

SECOND CORINTHIANS 5:15. (EHV)

[Christ] died for all, so that those who live would no longer live for themselves but for him, who died in their place and was raised again.

“It’s my life; I can do what I want with it.”

“It’s my body; I can do what I want with it.”

Perhaps you have heard these sentiments expressed before.

The Scriptures say differently. The passage I just read says that Christ died for us so that we would no longer live for ourselves. Paul wrote to Titus that Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (2:14). Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Christ has purchased us with his lifeblood to be his very own. So our bodies, our possessions, our lives are not our own to do with as we please. They belong to Christ. Our lives are not meant to be lived for ourselves but for him.

This is what we call Christian stewardship. We are not owners, but stewards of our lives and the things we have—stewards for God, who is their true owner. This is the topic we want to explore today.

1. Christian Stewardship in General

Before we knew Christ or believed in him, we were slaves to wickedness, slaves to the devil. Think about it. Think about what unbelievers live for. They live for vacation. They live for money. They live for athletics and sports. They live for pleasure. They live for eating, drinking, working, and so on. When I showed up for my first day of work at the Cemetery and Parks Department of the City of Neillsville in Wisconsin, my boss said to all of us young people, “Hopefully you all know the meaning of life by now, and the meaning of life is that you need to work.” In sum, unbelievers live for themselves, which is to live for wickedness, to live for the devil, because that is exactly what the devil does and what he wants us to do. And that’s what all of us were like before we were brought to faith in Christ.

But when Christ connected us to his life, death, and resurrection by planting faith in him in our hearts, all of that was changed. Our lives were no longer meaningless. We were no longer our own. We no longer lived for ourselves. We were freed from wickedness, freed from the devil. We now belonged to Christ and lived for him, and we continue to live for him.

The parable we heard earlier in the Gospel is a perfect illustration for this truth. Just as the master in that parable went away and entrusted his possessions to his servants, so Jesus has ascended and has entrusted the earth and some of the things in the earth to us. Yes, he has entrusted our very lives to us. But just as that master also returned and asked for an accounting of how his servants had dealt with his property, so Jesus will do the same one day. And since he has given his very life for our salvation, to redeem us from wickedness, we want to be able to stand before him and tell him that we have done our very best with what he has given us.

We are led to think especially of the particular gifts and interests that God has given us—the things that make us unique. We heard Paul mention some of those gifts earlier in the Second Lesson. There are gifts pertaining to education, communication, music and the arts, repair and maintenance, organization, administration, aid and assistance, recreational interests, professional

services, parenting and childcare, and the list goes on and on. With all of these, we ought to ask, “How can I, and how do I, use the gifts and interests God has given me to serve him and to benefit others, at home, at work, at church, or anywhere else?”

Now some of these gifts can be used in specific positions and functions at church. We think especially of our council and service committee members, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School teachers, musicians, ushers, cleaners, decorators, grounds keepers, and so on. But we would be mistaken to think that our gifts can only be used that way, or can only glorify God that way. If someone is asked to be on the council, but has to decline so that he can faithfully carry out his other vocations as a Christian father, husband, employee, and whatever else, praise God! Stewardship doesn't mean we have to have a job at church. Stewardship means that whatever job we have, whatever task we undertake, we do it faithfully and to the glory of him who died and was raised for our salvation.

Whatever task we undertake? Yes. Since Jesus has given us everything, that means that literally everything in our day-to-day lives falls under this concept of stewardship. Paul wrote, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). We are stewards even when we are eating or drinking. Think about your meals. Apart from Christ, you can either eat to live or you can live to eat. But for us Christians, there is a third option—eating to serve. Whether we consider food from its role as nutrition or from its role in providing enjoyment, its purpose for us is the same—to refuel and recharge us to carry out our various tasks and functions with energy and excitement, to the best of our ability, to glorify God and to help our neighbor to the greatest extent possible. Same with drink—whether it's a glass of juice or milk during a meal, or a glass of wine or beer afterwards. We drink so that we can serve God and our fellowman. If we're not eating or drinking for that purpose, then we are forgetting to whom we belong, and that's also when we tend to eat or drink too much or too little.

2. Christian Stewardship of Money

As you can see then, *stewardship* is really just another word for the Christian life, or another way of looking at it. But when we hear the word *stewardship*, we tend not to think of any of this. What we tend to think about and talk about is money. Now if literally everything falls under the concept of stewardship, because our life, our time, and all we have belong to Jesus, that of course includes our money. But why is it that we give special attention to our money when talking about stewardship?

For one thing, Jesus and his prophets and apostles talk a lot about money, and so if we're going to be faithful Christians who pay attention to what Jesus and his prophets and apostles say, we're going to talk a lot about money too. In the story of the widow's mite, we're told that Jesus sat down opposite the offering box and watched how the crowd put money into it (Mark 12:41). Jesus watches how we spend our money and how we give our offerings to church. Even in the parable we heard earlier, Jesus uses a unit of money, the talent, to talk about the gifts, abilities, and interests he has given us.

But *why* do Jesus and his prophets and apostles talk a lot about money? I think there are two reasons. First, the way we obtain and manage our money says a lot about how well we understand this concept of stewardship. For example, if we are spending our money to drink ourselves tipsy every night, we don't yet understand that our drinking is also meant to serve God.

If we spend our money on lottery tickets hoping that we won't have to work anymore, we don't yet understand that God wants us to use our body and energy to work. As Paul wrote, "If people do not wish to work, they should not eat either."

And second, as the saying goes, it seems that, for whatever reason, the last thing on person to be converted is his or her wallet. "Salvation is a free gift of God, you say? Great. God wants me to worship him regularly? Great. God wants me to work hard? Great. God wants me to help my neighbor. I'd be glad to. You need someone to mow the church lawn or clean the sanctuary? Sign me up. God wants a portion of my income? Whoa, whoa, whoa, hang on a second..."

Why is this, brothers and sisters? If we asked our dad for \$10 and he gave it to us saying, "You can have this, but I would like two candy bars," we would say, "No problem. Thanks, Dad!" But when our heavenly Father gives us life and breath and every last dime that we have and asks that a generous portion of it be given to the work of his kingdom, we easily get cross-eyed.

Fellow saints, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich—rich not in earthly terms, but rich in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Rich in the only way that will still matter after we breathe our last on earth.

So let's listen again to the principles of Christian giving as outlined in Scripture. First, God says the amount we give to him should be willing, not reluctant or forced (2 Cor. 9:7), even as he willingly gave up his Son for us and for our salvation. I've shared some Pastor Strieter stories with you before. Here's another one, from the early 1860s. Pastor Strieter said that, when he was living in rural Wisconsin, he one time had to ride way out of the way and baptize three children for a man. When he was finished, the man counted thirty-seven cents into his hand. Pastor Strieter said, "Certainly this is all the money you have, sir?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Okay, then I will give it back to you and add that much more," Pastor Strieter said.

The man actually started to cry. "Ach, it is meant to be a thank offering that my children are now baptized, and you won't accept it, sir?"

"Okay," Pastor Strieter said, "if it is meant to be a thank offering, I will take it." This was not reluctant or forced giving. It was completely voluntary and willing. God wants all of our giving to be like that.

Second, God says our giving to him should be a priority (1 Cor. 16:2; Proverbs 3:9). Tuition, groceries, clothes, and taxes can wait. God doesn't want or deserve our leftovers. When we get our paychecks or other income, the amount we plan to give to God should always be the first thing on our agenda, or should already be decided.

Third, God says our giving to him should be regular, as regular as our income (1 Cor. 16:2; Prov. 3:9). Just as little as God likes the attitude, "I attended church the last four Sundays. I can take a Sunday off," just as little does he like the attitude, "I gave God an offering from my last four paychecks. I can save this one entirely for myself." God is regular in providing for us; he doesn't take off even one hour. Our regular giving acknowledges his regular giving.

Fourth, God says we should give to him generously, in keeping with our income (Malachi 3:8-12; 1 Cor. 16:2). That suggests a percentage. In the Old Testament, the percentage God

required of his people was ten percent; that was called a tithe. In the New Testament, God gives us no such stipulation. He treats us like adults. It's as if he were saying, "Now you see how the Scriptures have been fulfilled in Jesus. Now you see death defeated. Now you see your salvation accomplished. I shouldn't have to tell you to be generous to me anymore or how generous to be." Since God himself settled on ten percent in the Old Testament, that is a great place for us to start. But what generous is for us in our individual situations will vary from person to person and family to family.

I think this principle—of giving a generous percentage—is especially important for us, brothers and sisters. The members of the congregations in this part of the country tend to be very practical people. We would much rather give when we see a need and know exactly how much is needed. This is our commitment to Nebraska Lutheran High School? Okay, I'll give my share to meet that. This is our commitment to the synod? Okay, I'll give my share to meet that. This is what we need to repair the bricks or replace the roof or pay the pastor's salary? Okay, I'll give my share to meet that.

Practicality can be a tremendous blessing and asset. But you and I both know why we love that approach. That approach means we'll typically spend the least possible amount on church. Once the last church bill is paid, there, we can stop giving. But if we follow God's principle of giving a generous percentage, then not only will we have enough to pay the bills, we'll have more than enough. We'll have extra for which we can ask, "What other gospel ministry or projects pertaining to God's kingdom can we start or support, either here or elsewhere?"

The other nice thing about percentage giving is that once you decide on the generous percentage, God is the one in control of how much money he gets. Let's say you make \$100 and your generous percentage is 12%, so you give God \$12. If God wants \$18 instead of \$12, then he has to see to it that your income is increased to \$150.

And even though God is the one who gives us our money and has done more than enough to deserve a generous percentage of that back from us, he even promises to reward this kind of generous giving. "Whoever sows generously will also reap generously," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 9:6). "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap," Jesus said (Luke 6:38). That doesn't necessarily mean that he will bless you with earthly wealth, but he promises that in one way or another your generosity will be matched and surpassed by his. You will never be able to outgive your Savior.

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld once said during one of his routines, "All things on earth only exist in different stages of becoming garbage. Your home is a garbage-processing center where you buy new things, bring them into your house, and slowly"—I'll clean up his language a bit—"slowly junk-ify them over time. This is your life." Take Christ out of the picture, and isn't that the truth? In fact, even with Christ in the picture, this is true to an extent. The things that we buy and bring into our home *are* used for a good purpose, to serve God and our neighbor, but they do turn into junk over time and eventually have to be thrown away or destroyed.

Think about it, brothers and sisters: The gospel work of God's kingdom is the *only* thing that we spend money on in this life that does *not* get junk-ified over time. The gospel work of God's kingdom is about saving souls eternally. It's that same work, that those before us supported with their money, that saved our souls. There is no more precious endeavor than that.

“[Christ] died for all, so that those who live would no longer live for themselves but for him, who died in their place and was raised again.” God fill us with his grace, that we may see what a precious thing it is to eat, to drink, to give, *to live* not for ourselves, but for our Savior. Amen.