

The Spiritual Disciplines: Stewardship/Simplicity

The Spiritual Discipline of Stewardship is about properly using things that God has entrusted to our care, including our possessions, finances, and time. In order to understand and practice the discipline of stewardship and various disciplines that fit under its umbrella, it's helpful to first understand a few basic principles: the principle of ownership, the principle of stewardship, and the need to have a right relationship with material things.

The fundamental principle of ownership, simply stated, is that God owns everything you own. The Bible teaches that God, as the Creator of all things, owns everything, which means that whatever each person possesses, He ultimately owns.

We read that *The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein;*^[1] *for all the earth is Mine;*^[2] *whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine;*^[3] *the silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine, declares the LORD of hosts.*^[4] All that we “own” is actually owned by our Creator, which includes not just our possessions, but ourselves as well. Because God owns them all, the biblical understanding regarding our things is that we are simply stewards or caretakers of what God owns and has put in our charge.

Donald Whitney explains this principle well:

That means we are managers or, to use the biblical word, stewards of the things God has given us. As a slave, Joseph was a steward when Potiphar placed him over his household. He owned nothing, for he was a slave. But he managed everything Potiphar owned on his behalf. The management of Potiphar's resources included the use of them to meet his own needs, but Joseph's main responsibility was to use them for Potiphar's interests. And that's what we are to do. God wants us to use and enjoy the things He has allowed us to have, but as stewards of them we're to remember that they belong to Him and they are primarily to be used for His Kingdom.^[5]

While God may own everything, He wants us to be happy and enjoy the things He has given us, as it says in 1 Timothy 6:17: *God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.* As custodians of God's resources—specifically the things in our possession, and generally the resources of the earth—we can use them for ourselves and our loved ones, to live our lives and to enjoy what He has placed in our care. Stewardship, however, implies being faithful to manage the true owner's resources and to manage them according to the instructions, or at least the guiding principles, of the owner. The owner sets the parameters and the manager works within them.

Our Relationship with Possessions

Understanding the principles of ownership and stewardship helps us to develop a proper relationship with possessions, money, and wealth. Having the right relationship with these things is vitally important to our relationship with God.

I want to point out that when speaking of possessions and money, within the context of the Spiritual Discipline of stewardship, it should be understood that material possessions and finances play an important role in our everyday lives. Having sufficient means to live, to provide for your family, to

have your legitimate needs adequately met, is part of the godly use of what the Lord has entrusted to your care. As stewards of God's funds, we are meant to use them in alignment with His nature and character. This means that besides using them for food, clothing, and housing, we can use some for taking time off, recreation, and celebration, as resting, relaxing, and celebrating are things which God has told us to do.

Money and material possessions are morally neutral—neither good nor evil in themselves. We need them to live. The problems that arise due to wealth don't come from the wealth itself, rather they stem from having a wrong relationship with it. It is when we crave money, when we love it, or when it becomes our main focus, and when we assign it power and importance that should be reserved for God alone, that there are problems.

As the apostle Paul said in his letter to Timothy:

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.^[6]

It's the love of money or wealth—in other words, a wrong relationship with it—which can damage us spiritually. Jesus pointed out that when one loves mammon—translated in some Bible versions as money and in others as wealth—this negatively affects one's relationship with God. It creates a rivalry with God.

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.^[7]

Jesus wasn't saying that wealth or money are evil, but He warned that loving it or setting our heart on it, making it central to our lives, putting our trust and hope in it for our security and safekeeping, is giving it the place of God in our hearts. God is meant to be central in our lives, and we are instructed to put our trust and hope in Him for our security and safekeeping. Loving and trusting in money and possessions displaces God in our hearts, and this is what Jesus calls serving mammon.

Having money, or working to earn money to live, to care for one's family, to improve one's economic situation, is not serving mammon. The apostle Paul made it clear that providing for your family is vital. *If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*^[8] Jesus wasn't condemning money or its legitimate use. He was speaking about the dangers which arise in one's life when undue importance is put on money and wealth, especially when one puts their trust in it, when it begins to take the place of God in one's life, when a person's relationship with their money supplants their relationship with God.

Some might feel that saying money isn't evil in itself promotes the idea that all Christians should be financially well off, an idea which isn't supported in Scripture. At the same time, it is also incorrect to say that money or wealth is in itself evil. It is the heart and attitude of the one who has the wealth which makes it either evil or good. As Robert E. Speer (1867–1947), author and authority on missions, said: *We cannot serve God and mammon; but we can serve God with*

mammon. There have been many men and women of God who were wealthy and who used their wealth in God's service by supporting mission works, financing missionaries, creating businesses which provided employment and made it possible for the poor to earn a living, and in numerous other ways.

The Dangers of Riches, and True Treasure

While wealth isn't evil in itself, Scripture makes it clear that having riches is spiritually challenging and potentially dangerous. We read a warning in Psalms: *If riches increase, set not your heart on them;*^[19] and Proverbs says: *He who trusts in his riches will fall.*^[10] Jesus conveyed the challenge that the rich face when He said: *For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*^[11] He explained that treasure should not be laid up on earth but rather in heaven, and drove the point home by showing that your heart is where your treasure is.^[12]

We read further admonitions about the dangers of the wrong relationship with wealth throughout the rest of the New Testament. The book of Hebrews says to *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for He has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."*^[13] Paul said that bishops should not be lovers of money^[14] and to *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*^[15]

Our true treasures are not money and possessions; our true treasures are the kingdom of God, His love and interaction in our lives, our salvation, God's provision and care for us, and our coming rewards. Understanding this puts our finances and their use in the right perspective.

Understanding the principles of ownership (that God owns everything) and stewardship (that we are to use what God has given us in conjunction with His will and His Word), and the need for developing a proper relationship with possessions and finances, all helps us to adjust our inner attitude and outer behavior regarding those things that we have control over, both tangible and intangible. Money and possessions are tangibles that we must decide how we use. Time is an intangible, yet we can also decide how we will use it. When we understand that our lives, our time, and our possessions all belong to God, we are in a better position to make godly decisions as to how we use what we are stewards over and how to have the proper relationship with them.

There are a few Spiritual Disciplines that can be put under the umbrella of stewardship, as they have to do with the use of our possessions or time. These are simplicity, giving and tithing, and the use of time, all of which will be covered in this and subsequent articles.

The Discipline of Simplicity

One of the disciplines which falls under the stewardship umbrella is the Spiritual Discipline of simplicity. Simplicity is refraining from using the money or possessions that we are stewards over merely to gratify our desire or hunger for status, glamour, or luxury. It means we use the finances at our disposal for meaningful purposes, that we live within the bounds of good judgment as far as what we spend finances on.^[16] It is being sensible and wise in our financial spending, and using the

funds entrusted to us with care. It's being modest in our personal spending, while being generous in giving to and helping others.

In order to bring simplicity into your life, you might consider:^[17]

1. Buying things for their usefulness rather than for their status. Avoid basing your buying decisions on the latest trends or what will impress others, and choose according to what you need. Don't focus on impressing others or on your personal status.
2. Simplifying your life by developing the habit of getting rid of things which you no longer use or need. Many of us hold on to things we haven't used for a long time, which could benefit someone else. Try giving them away and be free from having to store them. If you have become overly attached to some possession, consider giving it to someone who needs it.
3. Keeping yourself from being propagandized by advertising and social trends. The goal of marketing is often to convince you to discard your current item, which is sufficiently meeting your needs, and to buy the latest better, faster, more powerful model. You can make a conscious effort to avoid that, and use what you have until you truly need to replace it.
4. Avoiding purchasing things you don't need. Do without nonessential items rather than going into debt to purchase them.
5. Learning to enjoy things that you don't own. Use a library, public transportation, a public beach, or a park. Don't feel you have to own things to use and benefit from them.
6. Minimizing or forgoing things or activities that produce an addiction in your life. These could be excesses in food or drink (junk food, alcohol, soft drinks, coffee or tea), or the excessive use of technology, communication, and entertainment devices. If you find you have a habitual or compulsive relationship with certain things or activities to where you can't control your use of them, then stop using or doing them, put limits on them, or fast their use for a time.
7. Being careful not to let your responsibilities such as your family, or your legitimate pursuits such as your work, business, investments, etc., or your friends, become the center of your attention to the detriment of your relationship with God and His kingdom.

This list isn't in any way meant as laws to be adhered to, but rather provides practical counsel on some matters to be aware of, and how to minimize or remove things that may be a distraction to your relationship with God and may be competing with Him for first place within your heart.

The discipline of simplicity can be understood as a means of being freed from some of the unnecessary attachments to the things of this life, a means to *set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*^[18] Jesus told us that our heart is where our treasure is, therefore it's wise to examine what our true treasure is. We should have a right relationship with our possessions and recognize the damage that can occur if that relationship gets out of balance. Simplicity can lessen our focus on ourselves and our things and help to keep us focused on our true treasure, our loving God who has given us the most valuable things we could ever possess—His love and salvation.

Other aspects of the discipline of stewardship will be discussed in subsequent articles.

Note

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¹Psaume 24:1 PDV.

¹Exode 19:5 BFC.

¹Job 41:11 SEM.

¹Aggée 2:8 BFC.

¹Donald S. Whitney, *Disciplines Spirituelles pour la Vie Chrétienne* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1991), 140–41.

¹SEM

¹1 Timothée 6:9–10 SEM.

¹Luc 16:13 SEM.

¹1 Timothée 5:8 PDV.

¹Psaume 62:10 PDV.

¹Proverbes 11:28 SEM.

¹Luc 18:25 PDV.

¹Matthieu 6:19–21.

¹Hébreux 13:5 PDV.

¹... qu'il ne soit ni buveur ni violent, mais doux et pacifique ; qu'il ne soit pas attaché à l'argent. (1 Timothée 3:3 BFC)

¹1 Timothée 6:17 SEM.

¹Dallas Willard, *L'esprit des disciplines* (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 168.

¹Comme l'enseigne Richard J. Foster, in *Célébration de la discipline* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 90–95.

¹Colossiens 3:2.

