

A person stands on a rocky outcrop with their arms raised in a gesture of praise or joy. The background is a bright, clear sky, and a large rock overhang is visible in the upper left corner. The overall scene conveys a sense of freedom and gratitude.

FROM GRATEFUL TO GENEROUS:

**Stewardship Sermons by
John H. Neufeld**

Abundance Canada and
Mennonite Church Canada

From Gratitude to Generosity

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ISBN: 978-0-9680829-7-3

Published in Canada by Abundance Canada
12-1325 Markham Road, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 4J6

Printed and bound in Canada
by Christian Press, Winnipeg

Contents

Preface.....	i
Introduction.....	1
I. Getting Our Bearings.....	3
II. Ancient Memories Revived.....	10
III. Talents, Trust, and Risk.....	18
IV. Affluence, Attitudes, and Action.....	26
V. Excel in this Also.....	40
VI. Much has been Given.....	48

Preface

“Stewardship” is one of those words that few people in the church get very excited about, especially when it refers to stewardship of financial resources. To a jaded parishioner sitting in the pews, when a preacher talks of money stewardship, there are two likely responses: “the preacher is trying to make me feel guilty for not giving more to the church,” or “the preacher is looking for a raise.” Similarly, a pastor contemplating a sermon on stewardship will likely respond in one of two ways: “I don’t know enough about money to preach on it,” and “I don’t want to hurt or embarrass any of my parishioners, so I won’t talk about money.” Often, then, stewardship is relegated to issues other than money. Stewardship of time, stewardship of relationships, stewardship of the earth and its natural resources, and other forms of stewardship, are fair game for sermons and church discussion. But please, let’s not talk about money.

The fact of the matter is that stewardship makes sense when we’re talking about money. Money lies at the root of our (western) value/exchange system. Money tends to be how we measure time, relationships, and the earth’s resources. Without money, we fear we will perish. With too much money, we can exercise ruthless power and control over the lives of others. With just enough, we can be content – but we tend to get wrapped up in questions of just how much is “enough,” and how can you plan to ensure that you have “just enough” in the future?

At their heart, these questions and musings are deeply spiritual. The Bible is filled with references to money, to assets, and to greed. It is appropriate to discuss money issues in the church. Whether from the pulpit, in education classes, in small groups or among friends, we need to break the taboo on speaking money language. We need to hear about God’s intentions for our property and assets.

John Neufeld is a former pastor, educator, and college president. In the following series of sermons, first preached in his home congregation (First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba), he tackled the subject of money and God head-on. His words carry the weight of authority – his keen insight into biblical principles and his familiarity with our modern cultural obsession with demanding more and better for ourselves, combine to create a timely and relevant series. Elsie Rempel, director of Christian Education and Nurture for Mennonite Church Canada, has added a series of questions for each of the sermons that John has written. Together they have created a significant resource for pastors, for church leaders, and for parishioners. Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Foundation of Canada have partnered to present this resource to their constituencies and churches.

This book is a resource for pastors preparing sermons on money stewardship, as well as a resource for group and individual study. While relevant sermons can never escape becoming somewhat dated, the insights and topical relevance of these sermons will continue to inspire Mennonites and Christians of all stripes and sizes for years to come.

– *Dave Bergen, Executive Secretary*
Christian Formation, Mennonite Church Canada

– *Erwin Warkentin, General Manager*
Mennonite Foundation of Canada

Acknowledgements

Many thanks are due to the people who worked to transform the spoken sermons into book form. Melissa Miller edited the sermons. Elsie Rempel wrote the session responses. The cover design is created by Juliana Fast of Redhouse Design.

Introduction

Times of rapid change, combined with an increased emphasis on materialism and individualism, present a profound and subtle danger to the Christian church at the beginning of this century. Some sixty years ago or so, we were much more a separate people, consciously in the world but not of it. We were reminded again and again that we were to be separate from the world. Nowadays, we are much more assimilated and acculturated and rarely do we hear the challenge not to be conformed to this world. Even as we enjoy many of the incredible benefits change has provided for us, we may have succumbed to a danger Israel was warned against centuries ago.

As recorded in Deuteronomy 8 the Lord urged Israel not to forget God in times of prosperity. "When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery." Like Israel we are in danger of amnesia, enjoying our prosperity and forgetting our true calling.

Perhaps this is the time to consider afresh the challenge of Romans 12:1-2 where Paul urges everyone, in light of God's mercy, "Do not be conformed but to be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." The challenge is to keep on being transformed and to keep on resisting conformity to the culture in which we live – a culture that would "squeeze us into its mold."

The cultural scripts that we are exposed to have a potentially insidious influence on us, shaping our thinking, our values, our priorities. The challenge we

face is to allow our lives, our imagination, our values, and our priorities to be shaped and re-scripted by God's Spirit and Word.

I hope these six sermons on stewardship (what we do after we say we believe) will help us deal with the dangers of prosperity and amnesia so that we may "take hold of the life that is really life" (1 Timothy 6:19b). Being faithful stewards of all that we have received is the way in which we concretize our faith and escape the snare of materialism, covetousness and selfishness. "Wealth's grip on us can be broken; wealth can be 'clothed with grace.'" (Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power*)

Lord Jesus, teach me to be generous;
teach me to serve you as you deserve,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labor and not to seek reward,
except that of knowing that I do your will.

Amen.

(St. Ignatius Loyola)

– John H. Neufeld
Winnipeg, Manitoba
May 2007

I. Getting Our Bearings

Romans 12:1-13

I gladly accepted the invitation to write a series of sermons on the theme of stewardship. I like the subject. It challenges me. It takes me along paths I might not choose to go. I hope that my remarks will lead to a deeper understanding of stewardship.

I accepted the invitation for two specific reasons. My first reason was that I had read a current survey from a Mennonite church that indicated that 70 percent of respondents thought that the topic of stewardship was important or very important. Less encouraging is that 53 percent of those responding were not satisfied with their church's performance in this area. Secondly, I accepted the offer to develop these sermons because I was recently asked to lead a seminar on stewardship for pastors and church leaders.

When people hear the word stewardship, they react in different ways. Some have the urge to get up and run. Some endure the necessary barrage of words but close the gate to their hearts and minds. Some see "\$-\$" instead of "s-s" in "\$teward\$hip," and what do they do? They make sure their wallets are safe and their cheque books are closed. Eventually this series on stewardship will touch on money, but the teaching is much broader and deeper than that. Stewardship touches all of life.

I assumed that I would find useful material on stewardship in predictable places. Not so. I was a little surprised that the four-volume *Mennonite Encyclopedia* has no entry on stewardship. Nor does it appear in the index of *Mennonites in Canada*, though *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* does have an article on it. In the two-volume *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* by Mennonite Tom Finger, there are only three references to stewardship. Perhaps it was previously assumed that, steward-

ship was covered by discipleship. (A bibliography of Mennonite books on stewardship is available at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/112). On the internet I found that stewardship, quite apart from Christian faith, has become a common and accepted term in our society, with 53,581 listings.

I was introduced to the subject in Vancouver over 40 years ago when Milo Kaufmann, an American Mennonite preacher, gave a series of messages that were later published in a book called *The Challenge of Christian Stewardship*.

What is stewardship? According to Douglas J. Hall, professor of Christian studies at McGill University, stewardship is “a Biblical symbol come of age” (*The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*). In a major study completed by the Lutheran Church in the 1960s, stewardship is described as a “creative leitmotiv with which to think about our life under God” (Helge Brattgard, *God’s Stewards*). I like to paraphrase a definition by John H. Westerhoff III, “Stewardship is the link between what we believe and how we live” (*Building God’s People in a Materialistic Society*).

The soil in which stewardship is rooted

The specifics of Christian stewardship grow in the fertile soil of a number of Biblical passages. Stewardship speaks to some of the most important questions we have:

- ^ How are we to be in the world?
- ^ What does it mean to be in our culture, and yet not to be of it?
- ^ Where do we find solid ground on which to stand?
- ^ What fires our imagination and motivates us to act in certain ways?
- ^ What does it mean that the Bible speaks of us as “strangers and pilgrims”?
- ^ How do we get our bearings so that we have the capacity to withstand two dangers we face, either to conform to, or to escape from the world?

Let’s consider the soil of Romans 12:1-13. Here’s how Paul begins, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Being a steward is first and foremost our chosen response to what God has done for us. This is clear right at the outset because Paul begins with “I

appeal . . .” An appeal is something that must be responded to in one way or another. I see four possibilities.

- ⤴ We could ignore the appeal, acting as though it had not been heard.
- ⤴ We can respond with a “yes.”
- ⤴ We can respond with a “no.”
- ⤴ We can respond with “not yet.”

Furthermore, we can respond with varying degrees of enthusiasm or even with resistance. In the preceding chapters of Romans 1-11, Paul has presented the essence of the gospel.

He has emphasized God’s amazing grace toward all humanity. He has shown the way of salvation through Christ. He has written about the gift of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life.

In chapter 12, Paul comes down squarely on the need for a **response** to all that God has been doing in history. Becoming and being a steward is one possible response to God’s grace, to all that God has challenged us with and given us.

The response Paul is calling for is all inclusive. All of life is included; nothing is left outside its scope. He pleads for nothing less than a total giving of ourselves. In his words, a “spiritual sacrifice” on the altar of worship is required, a total commitment of life to God. Nothing is to be held back.

What we are going to be talking about and dealing with is first and foremost a matter of the heart, a matter of personal commitment based on understanding. It is a matter of worship! It is a matter of responding to the grace that has been given by God in Christ.

During the course of life, we may feel the tug of the Spirit and the challenge of scripture in response to particular situations in our lives. Each of us has the choice as to how and to what degree we will respond. And during the course of our Christian pilgrimage we will respond in varying degrees, sometimes more fully, sometimes less.

Presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice, in an act of worship, will lead to other things outside of worship. Paul assumes that a whole-life commitment to God will have an impact not only at the center, the heart, but everywhere else as well. “Do not be conformed to this world,” he says, “but be transformed” (Romans 12:2). Although Paul has written wonderful theology and doctrine, he has not forgotten where we are situated – in the world. He knows what’s going on in life and he does not want only to speak abstractly

or appear out of touch with daily life.

Paul does have a distinct view of the world, the culture, in which we find ourselves. He assumes that the world, the down-to-earth context in which we live, **has a grip on us that is in conflict with the intentions God has for us as stewards.**

In earlier times, we Mennonites saw our lives as separate from “the world,” but that emphasis has become muted in recent decades. In the last 50 years, we have become acculturated. Whereas earlier, separation was combined with being “strangers and pilgrims” in the world, now we rarely, if ever, hear about it.

Paul is telling us that, given the culture-faith tension, the steward’s life is not “a cake walk.” It is a struggle. It is not a “once for all time,” punctilious struggle, but ongoing throughout life. The tense of the Greek words for “transformed” and “not conformed” both imply ongoing action. This means that the text must be read something like this: “Keep on not being conformed” and “Keep on being transformed.”

This is not to be put on the back burner, ever! It is something we give attention to throughout life.

The challenge before us as stewards is to engage in the work of transformation. “Be transformed” is the phrase. How do we work at being transformed, at not being conformed?

Worship is the essential beginning, but it is not the end of the matter. We are **not** to be conformed to the world, that is we are not to be shaped by what everyone else around us in our culture is doing, valuing, and imagining. We are **not** to allow the culture to squeeze us into its mold. (J.B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*, Romans 12:1-2)

Our minds are to be renewed so that we can discern what God’s will is for us. We are to become involved in a whole new way of thinking, valuing, imagining, and acting. This suggests that knowing God’s will for our lives as disciple-stewards is not something that comes “out of the blue,” suddenly or even miraculously. It happens over time.

Being conformed to this world – its culture, its values, its imagination – is easy, one of the easiest things in the world. It comes naturally, gradually over time without our conscious attention. It is part of the socialization process

that happens to children in our families. It happens to young people and adults, all of us, simply by living in our setting. Because we grow up in our culture and feel at home in it, we may not even be aware that we have been conformed to this world, and to what degree, without some outside help.

Being transformed, on the other hand, is one of the most difficult and troublesome things we will ever undertake. As I have already said, being transformed is not a step taken once and never needing to be repeated. We are to keep on being transformed. We are to keep on **not** being conformed.

Being transformed will not happen on its own. It can and will happen gradually over time, but only if we give it some conscious attention. Even praying for this transformation will not bring it about. We will have to do more than pray. We will have to give attention to those things that can lead to transformation. We will have to make decisions, little ones and bigger ones, which will tilt the balance in the direction of nonconformity, of living with a radically new imagination, of adopting the bias that is rooted in the strange new world of the bible, of becoming engrafted into the memories, the words, the virtues, the attitudes and actions, the faith and culture of those who have entered the kingdom of God.

Now some may accuse us of being biased. That is true. We are not neutral. We are biased in one way or the other, biased towards nonconformity, towards transformation.

The path to transformation

The transformation process occurs, as Paul says, “by the renewal of your mind.” It involves discernment, which is an activity of the mind, and includes such activities as:

- ⤴ Figuring things out
- ⤴ Naming the assumptions we live by
- ⤴ Checking our perceptions
- ⤴ Trying to see clearly
- ⤴ Recognizing things that are kingdom-like
- ⤴ Making good judgments about things in our culture as well as things in our faith tradition.

Paul assumes that the work of discernment and transformation leads to something – that we will be able to figure out what God’s will and intention is, what is good, acceptable, and perfect. This lies at the heart of what it means to be stewards.

One of our criteria as stewards is to “be faithful” to that which we know is God’s will and intention for us. In order to have half a chance of being faithful, we will need to know God’s will and intention – for life in the created order, the earth and nonhuman life, as well as for human life, and for life in the order of redemption, in the church, the body of Christ.

What is expected of stewards? To know, to understand, and to do the will of God. Or, to elaborate, to figure out, and keep on figuring out, what is good, what is acceptable, and what is perfect! This is the agenda before us – to use our minds individually and corporately to discern God’s intention and to devise wise ways of dealing with opportunities to further God’s cause on earth and in the church. That is why the conversation, the discernment has to occur in many settings.

Fortunately, this work of discernment, of doing the work necessary for transformation, is not done by individuals in isolation but by believers in community. Paul speaks of “everyone among you,” “we, who are many, are one body in Christ,” and “individually we are members one of another” (Romans 12:3-5). Notice Paul’s emphasis that believers are part of a “peculiar” people, a community with a bias.

There are differences between us, but also commonalities. We have a variety of gifts, which have been given to us, and these varied gifts are to be used as an expression of our being non-conformed to the world, transformed into the shape of kingdom people on earth.

We are called to love and to outdo one another in showing honor and mutual affection. “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Romans 12:3-5).

Each of the stewards is uniquely gifted. Having given themselves to God in worship, being involved in the process of renewal and transformation, and

growing in the capacity to discern what is God's will and intention – each of the stewards and each of us – has a unique gift to offer. “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord” (Romans 12: 6-8).

Imagine the church as a community of stewards; imagine our congregation as a community of stewards, all responding to this challenge to be renewed in our minds, working to figure out God's will and intention. Imagine everyone seeking to exhibit these traits – having a hopeful attitude each day, each year; being patient when we suffer; praying for each other and for the world; actively seeing and meeting other's needs and not only looking after our own needs. Imagine everyone contributing to the needs of the saints and extending hospitality.

This is how we are called to be in the world and in the church. **This** is the rich subsoil in which Christian stewardship can flourish, forging a strong link between the faith we profess and the lives we live.

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. *John Neufeld has gathered several ways of describing stewardship, including, “a Biblical symbol come of age,” “a creative leitmotiv with which to think about our life under God,” and “the link between what we believe and how we live.” Which of these descriptions appeals to your understanding of stewardship? What other descriptions could you add to this descriptive list?*
2. *Being stewards involves our chosen responses to what God has done for us. According to Neufeld, it presents us with a challenge that includes all aspects of our lives. Does such a broad view of stewardship help or hinder us in the challenging task of talking openly about how we share our financial resources with the church?*
3. *Being transformed as Christians includes discerning God's will through a process of knowing, understanding, and doing. Reflect on*

II. Ancient Memories Revived

Genesis 1:26-31, Psalm 8

The psalmist asked, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them?” We find many ways of answering this question, sometimes with more questions.

- ^ What are human beings?
- ^ What is our model human being?
- ^ What are our basic attitudes to the environment, to others, to ourselves?
- ^ How would a model human being rank things from very important to not important?
- ^ What are the dreams that nurture our view of what a human being ought to be like?

This is another way of getting at the topic of stewardship. It’s not only what a person does but what a person is, and what a person thinks he or she is, that matters.

Many people assume that stewardship is concerned with only the three “Ts” – our time, our talents, and our treasure. But stewardship is more than **time**, **talents**, and **treasure**. It is also **thinking**, the way we **think** about our identity – who we are in relation to God, who we are in relation to ourselves, who we are in relation to other humans, who we are in relation to nonhuman creatures, who we are in relation to the environment.

In this message we explore Psalm 8 and the ancient story of creation to find some clues as to what God intended us – men, women, and children – to be.

Discovering scripture's particular attitude to life

In the previous sermon, we stressed the importance of transformation, of learning to say yes to some things, and no to others. Paul challenged us to keep on not being conformed to the culture around us, but rather to keep on being transformed by the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:2), so that we would know God's intentions and commit ourselves to them accordingly.

This whole process involves us in a struggle. We will have to discern what is in keeping with God's intention and what is not. We are challenged continually to follow the ways of Christ, even though the culture we live in pushes us to follow other ways. Scripture challenges us to know ourselves as stewards, to know ourselves to be entrusted with God's gifts of creation, life, relationships, opportunities, resources, education, experience, talents, and time. Scripture offers us a particular **attitude** toward life.

But our culture wants us to have a different attitude. One writer uses the expression "a clash of narratives" to describe what we're up against (William Willimon, in a 1993 University of Winnipeg lecture). Your imagination and mine can be filled with many other notions about what it means to be human, and whatever fills our imagination will be translated into life – into values, priorities, perspectives, and lifestyle.

What we are going to find in Genesis may not be easy on us. I'm not talking about creation versus evolution or anything like that. That is not the focus. What we are focusing on is the assumptions, the belief system that lies beneath this ancient story, and is deeply embedded in our memories.

What are the "narratives" our culture would have us believe?

- ⤴ That we are consumers – "I shop therefore I am," and "I came, I stayed, I did a little shopping."
- ⤴ That we are self-made individuals who live by the motto, "Look out for *numero uno*."
- ⤴ That we are masters of our environment and we can milk it dry and exploit it for our immediate uses. After all, we are to have dominion.
- ⤴ That we are owners of all our stuff – "I own what I have, I've earned it, it's mine to do with as I please."
- ⤴ That we are creatures who are time-bound and oriented-to-the-material, and our goal is to acquire as many things as possible: "The one who has the most toys at the end, wins."

To quote Jerry Reinsdorf, sportscaster for the Chicago Bulls, speaking on TV at the 1993 (first) retirement of Michael Jordan, “The American dream is to reach a point in your life where you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do and can do everything that you do want to do.”

So the psalmist’s question is not at all out of date. It **is** an old question but it is also contemporary. Though it comes from ancient times and an entirely different setting, today we are still asking and trying to answer the question. Into the sometimes appealing visions and alluring sounds of our culture, the book of Genesis asks us to hear another voice and listen to another narrative. This ancient text offers a very realistic and hopeful vision in response to the psalmist’s question, “What are human beings?”

In a nutshell, these first two chapters of the bible proclaim something that is quite different than what our culture offers us. The vision of Genesis is that human beings are **stewards**, entrusted with incredible gifts, responsibilities, and opportunities; challenged to be in the world and in relation to each other as God the creator is to the world and to humanity. This is what we are being asked to believe.

God: owner/creator

The first thing under-girding stewardship in the bible is that since God is the creator, God is the owner of all. This conviction that God is owner/creator is not accepted by many people in our time. People claim that what they have is their own. “I’ve earned it, I’ve worked for it, it’s mine and I can do with it what I want, when I want, and how I want.” We may pretend to be owners, but in reality we know it is not ours. God the owner/creator is the one who gives humanity the space and the environment in which to live.

“God started with nothing and made a world, made this great, grand, and glorious world – and everything in it belongs to God alone. Yes, everything in this world belongs to God; it’s God’s because God made it. The trees, grass, mountains, rivers, men and women, the ability to think, to talk, to walk, to see, to hear, and the ability to transform that which God has given into other things such as material, energy, and food – all these come from God. To work and to use the gifts of life, to sing, to draw, to act, and to think, are all given of God. Yes, the list is endless. All that God has made and allowed us to use and/or transform, comes from our God, who made everything” (Everett S. Reynolds quoted by Ronald E. Vallet, *Stepping Stones of the Steward*).

God and the world

In his book *Creative Stewardship*, Richard Cunningham says that Biblical faith has God closely tied to creation, to the material world. In the eyes of some religions and philosophies, the fact that God, the eternal Spirit, is so closely connected with the material world is a big problem. Even for some Christians, the material world has been a problem. What is of the spirit and of the mind is valued and cherished, while what is material and having to do with the body is disparaged.

Genesis challenges the notion that the material world is not important to God and not important to spiritual people. At least five times in Genesis 1, we come across the words, “and it was good,” and at the end, considering everything that God had made, we read “and indeed, it was very good.”

How’s that for attitude? God, who is Spirit, affirms, blesses, and applauds the creation of the material world. This is quite different from other views. According to Cunningham, Hinduism views the world as transitory and harmful for man’s ultimate goal of reaching nirvana and in Buddhism, the world is viewed as unreal or illusory. Christians on the other hand, see the world as “substantial and real, and greatly valued.” The world is not an evil place from which we need to escape.

Cunningham continues with the following points:

- ⤴ We see the world not as an end in itself but within the ultimate purposes of God. We value the world without regarding it as ultimate value.
- ⤴ We see evil in the world, but do not concede defeat to evil.
- ⤴ We affirm the world’s original goodness. We recognize its fallenness, and we believe in its justification in Christ, and its future transformation.

In summary, we are “called to value the world, but not too much; affirm its intrinsic goodness without ignoring its evil, and to recognize its evil without denying its goodness. The Christian neither deifies nor disparages the world” (*Creative Stewardship*).

Humans: created “in the image of God”

The question is raised by the psalmist, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them

with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the seas” (Psalms 8:3-8).

In this psalm, human beings are depicted as “a little lower than God,” “crowned with glory and honor” and having been given “dominion over the works of God’s hands,” and “all things under their feet.” This is the only passage other than Genesis 1 where humans are depicted as having “dominion.” Although in a different form, it echoes the basic view found in Genesis 1 and 2.

At the end of it, God’s name is enthusiastically praised with “How majestic is your name in all the earth.” In other words, how wonderful that you, the creator, have not only created an amazing universe and many nonhuman creatures to play in it, but you have also created human beings just “a little lower than you.” What a high view of humanity! (No worthless worm theology here!)

Let’s turn back to Genesis looking for its answer to what it means to be human. I offer the following six points:

- ▲ Created: “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26,27)
- ▲ Given oversight: “have dominion over” (nonhuman creatures) used twice (Genesis 1:26,28) and closely tied to “subdue the earth” (1:28)
- ▲ Given responsibilities: “to till and keep the garden” and to name the creatures (Genesis 2:15,19)
- ▲ Dependent on nature: “have given you every plant for food” (Genesis 1:29), and created “from the dust of the ground” (2:7)
- ▲ Limited freedom: “may freely eat of every tree of the garden but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Genesis 2:16,17)
- ▲ The need of the man, who was created first, for a true partner, “a helper as his partner,” not a relation of subordination but of mutuality and interdependence with “woman” (Genesis 2:18)

Humans are created “in the image of God,” sharing the same environment, and depending on God as other creatures, yet distinct from all other creatures, and having a different status. Humans are made for fellowship and reciprocity and with a capability for responding, and are **made for free obedience**.

Being in the image of God, places a limitation on the role of subduing and having dominion over creation and creatures. Humans are to manage crea-

tion according to the image of God, to model God's management style. Humanity is to represent God's own concern for the goodness of creation.

Humans are given oversight, to "have dominion . . . subdue . . . and tend the garden." Giving humans dominion, oversight, and management is an expression of confidence and trust by God in those made in the image of God. Humans, in communion and cooperation with God, represent God on the face of the earth, and share God's work in the world.

In Genesis 2, we see that humans are not self-sufficient. They need plants for food and enjoyment and they need other creatures for companionship. God's instruction to till the garden and name the creatures implies responsibility for the well-being of nonhuman creatures. Humans, plants, and animals are all created for harmonious relationship.

Humans are given dominion, told to till the ground and name the animals, but are given no hints as to **how** to go about exercising dominion. Genesis does not specify how dominion is to be exercised. The what is a given. The how is left up to us. The connection of **the how** with **the what** hinges on humanity's accountability to glorify God by loving God and others. Humans exercise dominion in God's world, by acting as God's representative in the created order, living creatively in the authority delegated by God, and finally, being responsible to God for our actions (Cunningham, *Creative Stewardship*).

The strong language of dominion and subduing has been twisted and misused for a long time. It has been used to justify exploitation and rape of the environment and the creatures living in it. "Humans have often sought to exploit nature for short-term purposes, heedless of long-term effects on other creatures, including themselves" (Tom Finger, *Theology, An Eschatological Approach, Volume II*). This is a moral issue.

Let's see Genesis 2 as a companion to chapter 1. In chapter 2, humans are gardeners, caring for, cultivating, tending the environment. Eugene Roop suggests we are called to "actively engage in shaping the world," that we are to be "energetic managers in God's image who go about their work with the tender touch of the gardener" (*Let the Rivers Run*).

Limited freedom and accountability

Humans are free but not absolutely free. We are free within limits. Free to **be human**, not free to **be God**. The prohibition to eat from the tree (Genesis 2:17)

reminds us that we are creatures, not deities; we are stewards who remain responsible to our creator. Freedom and responsibility within limits are the essential elements in human personal and social life. Freedom within limits implies accountability for free choices as we see in Genesis 3.

Freedom **for** God can be twisted into freedom **from** God. Mortals fail in their stewardship. They misuse their freedom and turn from worshiping the creator to worshiping creation. They are made for personal relationship with God, but they declare independence. They are made for love and care of other humans but destroy relationships. But accountability is maintained when Adam is expelled from the garden. Through it all, God does not give up on humans.

In conclusion, these first two chapters of Genesis introduce us to the basic convictions of stewardship.

- ▲ God is owner/creator.
- ▲ God has confidence in humans.
- ▲ God endows humans.
- ▲ God gives humans latitude to do their thing.

Humans are called to be faithful, caring stewards of their relationships with other humans, with nonhuman creatures, with creation, and with God, according to God's intention for the good of creation, and to the glory of God.

This leaves us with a question or two, questions which reach back to the transformation language of Paul in Romans 12. Are we going to fill our imagination with the attitudes found in Genesis, or will we conform our attitudes about life to our culture? If we are willing to be transformed by the renewal of our minds on the basis of this ancient memory, that will have an impact on how we think, what we value, how we treat our environment, how we treat nonhuman creatures, and how we relate to others.

Let us allow this ancient vision to penetrate our hearts and minds. Reread it. Reflect on life in the light of this ancient story. Let us affirm the goodness of creation as this story does. Let us accept the awesome gift of freedom and responsibility given to us individually and as a human race. Let us never cease thanking God for having such confidence in us that God entrusts creation to humans – and gives us freedom to manage, to subdue, and to tend the garden. Let us see ourselves as stewards, gifted and entrusted with opportunity and a challenge – to manage, to subdue, to tend, and to relate to others – always with the attitude of our creating-saving God, in whose image we have been made.

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. *This sermon is full of questions that beg for discussion and reflection. In the opening set of questions we are invited to respond to the psalmist's questions with more of our own. What questions does the psalmist's question, "What are human beings, that you are mindful of them?" evoke in you? How do they compare to Neufeld's questions?*
2. *Make, or think of, a chart with four quadrants; one for each of the four "Ts" of time, talents, treasure, and thinking. Add this title to this chart: Humanity representing God's concern for the goodness of creation. Fill out how we could use these "Ts" in **free obedience to God** under this title.*
3. *Contrast the "narratives" of our culture, listed on page 11 to the vision of Genesis on page 12. Are there any points of overlap? Which narratives motivate your family and/or congregational life? Try and think of and journal examples. Once you have written for several minutes share some of these, in a way that respects privacy and confidentiality, as a exercise of confession.*
4. *Cunningham's three points, as listed on page 13 of this sermon, name polarities that could be placed on opposite ends of a continuum. Do so, and place your own worldview within that continuum.*
5. *Freedom for God, that leads to tending God's creation with our creative gifts, is an awe and praise inspiring thought. Reflect on this freedom and calling so that it leads you to a time of praise and thanksgiving. Your response might be your own psalm of praise, a song, or a silent tribute to our awesome God.*

III. Talents, Trust, and Risk

Matthew 25:14-28

Notice how the Matthew 25 text begins, “For it is as if...” We landed right in the middle of something, didn’t we? Matthew has just caught his breath after whatever he was writing about and continues with this new story, “For it is as if...”

Whenever we come across a preposition like “for,” we pause and wonder, “What is this about?” The opening phrase is not the most important thing here, but it does give us a couple of things to think about before we get into the meat of it. At least that’s what happened to me as I worked with it.

This beginning makes it very clear that the parable of the talents is part of the larger picture in Matthew 25. What comes before and probably what follows after are somehow connected to it.

The other two parables

In this part of Matthew, Jesus is facing death and giving last minute instructions to his confused and sometimes anxious disciples. He has talked with them about the end of the world and the need to be ready when the Son of Man returns. Here in chapter 25, he tells three longer parables—all on the theme of judgment.

The first is the familiar one about the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids. Five had oil and kept their lamps burning until the bridegroom arrived, and five ran out of oil and fell asleep. The point was – stay awake, be alert, you don’t know when the Lord will return.

The third parable is also familiar, the one in which sheep and goats are separated on the basis of how they had responded to the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. Here we read the well-known words,

“just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). And in between these two parables we find our text, a story about servants and talents.

The main point(s)

Now parables are slippery. We can try to have them say things that they were not intending to say. We can try to make some sense of every detail in them, to find possible hidden meanings. (There was a period of time when everything in parables was understood allegorically.) But that is not the best way to go.

Rather than attempting to analyze what this or that little detail might mean, the best way to deal with a parable is to ask, “What is its **main** point?” When I look at the three parables this way, several things stand out. Each of these three stories focuses on **consequences**.

- ⤴ You have oil and you get to be in the wedding party.
- ⤴ You meet the needs of others and you get to be a sheep rather than a goat.
- ⤴ You manage your talents well and you get a word of commendation.

The other thing that strikes me is that each of these parables is a parable of **stewardship** – good management of oil, of opportunities, and of talents or, conversely, examples of poor management of oil, opportunities, and talents.

In the previous message, when we looked at creation and asked, “What are human beings?” we concluded that we are to see ourselves as stewards who have been entrusted by God with life and all that it offers (rather than as owners, consumers, or whatever else). Being stewards then, is our identity in relation to God, who is the real owner. It is our identity as members of the human community, in relation to other people. It is our identity in relation to the environment in which we live.

And we said that while humans are “given dominion” over lots of things, we are not told how to go about doing it. Except for two things – we are always to remember in whose image we have been made (remember **who** you are) and we are to remember that we are accountable to God (remember **whose** you are).

The servants and the talents

Our parable fits in beautifully with all of this. Similar to the previous texts, in each of these parables, people are entrusted with this or with that – first

with oil, then with talents, and finally with needs. And in none of them are any directions given about how we are to go about managing our oil, our talents, or the needs around us. The expectation is the same – to be faithful with what you’ve got; be creative in finding ways of preserving oil, investing your talents, and meeting the needs of others.

In addition, there is accountability for one’s actions. In each of the parables we have some stewards being faithful (five wise bridesmaids, two servants out of three, those labeled “sheep” by the judge) while others are unfaithful.

Finally, as in the ancient story of creation, God is the generous and trusting giver of gifts. The man going on a journey in our text represents God. He regards his servants highly, has trust in them, and leaves his servants – humanity – in charge of things while he is away. God created the world and gave human beings dominion, to work on God’s behalf in his absence. God is pictured as a property owner going on a journey, one who entrusts his property to servants. That is a risky thing for the property owner to do, isn’t it?

Let me offer an illustration. I know a man who operates a business in partnership with his three sons. He and his wife went to Mexico for an extended period of time and placed the operation of the business into adult children’s hands. He likely implied or maybe even said, “You’ve seen how I operate the business, so while I’m gone, you keep it running. I won’t tell you in detail how to do it. Just do it. Be faithful, be creative, and be responsible. I’ll be back.”

After being absent some months, he returned home and went back to work. When he examined the books, he found that the business had nearly gone down the drain in his absence. The risk of entrusting the management of the business to the sons nearly lost everything.

One of the things this parable hints at is this – God takes incredible risks with humanity, just as the property owner risked losing it all when he entrusted his wealth to his servants and said, “Here, take this. Be my stewards; be faithful, and be creative, and know that I’ll be back though I don’t know exactly when.”

Another important point involves the word “talents.” When we think of talents, we think of talents, right? We know what is meant by talents, or so we assume. Today, “talent” is commonly understood as artistic, musical, or acrobatic talent. In this parable, a talent is not a talent as we think of talents

today, but a “talent.” In the text, talent has a different meaning altogether. It is a sum of money.

I looked up several different English translations which offered phrases such as “bags of gold,” and “silver coins.” I also checked to see what the currency exchange would be. Was this a few loonies or what? I discovered that one talent was nothing “to sneeze at.” It converts into just about \$20,000. So the five talent steward was entrusted with roughly \$100,000! And the two talent steward received about \$40,000.

This bit of information told me that the property owner was “no ordinary Joe.” He had done very well and he was willing to risk \$160,000 of his assets by handing it over to three of his servants, saying, “I’m going on a long trip, I don’t even know for how long. I’ve assessed your abilities and I’ve decided to give you \$100,000; you, \$40,000; and you, \$20,000.”

Did you notice what’s missing in the owner’s remarks? There are no directions. There are no warnings. There is no advice about how to play the investment game, about how to be a good steward. But one thing is very clear – the owner saw these three servants as stewards, managers of his wealth till he returned.

But let us not forget that this is just a parable, a story told by Jesus to get his disciples to think about life, about life with God, about being richly gifted, about having opportunities, and about the concrete reality of life when it ends, either when the owner returns or the servants die.

The money in the parable was real as far as the story goes, but it pointed to more than money. A talent is not a talent but a talent. A talent is whatever God has entrusted to you. **The talents in the story are ways of getting us to think about anything and everything God has entrusted to us in life, to you and to me.**

I suspect all three of these guys were scared half to death that day. They were speechless. Never before had so much been placed in their trust for management. They may even have wondered about the sanity of their boss. But they didn’t dare ask him if he had simply lost all his marbles overnight or whenever. The boss was likely already going round the bend with his camel train and his entourage of servants.

The servants were probably stunned for a good while, amazed at the risk he was taking with them, surprised by the trust and the generosity of their master. They looked at each other for awhile, each holding his bag of gold coins. And then they left, for they had work to do and no guidebook to help them.

Except . . . except one guideline they **did** have was the awareness that they really were stewards now, incredibly gifted, entrusted with wealth they had never even dreamed about. Stewards, nothing more, nothing less. (He did say he would be back sometime, didn't he?) Be faithful, be creative, be responsible.

Can we imagine what they did? Not really. Investment opportunities then were entirely different than they are today. Even so, just as the master had risked by giving his wealth into their keeping, so now they felt invited to risk as well.

Except for the one-talent man. He had heard the rabbis expound on the meaning of the law and one Sabbath he heard, "Whoever immediately buries property entrusted to him is no longer liable because he has taken the safest course conceivable" (Eduard Schweizer, *Good News According to Matthew*). He may have thought, "In comparison to my two friends, I received just a small amount, so I'll play it on the conservative side. I better not lose it. I'll follow the letter of the law and be safe. I'll squirrel it away" (Charles Bartow in a 1998 sermon *God Trusts You*).

He buried his bag of coins. He didn't lose them, but neither did he use them. He buried them.

The other two followed their master's example and risked the wealth, though we don't know how. They used their freedom and creativity, they invested where they could and they doubled the amounts. Each of them worked within the limitations of their situations. In one sense, they did not "perform" identically well. The most richly endowed servant had the sum of \$100,000 and was able to come up with another \$100,000. The second one could have felt insignificant in comparison because he only increased by \$40,000.

But in another way, their faithfulness was equal. While they began with vastly different sums, they both managed to gain 100%. Each of these three men faced the challenge to work with the potential, the resources they had received, not with what they didn't have, not with what the others had.

While the two-talent man might have felt his potential was less than the five-talent man, still he was faithful with what he had received from his master. He did what he could. He started with a lot less, yet he also risked, invested, and in the end doubled.

Now while the parable is literally about money, money is not the real issue. Though, of course, money – your money and mine – is included in what we

are managing, and is to be managed well. When we remember the opening words of Matthew 25:14, “For it is as if . . .,” we realize that this little story is supposed to get us thinking about life, about being trusted, about being gifted, about having opportunities, and about risk. The real issue is that the money in the story stands for anything and everything each of the disciples and each of us has received and needs to work with in life.

The one-talent guy

A word of caution is injected by the actions of the one-talent guy. He was unwilling to risk. Perhaps he thought the little he had to work with was not worth it. Maybe he thought he had been short-changed. Maybe he was angry and depressed over the larger amounts that the others received. We don't know. What we do know is that he failed to see that there were opportunities out there, even for him. So he simply buried his wealth in the ground, hoping to preserve it. There it was of no use to him or to others. In the end he completely lost what he once had. Tragic.

He failed to imagine the meaning and the possibility connected with a cup of fresh water, or a sandwich for the hungry, or some clothing for those who needed clothing. He failed to see the opportunity of sharing someone's burden simply by sipping tea and listening. While pining for the big opportunities, he failed to see the small steps possible right now. He was stumped, so he went and buried what he had.

When I think of this, I feel sorry for this man and for people like him who have this feeling of not having as much to offer as others. The one who has less, or feels he or she has little, is just as responsible to be a faithful steward as the one who has much. God is interested in what we **do** have, what each of us has, and whether we are faithful in our stewardship of it. We may want to excuse ourselves by appealing to what we do not have in comparison to others. God reminds us that each of us is gifted, variously entrusted in life, and that we are to serve with what we've got.

The other two servants had somehow learned that since they cared for, loved, and appreciated their master, they would demonstrate that care, love, and appreciation by working faithfully on his behalf. By their faithful efforts with the wealth entrusted to them, they demonstrated their devotion to the master. I suspect they enjoyed themselves in the process and in the end they received a “well done.”

In conclusion

In a sense we need to come to a conclusion now, but once this parable has entered our hearts, it doesn't really allow us to conclude anything. The parable invites us to continue thinking about our lives, to continue rejoicing in the variety of ways God has gifted people, to continue wondering how best to use our gifts in keeping with the master's character, to continue thinking about opportunities, big ones and little ones, which invite us to get involved, to invest ourselves in the needs of others.

So the conclusion to this sermon cannot be uttered on a specific day. The conclusion lies with each of us. It will be created and expressed, in your life and in mine, both in words and in deeds, in many different ways. What we share in common, as we create the conclusions to this sermon, is a basic attitude that each of us is incredibly and differently gifted, each is generously entrusted by God.

As stewards, we know that first of all we are receivers before any of us are givers. For that we cannot but be thankful:

- ^ For life itself in all its complexity, delight and potential which is simply given us
- ^ For time and opportunities
- ^ For relationships
- ^ For training and experience
- ^ For the heritage of faith and the good news of Jesus Christ
- ^ Each of us is challenged to faithfully manage what we've got, not what we don't have, not what the next person has.

Faithful management of life leans in the direction of living in harmony with our identity of being in the image of God; being there for others, generously, as God is there for us. Each of us is challenged to follow Jesus' model by being creative, remaining open to surprises and opportunities that arise within the limits set by our unique life situations, and investing our lives for others.

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. *This parable of the talents is part of a familiar trilogy. What have your former understandings of them been? Are there valid allegorical ways of appreciating them for our context? How does your understanding of their main points compare with the points Neufeld states on page 18 of this chapter?*
2. *Neufeld states: “The talents in this story are ways of getting us to think about anything and everything God has entrusted to us in life, to you and to me” on page 21. Reflect silently, and then in writing, on what God has entrusted to you. Do these opportunities frighten or/and excite you? How do you respond to God’s invitation to risk? Discuss how we can learn to trust and then help each other claim and develop the gifts God has entrusted to us as individuals and congregations.*
3. *This parable, which challenges us to risk, also reminds us that each of us is only called to work within the limitations of our situations. How does this compare with the ways we evaluate performance in our schools, work places, and congregations? Return to the list of things you created for question 2 and add lists of perceived and realistic limitations to each of those gifts.*
4. *The tragedy of the “one-talent guy” came from his unwillingness to take the risk of working with what had been entrusted to him. Many of us respond with “Who, me? Oh no, I’m not talented enough,” when the church is recruiting volunteers and sponsors. How can viewing a ministry as something that is entrusted to us by God free us from the self-consciousness and inaction of the “one-talent guy”?*
5. *Create and speak a litany of dedication for using the gifts with which your group has been entrusted.*

IV. Affluence, Attitudes, and Action

1 Chronicles 29:10b-13, Deuteronomy 8:11-20
1 Timothy 6:17-19

In the previous three sermons, we considered Romans 12 and the theme of transformation; Genesis 1-2, the creation narrative; and Matthew 25, the parable of the talents. We have said that stewardship calls all of us to be faithful with all that has been granted us, to be creative, and to be accountable.

Now it is time to turn to two bothersome biblical texts. These passages challenge us to rethink our priorities and our commitments. They challenge us to ask honestly whether we are on the road to being generous. They do not allow us to remain neutral about our affluence.

When I was a teenager, I never heard the word “affluence.” We read about people of means and of wealth in literature, but we never even came close to observing it in anyone or to experiencing it ourselves, and so affluence remained a meaningless concept. By no stretch of the imagination would anyone have thought of labeling us as well off or affluent, and we didn’t mind since all of our friends and their families were in the same boat. Everyone was concerned about eking out an existence. Nothing more. Those who had food on the table, a roof over their heads, and necessary clothing were content. We were happy to get by. That was enough.

During those years we didn’t hear sermons on the passages from Deuteronomy 8 and 1 Timothy 6. These texts were irrelevant, both for our parents and for those of us who were children. No one found them bothersome – not in those days. They simply didn’t apply to us.

But now these ancient words have become bothersome; they make us feel uneasy. The truth they speak is relevant, and sometimes painful. Times have changed – drastically changed – and through we may not have moved geo-

graphically, we have moved to an entirely different place in the world. No matter how much we might want to deny it, we will not succeed.

Affluence has become a reality for us. Today, you and I are the affluent ones. Whether we compare ourselves to people in the developing world or just to our circumstances in previous decades, we are affluent. And in this situation of affluence and consumption, we hear certain texts of the bible with a fresh sense of urgency, as though we had never heard them before.

These two texts are a reminder that our Christian faith is not a narrow focus on souls and salvation, spiritual life and sanctuaries, daily hardships, difficulties and dreams of a better life someday. We are no longer talking about coping with the wounds of oppression or the wounds of poverty.

Today we are talking about what has been described as the “wounds of wealth” (Tom Sine, *Wild Hope*). We discover that the bible addresses these concerns very directly for the bible does not permit any of us to separate worship from work and meditation from money.

We read these texts with newly opened eyes realizing that Jesus spoke more often about possessions and wealth than about many other things. He spoke more often about possessions than he did about prayer, or faith, or eternal life. We may wonder why so much attention is given to wealth. The New Testament sees wealth as flirting with danger. Consider the following:

- ▲ “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).
- ▲ “The lure of wealth choke(s) the word” (Matthew 13:22).
- ▲ It is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom (Matthew 19:23).

We read these texts and realize that following Jesus has placed us in the midst of a struggle and placed a choice before us. Will our imagination and our dreams, including those about our money and possessions, be colored by the culture in which we feel at home, or by the colors of God’s kingdom with its new set of dreams and new kind of imagination?

Stewardship is about many things – about how we are going to be in the world; stewardship is about a whole lot more than money. It is about non-conformity to the culture around us; it’s about being involved in a process of discerning what is in sync with God’s intentions for humans and what is not. It is about having our identity shaped by that ancient creation story – that we are made in God’s image, that we have been given responsibility to manage life on God’s behalf, and in God’s way. Indeed, Christian stewardship is about all these things, but as we consider these two Biblical texts, we will

realize that stewardship is also about money. It's about possessions. It's about that which you and I already have and still hope to have.

Our cultural values

We find ourselves both “in the faith” and “in our culture.” We live in a culture that is called “consumer capitalism.” We earn our money here. We acquire, we invest, we accumulate, and we spend. We get attached to things. We get excited about having more than we had before. Simply by living in this culture we take on the values and the imagination of everything around us.

While browsing a book rack the other day, I noticed a title in the *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* series that probably expresses the true meaning of our culture, *Don't Worry, Get Rich*. At the same time, I hear the echo of Paul's word “not to be conformed,” and not to let the world squeeze us into its mold. Sometimes I feel myself tugged this way and sometimes the other way.

A while back I read an intriguing book, *The Joy of Not Working*, by Ernie Zelinski. He hits the nail on the head when he says, “If I had a lot of money, then I would be happy, then I could enjoy my leisure time, then I would feel good about myself, then more people would like me.” And he concludes, “If you have any of these thoughts, you are ruled by money and fear.”

A recent car ad proclaimed, “Whoever said money can't buy happiness isn't spending it right” – a tug back to the values of our culture. Then other voices remind us of our faith.

- ▲ We are “wounded by wealth” and victims of “an ever expanding consumerism” (Tom Sine, *Wild Hope*).
- ▲ “Covetousness is the hallmark of our society” (Vernard Eller, *Mad Morality*).
- ▲ Our culture is one of “conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, and conspicuous waste” (Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*).

And finally, someone has coined a new word for the dominant disease of our times – “affluenza” – defined as “the epidemic of shopping, overwork, stress, and debt infecting North Americans” (from an Internet article on *The Affluenza Project*).

Underlying all of this is the assumption that money talks, that money has power, that persons with wealth have clout. Money says that much. We know that.

But money also talks in another sense. Money talks and reveals the heart, attitudes, and priorities of its owners. Money “spills the beans,” makes public what we so much want to keep private – our real attitudes, our real priorities, and our real commitments.

Now don’t get me wrong. I like money. I like to have enough money so that I don’t have to worry about it. I enjoy having things; possessions do enhance life. I am thankful for house, clothing, for computers and CD players, for TV and for creature comforts. I would rather have more than less. I agree with Robert McClelland when he says, “It is not more godly to be poor than to be wealthy” (*Worldly Spirituality*). But the meaning of my life, my identity, is not to be wrapped up and determined by what I have.

Faith and culture

The Christian faith has a complex relationship to our culture. Many things are to be affirmed, some things are seen as being neutral, and others are seen as being in tension with, and in contradiction to Christian faith. Stewardship invites us to challenge those aspects of our culture that are not in harmony with the values of the Kingdom of God. Stewardship confronts the values, aspirations, and the imagination being promoted by materialism.

Our track record is not all that good. The average mainline church member is indistinguishable from anyone else in society when it comes to living for profits, possessions, and for personal gain” (Donald W. Hinze, *To Give and Give Again*). This means that, for the most part, the Christian church has not been able to do a very good job of being countercultural. We have not paid sufficient attention to our texts.

Listening to the texts

Both of our texts speak about affluence, but differently than our culture does. In Deuteronomy 8:12-13 we read, “When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied” (note the three time use of “multiplied”), and in 1 Timothy 6:17a, “As for those who in the present age who are rich....”

What strikes me is that in both passages, wealth is not condemned, but neither is it set up as the source of life’s meaning and worth. Wealth is accepted as a reality, even a blessing. That’s what I get from Paul when he says, “God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17).

Neither of these texts condemns people for being affluent. Neither do they accept wealth uncritically. In this area the bible is more insightful than our culture. It is not blind to the dangers and temptations associated with affluence, nor is it blind to the good that can come from affluence. These two texts name the dangers, give the warnings, and show how money's grip on us can be broken. These are things that every affluent person needs to hear.

The danger of wealth

The situation in Deuteronomy 8 is that Israel has come through the wilderness experience, an experience of scarcity, and now they are on the verge of entering the Promised Land where they will leave scarcity behind and enjoy material success and well-being. That's the promise they get. The future looks good. Bad times are over.

The people are being urged never to erase from their memory the harsh experiences of the wilderness. "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you" (Deuteronomy 8:2). They are promised a much better future. They are going into a good land. When they eat their fill there, they are to thank the Lord their God for the good land given them. They are to keep God's commandments and walk in God's ways, not in the ways of the Canaanites, or their surrounding culture.

The first insight for me then is **we are to acknowledge the bounty of our lives, our affluence, as a blessing – and thank God for it.** But the text goes farther – not only is abundance a blessing for us to enjoy, it is also a dilemma and a danger. Our culture says, "Let the good times roll," but our texts caution, "Good times are dangerous times." Our culture tells us, "Don't worry, get rich," but our faith speaks a counter-line.

Notice that both of these texts address the danger as being "within." Deuteronomy says, "do not exalt yourself and forget the Lord your God . . . Do not say to yourself 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth'" (Deuteronomy 8:14,17). Timothy says, "Do not be haughty, or set your hopes on the uncertainty of riches" (paraphrase of I Timothy 6:17). Exalting oneself is something that starts as an attitude in the heart which later finds expression in actions.

Similarly, being haughty begins as an inner attitude. What we set our hopes on is also within. Entering into conversation with oneself is private – a soliloquy we may have about success and good fortune and a secure future. And the act of "forgetting the Lord your God" is tucked away in a corner of our hearts long before it shows outwardly.

The bible wants to nip these problems in the bud. It knows that if these are not dealt with, they will grow. Those who set their hopes on uncertain riches have an insatiable appetite for more and more. “The more of it we have, the more we want” (W. Robert McClelland, *Worldly Spirituality*). Affluence is a problem. In the words of Thomas Carlyle, “Adversity is sometimes hard upon a man; but for one man who can stand prosperity, there are a hundred that will stand adversity.” It has been a problem for a long, long time and continues to be one.

Consider these two examples. Jesus once told the story of a well-to-do farmer who had bumper crops and the need to solve the problem of his abundance. The farmer had a conversation with himself: “What shall I do? **This** is what I will do. I will build, and then I will say to my soul, ‘Take your ease; eat, drink and be merry; you have many goods laid up for many years.’”

In the Old Testament then, there is the tragic story of King Ahab who had all the wealth that a ruler could have but still he wanted more. He saw the potential in his poor neighbor’s vineyard as he gazed out of his summer palace portico. His appetite for more took over, so he offered Naboth a fair price or a trade. The owner refused to sell. Ahab’s appetite was ruling him by this time; he pouted, he stopped eating. His wife Jezebel sized up the situation and “solved” it by having Naboth killed. Ahab’s appetite for more was satisfied; but along with the property, he got a very bad taste in his mouth and the seeds of eventual destruction in his heart.

Those who exalt themselves and set their hope on their abundance tend to see what they own as the source of meaning and worth. Those who exalt themselves lean toward arrogance, self-sufficiency, and an incredible false security. Those who set their hopes on their abundance lean toward selfishness and see everything in terms of the material. Everything is evaluated in terms of the bottom line, including people. “How much do you think he/she is worth?” they ask.

This is the dilemma and these are some of the dangers we face. Must it end that way? Will every wealthy person end up destroying him or herself like Ahab? Will all of us affluent people end up being called “fools” as was the rich farmer in Jesus’ parable? Is there a way out? Is there a chance of moving from selfish concern and narrow focus? Can the spiritual realm become a reality for those who are affluent?

“There is a way out,” says Jacques Ellul, a French sociologist-theologian, in his book, *Money and Power*. “Wealth’s grip on us can be broken; wealth can be ‘clothed with grace.’” Our texts echo the same good news.

Instead of exalting ourselves, instead of claiming self-sufficiency, Deuteronomy says, “Remember the Lord your God.” Remember that it is the Lord who gives you life and land, strength and opportunity, to gain wealth and to succeed.

Never allow the memory of God and God’s story to vanish from your life. Nourish this God-awareness and you will begin to escape the danger. Paul, in 1 Timothy 6, has a similar message – set your hope on God, not on uncertain riches. He goes further, offering practical advice on how to avoid the perils of prosperity. He says, “Do good, be rich in good works, be generous, be ready to share so that they may take hold of the life that really is life” (paraphrase of 1 Timothy 6:18).

Acts of giving

Paul’s antidote for the dangers of affluence is simple. Take away the power of money and possessions by hanging loose from it, by doing good with it, by being generous. As Jacques Ellul says, “To make money profane, take away its secret power. There is one act par excellence which profanes money by going directly against the law of money, an act for which money is not made. This act is **giving**” (*Money and Power*). He goes on to say that giving “is the penetration of grace into the world of competition and selling.” How simple and how powerful!

Being rich in good works with our wealth – being generous in our giving – is the way to clothe our affluence with grace! Not only is this simple, not only is this powerful, it is also difficult. Why? Because it runs counter to logic and cultural common sense.

Now the question arises, “What does it mean to be rich in good works?” What does it mean to be generous with our wealth? I would like to suggest several things it might mean and while I may step on a few toes, that’s a risk I need to take.

Let’s remember that money has power. Our money is our energy, time, training, and experience converted into cash. “Money is a miraculous thing. It is a person’s personal energy reduced to portable form and endowed with power the person himself does not possess. It can go where he could not go; speak languages he could not speak; lift burdens he could not touch with his fingers; save lives with which he cannot deal directly” (Harry Emerson Fosdick).

“In our world, money has power – power to do good, power to educate dulled minds, power to fill empty stomachs, power to shelter the homeless, power to heal broken bodies, power to bring justice to the disenfranchised,

power to share the light of the gospel with those who dwell in places of deep darkness. In a monetary economy, dollars make sense as a vehicle for the grace-full distribution of shalom to all the earth's inhabitants." (W. Robert McClelland, *Worldly Spirituality*)

If we are willing to be generous with our wealth, we will think of others as well as looking after ourselves. If we are willing to become generous, we will take a look at our priorities and probably make some changes. This sounds harmless enough until we become specific.

Remember, Paul says, we are to be rich and generous in doing good with our money, not stingy or tight-fisted. That is the biblical word to the affluent. That is the way to break the grip of the material on us. We will make decisions as individuals or families about our own needs and the needs of others and we will decide that we **want** to be generous.

A few examples might show what I mean. The *Calgary Herald* reported that in 2005 Canadians spend \$17.8 billion on pets and pet care annually. With the Canadian population at about 33 million, that works out to \$540 for every man, woman and child in the country! Was the average per member giving in your church last year higher or lower than the average amount Canadians spend on Fido and Fluffy? What does that suggest about priorities? Would believers who are grateful in their hearts to God for material and spiritual blessings not give more than pet owners do to take care of their pets?

Another example. Consider the cost of season tickets to one's favorite sport or music organization, or the money we spend on vacations. How does what we give for charity compare to what we spend on these good cultural, sports, and vacation events? The question this bothersome text raises for me is this – are we spending more on the things that benefit us than on the work of the church, and on meeting the desperate needs of people all over the world?

If we are willing to risk being generous with our affluence, it means that we will act responsibly with the commitments we make. If we are willing to risk being generous as Paul challenges, we will not be indifferent to the needs of others, nor will we be indifferent to the opportunities to do good.

When we became members of the church, we pledged publicly that we would support the church with our contributions. I think all of us are more than willing to grant that students and part-time employees and many younger couples saddled with mortgage payments are in a difficult situation.

My suspicion, though, is that many of us who are working and earning very well are content to play the average game rather than to risk generosity. What do you find if you take the annual budget of your church divided by

the number of members to determine the average per member giving per year? Are we giving generously? Are we giving responsibly? How does our giving to the church and to other charities compare to what we spend on restaurant meals or entertainment? And let's say that we give an average amount compared to other church members? Is that a good way to determine if we're following God's call to faithful stewardship? I don't think so.

In 2002, the per member giving to Mennonite Church Canada stood at \$1,286.00. That's an average of the total reported to the national body through local church treasurers, which was \$45 million!¹ Not bad.

How does our giving stack up? Are the members in our churches contributing generously to this? That's what Paul challenging us to do – be generous.

As I was thinking about this during the week, I realized something. We have no financial crisis in our church at all. What we have is a crisis of commitment. Our level of giving speaks loud and clear, telling volumes about our priorities and our commitments. Money is an extension of ourselves. Money talks; and money not given talks as well.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth he did not urge them to give the Old Testament tithe of 10 percent. He urged them to give regularly, in proportion to what each one received – not an average amount but a **proportion** of what each had earned. Paul's teaching follows the instruction given in Deuteronomy 16 that all males were to come before the Lord, and "all shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you" (Deuteronomy 16:16-17).

If we are willing to risk being generous with our affluence, it would mean that we would be on the lookout for ways of doing good, meeting needs, and supporting causes, instead of looking for ways of keeping more of our money for ourselves. Many of us give to special causes in addition to the budget of the church. Many give to Mennonite education and camps, to MCC, and to community agencies. Many people look for projects that they are interested in supporting and they give generously to them. What a great deal of good has been done by special donations over the years!

I think everyone can see now why I found these two passages bothersome. They have caused me to examine myself and my giving. They have challenged me to examine my priorities again. I hope that this will be true for

¹Numbers are based on the T3010 analysis for the year 2002 of Mennonite Church Canada congregations.

each of us.

Incredible good will be done everywhere if we risk being generous with the bounty God has poured into our lives. Let us not permit the opportunities for giving to slip by. We – the affluent of the world – have an amazing privilege to become involved in good works in many places around the world, close to home and through the work of our congregation.

As stewards, gifted by God, and rich in so many ways, we will give generously as an expression of praise and thanksgiving to God. We will give generously to break the grip of the material on our hearts. We will give generously to serve others' needs. We will give generously to support the life, ministry and mission of the church in the world. Giving generously, Paul said, we will "take hold of the life that is really life."

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. *As Christians who live in a culture of "consumer capitalism" we are in danger of catching – "affluenza" – that "epidemic of shopping, overwork, stress, and debt infecting North Americans" (page 28). We live in the tug between two sets of values. Share stories of how you experience this tug and how you try to protect yourselves from catching "affluenza".*
2. *Neufeld's first insights on living well within our affluent context include a recognition that "Good times are dangerous times," and an acknowledgment that the bounty of our lives, our affluence, is a blessing – and thank God for it. Make a two column chart and list the dangers of affluence on one side and the blessings of affluence on the other.*
3. *In "Listening to the text" on page 29, we learn that wealth is not condemned or set up as the source of life's meaning or worth, but that cautions balance the blessings of wealth in the biblical texts. In Deuteronomy 8:2, the Israelites are even encouraged to remember leaner times to protect them from these dangers as they prepare to enter Canaan. Spend a few minutes in quiet reflection on less affluent times in your family's history. How does this change your feelings about your current wealth and generosity?*
4. *This sermon challenges us to keep our giving to the church and charity in balance with the money we spend on entertainment, sports, vacations, and restaurant meals. Set up a ledger with estimates of what you spend*

in these ways to see how you balance your wealth. Then try to keep track and stay balanced in this way for a month.

5. *According to Paul in 1 Timothy, living generously can help us “take hold of the life that really is life.” Neufeld also quotes a current book that says “giving is the penetration of grace into the world of competition and selling. If we accept these statements, we need to redefine what our society calls “the good life.” Write out new definitions for “the good life” and*

V. Excel in this Also

2 Corinthians 8 and 9

The celebrations of Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter occurred in the midst of this series on stewardship when it was first given. What a welcome interruption it was! As we returned to the topic of money, opportunities, and responsibility, some of us may have thought, “What a letdown!” For we had experienced the profound worship in the communion service on Good Friday, which consisted of a wonderful service of readings and singing, and the powerful Easter Sunday celebration! There had been moments of mystery, and we marveled as we were touched by God’s Spirit and inspired by word and song. Powerful worship reminds us of and connects us with God’s gracious acting on our behalf. We renew our faith, confess that we are followers of the Christ, who served and suffered and died and was raised from the dead for us. These truly are the highlights of our faith.

In the midst of all that, we may have felt a bit like the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9). Seeing the glorified Christ before them, they expressed the familiar wish, “If only life could always be this good” by saying, “. . . it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings for you . . . (Mark 9:5). Today we might say, “Couldn’t we just freeze this moment in time and preserve it?”

Jesus did not even respond to their suggestion. He just led them down from the mountain top of worship and mystery into the valley of human need and pain. I suspect the three disciples had a letdown feeling as they made their way down the mountain that day. Perhaps we have similar feelings as we move from thinking about the celebrations of Easter to stewardship. However, if we do, we’re not seeing the whole picture.

When Paul wrote about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, he moved seamlessly into the practicalities of raising money for needy people. His longest chapter on the importance of resurrection – both Jesus’ and ours – is followed immediately by words about money. This did not seem to be a problem for Paul, so he moved smoothly from one topic to the other. The chapter break in our bibles did not exist in his manuscript. Far from being a letdown, Paul assumed a strong connection between an Easter faith and giving for the broader church.

The highly spiritual and the most down-to-earth are placed side by side. Do they belong together? How is it possible to mix the central affirmations of our faith – the death and resurrection of Jesus – with money and giving? The one is so spiritual and other seems so material!

I come to this conclusion because 1 Corinthians 15, the great resurrection chapter, is followed by these very down-to-earth words, “Now concerning the collection for the saints” (1 Corinthians 16:1). On Good Friday and Easter, we celebrate what God has done for us in the sending of the Son – to minister, to heal, to die, to be raised. We celebrate that God is on our side; that God has come into the messy human situation and given us salvation and hope and purpose.

Paul concluded the resurrection chapter to the Corinthians with a sentence that brought them and brings us down to earth, “Therefore (since we believe in Christ’s resurrection and our own), my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Right on the heels of speaking about God’s saving work, Paul shifted to the work of the church and his first example concerned an offering. Right on the heels of resurrection talk, he introduced the collection for the Jerusalem believers (1 Corinthians 16:1-4, Galatians 2:10, Romans 15:25, Acts 24:17). In 2 Corinthians 8 & 9, Paul gave us two whole chapters of teaching on giving – the longest single passage on stewardship in the New Testament! In these chapters, Paul dealt with the practicalities of administering a collection for the far away poor in Palestine. Intertwined with those details, he provided insightful teaching on stewardship.

The situation

There were several reasons why the Christians in Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside were in need. The early church had embarked on a faith experiment that worked to their detriment later on. They had “a com-

mon purse,” Christian communism (Acts 4:32-37). Those who had property sold it and those who had savings gave them, so that everyone had enough.

At first “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34), but, about twenty years later, the church fell on hard times. There weren’t enough members like Barnabas who could sell off real estate on a Mediterranean island and hand the proceeds over to the church. The well ran dry and everyone became poor. In addition, there had been a severe famine in Palestine, which made the situation desperate.

When Paul visited this area on one of his trips to Jerusalem, he became aware of their plight and devised a plan. (It became a pet project of his; he mentioned it in three of his letters.) His plan was simple. He believed that the church in the whole world was **one** church scattered in many places. He felt that they were all connected with each other because of their common faith. He did not believe in congregational isolation. He urged the new believers in the daughter churches, formed as a result of missionary efforts in Asia Minor (including Macedonia and Greece); to help people they had never seen or heard of before. He told them about the needs and he urged them to be generous in giving to meet those needs. That is what 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is all about.

Paul’s approach

Since we can’t deal with everything in these chapters, I have focused on a few words that stand out for me and then concluded with comments on 2 Corinthians 9:6-15.

Paul motivates the believers by doing at least four things.

- ▲ Paul is excited about this project. He’s enthused; he’s “pumped” about meeting the need. Paul was not a low-key, down-in-the-mouth leader who had a depressing, gloomy attitude, such as, “Well, folks, I’m not too excited about this thing myself, but I have to tell you about it. I guess we’ll have to pitch in to help those poor Christians in another part of the world. Others are helping and we shouldn’t lag behind.” There is no trace of a depressing attitude in his comments.

Paul, the great apostle, did not think he was stooping down to write about the details of an offering. Doing so was as great a challenge and was given as much careful attention as his writing about the resurrection. I find that refreshing.

- ▲ Paul affirms the congregation, “Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness . . .” (2 Corinthians 8:7) – what a list of compliments! He knows there are problems in that particular church, but he sees beyond the problems and reminds them of their strong faith, their ability to speak about it, their knowledge and insight, and their eagerness as new believers living in a difficult social situation. And then he adds, “so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”

He had challenged the whole church in his first letter with the words, “always excelling in the work of the Lord.” Here he mentions that goal of excellence again. Do we still aim for excellence? Or have we been overcome by our culture’s attitude “that anything will do,” or the expression, “whatever”?

This was certainly not Paul’s attitude. He affirms excellence and challenges the church to aim for excellence in giving as well as in other things. As I read this, I wondered what Paul would affirm as excellent in our church. How would he define excellence? Would he say that our faith, our knowledge, our worship, our work, and our witness are excellent? Would his assessment be a fair description of us? Would he say that our singing, our reading, our preaching, our praying, our storytelling, our teaching, our involvement in meeting the needs of others are excellent?

We might get varying responses to such questions, but I don’t think we can argue against his specific challenge in this text – to excel in this matter of giving.

- ▲ Paul motivates his listeners by mentioning the example of other believers living in Macedonia. His enthusiasm about them is clear as he notes their “wealth of generosity” (2 Corinthians 8:2). This is said against the background of their own difficult situation; in spite of their “own extreme poverty,” he says, they were eager to help. He also relates that their willingness to give was preceded by them having given themselves first of all to the Lord (2 Corinthians 8:5).

What is most surprising is that they did something I haven’t ever heard of before – they “begged . . . earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints” (2 Corinthians 8:4). It’s as if they said, “We just hope we get a chance to give!!” This would be a church treasurer’s delight – people just begging and hoping they will get a chance to give before the budget is met!

Paul asks his Corinthian friends to look at the numbers and the dedication of others. He writes, “I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others” (2 Corinthians 8:8). Taking Paul’s example, I looked into the statistics of our giving. What was the amount for the per member giving to your denomination’s area and national church in the last fiscal year?

In 2002, the per member giving to Mennonite Church Canada stood at \$1,286.00. That’s an average of the total reported to the national body through local church treasurers, which was \$45 million!¹ How do you think your personal and congregational giving stack up to that? I think that Paul would make such comparisons if he were writing to us. He would affirm things in our church and then he would challenge us to “excel also” in this act of giving.

- ▲ The fourth motivational plank for generosity is a reminder of that which they confessed and affirmed in every worship service and especially on Good Friday and Easter. Paul reminded them of the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Sowing and reaping

Paul has urged the Corinthians to give to the cause. He has given them the example of the Macedonian believers. He has affirmed them and asked them to aim for excellence in giving (2 Corinthians 8:6-8). He sums up his teaching with the metaphor of sowing and reaping (2 Corinthians 9:6-9).

I wonder whether Paul had the following verses from Deuteronomy 15 in mind as he wrote. “If there is among you anyone in need . . . do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor . . . Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you” (Deuteronomy 15:7,10).

Giving, according to Paul, is much like sowing seed in the ground. All who grew up on farms or nurture garden plots know this to be true. Planting sparsely is related to reaping sparsely. If you plant generously, you may get a larger return. This is true in all of life, isn’t it? Conductors and choirs know this, soloists know this, students know this, people in their professions and businesses know this, athletes know this, preachers and teachers know this.

¹Numbers based on the T3010 analysis for the year 2002 of Mennonite Church Canada congregations.

Whenever we plant or invest in a tight-fisted way, we reap the results accordingly.

Paul challenges us here to consider whether a generous person has ever really been a loser. Aren't the happiest, most contented people in the world those who are generous – not only in giving but also in every other area of life? The happiest people are those who, when they sing, teach, study, work, serve, visit, serve on committees, help the needy, or run a marathon, do so with abandon. Sowing generously in life means they are also getting the most out of life, and they benefit along with others. Later in this chapter he goes so far as to say, "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity" (2 Corinthians 9:11).

The path of giving brings a harvest of generosity into our lives. I do not mean that those who give will necessarily be that much richer in a material sense, although that may be the case. But those who are generous will find an increase in their lives.

What kind of an increase, you might ask? Consider these rewards:

- ▲ A heightened interest in the projects they support – where our treasure goes, there is our heart as well
- ▲ An increased sense of investment in others' lives
- ▲ A greater awareness of needs and opportunities
- ▲ A greater sensitivity to others
- ▲ The knowledge that those who are helped will thank God for the blessing of needed assistance.

God loves a cheerful giver

"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). Several things strike me here. Paul does not leave anyone off the hook. The Corinthian congregation – just like our congregations today – had a variety of people in it, from lowly slaves to powerful civil servants. And Paul says, "**each** of you." He would say that to all of us here – no one is excused from the privilege of giving, of being generous. Don't try to escape from this giving opportunity because you are young and unemployed, or self-employed, or employed part-time, or a student, or newly married, or struggling with mortgage and other payments, or retired. Paul says each of us, no matter what our situation might be, ought to be a giving person.

More than that, he says, “Don’t just give spontaneously, on the spur of the moment, without careful thought.” He urges everyone, to do some conscious thinking about how much to give, “as you have made up your mind.”

And finally, Paul says, our giving is to be checked, not only for the amount, but also for the accompanying attitudes. It is not to be reluctant, or under compulsion, but cheerfully, with joy. In an article on joyful giving, David P. Polk comments on Paul’s statement that God loves a cheerful giver. He sees the following options:

- ^ Joyful non-givers
- ^ Joyless non-givers
- ^ Joyless givers
- ^ Joyful givers

The least realistic of these is the joyful non-giver. We have heard of grumpy misers. Have we ever heard or encountered a joyful, tight-fisted person? It’s not a real option, trying to be happy in life and tight-fisted at the same time.

But being a joyless non-giver is a real option. Think of Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, who showed the world “the joylessness of a rich but impoverished life.” That grumpy old man, that tight-fisted miser, was down on everybody. He didn’t care about his neighbors or employees. He had no heart. And his joyless non-giving became a prison for him.

Another real option is joyless giving. Paul touches on this by urging people to give, “not reluctantly or under compulsion” (2 Corinthians 9:7). This kind of person gives, but always grudgingly, because of obligation, because he feels he should. No matter how much such a person gives, it is a parsimonious gift, for it is an expression of poverty of spirit and narrowness of heart.

The kind of giving Paul aims for could be called “Scroogian” giving – giving like the transformed Scrooge after his Christmas eve conversion, when he threw open the windows of his soul on Christmas morning. That was life! There was joy in his step and in his voice! He began to experience the enrichment that comes from meeting needs and making others happy.

So the question isn’t only how much am I going to give, but also, with what sort of an attitude am I giving? God loves a cheerful giver! God wants us to be hilarious in our giving. When we write our donation cheques or put cash into our envelopes or into the offering, let’s do it with joy. Let us respond to needs and opportunities with Christ-motivated generosity and hilarity!

We must talk about the amount we give as well. Although the word tithe is not mentioned by Paul, we must mention it. It is usually raised when it comes to giving. Do we have to tithe? Is that what is meant by excelling in giving?

In the Old Testament, tithing is mentioned, but not in an exclusive manner. For example, in addition to expected tithes discussed in Deuteronomy there are instructions for “a freewill offering in proportion to the blessing that you have received from the Lord your God” and, three times a year, all males shall come before the Lord, “not empty-handed; all shall give as they are able according to the blessing of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 16: 10-12, 16-17). What the tithe did was remind Israel that everything they had was a gift and they were stewards of these gifts.

“Tithes” and “tithe” are mentioned 36 times in the Bible, only eight times of which are in the New Testament. “Tithe” is mentioned incidentally in Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42, Hebrews 7:4 and “tithes” are mentioned only in Luke 18:12 and several times in Hebrews 7.

I find it surprising that Paul, the Jewish Christian, who knew all about tithing as far as the Old Testament was concerned, did not even mention it in his longest treatment on the subject of giving. Paul urges Christians to be **generous** in their giving. He urges us to give in proportion to that which we have received. His emphasis on cheerful giving might well go beyond the tithe expected under the law.

Cheerful givers do another thing as well. I would say they decide ahead of time how their accumulated assets, their material wealth, will be dealt with after they die. Cheerful givers think hard about making out their wills and expressing their commitments there, resisting the tendency to give everything to their children. They choose to give a portion to their favorite projects – an institution, school, college, seminary, MCC, missions, or the church. This too is an expression of being a joyous steward.

God provides so we can share

In the midst of writing about details of a relief offering for the poor in far off Palestine, Paul shares some other insights about life. He says “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8).

What is interesting here is that God, the giver, gives so that we, the stewards, have enough to share. We might think we ought to have enough so that we don't have to bother working anymore, or so that we might add a few more luxury items to our collection. No, Paul says. God's abundant blessing in our lives has the purpose of enabling us to think of others, to share abundantly in every good work.

The giving chain

Paul's enthusiasm for cheerful stewardship of money includes his conviction that good things happen in the giving chain. What I mean is:

- ^ God gives to us
 - ^ Our needs are met
 - ^ We share abundantly with others
 - ^ Their needs are met
 - ^ All those helped are thankful
 - ^ God is showered with an overflowing of thanksgiving – and
 - ^ Those helped pray for those who have given to meet their needs.

The chain goes on and on if those who receive begin to give. Then those who are helped begin to thank and God is praised by both givers and receivers. Stewardship makes our faith concrete.

Let us count our blessings, let us rejoice in our material abundance and let us be hilarious givers, always remembering to thank God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15)

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. *In this sermon on page 38 we are challenged to compare God's saving work in Jesus and the generosity of our own work. Search for lines of hymns that make this same comparison and reflect on their potential for a worship service on stewardship in your congregation.*
2. *Paul's strategy for encouraging the Corinthians toward better stewardship included an enthusiastic approach, affirming the congregation where he could, motivating them with the example of other believers and reminding them of Jesus Christ's act of ultimate generosity. What would a stewardship campaign based on this strategy look and sound like in our context?*

3. *Gather information about planting and harvesting seeds. What other factors impact the final crop yield? How does this compare to factors that could affect the harvest of generosity in our individual and corporate lives? What comparisons are there to the impact of joyful giving in the world of agriculture?*
4. *Bryan Moyer Suderman reflected on generosity in a song with the words, "There's enough for all if we would only share it, there's enough for all, if we would learn to see" (CD Can't Keep Quiet, available from SmallTall Music). As you reflect on the true harvest of generosity that God wills for us, what images, phrases, and melodies occur to you?*

VI. Much has been Given, Much will be Required

Luke 12:48; Philippians 2:4-11; 1 Peter 4:8-11

Looking back: the challenge we face

As we conclude this series on stewardship, I think it might be helpful to remind ourselves of the path we have traveled. In Romans 12, we sought a framework within which to see ourselves in God's world. We heard the challenge of Paul not to be conformed to this world, this culture, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. We said it was the easiest thing in the world to have our imagination fueled by our culture, to think about, see and act the way the culture in which we live, thinks, sees, and acts. We talked about the reality of Christians as a group of people with a different bias, rooted in the biblical story of God and the people of God.

In the second message, we talked about the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2. Already in these accounts, the foundations of an alternative imagination, a different way of seeing ourselves and of acting, is presented. A foundational truth is that God is the owner/creator. In addition, God has a great deal of confidence in humans made in the image of God; God endows humans with responsibilities to "have dominion," meaning to manage God's world in God's way. On the basis of the creation story, we were given an identity as stewards of God in the world, relating to the environment, to nonhuman creatures, and to other people in God-like ways.

Using the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 as a basis, we emphasized that the owner trusted his servants, and was willing to take a risk; he entrusted his property, his talents to them for their management while he was away. Again, the mandate was overarching – be stewards. But it was not specific; details were not given as to what each servant was to do. The owner expected them to be creative. They also knew that when their master returned,

they would be held accountable for their work. In the parable, a talent was money, but it really points to everything that God has given us in life.

In the fourth sermon, we considered Deuteronomy 8 and 1 Timothy 6:17-19. These texts offered guidance about the dangers inherent in wealth and our attitudes toward it. We looked at Paul's suggestions for dealing responsibly with all we own – to clothe our wealth with grace, to rob it of its power over us, by being rich in good works, generous and ready to share.

Finally we looked at 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, the longest New Testament passage on the topic of material stewardship. Paul motivated the church to give by reminding them of Christ's incredible gift, by linking giving as a response to God's blessings in our lives, by reminding them of the example of others, and by showing them a desperate need that had to be met.

Paul also talked about **method** in giving – teaching that each one should think carefully about it, and give regularly, joyfully, and proportionately to one's means. What we have been reminded of repeatedly is that Christians are led to an alternative way of being in the world. In particular, we think and act towards things (our possessions, our resources, our environment) differently than our culture would have us think about and approach things. This alternative way, the Christian as steward, rests on a few basic convictions:

- ▲ God is the owner of all, including all that you and I have and are
- ▲ We are grateful to God for all the gifts and opportunities of life
- ▲ We respond to God's generous giving in our lives by being stewards, by being in the world in God-like ways

In summary, we are to be stewards of all that has been entrusted to us, responding to the needs of others, responding to the needs of the world.

Much has been given

In this sermon, we consider the familiar but still challenging words spoken by Jesus to his disciples, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48), or in *Today's English Version*, "Much more is required from the person to whom much more is given."

Jesus' words are a challenge to all of us, since we live in the most advanced and developed part of the world. None of us can deny that we are in the upper percentiles when we add up all that we have generously received in our lives. When we reflect on all our "talents," we should find no grumpy misers

among us. Lingering indifference would be replaced by care, icy aloofness would be replaced by involvement, selfish individualism would be replaced by generosity. The grip of the material world and all it has to offer us will not hold us down, once we have learned how to clothe our affluence with grace.

Jesus' words about "those to whom much has been given" are not hard to understand. We accept the validity of his words when we are reminded that:

- ▲ We have received so much as recipients of the story of salvation through Christ.
- ▲ We have received so much through our education, training, skills and experience.
- ▲ We have received so much of material blessings and comforts.
- ▲ We have received so much in the way of relationships and contacts.
- ▲ We have received so much through information and culture.
- ▲ We have received so much through our environment.
- ▲ We have received so much because we have time.
- ▲ We have received so much through difficult experiences as well – setbacks, illnesses, losses, uncertainties.
- ▲ We have received so much in the form of opportunities to become involved with others in God-like ways.

In his later life, Simon Peter, one of Jesus' first followers, wrote the powerful and challenging words found in 1 Peter 4:8-11. He urges us to be good stewards, and what does he emphasize? "Above all, maintain constant love for one another. . . . Be hospitable to one another without complaining. . . . Like good stewards . . . serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks . . . whoever serves . . . so that God will be glorified in all things."

Did you notice the underlying thread of these expectations? **Constant love, hospitality, and serving.** Each of these specific qualities is linked to being good stewards; each is an example of being concerned for others, not only for oneself; each is an example of investing in other's lives; each is an example of being involved in someone else's needs, rather than focusing only on our own needs. Jesus himself was the prime example for Paul of a person who is unselfish, compassionate and caring, who is present for others. Jesus embodies the alternative model of the Christian steward.

Both the words of Jesus and the words of Peter express a definite bias, the bias of the steward. They invite us to imagine our lives in keeping with God's alternative way of being in the world. These words challenge us to actually do what Paul says in Philippians 2:4, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

What's our reaction to this? Isn't God the gracious and giving one? What's with all these expectations? Do we really have to put up with this, that if we have been blessed with more, we will be expected to do more?

Yes. It is true that we are saved by the free gift of God's grace. And once we are, the Lord asks us to respond to the gift and become involved with others, and on behalf of others, to follow the example Jesus provided. The alternative is cheap and private grace. We are called not only to love God, but also to love our neighbor! And these two commands are tied for first importance. We are saved for good works, Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:10. Even though we might want a free ride from here to the end of time, Jesus doesn't offer it. Instead, he challenges us to think about all we have been given in life and use it for the good of others, to God's glory!

Furthermore this expectation is placed on our lives for the long run, not only for a week here or a week there. It is a life-long calling **and** the path to meaningful, abundant living. This quality of being giving and generous, being concerned about others, is to be the prime characteristic of your life and mine. As we follow Christ on the transformation journey, we will always be moving in this direction of being generous and caring. I am not trying to say that this life will be an easy one. From time to time we may even suffer from what is called "compassion fatigue;" we may get tired of caring for others. We will struggle because it is not the way we are naturally inclined to live and to be. But when we gratefully remember how much we have received, we will find the motivation to care again and again.

Three stories of stewardship

To make this image of the caring steward more real, I would like to give three examples of persons to whom much had been given and much was required. Each of these individuals was a struggling steward – sometimes more faithful and caring, sometimes less so. Each used whatever gifts he had in the service of others and to the glory of God.

Jacob. The ancient story does not paint Jacob as a "super steward." Like us, he had faults, a good number of them, but still God used him. His early story

is a story of botched stewardship. As a young man, he cheated his brother Esau to get the double-sized birthright. Later he deceived his nearly blind father, Isaac, in order to get the blessing. This really stirred things up in the family and Esau threatened to kill him. So Jacob fled to his uncle's place in Haran and lived there for many years. Never came home. Too much tension.

He acquired goods and became wealthy, and had a family, but continued his self-serving life. Jacob was a strong-willed man bent on achieving his own ends. He was really a lousy steward. A failure. He looked after *numero uno*. He was in control. He failed to live according to God's intentions for him and his family. Deep down he was not happy, and fortunately God hadn't given up on him yet.

In middle-age, he left Haran and headed toward home with wives and children, herds and flocks. And then, the night before he was to meet his estranged brother, Esau, he had a wrestling match till dawn. In that wrestling match he finally gave up control, admitted his insincerity, and confessed that he was a cheat and a liar, a poor steward. At dawn he received his new identity, and with it, a new name. No longer was he "Jacob," the one who always looked out for himself, at the expense of his brother and others. Now he was "Israel," a name that bore God's promise and pointed to a wider community of responsibility. He also got a limp from a sore hip, which reminded him for the rest of his life that he had chosen to be a more faithful steward with all that had been entrusted to him.

You and I may see ourselves in the story of Jacob. It may be that, in the process of becoming a more faithful steward, we also may have to enter a time of intense struggle in which to realize afresh who we really have been and how we have botched our stewardship. We may need to re-commit ourselves to God who has still not given up on us.

For a good part of his life, Jacob assumed control and looked out primarily for himself and his interests. Jacob was blessed by God; he received much, and over time, he discovered that more was required of him. It may also mean that we will wrestle with God as we come to clearly see ourselves and the world of which we are a part. It may mean changes in the way we have been accustomed to doing things. Jacob limped through the rest of his life, but he was a better man for it.

Joseph. A quite different story. Jacob's son but somehow with a different attitude than his dad's. Joseph is called "the steward par excellence" by Eugene Roop (*Let the Rivers Run*). Sold as a slave by his brother, he became an employee of Potiphar, an army captain under the Egyptian Pharaoh. As a

young man in exile from his family, Joseph could have wallowed in self-pity and refused to show any enthusiasm for life, but he didn't. He was given a job to do; he did it well and his master noticed. He was entrusted with more because Potiphar saw that everything that he touched prospered in his hands. Joseph promoted the interest of his master and enhanced the life for all others around him.

But Joseph's good stewardship in that household ended when he was falsely accused of attempting to sexually assault his master's wife and was thrown into prison. Even there, his practice of being a good steward continued, and life in prison became better for everyone. In time, he came to the attention of the nation's king and was released and appointed chief steward and manager of the Egyptian economy. He ensured that crops were stored up during good harvest years and distributed during the famine. "Wherever this steward worked, life improved – in the household, in prison, and in the world" (Roop). Here was a man who "looked not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Here was a man to whom much was given and from whom much was received.

The Good Samaritan. We know the famous story that Jesus told. A man was beaten up and left for dead on the side of the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. He was obviously in great need. He has become a symbol of those in the world who suffer unjustly, who suffer because of circumstances beyond their control, like people caught in the fury of a devastating hurricane, or refugees fleeing a war-torn homeland. If ever there was a time when passersby ought to have "looked not to their own interests but the interests of others," or, in other words, if ever there was a time to show care and compassion, to respond to needs, to be stewards in God's way, this was it.

Those from whom we might have expected such a compassionate response – the religious leaders, the priest, and the Levite – were the first to fail. But the Samaritan – despised and rejected by Jesus' listeners – turned out to be the good steward. He had been given much, obviously. He was traveling; he had time, he had money, he had energy. And he responded with compassion to the needs of the injured man, lying wounded in the ditch of life. What went through his mind? Would the muggers still be nearby? Will I get hurt if I get involved here? We don't know.

What we do know is that this person cared. He had compassion for another human being, even a stranger, one of his people's "enemies." He looked

beyond his own needs and his schedule for the day. He dealt with the interruption. He responded with what he had. He gave this man first aid. He got him to an inn; he paid the bill and promised to pay the rest when he returned. He was a caring, compassionate steward, acting in God's way in God's world.

We know how that story ended – Jesus told the lawyer, “Go and do likewise!” Be a steward of your opportunities. Respond to the obvious needs on your path. Use what you've been given for the sake of others!

Caring stewards

Being a steward is not an optional or fringe ethic for the enthusiasts or the extremists. This invitation is extended to every one of us – to be stewards of all that God has given us. To be Christian stewards is the alternative way of being in the world. It is the way that rejects indifference, isolation, and insensitivity. It is the way that embraces caring.

It is on this note of caring that I want to close. In his book *The Steward*, Douglas J. Hall asks the uncomfortable question, “Who cares enough for the world to rise above the pursuit of pleasure and escape and become the champion of justice, equality, international sanity, the future of the biosphere?”

To paraphrase Hall's answer:

- ▲ Because God cares for the world, for humanity, for the church, for the future
- ▲ Because God cares, God became involved, incarnated among us
- ▲ Because God cares, Jesus Christ, the Chief Steward, came, served and died
- ▲ Because God cares, **we** care for the world, for humanity, for the church, for the future
- ▲ Because God cares for us, we have become the new humanity, by grace through faith

The new humanity, the church, continues to do on earth what God started to do on earth, especially through Jesus. Because the church is the new humanity, we care at the core of our being and become involved. We invest ourselves. We serve. We fight indifference like the plague. We see ourselves as caring people and caring individuals. Our caring is the expression of our response to all we have received in life.

May God help each of us to be faithful stewards. Much has been given and much will be required.

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. *By beginning with a summary of the last five sermons, Neufeld reminds us of the framework within which to see ourselves, that we are to relate in God-like ways, that we are to be creative and take risks with our talents, that we are to beware of the temptations of wealth and that giving joyfully is our appropriate response to the blessings God has given us. This sets the stage for his reminder in this sermon that much is required of us as churches and individuals. How do you set the stage for stewardship teaching in your congregation? What aspects of Neufeld's approach would be helpful for your next stewardship appeal?*
2. *Neufeld makes the bold statement on page 49 that "the material world will not hold us down for we have learned to clothe our affluence with grace." Discuss whether such an attitude can be learned once and for all, or whether it requires repeated confessing and enabling by the Holy Spirit.*
3. *This sermon series concludes with the biblical stories of Jacob, Joseph, and the Good Samaritan and challenges us to become caring stewards. Reflect on, or create stories, of people in our day and context that act like Jacob, Joseph, and the Good Samaritan and share these stories in a suitable context.*
4. *As we grow in spiritual maturity our hearts become more closely attuned to the heart of God and our attitudes toward salvation shift from seeing it as a free gift to a gift that frees us for God's saving purposes. Silently consider this process within your congregation and within yourself. Where is your attitude toward salvation? How does it align with your attitudes toward stewardship? Pray for grace to joyfully align your stewardship more closely with the heart of God for the world.*