

“Taking Care of Somebody Else’s Stuff”

One of the better known stories or parables of Jesus is usually called the “Parable of the Talents”. It begins like this: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them" Matthew 25:14 (New King James Version). This man gave to one of his servants 5 talents, to another 2, to another 1 talent. While the man was away, the servants who had 5 talents made 5 more. The man who had been given 2 talents also doubled what he had been given. But the servant who had received 1 talent dug a hole in the ground and buried it (it was a common custom back then to bury valuables in the ground in order to keep them safe).

After a long time the master returned. His servants gave an account of what they did. "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them'" (Matthew 25:20). Look how pleased the master was: "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (verse 21).

The man who had been given 2 talents also reported that he had doubled his – 2 more. But it's a different scene when the man given 1 talent checks in. "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have now sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours" (verses 24-25). Even though he didn't *lose* what he had been given, he didn't *use it* to gain more!

The master's response is very different also! "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give *it* to him who has ten talents (Matthew 25:26-28). He then orders this worthless slave to be thrown into outer darkness.

This is a story about “stewardship”. Stewardship is a big idea in the Bible! It represents a different way of looking at life than the way many people view it. The typical view is something like this: “What’s mine is mine. I have a right to do what I want with the things that belong to me.” So, we can talk about *my* home, *my* car, *my* time, *my* new outfit, *my* hunting rifle, *my* retirement fund, etc. But “stewardship” means *nothing really belongs to us – God owns it all*. We are only “stewards”, “managers”, “caretakers” of what God has entrusted to us.

In the parable, the 3 men were asked to take care of the owner's "talents". In New Testament times, the “talent” was a standard of weight. The value of a talent depended on whether you were weighing copper, or silver, or gold. Many Bible scholars feel that eventually a talent came to represent about \$1,000 (which would be about *20 years wages* for a common laborer!). So, each of the servants in the story was trusted with a lot – even the one talent person!

Think about it: Hasn't God entrusted us with much? God's put everything in life into our hands.

Everything God's created has been given over to us humans to manage.

There is the stewardship of the earth. Psalm 24:1 tells us, "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it" (notice: the earth isn't ours!). We Americans live in a throwaway society – a culture of waste. Many times we don't fix stuff; we just throw it out. We gobble up the precious resources of planet earth. We in the U.S. make up about 6% of the world's population, and consume anywhere from 34%-40% of its natural resources.

A pastor in Atlanta, Don Harp, tells of coming across a couple of little girls selling Kool Aid. He went up to their stand and bought a cup. As he sat sipping, one of the little girls asked, "Are you done yet?" He wasn't, so he said, "No, why?" "Cause that's our only cup!" she replied! (I guess you could say they were doing their part in conserving plastic cups!).

We humans pollute God's good earth – the air, the water, the land. In secular terms, we talk about *ecology* – taking care of the planet. Unfortunately, we've *politicized* this discussion. But caring for God's earth is not primarily a *political* issue – it's a *spiritual* issue. It's about *stewardship* – how we care for God's good earth. (Remember, planet earth is all we've got – there's nowhere else to go!).

Then, there is the stewardship of our bodies. Did you ever go to a mirror, look at your body, and think: "What a wonderful gift of God this is!" Well, it really is! The human body is a magnificent machine, a marvelous creation! Psalm 139:14 says, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." We are!

God wants us to take care of our bodies! If we're a follower of Jesus, our body is the building where God's Spirit lives! 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you?" Shouldn't we want to keep it in good condition!

There are some good signs that many people are taking the care of our bodies seriously. I drive by fitness centers and their parking lots seem to be full! That's good! Even senior citizens are encouraged to exercise (studies point out the value exercise for both the young and old).

The emphasis on healthy eating is...well...*healthy!* When I was young I was a skinny kid, and very self-conscious about it. Well, being too skinny has not been on my list of things to worry about for some years now! I've discovered in more recent years that my sport coats and pants actually shrink while they sit in the closet. I struggle with trying to eat right. I love desserts. I don't eat between meals, but I can't kick my addiction to night-time snack. (Somewhere in the Bible it must say something about the spiritual value of having a night-time snack).

Being good stewards/managers of bodies also means keeping chaste and pure. 1 Corinthians 6:13 says, "The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body." Romans 12:1 urges us to dedicate our bodies and ourselves to God: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your *bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

Then there is the stewardship of the mind. Just as our bodies are an amazing creation of God – so is our mind. God gave us a mind to think and reason, to expand our understanding of the world and of His will.

How about our *thought life*? Is it pure, or is it in the gutter? What do we read? What do we watch on TV? What internet sites do we visit? Is all of this bringing us closer to God or taking us further from Him?

It's easy to become mentally lazy. Since the advent of television, a good chunk of the human race has been able to soak up hours of mindless, often trashy TV programming. There is the biased TV news. Complex world events and issues are compressed into 1-2 minute simplistic news bytes. Today, we can immerse our minds in our cell phones or computers, spend hours on YouTube or Facebook or Twitter. Much of the information we get on the internet is biased, or simply not true.

How much better to fill our mind with good stuff! Think positive thoughts. Read a good book. Study the Bible. Take a college course. Stretch our minds and broaden our thinking! Philippians 4:8 is a good guide for us: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things."

The Bible says we are to have the mind of Christ. We're to think and view life and people like Jesus. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). If Jesus were physically here, how would He use His mind? Would He have a computer or a cell phone? Would He go on the internet – and if so, what sites would He visit? How much would He watch TV? Something to think about!

How about stewardship of time (how we manage the time God gives us on this earth?) Do we dedicate our hours and minutes to God and seek His will each and every day? A lot of people today are functioning with overcrowded schedules. Many younger families, in particular, are stressed out by being *overcommitted*. Their lives are so busy, so hectic. Being a better manager of the time God's allotted us might mean listing our priorities, saying no to certain things, and trying to live a more balanced life.

While some are too busy, others are wasting their time by filling their days with trivial stuff (perhaps one of the ways we squander God's gift of time the most). We're busy, but filling our hours and days with stuff that doesn't count for much. When I retired I vowed that I wouldn't waste the rest of my life on trivial pursuits. I wanted to make my remaining years count for God. The next 4 months I had more free time than I've had since I was a kid. Though I worked one day a week as a therapist in a counseling center, I soon began to fill up my days doing stuff, but mainly just putzing around. That's when I decided to take a church again!

We have a way of filling our time with *something*. Question is: Is it important in the long run? Am I doing good in the world? Am I making any difference for Christ?

Herman Cain was an author, business executive, syndicated columnist, radio host, and a one-time Presidential candidate. He was an African-American raised in poverty. He credits his hard-working father for his success in life. He also found inspiration from Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, a former president of Morehouse College. Dr. Mays taught Herman Cain a poem that guided him through the ups and downs of life:

“Life is just a minute, only sixty seconds in it;
Forced upon you, can’t refuse it; didn’t seek it, didn’t choose it.
But it’s up to you to use it. You must suffer if you lose it,
Give an account if you abuse it,
Just a tiny little minute, but eternity is in it.”

Then there is the stewardship of our talents and abilities. God has given to every one of us certain natural abilities and talents. We often don't see ourselves as being very talented – but each of us has certain things we do well. A few years ago the Washington Post carried a story about a 104 year-old lady named Nellie Elvidge, in a nursing home in Virginia. She got the nickname “Sock Doll Lady”. She would take a boy’s crew sock and sew it into a cuddly, miniature, slimmed-down version of the Pillsbury Dough Boy. Back when she was 99 or 100 she could sew one in 2 hours. When she got a little older it took longer. But at the time of her 104th birthday, she had made 1847 dolls that delighted that many little girls. One of the long-time volunteers at the nursing home said, “This is what she does. It keeps her sane, it keeps her viable, it keeps her going. It’s her vocation.”

What are the talents and abilities God’s given to you? Don’t use them just for yourself. Use them for God's glory and for others!

I began this message looking at the Parable of the Talents, a story Jesus told that has to do with *stewardship* – being good stewards/managers of all God has entrusted to us for our little time on earth. Remember, *everything we have in life – everything – has been given to us, and belongs to God. We will have to give account to God of what we do with what He's entrusted to us.*

As in the parable, not all of us have been given the same gifts and opportunities. Some of us are 5 talent people, some 2 talent people, some a 1 talent person. It doesn't matter: the servant given 1 talent was no less responsible to do something with his one talent than the person blessed with 5 talents. And because this person didn’t do anything with his one talent except hide it, the master took it from him and gave it to the servant who had doubled his 5 talents. "So take the talent from him, and give *it* to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away" (Matthew 25:28-29). Ever wonder why some Christians, who already are blessed and living an effective Christian life, seem to get more opportunities to serve the Lord, or just seem to be more and more blessed? While people who don't do much with what they've been given, just seem to kind of fade in their usefulness to God. The reward given to the faithful servant is not rest and relaxation, but *more* to be responsible for in his master's service.

The title of this sermon is: "Taking Care of Somebody Else's Stuff." There is a difference between taking care of your own stuff, and managing what someone else has trusted you with.

A few years ago Nancy I took a trip to Niagara Falls with her sister and her husband. We took their car. It was a relatively new Toyota Highlander, with all the bells and whistles. I've bought a lot of new cars over the years. I've always tried to take care of the vehicles we've bought. But when Chris wanted me to drive their Highlander part of the way, I felt uncomfortable. I know he's very fussy about his car. I didn't want to wreck it or damage it in any way. You can bet I was extra cautious the whole trip! (I did scare them once passing a car when a truck was coming towards us!). There's just a difference between taking care of your own stuff, and taking care of what belongs to someone else, isn't there!

Mickey Mantle was one of the greatest ballplayers ever. He died at the age of 63 of alcohol-related liver disease. Not long before his death, Mantle said to someone, "You talk about a role model? This is a role model: Don't be like me...God gave me the ability to play baseball and I wasted it. I was given so much, and I blew it. I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to make it up. I want to start giving something back."

God has placed life and its gifts in our hands. It's His, not ours. May God help us to do a good job taking care of all that God's put into our hands for this short time we're on earth!

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