

THE BLESSINGS OF STEWARDSHIP

Luke 16:10-13

(NASB): "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. ¹¹ Therefore if you have not been faithful in the *use of* unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true *riches* to you? ¹² And if you have not been faithful in *the use of* that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³ No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, a young man of 18 heard a sermon on being faithful stewards of our wealth. He determined whatever money he gained from that day forward, one-tenth would be set aside for the Lord before he devoted any of it to his own use. For a number of years, he honored his commitment by tithing 10% of all he earned in the publishing business. But after a time, he noticed he was giving more to God's work than many of his friends who had much greater incomes. Some of these friends tried to convince him of being overly generous, so he took this matter to the Lord in prayer. He was about to launch a new type of periodical never before seen in London. He asked that in connection with this new publication, he would be given a clear sign showing whether God wanted him to continue tithing or not. As it turned out, his new publication proved to be a huge success. He made much more in profit than he'd dared to hope for or even dream. But he then realized something even more startling. The amount he made in profit on his new publishing venture turned out to be the same sum of money, to the exact penny, that he'd given away to the Lord in all the years he'd been tithing, starting when he was 18 years old! This publisher concluded, "I saw that the Lord was determined never to be in debt with me, so I went ahead with tithing."

Around this same time, another Christian man faithfully tithed \$500 each week (in today's dollars) for the support of his Methodist church. Another member of this congregation, a poor widow, just as regularly gave about \$5 per week to her church. One day, this kindly Christian man sent word to her through their minister. He offered to relieve her of any sense of financial obligation toward their church because of how great her needs were. He would pay the \$5 in her behalf. As the minister shared these words, tears came to the eyes of this woman as she replied, "Do they want to take from me the comfort I experience in giving to the Lord? Think how much I owe Him? My health is good, my children are provided for, and I receive so many blessings that I feel I could not live if I did not make my little offering to Jesus each week."

Whether we have a lot of this world's goods or if we have little, we can each share in The Blessings of Stewardship. A steward is "a person who manages the property or financial affairs of another." **Psalms 89:11**(NLT) reminds us who owns us and everything around us: "The heavens are Yours, and the earth is Yours; everything in the world is yours—you created it all." Because this is true, are we responsible to see our Creator-Savior receives a good return on all the good things He allows to come our way? Yes! David experienced great suffering before and after becoming Israel's king. He risked his life repeatedly in battle against Israel's enemies. The people of Israel overcame much adversity and worked hard for their prosperity. They collectively gave a fabulous offering to build the Temple, Israel's worship center for their nation. Yet, hear how David prayed to express the people's joy over this offering in **I Chronicles 29:14-16** (NLT): "But who am I, and who are my people, that we could give anything to You? Everything we have has come from You, and we give You only what You first gave us! ¹⁵ We are here for only a moment, visitors and strangers in the land as our ancestors were before us. Our days on earth are like a passing shadow, gone so soon without a trace. ¹⁶ O LORD our God, even this material we have gathered to build a Temple to honor Your holy name comes from You! It all belongs to You!" **I Peter 4:10** (ESV) clarifies that our Lord expects us to be good stewards of our spiritual gifts and abilities, in addition to being financial stewards: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

Over the centuries people have come up with a lot of different ideas about Christian stewardship. There's a story of two guys discussing their approaches to giving. One said, "Here's how I decide how much to give. I cash my paycheck in small bills. Then I go home and draw a circle on the floor. I throw the money into the air and whatever falls into the circle is God's." The other guy said, "I think my way is better. On payday, I cash my check in small bills. When I get home, I toss the money into the air and count to 7. Whatever is still in the air by then is what God catches. I keep the rest." We look today at *The Precedent of Stewardship*, *The Purpose of Stewardship*, and *The Practice of Stewardship*.

I. THE PRECEDENT OF STEWARDSHIP

God's people have historically honored Him by returning to Him a tithe, a tenth of all they gained. When God gave Israel His laws through Moses, their wealth was mostly crops and flocks. In **Leviticus 27, 30, 32** (NLT), God clearly instructed His people that a tenth of all their increase was to be considered His: "One-tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain from the fields or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD and must be set apart to him as holy.³² Count off every tenth animal from your herds and flocks and set them apart for the LORD as holy." **Malachi 3:8-9** (NIV) shows us how strongly God feels about receiving His tithes: "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob Me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'" In tithes and offerings.⁹ You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing Me."

Some Christians today insist we live in New Testament times and are not duty bound to observe many Old Testament laws, including tithing. A close examination of the Bible reveals tithing was *Commenced* by Abraham (**Genesis 14:17-20**) and *Committed to* by Jacob (**Genesis 28:20-22**) centuries before God gave Israel His Laws. It's therefore not surprising Moses *Commanded* that it embodies God's will (**Leviticus 27:30-32; Numbers 18:25-30**). Malachi, the Old Testament's final prophet, then *Confirmed* tithing (**Malachi 3:8-12**), and **Jesus Himself Commended** tithing (**Matthew 23:23**). Who are we, then, to *Cancel* it? Please consider this. Nearly all the first Christians were Jews. As Jews, it was a deeply ingrained part of life to bring tithes and offerings (gifts over and above a tithe) when they came to worship God in their faith communities. After these Jews became Christians, having fully embraced the depths of God's love and grace toward them through the sacrifice of God's Son in their behalf, can we truly believe they would bring less tithes and offerings when they came to worship God than they did prior to becoming Christians?

II. THE PURPOSE OF STEWARDSHIP

Before we discuss how we should apply the Biblical principle of tithing to our lives, let's consider three reasons why tithing is important to God under the heading of *The Purpose of Stewardship*.

A. Privilege of Participating in God's Work

Is God poor? Of course not! On one occasion during His brief and busy three-year ministry as the Messiah, **Jesus** needed money to pay for the support of the Temple that God required of all Jewish men. Rather than asking someone for it, **Jesus** sent Peter fishing. The very first fish Peter caught had a coin in its mouth that covered the Temple contribution for Him and for Peter (**Matthew 17:24-27**)! This reminds me of another story, in honor of tax season. One day at a local café, a woman suddenly called out, "Help! My daughter's choking. She swallowed a nickel." Immediately a man at a nearby table came up and said he was experienced in these types of situations. He calmly wrapped his arms around the girl and squeezed. Out popped the nickel. He then returned to his table as though nothing had happened. The mother went over to him and said, "Thank you! Are you a doctor?" "No," the man replied. "I work for the IRS."

God offers us the privilege of participation in His eternal work of changing people's lives for time and eternity by asking us to contribute at least a tenth of our increase to His work. Here is how Paul describes this privilege in **II Corinthians 9:11-13, 15** (Phillips), with reference to an emergency offering for the relief of Christians in Israel: "The more you are enriched by God the more scope there will be for generous giving, and your gifts, administered through us, will mean that many will thank God. For your giving does not end in meeting the wants of your fellow-Christians. It also results in an overflowing tide of

thanksgiving to God. Moreover, your very giving proves the reality of your faith, and that means that men thank God that you practise the Gospel that you profess to believe in, as well as for the actual gifts you make to them and to others. Thank God, then, for His indescribable generosity to you!"

B. Personal Satisfaction

Jesus taught us, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (**Acts 20:35**). I have spent money on more things and in more ways than I can remember. Most of it is not worth remembering and does nothing to make me happier today. Corrie ten Boom (1892-1983), a Christian woman imprisoned by the Nazis during WWII for helping Jews escape Adolf Hitler's death grip, later traveled the world proclaiming God's message of forgiveness and reconciliation. She stated, "I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess." Many of the ways God uses our money for His work will be joy gifts we receive in His presence when He reveals to us the Heavenly and everlasting fruit of our stewardship!

C. Prevention of Greed

Christ's followers are urged to be, "those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep;³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away (**I Corinthians 7:30-31**, NIV). Can we become possessed, or obsessed, with gaining material possessions? It's no surprise God gives us specific warnings about the power of possessions to displace His rightful place in our hearts and become our god: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (**Matthew 6:21**); and, "For the love of money is the first step toward all kinds of sin. Some people have even turned away from God because of their love for it, and as a result have pierced themselves with many sorrows" (**I Timothy 6:10**, TLB). When preparing a contribution of tithe and offerings to the Lord, if \$10 or \$100 seems to be a much bigger amount than when we spend the same amount on something for ourselves, greed is crying out to be our god! Someone once said, "Stewardship is not leaving a tip on God's tablecloth; it is the confession of an unpayable debt at God's Calvary."

III. THE PRACTICE OF STEWARDSHIP

Let's reread our opening text [read]. God looks closely at how we use the resources with which He entrusts us and whether we spend money like it's purely our own or whether it's given to us by God on loan. We'll experience less of His presence and protection in this life, and we'll be entrusted with less privileges in the next life, based upon our practice of stewardship. To some extent, we are earning Heavenly rewards or spurning Heavenly rewards by much we demonstrate if our love for our Savior controls our spending. A Sunday School teacher knew some parents sought to teach stewardship to their sons by letting them give part of the family tithe. One morning, one of the boys revealed his parents' lessons on the blessings of giving were falling on deaf ears. The teacher asked them that day, "Do you know where little boys go if they don't put their money in the collection plate?" "Yes sir," a boy blurted out. "They go to the movies!"

In **Malachi 3:10-12** (NIV), immediately after what we read earlier from Malachi, our Lord declares some of the exceptional blessings that will be ours if we partner with Him by faithfully supporting His work: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house [resources to carry out God's work]. Test Me in this,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. ¹¹ I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,' says the LORD Almighty. ¹² Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,' says the LORD Almighty." God knows tithing will often be a severe test of our faith. We may think, "I'm barely getting by now. If I live off of 90% of what I make instead of 100%, I may not have enough to pay my bills." God replies to us, "Can't you trust Me? When you tithe, I will always give back to you more in blessings of one kind or another—increased health, protections from injury and harm, productivity, promotions, finding great bargains, extending how long the things you own last—so that 90% will stretch much farther than 100%." This is one of the rare occasions where God invites us to put Him to the test!

CONCLUSION

Oseola McCarty was conceived when her mother was raped on a wooded path in rural Mississippi as she returned from tending a sick relative. Oseola was taken in by her aunt and grandmother after her birth in 1908 in Hattiesburg, MS. They raised this poor little black girl to believe she had a Heavenly Father who loved her and had sent His Son to be her Savior. Oseola dropped out of school at age 12 to care for her sick aunt and began a lifelong career of washing and ironing clothes. She preferred a washboard to modern washing machines. She tried an automatic washer and dryer in the 1960s but found, "the washing machine didn't rinse enough, and the dryer turned the whites yellow." After years of boiling clothes and doing four fresh-water rinses, that wasn't good enough to meet her high standards.

She retired at age 86, her hands painfully swollen by arthritis, having never married or borne children. She consistently tithed to her church, paid all her bills, and made monthly payments on her insurance and burial plot. Everything left over went into the bank. "The Lord portioned out the good things in life to me just fine," she said. "Who needs any more?" Miss McCarty proved Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55) correct: "It is more blessed to give than to receive, but then it is also more blessed to be able to do without than to have to have." Miss McCarty chose to live very simply.

About five years before her death in 1999, Oseola became a national celebrity by giving \$150,000 — sixth-tenths of her life savings — to the University of Southern Mississippi to found a scholarship for worthy but needy students seeking the education she never had. When word spread of what she'd done, over 600 men and women in Hattiesburg and elsewhere made donations that more than tripled her original endowment. Today, the university presents several full-tuition McCarty scholarships each year. "I start each day on my knees, saying the Lord's Prayer. Then I get busy about my work," McCarty told one interviewer. "You have to accept God the best way you know how and then He'll show Himself to you. And the more you serve Him, the more *able* you are to serve Him. I can't do everything, but I can do something to help somebody. And what I *can* do I *will* do."