



DYNAMIC

Steward

Exploring Partnership with God

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Until the gospel grips our souls, our stewardship is stingy.

Bought with a price

What does the gospel have to do with stewardship? Stewardship is the recognition that we are not our own, that we are bought with a price. In the story of Abraham we have the full revelation of the gospel that includes stewardship.

The gospel is the good news of God recovering the human race. Genesis 3:15 unveils the *seed* of the gospel. The stories move fairly rapidly to the point where God unfolds the story of Abraham. Here God recovers the human family through a covenant with Abraham, his family, and descendants.

The choosing of Abraham and Sarah was sealed with the covenant. At that point the gospel and stewardship were linked together. The dramatic point came when God asked Abraham to give Him Isaac. Isaac was a gift from God, a fulfillment of a promise. Yet God said to Abraham *Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, . . . Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering (Gen 22:2)*. Everything Abraham had was a gift from God. And of all the gifts, God was now asking for the one gift that would be the fulfillment of the promise, the one gift that promised his future. Abraham's very life was wrapped up in Isaac.

John 3:16 contains the same words God said to Abraham: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son—the Son He loved. He did not withhold His Son in recovering the lost family. Abraham put on the altar his most cherished possession—his life in his son. God put on the altar His most cherished possession—His life in His Son.*

Until the gospel grips our souls, our stewardship is stingy. Until we, like Abraham, recognize the total lordship of Jesus, we will have difficulty placing on the altar our most cherished possession, ourselves. The gospel is not a matter of things; it is a matter of love. When we realize the fullness of the gospel, then stewardship becomes a matter of love. Abraham did not respond out of fear of what God could do. Neither did he respond out of duty. He responded out of love to the One who had provided the gift. He knew that his descendants and he were secure in the God who *supplies all our needs*.

It is not a matter of giving a tenth or a seventh portion. When we accept that everything we are and have is a gift provided, there will no longer be a debate about stewardship, ownership, or lordship. Our recovery (gospel) will be evidenced in our willingness to place our gift of life on the altar just as He did for us.

Don Driver, Pastor, Beltsville Seventh-day Adventist Church, Beltsville, Maryland

Applications



Scriptural Emphasis

Philippians 2:11

Introduction

What connotations does the word *lord* bring to you?

How does the dictionary define *lord*?

Lord of my life

- A. courtesy and respect
- B. a position of great authority
- C. distinction, honor, and hierarchy
- D. an owner

Biblical use of *lord*

Give an overview of the term *lord* as used in the Bible.

The term *lord* in the sacred scriptures is a title of respect and position, applied generally to God. It is used more than 450 times.

1. In the Old Testament

In Hebrew **Adon** means *lord* or *owner*. It is used generally in the form of **Adonai** = *Lord*. This term also is translated with **YHWH**, the divine name which appears in the abbreviated form as *Yay*.

When **Adon** and **Adonai** appear together they are normally translated as *Lord God* or *Lord and God* (Gen 15:2).

2. In the New Testament

In Greek **Kuriou** means one who owns property—a *manager* or *an owner*. This word is used to talk about God and Christ (Jn 20:28; Heb 10:36; Rom 6:23, 8:39; 1 Cor 15:31).

Christ was lord before, Christ is lord now, and Christ will continue being Lord forever.

Lord for eternity

Read Colossians 1:17 and John 1:1-14 to find supporting documentation for Christ being eternal.

1. When we penetrate eternity past, He already was before all things. He existed before the creation of all things.
2. The word **beginning** in John 1: 1,2 was actually prior to or before the word **beginning** in Genesis 1:1. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God in the beginning.* Christ in other words, was there before the beginning.
3. Christ is eternal. He Himself said, *Before Abraham was, I am* (Jn 8:58). Christ is the beginning *Before the mountains were born or the earth was formed in the world. From ages unto ages you are God* (Ps. 90:2).

Personal application

Using Philippians 2:1-18, discuss the following questions.

What is it about Christ that can make my joy complete?

What does my attitude have to do with accepting Christ as lord?

Why is it important to be known as *children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation* (verse 15)?

Stewardship videos

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The South Pacific Division has produced stewardship videos for all ages. Using creative, timely scenarios, these videos teach the biblical foundations of stewardship.

For ages 5-10 . . .

Work It Out is the first of a series of puppet-based tools to teach stewardship concepts to young children. *Work It Out* focuses on the management of our time and resources. The next in the series (available end of 1998) focuses on stewardship of our bodies and approach the subject of healthy eating and the danger of junk food. Each video comes with a teacher's guide and the lyrics/music for the theme song.

For ages 11 and up . . .

The Auditor is about Andrew, a young Australian college student who is skeptical about how his church spends tithes and offerings. He has no idea where all the money really goes. Then one night he has a surprise visitor—a heavenly visitor with impressive computer skills. Andrew, with the help of his hi-tech visitor, does some serious investigating and comes to a few interesting conclusions.

For ages 20 and up . . .

Where Your Heart Is introduces Bob and Anthony, two young executives. Their life speaks success—beautiful home, clothes, jet skies, pretty wives, lots of money. They sit down for another evening of television. Bob dozes off and . . . life becomes a nightmare. This modern parable brings home the fact that *your treasure is where your heart is*.

The Gospel . . .

See what vitality the Gospel has! Plunge her under the wave, and she rises the purer from her washing; thrust her in the fire, and she comes out the more bright for her burning; cut her in sunder; and each piece shall make another church; behead her, and, like the hydra of old, she shall have a hundred heads for every one you cut away. She cannot die, she must live; for she has the power of God within her.—*Charles Spurgeon*

The Gospel is the greatest story every told, about the greatest offer ever made, by the greatest person who ever lived.—*DJ Kennedy*

A purely social gospel is like a body without a soul—it is a corpse. A purely personal gospel is like a soul without a body—it is a ghost. But put them both together and you have a man.—*E Stanley Jones*

Because it was the message of God to humanity, the gospel could only reveal itself in the simplest of garments.—*Adolf Deissmann*

Euangelion (which we call gospel) is a Greek word, and signifies good, merry, glad, and joyful tidings, that makes a man's heart glad, and makes him sing, dance, and leap for joy.—*William Tyndale*

Humble and self-forgetting we must be always, but diffident and apologetic about the gospel, never.—*James S Stewart*

The gospel is not made to dominate the world. It's the grain of sand that upsets the world's machinery. One can't inhale its fragrance and be content to leave everything the way it is.—*Jean Sullivan*

The gospel is not so much a demand as it is an offer, an offer of new life to man by the grace of God.—*E Stanley Jones*

There is nothing attractive about the gospel to the natural man; the only man who finds the gospel attractive is the man who is convicted of sin.—*Oswald Chambers*

We can learn nothing of the gospel except by feeling its truths. There are some sciences that may be learned by the head, but the science of Christ crucified can only be learned by the heart.—*Charles Spurgeon*

We say that Jesus preached the gospel, but he did more. He came that there might be a gospel to preach.—*Oswald Chambers*



Concepts



An experience of joy

Because of our sinful nature and the influence of sin around us, each day we must choose to reaffirm our relationship to God. Each day we must accept His gift of grace. Each day we must surrender to His indwelling lordship. Each day we must abandon ourselves to Him to be controlled and empowered through the living presence of Christ.

I hate writing out a tithe check. But I will tithe even if it kills me, the woman insisted. What drove her to this attitude? Why did she continue to give even though she really did not want to? How does this fit with what Ellen White says: *The Lord will not accept an offering that is made unwillingly, grudgingly.* (*Testimonies*, vol 5, p 285).

People have different reasons why they put money in an envelope and call it tithe or offering. Similarly the church uses different ways to motivate people to give. Most often we use traditional, human motivations. For example we use recognition and praise when we fund-raise. Sometimes we use guilt. At other times, we emphasize what giving will do for the donor. All these methods focus on the donors and their needs or desires. All these methods strengthen the power of selfishness.

The very words tithe and offering describe a worship relationship—an act of adoration based on the salvation relationship. True worship begins with and is based on a relationship with Jesus, intimately knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord. This is why the gospel is the foundation for stewardship. Without the experience of the gospel, stewardship becomes simply a form of spiritual slavery—just another way of perpetuating a performance-based religion and life.

Even while talking about the gospel, we often misunderstand the term or use it in a limited way. Jesus spoke of the *gospel of the kingdom*. What is this *good news*? Is the gospel simply the act of forgiveness? Or is there a more dynamic meaning of salvation and the gospel? Can this deeper insight really help us broaden our understanding of stewardship? I find it helpful to explore the meaning of salvation through the *act* of salvation, the *condition* of salvation, the *content* of salvation, and the *consequence* of salvation.

The *act* of salvation took place on Calvary. God gave Jesus His Son to die. This act of grace is the central point of biblical salvation and the starting point for stewardship. Without this act, there is no salvation—no Christianity. We cannot be biblical stewards if we do not understand and personally accept this act of salvation. Through this act, God provides the gift of salvation and reestablishes the lordship relationship.

The *condition* of salvation focuses on what we have to do to receive and experience salvation. This becomes an area of debate when we confuse the role of obedience in the faith experience. Most of us agree that salvation is a gift that can neither be bought nor repaid; we can only accept it. Yet acceptance is not merely a mental assent; acceptance means surrendering to Jesus. It means dying to self. Salvation is not merely a bookkeeping transaction in heaven's records. It begins with an act on Calvary which initiates a process that solves the sin problem. However, it is crucial that we realize that the only *condition* of salvation is that we accept the gift. This means the only condition for being lost is rejecting the gift. We must be very careful to avoid making our performance in any way a basis for our salvation. Although obedience cannot be fully separated from saving faith, we must clearly delineate that which provides us salvation.

A dynamic understanding of the gospel cannot end with the *condition* alone. Salvation is not only being declared just; it is also accepting Christ's solution for the sin problem in our lives. When we accept Jesus Christ as Savior, we receive Him and all that He brings.

The *content* of salvation is what we receive when we accept Jesus as Savior. He promises to come to us through the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16-20) that we may be transformed with *power through the Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith* (Eph 3:15-16). He gives us His righteousness. He forgives us and He makes us a *new creation* (2 Cor 5:17). When we receive Christ, He brings the power of God into the human heart and we live from the very throne of God (Eph 2:6). All of this is included in Christ when we accept Him. The very life we live is lived in Him (Gal 2:20).

The *consequence* of salvation produces a life of discipleship and obedience. One cannot have Christ dwelling within and remain the same. God promises to give us a new heart and a new spirit (Eze 36:26-27). He promises to replace our heart of stone with a heart of flesh and to put His spirit in our

hearts. He further states that He will cause us to walk in His principles. Paul presents the same concept when he states that it is God who will work in us to both will and do (Phil 2:13). The natural result of experiencing Jesus as Savior also leads us to share with others what we have experienced.

So how do we experience this dynamic salvation? There is no way to dissect the mystery of grace. The work of the Holy Spirit in a sinner's heart can be experienced but never described in full detail or understanding. Every part of this dynamic experience of salvation is by faith and choice of the will. We choose to believe that what God says is true, and we choose to act—allowing God to work through us.

This brings us back full circle to stewardship as the integration of the saving relationship with Christ into every area of life. For many years, I understood lordship as obeying God. Today, I understand lordship as accepting Him at His word. And choosing to accept Him is the only way to work out His will in my life.

Because of our sinful nature and the influence of sin around us, each day we must choose to reaffirm our relationship with God. Each day we must accept His gift of grace. Each day we must surrender to His indwelling lordship. Each day we must abandon ourselves to Him to be controlled and empowered through the living presence of Christ. Only then will obedience be a joyful experience of seeing His power at work in the midst of our struggles.

This is how tithing becomes an experience of joy—reflecting on our relationship with God. When we bring this intimate partnership into the material area of life, we realize that everything we are and have belongs to Him. Joyfully we worship Him with tithe and offering, reminding our own hearts of who He is. Only the dynamic experience of salvation can move tithing, or any other part of life-style stewardship out of the drudgery and slavery of legalism and into the joyful life of grace.

This is why stewardship must begin with a clear understanding and presentation of the gospel—the good news of salvation. Jesus Christ is Lord, Lord of every area of our lives. Thus the power of the Creator and Redeemer works in the life of the weakest believer. Rejoice! He is Lord.

Benjamin Maxson, Director, General Conference Stewardship Department

For many years, I understood lordship as obeying God. Today, I understand lordship as accepting Him at His word. And choosing to accept Him is the only way to work out His will in my life.



Stewardship Window

Exciting things are happening around the world. Every division has heard the broader biblical approach to stewardship during the last three years. Things are starting to change, and the result is showing in many ways.

Euro-Asia Division had a three-day stewardship seminar for administrators from every organization in the division. The response was exciting. Plans are under way for similar meetings this year in ***African-Indian Ocean Division*** and next year in ***Euro-Africa*** and ***Southern-Asia Divisions***.

The results of a biblical approach to stewardship can be clearly seen in the ***Inter-American Division***. After a three-year intensive strategy, there has been in a dramatic change in response to tithes and offerings. This strategy has included four key factors:

- strong administrative support
- thorough training of pastors
- broad biblical approach to stewardship
- careful emphasis and training in systematic giving

The result of the spiritual growth is demonstrated in what has happened financially. After adjustments for currency devaluations, the ***Inter-American Division*** experienced a 14.7% tithe increase for the year 1997. But the real results are seen in some specifics:

Venezuela-Antilles	42.4 %
Southern Mexico	33.1 %
Northern Mexico	29.7 %
Haiti	33.4 %

The ***Inter-American Division*** also experienced a significant, proportionate increase in giving to World Missions and to local budgets.

Let the word go out. Biblical stewardship works in many different ways. It pays off in the transformed lives of leaders and members, and it also pays off with increased financial faithfulness. Increased giving is the natural result of a growing faith walk.

Scripture reading:
Ephesians 4:1-6
Acts 15:35-41

Introduction

Could Paul preach about unity in Ephesians and yet refuse to take Mark along with him in Acts? Doesn't it seem like he's preaching one thing and doing another? Do these texts contradict each other? The answer is an emphatic *No*. The early church was doubly blessed by Paul and Mark's separation—instead of one missionary team, they had two.

God uses diversity and differences that may arise among us for His own profit. It is He who created diversity in His creation. How many different kinds of flowers do you know? Did you know there are over one thousand different varieties of roses alone!

Diversity in creation

Consider the creation of man. God could have created a prototype with a standard, one-size-fits-all mind and brain, and duplicated it ad infinitum. Instead He created humankind to be free, with the capacity to think and to choose. Children can be raised exactly alike and yet one never knows how each will turn out. Does this mean if a child turns out bad, the parent no longer loves that child? Certainly not! Some of us are like the prodigal son—we have had the same privileges as the rest of humanity, but we have turned out different. Yet God loves us just the same. We should have the same attitude towards those who have gone astray.

Diversity in gifts

Have you discovered your spiritual gifts? Does the church use all the gifts which are present in its midst today? Statistics reveal that 10% of the active members involved in diverse evangelistic activities are the source of 90% of the baptisms. Do you realize that we could have 10 times as many baptisms if we used all the potential of the spiritual gifts in our church today? Would you go to a dentist to have your car repaired? Or to a bricklayer to have your hair cut? Or to the bakery to have your house remodeled? Each has mastered a trade. The members of our church are to be looked at in a similar manner. We cannot expect all to have the same gifts and qualifications.

Those who have received gifts know what to do; it is not because they learned how to use them but because the Holy Spirit guided them. Very often we plan and start evangelistic efforts and all church members are expected to participate actively. However we all have a different heredity, education, and experience. How can we expect every church member to think and react the same way when we talk about evangelism? We are not coherent with our preaching.

God wanted diversity. Like the human body and its different parts, each has its unique place, function, and role to play. The question is how to find it.

Diversity in ministry

A pastor said to his congregation: *Too many of us waste too much time distinguishing a spiritual gift from a talent. Both come from God and as such everyone should use them for His glory. The Bible says that each of us has at least one gift or talent.* An elderly woman later approached him saying *I have been a member here for more than 40 years and I've always wanted to do something to share my faith. But, I've never discovered my spiritual gift and I have no education. I feel useless.* The pastor reassured her that there must be something she enjoyed doing that she could use for outreach. She left pondering on what the pastor had told her. She prayed about it all weekend. Suddenly she realized that baking was the only thing she liked doing and that she did well. Certainly that was not a spiritual gift! But the pastor had said that talents come from God and should be used for his glory. A young couple had moved in next door just a few days earlier. She decided to bake a loaf of bread for them as a welcome gift. With special attention and prayer she baked the loaf. She timidly knocked at her neighbor's door. When the door opened, she thrust the loaf into the young woman's hands saying *This is just to*



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welcome you, I am your neighbor and quickly ran back to the safety of her home.

Since baking was the only thing she could do well, she baked another loaf of bread the next day with the same prayerful process. And again she delivered it with only a few words. The young lady was surprised at the second gift from the same woman. The third day it was the same and the fourth as well. It was the only thing the old woman could do! And the young couple began to appreciate the daily gift of such good bread. They soon began expecting the bread every day. Then came Saturday. They waited for the bread but it didn't come. They almost felt cheated. How could the woman have forgotten to bring the bread?

Eventually she was back on Sunday with a loaf of bread. The neighbors were eager to know if she had been ill. *I was OK.*, the woman replied. *But I am an Adventist, and I do not work on Saturday.*

The neighbors asked, *Adventist? Is that an illness?*

It is a religion. We go to church on Saturday, the woman hurriedly responded.

Their curiosity had been aroused now. They said, *We have never heard of such a religion. Can you tell us more?*

I am not too good at explaining things. But I could ask my pastor to visit you, the woman shyly responded.

Certainly, they said enthusiastically. *But since we are Catholics, we will invite our priest to be there too.*

A date was set for the young couple, the Catholic priest and the Seventh-day Adventist pastor to meet. The pastor explained the biblical reasons why he believed in and observed the seventh day. The young couple turned to the priest, expecting him to rebuke the pastor. But the priest realized the pastor based his teachings on the Bible, and that it was the Pope who had changed the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday.

The studies continued. The couple eventually joined the church and so did the priest. Three people joined the church because of an old woman who could do nothing but bake good bread.

A witness of His love

Look at 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and Romans 12. There are 27 gifts listed. (We could find more in other passages.) 1 Corinthians 4:10 says that we all have at least one of them. 1 Corinthians 1:7 says that there is not one missing. Gifts are very often related to one's character. If you observe the different behaviors around, you may get a glimpse of people's gifts.

At a church potluck, a woman entered the room carrying a large tray of delicious food. Unfortunately, she tripped, bringing everything down to the floor. How did the members of that church react? From observing their reactions we can guess what their gift might be.

The prophet: *I have always told you this doorway was faulty.*

The merciful: *But it was not her fault! The carpet was not laid properly; she did her best.*

The doctor: *Let's fix the doorway or teach her how to walk around it.*

The administrator: *This has cost us \$30 dollars in cleaning supplies and time.*

The hospitable: *I don't have much, but you're all invited to my place.*

The generous: *I will bring whatever is needed. I have plenty at home.*

The servant: Goes to help clean the mess, without saying a word.

We must be very humble and recognize that God wants to use us as much as He can. He has given us everything we need to live and to be a witness of His love towards us. Let us give up our own nature and let Him be the principal actor in our lives

Looking in, looking out

Scripture
Luke 16:1-13

Plant your roots deep. Get involved. Drink deeply from the nourishing soil of the church as a community of people who can help but who also need your help. Giving is not just something we do for others. Giving of ourselves is something that we do which gives us the opportunity to bloom, grow, and flourish.

Introduction

Last spring I bought two small geraniums. I took them home and placed them on top of a larger pot with the intention of transplanting them into the larger pot. I kept thinking that I would get around to planting them in a larger pot, but forgot about them for a long while. One day I noticed that one was growing well, but the other was tiny. I didn't figure out why until a few weeks later when I decided to bring them indoors for the winter. I tried to pick up the pots. The tiny plant was easy, and it was still encased in the small pot. But when I tried to pick up the huge geranium, I realized why it had grown so large. The roots had become deeply embedded in the large flower pot after breaking through the small pot that had confined it.

Our experience with the Church is like that. We could sit on the sidelines without getting too involved. We could give a little without giving much of ourselves. We could keep as much of our time, talents, and resources as possible for ourselves alone. But, we wouldn't benefit much, we wouldn't grow much, we wouldn't become much stronger. Instead, we would lose opportunities for fulfillment, for growth, for experiencing abundance in our faith and life.

Plant your roots deep. Get involved. Drink deeply from the nourishing soil of the church as a community of people who can help, but who also need your help. Giving is not just something we do for others. Giving of ourselves is something that gives us the opportunity to bloom, grow, and flourish like the huge healthy geranium in my garden.

Sufficient and adequate

Jesus tried to convey the miracle of giving in feeding the 5,000. He sought help from the boy with a lunch. He asked the disciples to distribute the food in an act of faith. Jesus directed the disciples to look beyond their perceptions that their resources were *insufficient and inadequate*. He directed them to see the potential of those who find God's power sufficient to empower them for even greater loving action. Jesus helped them to believe in their own capacity to perform miracles of caring. Jesus even now empowers us also to turn away from saying *We do not have enough for ourselves* or *Our budget is too small* or *We have nothing left to give*—to saying along with the boy who shared his lunch: *Here, I will share what I have*.

If we focus all of our energies upon getting and none on giving, we will never have enough for ourselves. We will feel even more needy. But if we focus on the needs of others and how we can meet these needs, we can have more than we need for ourselves. When we conclude that we have enough to share, suddenly what we have is enough for our own happiness as well. Then the miracle of the loaves and fishes takes place in our own heart. What we have is multiplied in significance. The miracle happens in us by faith.

Matthew 10:8 says *Freely you have received, freely give*. Our giving is done in response to what God has done in our lives. Each person should give what he or she has decided in the heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. The word *cheerful* literally translates *hilarious*. Our giving should be hilarious (or in a mood of celebration). Whether we give of our time, talents, or money, it should be sacrificial and joyful at the same time.

Because God can satisfy us in ways that money cannot, we are more free to help meet the needs of others. God has given freely and unconditionally. In response, as we have freely received, we freely give with joy and celebration for the love of God in our lives.

Looking out

It is easy to get resources from our pockets to our offering plate, because we are, all too often, tuned into our own needs as individuals and as a church. If we were to join hands and form a circle, we would turn



inward, facing each other. A different kind of circle is possible. We could form an outward-facing circle.

Looking out instead of looking in enables us to focus on the needs of others instead of ourselves. It enables us to focus upon our work in the world and not just our own physical plant. It encourages us to stretch our capacity for service when we see the vastness of human need and the sufficiency of our own resources for life.

Facing out was the discipleship that Jesus preached. Jesus taught that to give up your life is to save it. Jesus did not teach upward mobility. Jesus taught outward mobility. In fact, Jesus warned about the downward slope of upward mobility. The church is not in this world to save itself. There are far too many churches whose only goal is to survive, to form circles that look in. The church has become too fixated on how to save itself rather than saving the world.

Gratitude and generosity

The story of creation in Genesis is an expression of the writer's gratitude for the abundance and beauty of God's creation. The Psalmist certainly wrote some of the most wonderful expressions of gratitude. Gratitude is as basic to human nature and is essential for mental, physical, and spiritual health. Gratitude inclines our attitude in a healthy direction. When we are grateful, we are focused outwardly and upwardly toward God in praise and thanksgiving, and toward others with expressions of appreciation and love.

Mark Twain said, *If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man.* People on the other hand, tend to forget God after a crisis is past.

We have to believe that we have been blessed before we can live a life of gratitude. We have to believe that we are loved before we can love others.

Jesus performed the miracle of feeding the people when there appeared to be enough to go around. If we believe in the power of God to nourish us sufficiently today, we can also see the abundance of resources in our lives that would enable us to feed others in need.

When we know that we have enough, it is a pleasure to share what we have with someone else. If we believe that we have enough money, we can give generously. When we have acquired the wisdom to know that we can live on less and be happier than if we had money to spare, we have reached a pinnacle of spiritual growth. Those who have acquired such wisdom do not feel tithing and offering is a guilt trip. We feel great about celebrating God's love by giving our gifts.

Spiritual wealth

Having positive feelings about our giving is a sign of spiritual wealth grounded in God's love for us. Because God loves us unconditionally and generously, we have love to give and we can give it without constantly counting the cost as something lost. Our giving is not just someone else's gain, it is our gain as well.

We may be feeling anxiety about not having enough money. By giving to others despite this feeling, we may be able to overcome the anxieties. In sharing, we may recognize more profoundly that we do indeed have enough for ourselves.

Jesus fed the five thousand by the miracle of multiplying the loaves and fishes. Jesus gives to us today an awareness of the abundance in our lives in no less miraculous ways and with no less miraculous results. May we be fed and satisfied.

Believe that you have enough time, and use it for others. Believe that you have enough money and offer it generously. Believe that you have enough love, and love completely.

*Gary Ritner, Pastor, Hillcrest United Methodist Church, Bloomington, MN.
Complete transcript of this sermon can be found at www.mumac.org/Hillcrest.html*

Sermons

We are the clay, you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand.—Isaiah 64:8



Introduction

We are partially molded by the predominant cultural trends of our times. Consider the social molding of those here who are over 40:

*there was more time and less rush
there was less money and more time
there were fewer necessities and fewer niceties
there were fewer demands upon the family budget
there was more giving of time and resources for others and less for self
there were more people who got deeply involved in church work
there was more tithing or contributing to the work of God
there was more of volunteering at the church*

Today's dominant culture molds many minds and attitudes. It is a *Me first* culture. We take care of ourselves first and let everybody else take care of themselves. The dominant culture pressures people to:

*critique not contribute
chow down not cook
criticize not compliment
create a mess not clean up
spend more time and money on oneself
find more possibilities for distraction from caring
need more necessities that take up time and money
want more niceties that crowd out caring and contributing*

Who's first?

Church attendance has been dropping, and it appears clear that changing attitudes about time and giving have something to do with it. Of course, there are plenty of exceptions but times are changing and it's not getting any easier to put together a church program that focuses on caring rather than survival or conflict produced by scarcity. Predictions are everywhere that the church, as we know it, is doomed if the culture keeps moving in this direction. But what if it doesn't keep going toward more self-centeredness? What if there was a new birth of generosity and caring? What if the pendulum swings back from getting toward giving? The church and ministries and caring could make a dramatic comeback! Perhaps we are partially molded by the times, but we don't have to be. We can also be molded by God and we do not have to go with the flow of the times. God, like the potter, can mold us physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Divine Potter

The potter's use of clay gives us insight into how God works with us. At first, the clay is a formless lump that is pressed upon the wheel. Then, it is spun rapidly as the potter's skilled hands press and pull it into shape. The parallels are striking. God shapes our lives in the midst of the pressures that life brings to bear upon us.

There are two ways of making pottery. One is to paint a glaze over the product to seal and cover up the flaws, blemishes, and holes. The other method is used to make fine, flawless pieces of beauty and art. This second method is a long process: The pottery is put into a kiln here the heat can sometimes reach 2500 degrees Fahrenheit. In the prolonged heat, a natural glazing process takes place and the ashes floating in the air are melted into the hot clay, to refine the surface into glazed-like beauty.

In God's hands, we can be refined over a long time and changed into a more beautiful spirit and character. We do not need the glaze of possessions or money. We need to be pliable to God's shaping touch over time. God can shape us into a people of great spiritual beauty and character in the midst of all of the hardships and difficulties of life.

Dominant culture

What is our part in all of this? To be shaped, the clay must remain soft and yielding. Any hardness or rebellion will lessen the effectiveness of

the potter's touch. The design may be damaged beyond usefulness. If we will allow God to be the potter of our clay, we can be the work of God's hand rather than just another self-centered, self-serving molding of the me-first, fast-food culture.

Who is a dramatic extreme opposite of this dominant culture? I believe that it is Mother Teresa. When only 12, she gave herself completely to God. She was sent to India to be a school principal, but she left the school to work with the poor. On the first day in the streets, Mother Teresa gave all that she had (four rupees to the poor and one rupee to a Catholic newspaper). Before long 50 rupees came back to her for the mission. Pope Paul VI gave her a car, but she raffled it to build a rehab center. Once she visited a very sick, abandoned man in a dark hut. She asked him why he did not light his lamp. He replied *Nobody ever came in here before*. Later, he expressed his appreciation for her ministry saying, *You lit the light of my life and it is still burning*.

We hear of practicing random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty, but the world has been less inclined to do what has been done so faithfully for centuries: We need to be less casual about it. We need to commit to caring and we need to plan to give on a regular basis. We know somebody has to do this if the church is to continue serving God and meeting the needs of people, but we tend to think, *Let somebody else do it*.

There was a storm in Holland once, and a boat had capsized. A rescue team worked to exhaustion recovering all but one survivor. They returned exhausted. *Who will go?* Someone shouted. Sixteen year-old Hans said *I will go!* His mother begged him not to, *Your father died at sea 10 years ago. Your brother Paul was lost at sea just three weeks ago. I can't take any more heartache. You are all that I have left.* Hans explained, *I have to go. What if everyone said, 'Not me. Let someone else do it'?* An hour passed anxiously for his mother and everyone. Then a voice came through the fog. Hans called out, *Tell my mother that I have rescued my brother Paul!* (Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *A Second Helping of Chicken Soup*, Health Communications, pp. 11, 12)

Who will do it? Will you step forward? Will you help provide for mission and ministry? Will you make a pledge so big that it feels really good? The neighbor that you rescue may be your brother or sister! There is no shortage of funds in the church. There is only a shortage of good will. We have enough; we just have to use it for the purpose of God's work.

God is calling

God is calling you to give your life for others. God is calling you to a life of service. God is calling you to provide for the needs of the people of this church. Are you going to expect someone else to do it? Are we going to sit back while the last survivor drowns? We can go to the rescue! We can be molded by the *Divine Potter* rather than the *Dominant Culture*. We can turn this ship around instead of watching the church run aground. If we are open to being molded by God, the Divine Potter, we can become what God has created us to be: centered in Christ and committed to caring.

Your response

Offer yourself afresh to the hands of the Potter. God can make your life more beautiful and more useful. I invite you to renew your commitment to center your life in Christ again. I invite you to submit yourself to the Divine Potter, to be yielding and obedient. Come into the presence of God and feel God's love and grace and power with you in this moment of your commitment to caring. Come back to center yourself in Christ. God is waiting to shape your life.

In God's hands, we can be refined over a long time and changed into a more beautiful spirit and character. We do not need the glaze of possessions or money. We need to be pliable to God's shaping touch over time. God can shape us into a people of great spiritual beauty and character in the midst of all of the hardships and difficulties of life.

Sermons

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are (1 John 3:1).



Born-again good people

Introduction

The streets were dark as the robed figure made his way through the city of Jerusalem. This was not an ordinary citizen. He was the leading theologian of the day, and he was an influential politician. Just what was Nicodemus doing sneaking through the streets of Jerusalem at night? He was on his way to an interview with a popular, uncredentialed rabbi. But why should that have required secrecy? Other priests and religious scholars regularly visited Jesus to argue and debate with him. Why couldn't Nicodemus visit Jesus in daylight like all these other religious personalities? If Nicodemus had been planning to conduct an investigation of Jesus, he could have approached Jesus any number of times quite openly. And no one would have raised an eyebrow. But Nicodemus was going to Jesus because of questions he had about himself.

The reason Nicodemus visited Jesus at night was that he had already moved beyond cold, professional analysis. Nicodemus was pursuing a hunger that lived deep in his heart. And that's risky, especially when that hunger might take you away from the mainstream, away from ordinary, routine life—especially when you have the public visibility and social standing Nicodemus did.

Nicodemus had a lot to lose. And that's precisely what connects so many of us to this story. If we were homeless, out of work, without family and friends, then there would be no great risk in a radical commitment to Jesus, in radical discipleship. To give God your life . . . when your life already appears worthless . . . well, that's no big deal, is it? But when you have status, money, career, friends, maybe even connections, country club membership and professional dignities to maintain, getting radical with God poses some real risk.

Born again

Who are the Nicodemuses of today? A doctor at the peak of his career; a lawyer with a reputation for honesty, integrity and effectiveness; a theologian or minister at a respectable church—people with social status, people respected for their spiritual life, people who appear to have it all together. We often think of the phrase *born again* applied to people with really messed-up lives who experience a dramatic turn around—a drug addict who finds deliverance or a thief who becomes honest. But this is not the kind of person Jesus was talking to when He first introduced the idea of being born again. Let's go to the beginning of the story. *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Him by night (Jn 3:1, 2).* Nicodemus belonged to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the scripture-quoting, religious people of the day. They believed in miracles, in the resurrection of the dead, in angels. They worked really hard at keeping themselves pure. They didn't want to be corrupted by the wickedness of the world or the creeping compromise among the people of God. The picture, then, is that Nicodemus is a leading member of society. Still he sneaks through the dark streets of Jerusalem for a private interview with Jesus of Nazareth.

Nicodemus begins his interview with kind words. *Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him (Jn 3:2).* Nicodemus was trying to be nice, to be generous. But Jesus avoids the social niceties and cuts right to the chase. He speaks directly to the hunger in Nicodemus' heart—*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (verse 3).* Nicodemus didn't need to refine his theological theories. He didn't need to join a church. He didn't have a collection of bad habits to get rid of. He didn't have a great need to change his life style. As a Pharisee, he had already taken care of all that. What Nicodemus needed was a new relationship with God. He needed to be born again.

And right here is where this story connects with so many church-going people today—decent, upstanding people who have been members, even leaders in a church can be born again. Sometimes we are guilty of projecting the idea that the only way you can have a truly joyous, exciting experience with God is to first make a wreck of your life and then get converted. The story of Nicodemus proves otherwise. It took Nicodemus three years: The day Jesus died, Nicodemus publicly took his stand as a devotee of Jesus. He let himself go and accepted God's gift of new birth.

Nicodemus appeared to have it all together. He was a good man. He was sincere. But he wanted something more. He craved a heartwarming connection with God. And that's what Jesus offered.

Like the wind

I don't want to deny that being born again offers hope for people with huge problems. But I want to emphasize that you don't have to be spectacularly bad to receive the new birth Jesus offers you. When Jesus said to Nicodemus, *You must be born again* he identified the problem and prescribed a cure. Nicodemus asked, *How can a person be born again?* Jesus answered by referring to the wind. You can go down to the beach and watch the wind whip the waves. But you can't see the wind. You can't trace its path from point A to point B. There is some mystery about the process. What we can do is prepare for this new birth experience.

How do two people fall in love? It takes more than one encounter. They need to spend some time together. And it's like that with being born again, too. A person must encounter God, must meet God. And it takes more than just one meeting. You have to spend some time with God, by listening to the gospel message, by reading the Bible, especially the gospels. You need to prepare yourself for the special visitation of the Holy Spirit. The most important human activity you can engage in is preparing to be born again. Getting acquainted with God, spending time with Him, is the indispensable human preparation for being born again.

New joy

The simplest statement of what it means to be born again is that you acquire new parents. We take our identities from our families. Mom and Dad determine who we are. We carry Dad's name. From our parents we receive genetic material and varying degrees of cultural and social shaping. When we are born again, we move from seeing our primary identity rooted in our family of origin and take our primary identity from our loving heavenly Father. Our earthly parents are defective. Even if you come from a solid, intact home where Mom and Dad were pretty decent people, still, your home wasn't perfect. Your parents weren't perfect.

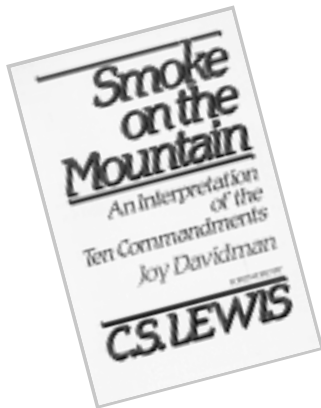
When we are born again, we move from organizing our lives around the strengths and weaknesses of our parents to organizing our lives around the perfection of God. Being born again means acquiring a new Father. The idea of being born of God is highlighted in the meaning of the word *again* in the phrase *born again*. The Greek word translated *again* means both *again* and *from above*. We must be born twice. The first birth merely gives us existence. I recognize that's something pretty special, but this second birth, this birth from above, makes us children of God.

Have you been born again? Do you know the joy of coming home to the Father and being enveloped in his embrace? Will you join Nicodemus in his walk across town to see Jesus? Maybe that means going to church. Maybe that means getting out a Bible and reading the stories of Jesus. Maybe it means praying right now and asking God to give you His special gift of new birth. Ask Him to accept you as His son or daughter. And He will say, *Yes. How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are (1 John 3:1).*

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What are the results of falling in love? A person in love can't keep it quiet. There is new joy in life. Everything is brighter, fresher, more exquisite. And so it is when we have been born again. *In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet 1:3).* Notice how Peter accentuates the fact that this new birth is a gift. It's kind of an obvious fact, but sometimes we overlook it. Birth is not a great accomplishment of the new born baby. Birth is an accomplishment of the parents. So with spiritual rebirth. It is not the accomplishment of the converted person; it is the accomplishment of their heavenly Father. God is eager to give you new birth. He is eager to become your Father.

Book Reviews



Smoke on the Mountain

Joy Davidman
Westminster Press
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
1954

Born of Jewish parents in 1915, Joy Davidman became a communist in early life, and later converted to Christianity. In 1957 she married C. S. Lewis. Three years later she died of cancer. Discovering that only through love could she fulfil the law, her personal journey took her to original interpretations of that law. Though I can't agree with all she wrote, I found very stimulating angles that had never occurred to me. Here is what I consider the highlights of the book, chapter by chapter.

God comes first Modern world must choose between divine order and chaotic atheism. The vacuum fills with false gods. Hopefully the 20th century self-worshiper will discover that *no other gods before Me* is the prescription for happiness. The more we look to objects for happiness, the less help we seek from God.

Gods made with hands What shape is your idol? The more we look to objects for happiness, the less we ask help from God. If we are saved it will be through a God we can't make with hands, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The word was with God Great faith was placed in the power of names, especially the names of God. Many think this commandment is mainly to forbid casual profanity. But our ultimate offense is not to call upon Him at all. Let's think of it in the positive: Thou shalt take the name of the Lord thy God in earnest, in sincerity.

Day of rejoicing How does one keep God's day holy? It was God's plan on His day for man to enjoy companionship with one another and with God. But soon hundreds of man's foolish restrictions came in, such as on the Lord's day one might not use false teeth; rescue a drowning man, or put out a fire. In Scotland in the 17th century one was haled into court for smiling on the Sabbath. If we are joyful Christians seven days a week, it is likely that the Sabbath will take care of itself.

Honor your father and mother Many parents are willing to be honored, but not all are willing to be honorable. The result is juvenile delinquency and adult unhappiness. Children who never experience warmth and love when small are seldom capable of showing it when older. Let's practice and pray for love, and the honor will take care of itself.

Who takes the sword No previous age has ever killed so much. Into the midst of all the killing came the Prince of peace who went beyond the injunction of the law which condemned killing, and added the "impossible:" instead of harboring anger they were to forgive their enemies. In spite of all the hypocritical justification for killing, the only remedy is the new birth.

The adulterous synopsis Marriage was given by a loving God for the happiness of His children. But man's self love so often ends in no love. Casual adulteries follow civil contracts. If instead, as Christians, we concentrate on what we can give to our marriage, instead of on what we can get, our children may grow up in happy homes.

You can't cheat an honest man Dishonesty makes headlines. Why? Dishonesty in any form—lying about what we sell, shady dealings of any kind need not entrap a Christian. Sadly the human heart deceives us. The Christian steward uses his property as a loan, a trust from God.

Pilate—did expediency justify him? Roman law agreed that a false witness against a criminal should receive the same punishment. Whether one lies boldly, is evasive, tells a half truth or keeps silent, he's certainly tampering with truth. Easiest is to lie to ourselves about our own offenses. Too often we believe our own rationalizing, and justify any lie to ease our conscience. Freedom comes with confession and repentance.

The moth and the tile rust Could it be our violation of *Thou shalt not covet* that the richer we become, the worse off we seem to be? None who think things bring happiness ever has enough. Covetousness stops when we want God so much we can't be bothered with any other wants.

Book Reviews

The book, *We Believe*, by Michael Horton tries to analyze the heart of the Christian religion based upon the apostles creed and traces its historical development from the scriptures.

Christians believe in communion of saints, forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and everlasting life. Nevertheless, times are changing and people are not concerned about justification and sanctification for salvation. The book begins with a historical background that explains this shift in thinking and the need to develop a creed.

Satan's best tactic is not the heresies that we find in the church, but the gradual transformation of the biblical God into an idol of domestic religion. The generation which lived after the World Wars longed for the God of love and freedom. People wanted to know a God who was friendly and approachable, accepting them just as they were with their jeans, long hair and all the rest. And so most evangelicals, instead of adhering to strict theological perspectives, drifted into liberalism. The Protestant liberals accommodated modernity, and the Evangelical accommodated their preaching and popular diet to feed the felt needs.

Whenever tragedies occurred in the natural world, people raised the question about the presence of a God who cares. There are people today who feel God has the ability to end sufferings and when he does not, He is not a good God. If God would like to end suffering, but cannot, then He is not an all powerful God. People were driven to believe in God's death in the 1960's.

We can know God through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is not just the only Son of God. He was the full and complete revelation of God the Father. Seeing Him is equivalent to seeing the Father. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. *We beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of praise and truth (John 1:14)*. Jesus Christ is not only the most perfect expression of God the Father but also He is God. We do not come to know about God by our experience and reasonable opinions. We come to know Him by locating His divine actions in history.

We find, right from the beginning, two tribes indicating two lines of descent: works and grace. Isaac and Ishmael were representatives of the two lines and works respectively. These two lines of dissent came to sharp focus as Cain persecuted Abel. Later we find Esau and Jacob at conflict. These are examples of the two covenants, one by grace and the other by works. The war continued in the life of Moses, Joshua, and in the land of Israel. The Messianic line was threatened more by apostasy than enemy forces without. Human heroes had corruption in them and were weak, but God Himself is the greatest hero of this redemption. He is the real hero of this salvation. He is faithful to His promise in spite of every obstacle.

The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is disputed by people even today, but if one chooses not to accept this, the story of redemption exhausts its potential. It will not yield any blessing to man. The death of Christ is important for the salvation of mankind. We believe that His death is salvation bearing for man because sin could not be forgiven and man could not be delivered from the curse of sin without a death for sin. Therefore, Christ died for the ungodly (Rom 5:6). It is only by the sacrifice of the substitute that one can appeal before God and be accepted of Him. Jesus became not only the Lamb, but also the High Priest. Accepting Him, worshiping Him and obeying Him have won us a place at the Father's table. Through his exposition of fundamental doctrines, Horton reaffirms the Christian's belief that his God is the same God both in the old and new Testament. This book is written for the average layperson who is searching for answers to questions—*How can I know God? Is God always right? Do I really need the church?*



We Believe
by Michael Horton
Word Publishing
Nashville, Tennessee
1998

Resources

Stewardship training seminars presented by Benjamin C Maxson are now available on video and audio tapes. Each seminar is six to eight hours in length, divided into 30-minute segments, and designed to be used by itself or with an instructor. Also available are the participant's workbook and instructor's manual. To order, contact either AdventSource (5040 Prescott, Lincoln, NE, 68506; Tel: 800-328-0525; Fax: 402-486-2572 email: 74617.1241@CompuServe.com) or the General Conference Stewardship Department (12501 Old Columbia Pk, Silver Spring, MD 20904; Tel: 301-680-6157; Fax: 301-680-6155; email: gcstewardship@CompuServe.com). The cost of each set, excluding shipping is \$79.95 for video and \$29.95 for audio (available at a subsidized rate to churches in the mission fields).

For pastors and church leaders:

Volume I: Biblical Stewardship Foundations This seminar explores stewardship and its biblical foundations. The very word steward implies the reality of Christ as Lord. The relationship with Christ as Lord must begin with experiencing the gospel.

Volume II: Strategic Church Stewardship This seminar explores the strategic elements that make stewardship ministry successful. To be effective, stewardship must focus on the overall life-style in Christ. Even financial stewardship must begin with helping people grow spiritually, and discipling them to become partners and friends with Christ.

For church members

Normal Christianity This seminar explores a biblical approach to daily life. Biblical principles provide the foundation for living life in a dynamic, vibrant partnership with God. He created us to enjoy Him—to share life with Him.

Editorial

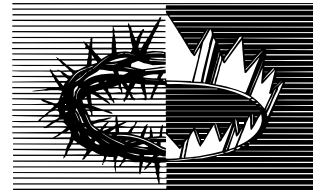
The year was 1824. He was but a young lad of six when, along with his family, he left Judaism and was baptized into the Lutheran church. Through the years that followed, he thirsted for spiritual wisdom with passion and abandonment. While in high school, unlike his fellow students, he continued his interest in the Scripture and the saving message of the Gospel. At 17, he wrote an essay on the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. His words echoed his deep convictions—*Our heart, reason, history, and the work of Christ convince us that without Him we cannot achieve our goal, that without Him we are doomed by God, and only Christ can save us.*

This was a committed Christian teen who clearly understood that the fruit of our union with Christ is our willingness *to sacrifice ourselves for our fellow man* and that pure joy is *only known to the innocent heart united with Christ, and through Christ to God.* This was a young man who felt the call of the gospel, who heard Christ knocking on his door.

Yet nine years later, this same young man abandoned his Christian devotion for militant atheism and philosophical ideas of a utopia, free of religion. He was Karl Heinrich Marx.

Instead of being changed by the Gospel, Marx chose to change the world. He chose the so-called freedom of classless society over the freedom of the Cross. He chose himself over Christ.

It is not enough to learn and understand, yearn and long for. We must hear the knock, act in faith, and let the Christ of the Cross come in to reign in our hearts forever.



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