

Management 101
Matthew 25:14-25
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Have you ever noticed that there are some words we use in church that we don't use anywhere else? Take the word "narthex" for example. In any other building, it's a foyer or an entryway, but for some reason, in a church, it's a "narthex."

As Presbyterians, we have a particularly peculiar vocabulary. What in any other organization would be a governing board or church council is something called "the session," which comes from the Latin, "to sit." And we love our acronyms almost as much as the military. Here at FPC, the PNC worked closely with the COM to develop the church's MIF so it could be posted to the CLC and matched with PIFs.

Last week, we talked about first words, about how the biblical story begins with God's intention of the blessing of all the families of the earth.

This week, I want to talk about one particular word, a church word, a word that we hardly ever hear in any other context, but a vital word that shapes our walk with Christ, a word that has deeply shaped my own personal spirituality in recent years.

Stewardship.

Now, I bet I can guess what you're thinking. The guy's been here two weeks, and he's already preaching about money!

And that's the problem. Somewhere along the way, the church has so misused the word stewardship that we have conditioned the people of God to believe that stewardship is just a code word for money. Whenever the word stewardship is uttered in church, it must be time to develop the operating budget for next year, or we're about to build something, and it's going to be expensive, or we've built something expensive, and we need to pay it off. Somewhere along the way, we have conditioned the people of God to believe that stewardship is just about money and the church's need to receive it.

I grew up in and around the church. I grew up believing that stewardship is about money, about budgets, about buildings. As a young preacher, I preached those sermons.

But when I was 33 years old, the lightbulb finally went off for me about this area of my walk with Christ. And I'll be happy to share that piece of my personal faith journey with you on another day.

But what took me a long time to learn was that the root of the word stewardship is steward, which is an old English word that simply means, "Manager," or "Caretaker." A steward is not the owner, but rather someone who manages on the owner's behalf.

Years ago, flight attendants were called stewards and stewardesses. They did not own the airplane, but rather, they managed the safety and comfort of the passengers on the airlines' behalf.

If you know the biblical story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, Joseph became Pharaoh's steward. He managed all of Egypt's affairs on Pharaoh's behalf. But he was most certainly not Pharaoh, and he never dreamed of passing himself off as such.

A steward is simply a manager, a caretaker.

And that brings us to this troubling parable from Matthew's gospel. It's a parable about an owner and three stewards. Not for nothing, Jesus teaches this parable just after he's arrived in Jerusalem, just before his betrayal and crucifixion. Jesus knows that his time with the disciples is growing short, and so he teaches this parable about a landowner who goes on a long journey before his return.

This landowner Jesus describes is unbelievably wealthy. In fact, Jesus is probably using hyperbole, because a talent was not a skill like playing the piano or shooting a free throw – a talent was a sum of money equivalent to 15 years' worth of wages for a laborer.

And so this landowner is going on a journey, and so he summons three of his slaves. Now, by definition, a slave owns nothing. They have a net worth of zero. But the landowner entrusts some of his wealth to their management. To

one, he gives 75 years' worth of wages. To another, 30 years, and to another, 15. Either this landowner is incredibly trusting, or completely off his rocker. There are no two ways about it.

But the key to unlocking this parable is this phrase: "to each according to their ability." What this tells us is that the landowner did not summon the slaves at random. He knew them intimately. He'd likely been watching them for some time. He chose them specifically for a purpose, and he knew their capabilities. And so he entrusts them with this incredible wealth, and then he goes away.

And after a long time, he returns. And there is an audit. And why wouldn't there be? If you gave someone that kind of money to manage, wouldn't you like to see a statement from time to time?

And the one who had 75 years of wages has been faithful with it, and it has grown to 150 years. And he hears those wonderful words, "Well done, good and faithful one, you have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many. Enter into the joy of your master."

And the pattern repeats with the one who received 30 years' worth of wages. He has managed it well, and it has grown to 60, and he gets the same praise.

And then we come to the one who was entrusted with 15 years' worth of wages. He didn't take the master's

money and go spend it on stuff his little heart desired. Every penny is there. So what's the problem?

He refused the opportunity to manage on the owner's behalf. Instead, he took what was the master's and he buried it, full of fear and anxiety. And so when the audit came, he failed it.

Here's the biblical truth, my sisters and brothers. Everything you have, everything you are, everything you will be, is a gift. You came into this world the same way everybody else did – stark naked and completely helpless. Everything you have is not ultimately yours – it's God's, and it's been entrusted to you to manage on God's behalf. And God expects you to take up that responsibility. God is looking for faithful managers.

This is not just about money. Money is amoral. It has no morality of its own. It's like a brick. You can take a brick and build a hospital or a home or a school, and you can take that same brick and club someone over the head with it. It's what happens when it touches our hands that gives it a morality.

Stewardship is not only about dollars and cents. It's about coming to the spiritual understanding that everything belongs to God. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. God doesn't want or need your money. What God wants is your heart, and what you do with your money often reveals the orientation of your heart.

Amy and I tell our three sons all the time that they don't belong to us. They are on loan to us from God, and God has called Amy and I to steward them – to see to their physical and emotional and educational and spiritual needs – but they are not ours. They are God's, and that's what we reaffirmed on the day that they were baptized.

Earlier this month, Amy and I were blessed to close on the purchase of a beautiful home here in Athens, and, by the grace of God, if the way be clear, by the time we meet back here next week, Amy and I will no longer be the owners of a beautiful home in Fort Worth, Texas. We have signed so many pieces of paper in recent days, and we will do more of it in the days ahead, that has to do with buying and selling real estate. And all of that is fine and good. But the reality is that the home at 126 Telfair Place isn't really our home. It's God's house, and God has given it to Amy and I to create a home of Christian hospitality and welcome all who enter it.

I think when God watches us sign all of those papers that convey ownership, God just laughs and smiles. The earth is the Lord's, testifies the Psalmist, the world, and those who live in it. The reality is that Amy and I and you and your neighbors and all those people walking by out there – we don't ultimately own a thing. It all belongs to God.

One day, I hope many years from now, the last breath will leave these lungs of mine and I will stand before the

judgment seat of God. And there will be an audit. But as I read through the Scriptures, I don't believe that the basis of that audit will be how many souls I saved, because I don't have that kind of power – only Christ does. I don't believe the basis of the audit will be the growth of the budgets of the churches I served.

I think the basis of the audit will simply be this: Did I manage the gifts that God entrusted to me to the best of my ability?

And here's the truth – someday, you, and your neighbors, and all those people out there, will also face an audit. We worship and serve a God who is exceedingly, extravagantly generous. And God has entrusted you with some of God's incredible gifts to manage on God's behalf, to use them and enjoy them, not to bury them or be afraid of them.

So how are you doing? Are you managing faithfully and well to the best of your abilities? Are you letting God's blessings flow in and through you and out to all the families of the earth? There's an easy way to do a self checkup. Take a look at your calendar, and take a look at whatever tool it is to track your personal finances. Money and time are gifts from God that we are given to manage on God's behalf every day. Are you managing those gifts in a godly way, with an eye toward managing for the glory of God's kingdom? Or do some adjustments need to be made?

And as I mentioned last week, this stewardship thing is not just about

you, it's about all of us, in this thing together we call the church. This congregation is approaching its 200th birthday. You and I are direct beneficiaries of generations faithful stewards who have gone before us.

This is not my church, nor is it your church. This is God's church. This planet we share is not ours, either. It's God's. The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.

You and I are just here for a season of time. You and I are just stewards, given these incredible gifts, entrusted to us according to our abilities.

May we use these gifts. May we enjoy them. May we steward them well. And on the day of our audit, may we hear these words. "Well done, my good and faithful servants. You have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many. Enter into the joy of your Master.