

Entrusted with Much

by Ray Linder

My wife and I were out walking one evening when we encountered a scene that brought back memories. Our neighbors' faces displayed a mixture of pride and horror as they put their teenage daughter, grinning ear to ear, behind the wheel of a car for the first time.

I've often thought that God may watch us handle life's events with a similar sense of concern. He has given us tools to build His kingdom — wealth, talent, position, and power — and expects us to use them responsibly. In Luke 12:48, Jesus warned His disciples, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." This is the basic principle of stewardship, the responsibility we have to manage the life and property we've been given by God for His plans and purposes.

Jesus' simple admonition raises two important questions. The first is, *With what have I been entrusted?* Jesus teaches us we have three primary resources at our disposal. In Matthew 24:45-51, He commands us to use time responsibly. In Matthew 25:14-30, He teaches us that good and faithful service is measured according to our abilities. In Luke 16:10-12, He links trustworthy handling of worldly wealth to our fitness for handling the greater riches of His kingdom. *Time*, *talent*, and *treasure* are the three earthly resources God gives us to accomplish His eternal purposes.

The second question is, *Since I have much, what am I being entrusted to do?* The precepts for a successful Christian life can be summarized by Jesus' Great Commission, commanding us to be His witnesses to others throughout the earth, making disciples of all nations.

Stewardship, properly understood, is a lifestyle.

Just giving money is not enough if we are to be good and faithful stewards. While generous financial giving is an important aspect of Christian life, we are to use all our resources as an earthly investment in the heavenly kingdom. Through our lifestyles the world may witness God's loving character in action by our effective and proper use of talent, position, and power.

The Bible cites many examples of individuals who furthered God's purposes through their trustworthy stewardship in these areas:

Lydia was a renowned trader whose home was a place of encouragement for the early church. Onesiphorus, whose name means "profit-bringer," was cited by Paul for his service to the Christians in Ephesus.

Esther, Nehemiah, and Daniel are classic examples from the Old Testament of God's people effectively using their positions of power, even under adverse circumstances. If we are to be like them, we must expand our view of stewardship.

To be Christ's wise and faithful servants, we must recognize that we have been given much more than money to build His Kingdom. Indeed, the apostle Paul urges us to be living sacrifices, worshiping God by putting all of our time, energy, and abilities at His disposal and direction.

Stewardship, properly understood, is a lifestyle. To win and influence people to the gospel of Jesus Christ means we must see all we've been given — our time and talents, positions and power, as well as our money — as entrusted to us to represent God's character and nature to others.

Having a stewardship lifestyle entails a full-life attitude that drives us to work vocationally; spend money purposefully; and use time opportunely.

WORK VOCATIONALLY

Early in the 20th century, Milton S. Hershey became one of the wealthiest men of his day. But working to amass wealth was not how Hershey defined his life. He measured his financial success in terms of what he could accomplish for others. He built a town that provided pleasant living conditions for his employees, a medical center, a family amusement park, and a school for underprivileged children. Milton Hershey delighted in making chocolate, but to him, work was primarily a means by which to serve God and provide enjoyment to others.

Vocation often refers to one's occupation. The term comes from the Latin word meaning "to call." More than just a job, it is responding to a summons to a course of action. Because God created man to work, we should view our occupations as callings from God.

When God calls, it is always to purposes higher than ourselves. According to Douglas Sherman and William Hendricks, authors of *Your Work Matters to God*, the Great Commandments (Matt. 22:37-40), contain the essence of God's purposes for work:

- Loving others by serving them, through providing necessary products and services to our customers and co-workers in a Christlike manner. Loving others also includes seeing our work as the means to give to them financially.
- Loving God by obediently doing what He wants done. An example of this is the building of the tabernacle, where God designated tasks according to each person's abilities (Exod. 35:30-36:1). Jesus affirmed this principle in the parable of the talents, as the master assigned work and expected results in accordance with each servant's abilities. When we work vocationally, God is glorified as we use our gifts and talents obediently and effectively.

SPEND PURPOSEFULLY

Does money buy happiness? When adults are surveyed about their satisfaction with their lives, they indicate the least satisfaction with the amount of money they have. People think being short of money hampers them most in their desire for the “good life.”

Yet King Solomon, the wealthiest man in history, found that money didn’t buy him happiness. Limited only by his imagination, Solomon constructed vineyards, houses, gardens and parks, and acquired herds, slaves, singers, and a harem. Not until the end of his life did he realize that money spent outside of God’s purposes does not buy happiness.

God wants us to view our spending of money as an investment that will bring others into His kingdom. This can happen on two levels:

On a personal level, we spend money in a way that recognizes our responsibility to care for those within our family circle (1 Tim. 5:8). This includes appropriate and affordable attention to both physical needs and material possessions, which we view as gifts from God that keep us “occupied with gladness of heart” (Eccl. 5:20).

On a social level, the way that we spend money has a provocative effect on those around us. Sociologists have long observed that people use their neighbors or co-workers as a frame of reference when making financial decisions. Paul said, however, that comparing ourselves with others is not wise (2 Cor. 10:12).

As Christians, we should strive for lifestyles of contented limits rather than lifestyles of competitive luxury. Our lives should present a contrast to the prevailing culture, so others might wonder why we live differently from others in our social circles.

In the cosmopolitan, affluent city of Antioch, Jesus’ followers were first called Christians. It was a derisive term that called attention to how the lives of Jesus’ disciples differed from others’. Yet today’s Christians are essentially no different from non-believers when it comes to workaholicism, materialism, marital money conflict, and excess consumer debt. If this is so, then we have lost the purpose of money.

With personal incomes in our nation at record levels, we have an extraordinary opportunity to spend this wealth in ways that attract the culture to Jesus Christ. Rather than seeking to buy the “good life” for ourselves, we can spend money in ways that interest others in eternal life.

USE TIME OPPORTUNELY

With nearly 1,000 restaurants that generate \$1 billion in annual sales, S. Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-fil-A restaurants, is clearly a successful businessman. But what really distinguishes him are opportune uses of time. For 45 years, he has taught a Sunday-school class

for 13-year-old boys, because he believes it may be the last time he can deeply touch their lives. He also keeps his stores closed on Sundays, an extraordinary move in the restaurant business.

This opportune use of time has proved to be profitable. One of those 13-year-olds, an orphan, is now a vice-president at Chick-fil-A. The firm's employee turnover rate is an exceptionally low 4 percent, giving Cathy the benefit of a stable base of loyal, long-term employees.

In our fast-paced world, it is easy to fill all of our time with activity. Time marches on in minutes, hours, days, and weeks. It passes through winter, spring, summer, and fall. The Greeks called this *chronos*, a kind of time measured as a quantity or duration. Each of us is given an unknown quantity of this time with which to use our talents. The Scriptures exhort us to be wise stewards over it, such as Chick-fil-A restaurants honoring Sunday as a day of rest.

But there is another kind of time, the *right* time, when the light is green, all the pieces are in place, and the moment is at hand. This is the time to act, an opportunity to seize what the Greeks called *kairos*. We are each called to critical opportunities for decisive action for serving Christ's kingdom, like Truett Cathy's seizing the opportunity of teaching Sunday school to influence adolescent boys.

The prophet Samuel was dedicated at birth to God's service and spent most of his lifetime in ministry. Paul's life was very different, having fought against Christianity, then taking a sudden turn to help establish the new faith. Esther's life was distinguished by her seizing one significant moment.

What is common to all three, and what we can share with them, is the dedication of both large quantities and key moments of time to God. Although Samuel's entire life was set apart for God, his response to a late-night encounter with God set the stage for his ministry throughout Israel. Paul's life was forever changed by Jesus' appearance to him on the Damascus road. Esther risked death to take advantage of one opportunity to rescue her people.

How can we be trustworthy users of the time and opportunities God gives us? First, we must be concerned foremost with God's will being done and see every action from this perspective. We can constantly ask ourselves if what we are doing, or how we are doing it, reflects God's character.

Second, we must be abiding with God, searching His heart through prayer, learning about Him through His Word, and encouraging ourselves by the presence of other Christians. The more time we spend with Him, the more we will view time from His eternal perspective.

Finally, having a realistic understanding of our God-given talents (Rom. 12:3) helps us to use our time as God intended. A variety of tools, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Strong's Interest Inventory, or the DISC profile, can help us assess our God-given skills and the

environments where they can thrive. These assessments, with insight from others, can make us aware of the talents that God specifically designed us to spend our time using (Eph. 2:10).

While at times God challenges us outside of our comfort zones, studies indicate that two out of three people are devoting their employment or volunteer time to environments poorly suited to their gifts and interests. God has arranged our skills according to His will and to round out one another's (1 Cor. 12:18). Stewardship of time means recognizing the kinds of situations God has designed us to concentrate on over time and to hear His voice when He directs our talents to special purposes for a unique seasons. We expend our time for Him most effectively doing what we were designed to do.

LIVE EFFECTIVELY

Should God be concerned about giving you the reins of wealth, power, and position? Can He trust you to handle effectively the talents and time you have as Christ's disciple? Is your life a living sacrifice, one that is filled with the love of God and that makes the world want to know more about His wonderful character?

As stewards, we must look past generous financial giving and set ourselves to live effectively with all we've been given. Then, having been entrusted with much, we can receive our master's commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

Ray Linder is assistant pastor at Cornerstone Chapel, Leesburg, Va., and author of *What Will I Do With My Money?* from Northfield Publishing, an imprint of Moody Press.