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Stewardship: A Shared Responsibility

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What is stewardship?

Stewardship means a person administering someone else's assets, resources, and properties. Although the word "steward" sometimes might make us think of the butlers who appear in soap operas or movies (in Spanish: *mayordomo*), the truth is that each and every one of us (men, women and even children) are stewards. For example:

Sometimes parents loan their car to a teenage son or daughter. That privilege carries responsibility: The child must drive carefully, obey traffic rules, and return the car on time. If the child breaks some of the rules, or has an accident, it is likely that parents will find out and withdraw that privilege.

If we borrow a book from the library, we do not become the owners. We must return it in good condition and by the due date.

If we buy a pet, although we become the "owners," the truth is that we are responsible for the welfare of that animal. If we don't feed it, or if we abuse it, we could be charged with neglect or cruelty to animals.

The Bible teaches us about stewardship

The Bible teaches us that God is the creator of the whole universe. When God created Adam and Eve, God commanded them to "have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28) and told them to till and keep the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15). This means that as daughters and sons of God, we are not the owners of creation, but only stewards or managers. God is still lord and master of the whole universe. The Bible teaches us that everything we have and are, even our lives, comes from God.

In the Bible we find many examples of men and women who acted as faithful stewards. For example, Genesis tells the story of Joseph, a wise Israelite slave. Joseph told the Egyptians to store wheat during seven years of plenty, so that when lean times came, they were all prepared to face that crisis (Genesis 41). The book of Ruth tells the story of a Moabite widow who, despite being foreign and poor, was also hard-working. Ruth gleaned among the ears of grain, behind the reapers, and thus survived despite being poor (Ruth 2:2-3).

Jesus teaches that we must be faithful stewards

In Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of a man who, shortly before leaving on a journey, calls three slaves and instructs them to take care of his money. To one of them, he gives five thousand coins, to another two thousand, and another one thousand (some translations of the Bible speak of “talents” rather than coins):

The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money (Matthew 25: 16-18).

After a long time, the master returns and settles accounts with his slaves. The master praises the slaves who doubled their money, calling them “good and trustworthy”; the master invites them to enter his home and promises to put them in charge of much more. But when he learns that the third slave hid the money in the ground, instead of investing it, he scolds him, calling him “wicked” and “lazy.” “You ought to have invested my money with the bankers,” he says, “and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.” The master orders his other slaves to take away the unwise slave’s talent and throw him out of the house.

This story teaches us that if we are faithful stewards, we must be wise and productive managers, investing and multiplying what we receive from the Lord. It also suggests that the day will come when all of us will have to give an account of our stewardship, and that the Lord will reward us (or punish us!) according to our performance.

Three special areas of stewardship

Like a father or a mother who lends their car to a daughter or a son, God expects us to use our gifts responsibly, productively and generously. Although the principle of stewardship affects many areas of our lives, there are three areas in particular that we will describe. To make it easier to remember, the three areas will begin with the letter T: time, talent and treasure.

STEWARDSHIP OF TIME

Paul gave this advice to Christian communities: “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time” (Colossians 4: 5). “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” (Ephesians 5: 15-16).

Jesus’s parables highlight the danger of wasting time and thinking that the time to settle accounts will never come. The Gospel of John describes the urgency that Jesus himself felt to fulfill his mission in time: “While it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me; night is coming when no one can work” (John 9: 4). In the parable of the ten bridesmaids (sometimes called “the ten virgins”), five bridesmaids prepare themselves in advance to meet the Lord: they buy oil and put it in their lamps. When the Lord comes, all the bridesmaids have fallen asleep. But upon waking up, only five of them are prepared (Matthew 25: 1-13).

STEWARDSHIP OF OUR TALENTS

We are all born with abilities and skills that can be developed with practice. As we grow and mature, we can learn how to use these talents to advance in life and to serve God and our neighbor. For example, the Bible tells us that David, besides being courageous, had talent as a musician (1 Samuel 16: 14-23). Moses was a great prophet who had visions of God, but he was not a good speaker; for that reason, God called his brother Aaron to help him convey his message (Exodus 4: 10-16).

In the New Testament there are several passages that mention spiritual gifts, which are talents that God gives to people and should be used for the good of the church. Paul says that “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12: 4). Paul teaches that in the same way that the different organs of the human body have different functions, so we, who are the body of Christ, receive different spiritual gifts: some have talent to teach, others have talent to care for and heal the sick, and others have talent to speak in foreign languages. This diversity of gifts is “for the benefit of all” (1 Corinthians 12: 7).

STEWARDSHIP OF OUR TREASURE

All our material possessions, including our salary, are also a gift from God. They should be used wisely, to support our families, do much good in the world and support the mission of the church. Generosity in the service of our neighbor is one of Jesus’s teachings that stands out the most. If we are rich but miserly, Jesus says, we are poor before God (Luke 12: 15-21). Jesus invites us not hoard riches here on earth, “where moth destroys wealth and spoil, and where thieves break in and steal,” but in heaven, where the riches are eternal (Matthew 6:19-21).

There is no correlation between being rich and generous. In the Bible, the most generous people are often the poorest. When Jesus saw a poor widow put two small copper coins which are worth a penny into the treasury of the temple, he said that she had given more than all the rich, because “all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (Mark 12: 41-44).

Jesus teaches us to see abundance rather than scarcity. For example, on one occasion, a large crowd followed Jesus, and Philip wondered how they were going to feed so many people. A boy offered five loaves of bread and two fishes. Jesus thanked God and handed this humble offering to all the people. The generosity of that child triggered a miracle in which 5,000 people were fed (John 6: 1-13).

STEWARDSHIP IN THE CHURCH

The ancient people of Israel practiced the law of the tithe: at certain times, the people were required to give ten percent of their crops as an offering for the priests and the poor. But the early Christians taught that offerings must be voluntary and made willingly. Paul says: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

In Latin American countries, many churches have independent sources of money, such as schools, or receive money from institutions or very wealthy families. In the United States, parishes are often more independent and democratic, but this carries a great responsibility: The congregations themselves must pay the rector's salary, the monthly bills, and the building maintenance. The principles of self-sufficiency and stewardship help us understand why we offer the church our time, talents, and treasure.

Making a pledge

By year-end, many congregations of the Church invite members to write on a card the amount of money that, according to our calculations, we will be able to donate to the church during the coming year. That amount is often called "the pledge." The amount we write is not decided by the clergy and vestry, but by each individual or family; and it is not public information, but confidential. Let us not forget that the "treasure" is only one of the areas where we can contribute: time and talents also count. Sometimes the pledge can include how many hours of volunteer work we are planning to donate to the church.

Writing down the pledge helps the parish have a budget estimate, but above all, it helps us make a commitment. It is not a legal contract, but a spiritual commitment. We invite you to see this commitment as a personal devotion that you exercise each time you make an offering. If you make the offering with cash, write your name on the envelope; this way, there will be a record of how much you have given so far this year and, consequently, how much is left to complete your annual pledge.

The teaching of the church is that we be generous with our offering, as we are able. Jesus also said that an important aspect is that the tithe should be offered with humility of heart, not as proof of our righteousness or superiority (Luke 18:9-14).

A shared responsibility

There are several ways in which our stewardship is a shared responsibility: God, the master of the universe, shares his gifts with us generously; as members of a Christian community, we join our contributions to other people's and carry out endeavors that might otherwise never be realized. The Bible is full of examples of feats that were the result of team work: surviving 40 years in the wilderness; building the imposing temple of Jerusalem; establishing and extending the church from Jerusalem to Asia Minor and the Mediterranean. Although today no congregation is asked to build an edifice as large or expensive as the temple in Jerusalem, we are encouraged to be self-sufficient congregations. That means we must chip in and assume financial responsibility for our mission or parish. There is strength in numbers.

Above all, we must learn to be grateful. Discovering the generosity of God and recognizing the abundance of what we already have are the first steps to becoming faithful and generous stewards.

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