

The Stewardship of Life

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We are told that the word "steward" comes to us from the good old Anglo-Saxon "sty" and "ward," and refers to persons entrusted with the keeping and the management of estates and affairs not their own. It seems first to have been applied to those who had the very particular care of the much treasured swine herds of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers. Like many words of its kind, however, it soon passed from the particular to a general application. It has not, however, lost its primary meanings or implications.

It still implies *ownership* by another. It leaves no doubt about the element of *personal* responsibility. It clearly implies not only *protection* but also *management*. It assumes ability and trustworthiness commensurate with the magnitude of the affairs entrusted. It implies an honesty that will bear checking up.

There is no single group of human beings who are more keenly conscious of the meaning of an entrusted duty than are our young people. The history of the world bears testimony in abundance to the fidelity of young people to fulfill the terms of a trust, once the import of it has been made clear to their imaginations.

The stewardship of life, therefore, as a philosophy, does not have to be preached to young people. They have the principles already. The practical application of the principles, however, may be made more personal if it is presented to them in a frank and straightforward manner.

In the light of our definition of stewardship, we shall think of its application. If I am a *ward* of a life, or, to coin a word, a *life-ward*, just why and

how does this relationship exist? And what are the possibilities and the responsibilities of it?

THE SOURCE OF LIFE

To begin with, God owns that which we call *our* life. He gave it. He takes it away. He gave it without our asking it, and he usually takes it away at a time when we fain would keep it a while longer. There is little that we can do with it of and by ourselves. A very basic idea of the stewardship of life is that we are God's. We are his by right of creation. He has loaned or entrusted to us, as it were, a bit of life which we shall keep until the day when he shall call for it. He helps us to enrich it and he expects us to return it to him with many increments.

But there is a more particular sense in which we are his. Every one who is a Christian must realize that he is a blood-bought Christian. We are not only his by right of creation, but we are his by right of purchase. Paul tells us (1 Corinthians 6: 19, 20) “. . . and ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price.” The record of Calvary is his bill of sale. He does not have merely a temporary lease upon our lives. He owns us “in fee,” and the deed is of record in “The Lamb's Book of Life.” The transaction has been sealed with the blood of Christ. We are, indeed, his.

THE ENRICHMENT OF LIFE

The very basis of a happy stewardship lies in the consciousness of God's complete ownership of all that is ours. He has entrusted to our keeping for a while that which we call life. He has enriched and has made permanent and enduring these lives by giving life eternal. He gives us that whereby we may enrich it and he expects us to return it to him with usury.

Browning sings, “Doubt that thy power can fill the heart thy power expands?” Along with the demands for stewardship and enrichment, he has

furnished us ample means for this enrichment. Every institution of learning bears testimony to the goodness of God, whereby he has prepared opportunities and means for learning the secrets of living and of life. Schools are largely a product of Christianity. Every American boy and girl to-day has the opportunity to receive training at the expense of the state. But the great comprehensive plan for the education of all of our young people grew out of the Christian impulses of our forefathers. The first schools were under the auspices and at the direction of the churches and were developed primarily for religious ends.

In this stewardship of life, God has not only given us our eternal lives, but he has made possible every means for us to improve our capabilities as stewards. There is a school for every one. No young person has the right to deny himself all the training that is necessary for good stewardship.

Not only are there schools for our enrichment, but there are other means. Many seem to feel that they are denied the privilege of attending schools as much as they would like to do. But every Sunday school, large or small, is a means for the enrichment of our lives. Whether as officer, teacher or pupil, this great agency has been and is now one of the greatest forces in the whole world. What greater opportunity need one have for the enrichment of his Christian life than that offered in our Sunday schools?

Certainly, also, the B.Y.P.U. must come in for its share of the enrichment program of the blood-bought possessions of our Lord. This great training school of the Church has in it the essential elements for making us good stewards, as it trains us to pray, to study our Bibles, to speak, to lead, to win souls, and to give of our means. What a poor steward one would be who was not versed in the language, the literature and the customs of his profession! The Bible-study program of the

B.Y.P.U. probably stands out as one of the greatest single phases of this wonderful institution of opportunity.

But we should be reminded also that through these means we also develop socially. A good steward is a social being if his influence extends very far. God expects his stewards to become enriched in their social lives. Jesus was and is a social being. What Christian has not seen it in his intercourse with those who knew him in Galilee? What Christian has not felt it in those precious moments when he knew he was in the personal presence of the Master?

Still another important enrichment of the lives over which we are stewards comes from our quiet devotions with him through our prayer life. Some are saying that we are losing the fine art of prayer. Let us hope that this is not true. Just as friends grow closer to each other by communion with one another, so can we grow into a sweet and powerful intimacy with Jesus through our prayer life. He enriches us most of all, perhaps, by this means. Every period of daily Bible reading should be also a period of prayer.

THE INVESTMENT OF LIFE

Many of us seem to forget, however, that the steward must be more than a mere keeper of that which has been committed unto him. The story of the talents brings forcibly to our minds the attitude of God toward a steward who merely keeps his trust. The "wicked and slothful servant" did all that could be required as to preserving faithfully that which had been committed unto him. But there is no mistaking that this was highly displeasing to God.

The successful investment of that which has been committed unto us is as necessary as is any other part of the steward's duty. When Jesus said "I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly" (John 10: 10), he evidently had in

mind an abundance which comes from a wise investment of the life which he has given us.

He is no steward who ever so conscientiously and persistently guards his trust but does no more. There is a justifiable increase which may rightfully be expected and demanded of every steward. Peter, no doubt, was tempted to do just this thing when he suggested "Lord, it is good to be here; let us abide. I shall make three tents . . ." But Jesus ignored the suggestion and soon led Peter back down the mountain to serve the seething unwashed multitude of suffering humanity. Stewardship involves the glorious use of our lives, our talents, and our means, in order that there may be increase.

But young people are so intensely practical and straightforward that they may become impatient and say, "Well, I want to do my part in the stewardship of life, but what shall I do? When shall I begin? How shall I start?" These and many other questions challenge the churches of today.

The glory of it all is that the kinds of service that can be done with the talents which God has given us are as numerous as are the needs of society. The world is still hungry for sympathy. People are still in need of kindly human service. Suffering is still a large part of the world's program. Disappointment still constitutes a dread menace to the happiness of men, women, and children everywhere.

Substantial help for physical needs has always been an outstanding opportunity for investing the life over which we are stewards. Human suffering constitutes a large outlet for the service of good stewardship. What one of us can not magnify the service which the Master so beautifully typifies by the giving of a cup of cold water? The trend of the world seems to be largely toward getting. The idea seems to prevail much that having will bring happiness. But any one who has ever tried it knows better. The giving of material things,

large or small, can bring great happiness, and is indeed, stewardship.

It was on a Saturday night in Memphis. The night was frosty. I had been on a train all day and was to take a sleeper for a midnight train that would get me home in the morning. I decided to walk for half an hour. Having done a mile or two, I was returning to the station. Half a block ahead of me I saw a young man, poorly dressed, looking uneasily in my direction. I felt myself say, "There's another bum and he's waiting to 'touch me.' I half made up my mind as to just how I would turn him down. As I passed him, however, he seemed about to speak, and then turned awkwardly away. I stopped short and said "Well, what is it, big boy?"

"I was just about to ask you if you would help a fellow get something to eat, but I just couldn't do it," said he.

"Here is a sandwich shop. I'll be glad to get you a sandwich and a cup of coffee," said I.

"Thank you sir." And we started for the shop. He hesitated and then said, "Pardon me, sir, but if you don't mind, would you just as soon let me go to a little place in the middle of the next block? The sandwich and coffee will cost a quarter. I've been standing outside this little place over here. They give a square meal for a quarter. I need all I can get for the money."

We went. He was a little abashed at my following him into the homely little place, but hunger triumphed. Have you ever seen a hungry man eat? He told me later that it was the first food he had eaten in more than twenty-four hours. I could easily have believed him if he had said forty-eight hours. Meat, coffee, potatoes, pie—these homely ingredients soon did their work. We grew a bit social. I mentioned something about God's guidance in life affairs. His response was genuine. (I think I can usually tell.) He told me of his home. I happened to know the family connection. He thanked me apologetically. We parted.

I slept well that night. Our paths crossed months later. The wayward, silly boy had, through his hardship, seemed to become a man. He seemed to be living successfully. Yes, he was a Christian. This is the first time I have ever told this experience. I do so now only to reinforce my words when I say that there is daily an opportunity to be stewards both of material and spiritual things which God has entrusted to us.

Need I go further and add another story? Is it not true that we do perform spiritual stewardship at the same time we are giving our small help in material things?

And do you not think there is enough to go round? It is fine to be optimistic. It is splendid that most young people are optimistic. But even to the most optimistic it must be evident that the problems of a changing civilization constitute a grave test for practical Christianity.

Christian statesmen were never needed more than they are needed now. Our whole denominational program is crying out for it. Certainly, no one believes that we have yet succeeded in Christianizing business and industry or politics. No one who thinks about it would even hint that we are rapidly Christianizing society. There is not a business nor a profession which does not need the influence of Christian members in whom it recognizes the practice of the basic principles of Christian stewardship.

God made us; let us be grateful. Jesus bought us; let us be faithful. He gave us our talents; let us develop and enrich them. He gives us capabilities to serve; let us serve to the end. Humanity needs us; let us respond with all our hearts. Jesus will reward his good stewards; let us serve him faithfully against that day.