously, we should be very focused on what our job expectations are because the consequences are as big as it gets. And our job expectations are stewardship in the household of God. So that is what we are going to look at today.

Now Article 21 sets up with this statement, *“As servants of God, our primary vocation is to be stewards in God's household.”* It goes on to say, *“God, who in Christ has given us new life, has also given us spiritual gifts to use for the church's nurture and mission”*. So get this. The head of our household has given us gifts so that we can nurture the church and its mission in the world. Now we have to remember -how successful we will be in our “mission” outside the church is related to how we take care of our conduct within the “mission HQ” which is the church. This is true on one level for the larger universal church, but it is also true on a different scale for our local church.

Now in talking about how the church conducts itself, the rest of article 21 talks about stewardship of our material resources and stewardship of our resource of time. Let's start with the stewardship of our material resources. The first thing to note is that if we are to understand the system of tithe in the Old Testament, we have to understand the context and intent of the tithes so that we can fulfill their purposes in our context.

There were three different tithes laid out in the Old Testament. The first is the Levitical of sacred Tithe. This is found in Num 18:21 and 24.

21 “To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting,

So the purpose of this Tithe was to support those who serve God as a profession. This was how the Levitical tribe was supported and they all had some roles in the temple. This is the tithe that continues to this day in the church and helps support the church workers, the pastors, missionaries and support staff who serve God and execute the mission of the church as a profession. Apostle Paul details this in 1 Cor 9. You can read it yourself. But the fairness of God in this is really remarkable. Think about how God instituted this in the Old Testament. If 11 tribes gave 10% of their income to one tribe, assuming the size of the tribes all averaged out then the Levites would have a similar income to the rest of the tribes who were given different pieces of land on which to farm, right? So the first tithe is the tithe that supports God's paid staff. This is called the sacred tithe.

There is a second tithe mentioned in Deut 14:22-27 that does not have a special name in the Bible but it has been given a name in later years, the Festival tithe. ***“You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field year by year. And before the Lord your God, in the place which he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstlings of your herd and flock; that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to bring the tithe, when the Lord your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the Lord your God chooses, to set his name there, then you shall turn it into money, and bind up the money in your hand, and go to the place which the Lord your God chooses, and spend the money for whatever you desire, oxen, or sheep, or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves; and you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household. And you shall not forsake the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you.”*** You see what God is saying here? This is another 10% of their income that they used when they made their pilgrimages to Jerusalem. And this amount was used for their own enjoyment. Yes, nowhere in the

Bible does God say not to enjoy the fruits of your labor! In today's terms you could call it a budget for retreats or conferences where you go to get spiritual nourishment but these holidays are also meant to serve as vacations where you can have a good time and spend the money on whatever your heart desires. Of course this should be within the will of God right 😊 Now even here Deuteronomy reminds us to not forget the Levite.

Now in the Old Testament there was a third tithe that was collected once in three years. Deut 14:28-29 reads like this ²⁸ ***“At the end of every third year, bring the entire tithe of that year's harvest and store it in the nearest town. ²⁹ Give it to the Levites, who will receive no allotment of land among you, as well as to the foreigners living among you, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, so they can eat and be satisfied. Then the Lord your God will bless you in all your work.*** This was the social security system of the time. God had made provisions for the poor. If you average it out you would say it was about 3% of your annual income going to charity.

So if you look at this entire system of tithing, it was a system to take care of all the people of God's household, including God's designated religious workers, the poor, the widow and orphan as well as your own trips with a religious purpose like the National or Regional conferences. And God is saying, you can even have fun when you are going for these conferences 😊 I guess God wanted his people to have a smile on their face when they went someplace, or else others who they encountered would look at God's people as “gloom and doom” kind of people and run away. That would not be so good now would it? 😊 But think about this. When God gives you financial resources, good stewardship of it includes keeping God first, then keeping a portion for your trips and finally even keeping a portion for charity aimed specifically on those who are poor, weak and helpless.

There is a second matter of stewardship that is also terribly important. This is your stewardship of time. Article 21 spends quite a lot of time on it. It begins by saying, “We believe that time also belongs to God and that we are to use with care the time of which we are stewards”. It continues, “Yet, from earliest days, the people of God have been called to observe special periods of rest and worship. In the Old Testament, the seventh day was holy because it was the day God rested from the work of creation.⁵ The Sabbath was also holy because of God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery.⁶ Through Jesus, all time is holy, set apart for God and intended to be used for salvation, healing, and justice.⁷ In the present time, the church celebrates a day of holy rest, commonly the first day of the week, and is called to live according to Sabbath justice at all times” End of quote.

When you trace the concept of Sabbath in the Bible what you find is that you have two different kinds of economies in this world. You have God’s economy and you have the economy of the fallen world. In God’s economy that is outlined in Genesis 1 and 2, you find that God himself works on the first 6 days and on the 7th day he finishes the work of creation and rests. God wanted his people to follow that pattern. Adam and Eve enjoyed both work and Sabbath rest inside the Garden of Eden. When they disobeyed God, and were removed from the Garden of Eden, the ground was cursed so that they had to toil endlessly on it and they lost their Sabbath rest. But later when God rescued the people of Israel from slavery and gave them the laws, he reinstated the day of Sabbath rest to give them a glimpse of the rest that he had in store for his people. Besides the weekly Sabbath, he also gave his people 7 festivals to celebrate in a year at which they could rest, and he gave them a Sabbatical year where every 7th year the people took a break from work and gave both their animals and the land itself a chance to rest. Then there was the 7 cycles of Sabbatical years which was after 49th to the 50th year where debts were forgiven, slaves were freed, land reverted back to their original owners if they had been sold because of financial difficulties. This was called the Jubilee year. It was also a

year of rest because it was also a Sabbatical year and you only ate what naturally grew in the fields. You did not plant anything. In our urban, technology driven 24X7 world such breaks are hard to imagine. But this is the rhythm that God had instituted. In the New Testament Jesus begins his ministry on the Sabbath by reading from the Isaiah scrolls the following words, Luke 4:18 and 19, ***“The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, [19to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.](#)”***

Jesus also did his healing miracles on the Sabbath and in Matt 12:8 he even declares that he, the Son of Man is the “Lord of the Sabbath”. Not only that, just as God finished the work of creation on the 6th day and rested on the 7th day in the Old Testament, so also Jesus finished the work of atonement on the 6th day of the week and on the 7th day, the day of the Sabbath, he rested in the tomb! Jesus was never too busy to take His Sabbath rest. And Jesus came to give us an eternal Sabbath rest. Does that mean we never have to work again? No it means we never have to obey all the Old Testament laws to gain favor with God. Jesus Christ fulfilled all those laws, so you and I don’t have to and then he paid the penalty for our sins. So what does that mean for those of us in the household of God. It means two things, since we have permanent Sabbath rest, we never have to do the works of the law to gain favor with God. It also means when we work for a living, we should cease even that activity to get Sabbath times to both rest and worship God.

And as we follow this rhythm of work, rest and worship, we have to remember God’s heart for the poor in his household and invite them too into our enjoyment because that is God’s desire both in the tithe for the poor as well as his Jubilee year declarations.

So to be part of the household of God is to have a very different attitude to work. We are stewards taking care of Jesus’ business till he comes back. Some people work

directly in God's household and others work outside. Whatever work we do, we handle our finances according to God's wishes. We also punctuate our work with a Sabbath day to rest and honor God. And finally we live in the permanent Sabbath rest of Jesus. That means we don't work thinking that we deserve points with God. We work to fulfill our stewardship role inside and outside the church. And finally we live out the justice that Jesus proclaimed as He declared it to be the year of the Lord's favor. Remember, we are called not just to be stewards of our material resources but stewards of the time we have been given as well. And good stewards, will be well rewarded at our masters return. May each of us have the great privilege of hearing the words, "Well done, my good and faithful servants!" Let us pray.