

What does God expect of me with the things that He has given me?

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Our question this morning was asked this way: "What does God expect of me with the things that He has given me?" There's an assumption in that question; a right assumption, I might add. The assumption is, "God's gifts come with expectations." Now, that might sound controversial. We hear that and we think *strings*; there are *strings* attached to God's gifts. There's a way that doesn't sit right, does it? Strings sound manipulative. I'm going to get what I want from you by holding out a carrot that you can't resist. That's manipulation. I would argue that's not the way God operates. God doesn't manipulate anyone. God does the truly glorious and impossible. Here's what God does: God changes people from the inside out in such a powerful and all-consuming way that people want to do the very thing he expects. He mercifully, kindly makes us into new creations where our hearts are supernaturally aligned to his heart; and he gives us the power to accomplish his purposes. When we are baptized into Christ we assume and take on his name; what a gracious gift! And when that happens, there's an expectation that we will wear that name well, but God gives (as a gift) us the desire and power to do it.

Years ago, Korby and I became the legal guardians of a 17 year old Medford girl named Gabbie; some of you may remember that and remember her. Gabbie's family was making a move, but she desperately wanted to finish high school in Medford. We wanted to give her that gift. When we talked with Gabbie and her parents we told them, "We only know how to do this one way - the Wipf way. This is a home, not a hotel. So, we are going to consider you and treat you like a Wipf, like a family member." And that's what we did; we treated and related to Gabbie like she was a Wipf. We tried to encourage, strengthen, motivate and help her like she was our own. I think it paid off. She improved dramatically in school when she was with us and the relationship has been sound ever since.

But there were expectations, too. Wipfs get their homework in on time; Wipfs treat others with kindness; Wipfs respect mom; Wipfs pick up their dirty clothes off the floor; Wipfs help with the chores. These weren't strings; we weren't looking for a maid. This wasn't some sinister plan to get a teenager girl to live us so life would be so much easier (believe me, it wasn't). When she took on our name, so to speak, she was expected to take on our way of life. The gift was free, but the expectations followed. and that's what it's like with God. The gifts of God's mercy and forgiveness, his adoption of us into his family are completely free. We don't have to pay God back for his gift. But in taking on the name of Jesus, we assume the responsibilities that come with bearing that name and using his gifts as God intends for them to be used.

So, what does God expect of his children? I want to take you to four passages and as I do I want all our observations and thoughts to be understood under the banner of stewardship. I'm not going to define stewardship at the moment; we'll see that materialize as we read God's word. Now, if you're wondering, "Why do I want to listen to this message? I didn't ask this

question.” Here’s the answer: God has given you gifts. Whoever you are and wherever you may find yourself on your spiritual journey, you are a beneficiary of God’s gifts. And he has expectations of you because of it. It would be wise of you to learn what that means.

First, under the subheading of *Stewardship as the goal*, turn with me to 1 Tim. 1. The Apostle Paul is writing this letter to young Timothy, the new pastor of the church in Ephesus, because he wants to help Timothy start well in a difficult situation. Right away we learn that Timothy is in a tough place because he’s got people in that church that are straying in their teaching and doctrine; it matters what you believe. So, Timothy was sent to provide pastoral and doctrinal correction. Let’s read vs. 3-5 and pay attention to what Paul says should be happening in the life of the body (READ).

So, Paul is saying that these silly discussions about different doctrines, myths and genealogies promote speculation rather than what should be promoted and emphasized by the people of God; what’s that? Stewardship. Here’s what Paul is getting at: “Set the theological house in order, Timothy, so that the people of God learn how to be faithful stewards.” What does it look like to be faithful stewards? Vs 5 tells us. It’s love from a pure or clean heart and conscience with a faith that is genuine and true. So, hear Paul’s aim: Timothy, make this church faithful stewards who express love and care to others by teaching sound doctrine. Do you see how stewardship is Paul’s aim? Do you see how he’s discouraged that instead of this church practicing stewardship they are practicing speculation about silly myths? It’s clear that Paul’s hope and desire through Timothy’s preaching would become faithful stewards who love others.

But, what does it mean to be a steward? What does a steward do? Turn to 1 Peter 4. Peter is telling this church how to live now as people who bear the name of Christ. He says, “be self-controlled, love one another earnestly, show hospitality.” He has this list of things Christians should be doing. Then he says this in vs. 10 (READ). The subtitle for this section might be *Stewardship as service*. Notice how the reception of gifts presumes service. You can see when you look at those first two phrases in vs. 10 that Peter’s idea of stewardship is for service. God gave you a gift; steward that gift in service to one another.

We’ll talk about this more soon, but notice the two directions of stewardship. First, there’s this vertical dimension. God gave you the gift. You have what you have because of God’s grace, meaning, he gave it to you. And because it’s his grace, it’s his gift - he’s the giver - you are accountable to him in how you use it.

But there is a horizontal component to stewardship, too. Your master and God gave you the gift to serve others. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another - that’s what a good steward does. So, to answer the question in this subheading, “What does a steward do?” A steward takes what God has given and uses it to serve others. That’s another way of saying, “a steward takes what God has given to advance his mission.” God’s mission is about your hands reaching out in the name of Jesus to be a blessing to others. And when you do, people see the love of Christ.

So, put our first two thoughts together. The goal of faithful church ministry is stewardship. And that stewardship takes the shape of service to others with the gifts that God has given. Now, don't hear gifts and think narrowly like spiritual gifts. All things, material and immaterial, are gifts from God and all of them are to be used spiritually for the good of the body.

There's one more aspect we need to consider about stewardship from the scriptures and that's *The Character of stewardship*. That's found in 1 Cor. 4:1-2 (READ). In a minute we'll talk about stewarding the mysteries of God, but notice what Paul says is characteristic of a steward. Stewards are required to be found faithful. Notice two words. First, *required*. They are required to be found faithful.

Do you know or remember Jesus' story about faithfulness? It's called the parable of the talents. We hear the word talent and we think of the ability to sing or play piano. A God-given and developed skill. Those are talents, but that's not what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 25. A talent was a unit of currency. 1 talent was equivalent to 20 years of manual labor. So, a talent was worth a lot of money. Let's read Jesus' story about a master entrusting his servants with money (READ Matthew 25:14-30).

There are all kinds of important points that could be made, but simply notice the requirement. The right management, the right stewardship of the master's money was so important and critical that his failure to steward the money well resulted in the harshest of punishments.

It was in the news this week that some Secret Service agents got themselves in hot water for trying to discredit a US Congressman who was investigating the agency. They failed to manage, they failed to steward their authority well. Now, they will be punished. It is *required* for a steward to be faithful. They failed what was required of them; that's about character.

The second key word is *trustworthy*, or another word for that is *faithful*. A steward accomplishes the task; she's faithful in the execution of her master's will. What great words: trustworthy; faithful. We all aspire to be like that. Everyone universally applauds faithfulness. Herodotus was a Greek historian who lived 500 years before the common era (so, 500 BC). In his writings he extolled the Persian Empire in many ways, but spoke of the Royal Road couriers who would deliver news from the various corners of the Kingdom. Herodotus describe the faithfulness and dependability of these couriers by saying, "these are stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed." That's the character required of a steward.

The goal, service and character of a steward. So, let's do something together. What has God given you? Let's write them down; let's put them on the table and talk a little bit about them.

So, consider these gifts; consider that God has made you a steward of these gifts. Think about the goal: The purposes of God for these gifts in your life are not to be merely for your

enjoyment, merely for your consumption, merely for your use or even abuse. They are not your own; they are God's gifts to you. He's made you a steward of them, meaning, you are to use them for his purposes.

Think about service: How can you use these varied gifts in service to others? Think about nature for a minute. Nature is a gift from God; it's not yours, it's his. But he's given us dominion over creation. That means we are stewards over nature. But not owners. We don't own nature like we have the right to do whatever we want with it. It's God's. God's purpose in nature is to help people see his splendor and glory. So then, my stewardship and use of nature isn't centered on me and my enjoyment, but in how I can use this gift in service to others.

Here's the question: will we be found faithful? Are we trustworthy? This is not a small or insignificant issue? The servant who poorly managed 1 talent learned the hard way that failing to steward what God has given has dire consequences.

Friends, consider the roadblocks to faithful stewardship in service to others. For many of us, it's selfishness. We are so preoccupied with ourselves and our desires that we interpret all of God's gifts through the lens of "It's all about me." Friends, it's not. It's about God and it's about others. Closely connected to selfishness is fear. I'm afraid of not getting what I want or what I think I need. I'm afraid of the demands being made on me. Don't be blind, my brothers and sisters, to that which tempts you to be unfaithful in your stewardship. If you are blind to your temptations, you most certainly will fail in being a steward of God's varied grace.

But is there no place for enjoying God's gifts? We've talked all morning about how God gives his grace with the expectation that we be found faithful stewards or managers of those gifts for the sake of others. Does that mean that God does not give his gifts to enjoy? When Korby and I give gifts to our boys we want them to enjoy the gifts. We don't want them feel guilty every time they have fun with a new ball or with a new game. Shame on you for enjoying your game! If you're in Pastor Tim's Tuesday book group you're learning how to enjoy the things of this earth as gifts of God while using them for mission. So, how can I enjoy God's gifts but also be primarily focused on God and mission?

It doesn't seem that Paul struggled with this as much as we may. Consider Paul's emphasis on stewarding the gospel. That's what he says in 1 Cor. 4:1, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." This primary identity as a servant and steward, though, doesn't mute or dissuade his joy in the Lord.

- He commands the church in Colossae (Col. 2:6-7), "Therefore, as you receive Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."
- (1 Tim. 4:4-5) "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer."

Just these two verses of the many more we could look at show that Paul's passionate commitment of being a servant and steward of God's grace didn't stop him from thoroughly enjoying God's grace and his gifts with hearty thanksgiving to God.

So, these are not mutually exclusive. You don't have to pick between enjoying God's gifts and being God's servant. His gifts can be enjoyed and in the same breadth used by us to serve others. It's like going on a date; you can thoroughly enjoy the presence and company of your significant other and at the same time put her needs first, her preferences first. Yes, it is possible with the help of God to not go to your favorite restaurant, not watch the movie of your choice (serving your partner) and still enjoy everything that God has given. What's required for that to happen? To believe Jesus words. To believe it better to give than to receive. To believe that service to others is kingdom greatness. To believe that you are steward and not an owner. And when God does that miracle, joy in service is a reality.

Questions for the week

- What are some of the gifts God has given you that you are very thankful for? How often do you use those gifts for the sake of others?
- What keeps you from serving others with your gifts?
- Do you feel guilty at times for enjoying God's gifts? Should you? How can you both enjoy God's gifts and use them for the good of others?