

“Whose Is It?”

Joseph Foltz

Nazarene Theological Seminary

“As soon as the order went out, the Israelites generously gave the firstfruits of their grain, new wine, oil and honey and all that the fields produced. They brought a great amount, a tithe of everything” (2 Chronicles 31:5).

You could say that Hezekiah, the king of Judah during the time of this passage, had his work cut out for him. His father, Ahaz, had been a wicked king and idolatry became rampant during his reign. When Hezekiah took over upon his father’s death, he started to weed out the idolatry that existed in the land. It certainly wasn’t an easy task.

We become uncomfortable with talk of idolatry these days. Since we don’t make golden calves or bronze serpents, we think we are exempt from the types of idolatry that took Hezekiah so much time to weed out. Yet, we give things more importance in our hearts and lives than we do to God. We work long hours so that we can provide for our families. We hold back from our tithe a little so that we can afford a new car with all the latest amenities. We stop coming to church so we can pick up overtime at work or because we don’t believe in God anymore since it seems that He won’t provide for us anymore.

It’s also hard to talk about stewardship these days. These are tough economic times and they seem to be tough for everyone. In times like these, it’s much more popular to proclaim a prosperity gospel than to talk about stewardship and sacrifice as it is presented in the scripture. Steven S. Tuell notes this when commenting on this passage. He writes the following in his book First and Second Chronicles, Interpretation:

The principle that God shows generosity to the generous is found throughout Scripture...It is important, however, that this principle not be misunderstood: it is

2010 STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES SERMON SCHOLARSHIP WINNER
CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE
Joseph Foltz

no mystical get-rich quick scheme! To be sure, those who practice lifestyles of giving will tell you that God has blessed them with happiness and fulfillment. But, as Paul observes, we are given the blessings we receive in order that we might be able to give even more (2 Cor. 9:8). After all the universe is the Lord's; our giving is in truth only a giving back (see 1 Chr. 29:14). In Chronicles, as the people give generously, they find themselves generously blessed, so that they may in turn give all the more.¹

So even if we are blessed due to our generosity, we are only called to give more away. What's more, we live in a day and age when many like to claim that the church is really only after their money; however, stewardship is about more than money. It is also about time, talents, and everything we so often think we possess.

At times, it becomes easy for us to act as though it is a bad thing for Christians to have high-paying jobs where they make a great deal of money. This misses the point of stewardship. A story from the life of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, will be helpful at this point. Bo Cassell tells the following story in his book *Global Christianity: The Life We're Called to Live*:

On one cold, winter day, John Wesley went out and bought some pictures for his room. At the time he was teaching at Oxford University and enjoyed a good salary, much more than what he was used to growing up. He returned home to hang his pictures up when one of the chambermaids came to his door. Wesley noticed she had no coat or anything else to protect her from the cold except for the simple linen dress she wore. Wesley searched his pockets for some money to give her to buy a coat, but he found he did not have enough left. God began to convict his heart, reminding him that the money he had earlier used to purchase pictures for his room would more than have covered the cost of a coat for this woman. Wesley examined himself and asked himself, "Will your Master say,

¹ Steven S. Tuell. *First and Second Chronicles, Interpretation*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2001, 224.

2010 STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES SERMON SCHOLARSHIP WINNER
CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE
Joseph Foltz

‘Well done, good and faithful steward?’ You have adorned your walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold! O justice! O mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid?²

This incident changed Wesley’s lifestyle in terms of his use of money. Back in the 1700s, Wesley earned 30 pounds in the first year after this encounter (a pound being the British equivalent of one dollar). He found he could live off of a mere 28 pounds, so he gave away the other 2. The next year his income doubled to 60 pounds, but instead of increasing his standard of living and spending more on himself, Wesley continued to live on 28 pounds and gave away the remaining 32. The next year, he earned 90 pounds and gave away 62. The year after, he earned 120 pounds, giving away 92 pounds to the poor. At one point in his life he earned over 1,400 pounds (making him a very wealthy man in that day!), but still Wesley lived on the bare minimum and gave away the rest.

Wesley’s motto toward money was “*Earn* all you can, *save* all you can, so that you can *give* all you can.” His attitude was world-focused. He wasn’t satisfied with meeting only the minimum requirement of a 10 percent tithe to the church. Instead, he viewed his finances from a lifestyle approach—all of his money was God’s.

We need to follow Wesley’s example. As Christians, our goal should not be to earn as much money as we can so that we can continually upgrade our lifestyles and keep up with the Jones’. No, our call is to earn as much as we can so that we can give it in ways that will further what God is trying to do in the world.

Ultimately, what matters most is how we choose to view our possessions. Either we will possess them or they will possess us. If they possess us, we will constantly live our lives in the midst of the rat race that tells us that we need the biggest, newest, shiniest, most expensive kind of item x, so that we may once again feel that all is right in our world. If we possess *them*, however, we can recognize that all that we have or are

² Bo Cassell. *Global Christianity: The Life We’re Called to Live*. Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 1999, 46-47.

2010 STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES SERMON SCHOLARSHIP WINNER
CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE
Joseph Foltz

ever going to have is a gift from God that is given to us. We are entrusted with time, talents, and possessions with the hope that we will then use those gifts to further God's mission in the world to make Christlike disciples in the nations.

Being a steward doesn't mean giving all of your money to the church, however. While we do need to bring in our tithes to support the ministry, as we saw in today's passage, we can also spread our generosity around in ways that are equally appropriate. Perhaps we would want to donate money to organizations that help provide clean water to places that do not have it currently. Maybe we will want to sponsor a child in another part of the world. Maybe we will donate money to an organization within our local community that attempts to help those that are poor and need to have their basic material needs met. We are given this great task of using our resources wisely so that we can further God's mission in the world. Part of this is certainly helping to support the ministry of the church, but it must also include helping to develop grassroots movements that can provide help to those who may need it.

What are we to do with the wonderful freedom that we have been given? How can we make smart decisions on what we use our money to buy? We have already discussed the way that John Wesley chose to use his money. Cassell says the following:

Wesley also offered four challenging questions to help people determine how to spend their money when faced with a purchasing opportunity:

1. In spending this money, am I acting like I own it, or am I acting like the Lord's trustee?
2. What scripture requires me to spend this money this way?
3. Can I offer up this purchase as a sacrifice to the Lord?
4. Will God reward me for this expenditure at the resurrection of the just? ³

It certainly isn't easy to be a faithful steward of our gifts. It is far easier to hoard our time, talents, money and other possessions so that we continue to accumulate and

³ Cassell, 95.

2010 STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES SERMON SCHOLARSHIP WINNER
CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE
Joseph Foltz

amass things without much loss on our own part. It is easier to waste hours playing a video game or watching sports or TV than it is to go to a soup kitchen and volunteer. It is easier to save some money for a rainy day rather than taking lunch to the homeless person you see on your way to work every day.

As Christians, we are called to more. We are called to put all the areas of our life under the Lordship of Christ. We have a good model for this in the example from the life of John Wesley. We can all probably think of others who have lived a life where they considered all of life a gift from God that was to be used for His purposes. We are called to do the same. May God's grace guide us as we seek to do His will.