

What is Christian stewardship?

In the most literal meaning of the word, a "steward" is a person employed to manage another person's property. Stewardship, therefore, is the process by which we care for that which is not ours on behalf of the person to whom it belongs.

When we consider the place of the human being in God's creation we find that humans have been called to be stewards of the whole creation. The first words of the Bible concerning human beings confirm this insight:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and 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 1:26-28)

The very first calling of the human being is to "have dominion" over God's creation. Human beings have been given stewardship of that which is not theirs, but God's. We will answer to God for how we exercise this dominion, this stewardship. We alienate ourselves from God by consuming the good things of His creation, rather than caring for them. Remember this parable told by our Lord, Jesus Christ:

And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful. And that servant who knew his master's will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating. But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, shall receive a light beating. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more. (Luke 12:42-48)

Notice in the parable that much will be expected of those to whom much has been given. We have been blessed in the Church to know the fullness of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Certainly much will be expected of us. Notice, also, how proper stewardship is the measure of a faithful servant. We are all servants of God. We must accept that designation and make sure that we are faithful stewards.

Faithful stewardship concerns absolutely and completely those things that we "have." Hear this parable of our Lord:

And Jesus told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21)

In this parable God asks us the question: "The things you have prepared, whose will they be?" The answer is that they never were ours and never will be ours. All that we "have" is from God. Listen to the witness of Holy Scripture, here from the Book of Psalms:

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep. (Psalm 127:1-2)

God provides us with both the means and opportunities to "possess." Since the things we treat as being our own are not actually not ours, but God's, we must steward them, that is, care for them, in a manner in accordance with the will of God and not just to satisfy our own desires.

However, the point is even broader. For our stewardship does not encompass only material possessions. It involves much more than that. Hear again the words of our Lord:

I tell you, on the Day of Judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:36-37)

God has given us everything, not just the possessions we have outside ourselves, but also the capabilities we possess within our persons—our intellect, our physical strength, our very being. We will answer to God for our stewardship of these things, too.

What then is required of us, right now, in the concrete sense? An insight into the answer of this question might also be found in the words of our Lord:

And Jesus sat down opposite the [temple] treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living." (Mark 12:41-44)

God requires of us everything—all that we have and all that we are. To give only what is left over—"out of our abundance," as the Lord puts it—is not sufficient. The "minimum" required of us (our "dues") is everything, all that we have. Giving is something we should notice because it costs us—it should actually impact our standard of living. In another place in Holy Scripture, our Lord reinforces this point:

And a ruler asked Jesus, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said, "All these I have observed from my youth." And when Jesus heard it, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But when the man heard this he became sad, for he was very rich. Jesus looking at him said, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:18-27)

How these words challenge us! Who among us can say that we do not "become sad" like the questioner of Jesus when we hear them? We must be thankful for the mercy shown to us by Christ in His words "what is impossible with men is possible with God." Each of us must also allow our conscience to be troubled and ask ourself: What is my attitude towards this passage of the Gospel? Do I struggle to accept it? Or, do I try to find ways to say that it does not apply to me? Do I truly seek to use all that God has blessed me with in accordance with His will? Or, am I as yet unable to accept this high calling—the call to stewardship—upon which my eternal salvation apparently depends?

What is a practical first step in the right direction? How can I begin to bring myself into accord and agreement with the Gospel? How do I become a steward, that is, a person who understands and accepts that I am only caring for that which is someone else's and do not in fact possess anything that I can truly call my own? The following passage from the Old Testament's Book of the Prophet Malachi may strengthen us in this regard and give us the courage and resolve necessary to (re)dedicate ourselves to a life of stewardship:

From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?' Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How are we robbing You?' In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me; the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, [see then] if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. (Malachi 3:7-10)

Malachi lived among the people of Israel centuries before God fully revealed Himself to His People in the person of His Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, two thousand years ago. Yet, Malachi was already called to remind the people that they had stepped away from God and from what God had taught them regarding their responsibilities towards Him. The people are not giving God what he deserves. They are "robbing" Him. But, we must notice God's promise in the words of His prophet, Malachi. He tells the people, "return to me, and I will return to you." He tells the people that if they only would "bring full tithes," that is if they would only give God what He deserves, that He, in return, will pour out "an overflowing blessing." He even tells the people that they are to "put [Him] to the test" through their giving and to see how richly He will bless them in return.

St. Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians summarizes in one small phrase what our attitude must be in regard to the things of this world: "as dying, and behold we live," he says (2 Corinthians 6:9).

What does this mean? It means that if we are only living for the things of this world we are already dead because we are not fulfilling the calling for which we were made by God. If, however, we instead "die" to the things of this world—if we are not "owned" by the things that we have made the mistake of thinking are ours—we actually live. We live because we are doing the will of God, which, for us, *is* life. To do God's will in all things is to fulfill the vocation to which God has called us. That vocation is to accept and embrace the call to steward God's creation on His behalf and to His glory. This for us is life and light and joy and peace.

Let us, therefore, commit ourselves with courage and resolve to fulfill our calling to Christian stewardship.