

A Biblical Journey in Stewardship

Christian stewardship is a journey. It is complex and often difficult, but one in which we are given considerable guidance with over 2,000 relevant verses in the Bible. Jesus is attributed with some 300 verses on money – not just on tithing and giving, but on all aspects of stewardship, e.g., debt, savings, effective management, taxes, etc.

Other Christ followers have also been on this journey before us, and left us with their ‘travel logs’ on the subject. The following outlines ten lessons that I have learned or am learning in my own stewardship journey.

- 1. Stewardship is a journey of freedom.** Matthew 6:24 says, “*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.*” Jesus saw the potential of our possessions to become a rival God, and ultimately bind us. Our money is an excellent servant, but a terrible master. Effective stewardship sets us and others free from money controlling our lives. Two questions to test our own relationship to possessions are: 1) How sensitive am I when challenged on money? 2) How available are my possessions to the community?
- 2. Stewardship is a spiritual discipline.** Matthew 6:2-4 assumes we will give just as it assumes we would practice the other spiritual disciplines especially the complementary disciplines of prayer, fasting and simplicity. A primary goal of spiritual disciplines is freedom. They are not theory, but practice. Like the other disciplines, stewardship needs to be taught and practiced - it is never too early or late. We start where we are.
- 3. Stewardship replaces an ‘ownership’ mindset (“heartset”).** Stewardship can be defined as ‘managing God’s resources for His intended purposes.’ All that we have belongs to God, and we are his ‘money managers’. Psalm 24:1-2 says, “*The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.*” He sets the guidelines, and ultimately we are accountable to Him for His investments and trust in us. We don’t choose to be stewards: we’re already entrusted by God.
- 4. Stewardship incorporates the tithe.** This is where I (and many others) began my stewardship journey. My father learned as a boy to tithe on the 15 cents he made delivering papers, and taught me to tithe on my allowance although it didn’t really become ‘my practice’ until after university. The earlier you learn, the easier it is and the more it becomes ‘part of you’. Richard Wurmbbrand talks about how during his imprisonment the prisoners were given soup once a day and bread once a week. Wurmbbrand, with an imbedded sense of tithe, would give his soup to another prisoner every 10 days, and his bread every 10 weeks.

A ‘tithe’ literally means ‘a tenth’, and can be interpreted different ways, e.g. on gross or on net income. Malachi 3:6-18 teaches about the tithe as something we owe to God, and Jesus confirms this in Matthew 23:23 while warning us not to let any legalism overshadow the love, worship and social justice intended in the tithe, i.e., the tithe was made for us, and not us for the tithe.

Today, some would say that we are no longer under ‘the law’, and therefore not required to tithe. Jesus seems, however, not to have lowered the standard, but praised those for giving their all (old woman and “the mite”, Mark 12:41-44).

The tithe for many is where we start, but each needs to seek God on the question of amount. C.S. Lewis wisely said, "I do not believe we can settle how much we ought to give. I'm afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare."

5. **Stewardship works best through the local church.** In Acts 4:32 forward, we are told that the early followers brought everything to the local community, and then in 2 Corinthians 8 we read of believers giving through their local fellowships. Malachi 3:10 says, "*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse*" which meant the treasury room of the temple or the synagogues. Some would interpret this as 'the local church' while others interpret it more broadly. My own working interpretation is that the tithe goes to and through the local church as God's primary agent in this world, and then additional giving we allocate as we discern God's leading.
6. **Stewardship is about love.** It's about loving God with the gift of my 'first fruits', (Community Church practices the 'first fruits' principle by giving away the first 20% of our income), it's about loving others through practically meeting their needs, and it's about loving myself by keeping me free from the bond of possessions. In Matthew 6:4, Jesus talks about our Father 'rewarding us' for giving – we are rewarded by the freedom and joy we receive through our acts of generosity. Stewardship leads us into joy.
7. **Stewardship is a grace we can excel at.** In 2 Corinthians 8:7, Paul exhorts us, "see that you also excel in this grace of giving." So, giving is a grace – not something we work for, but give thanks for. We need to excel in it because the more we do, the more we become like the Father, who gave his Son, like the Son who gave his life, and like the Spirit, who continually gives us spiritual gifts, teaching, comfort and encouragement.
8. **Stewardship can be hard work.** In Mark 10:17-31, Jesus tells the story of the rich, young man who was bound by his possessions, and says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Rockefeller said, 'I never gave away money without causing trouble.' We need God's help – "all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27)
9. **Stewardship needs a plan.** We do not drift into effective stewardship any more than we drift into our personal investments – we plan, we ask experts, we are intentional, and the best plans look for long-term returns. Our stewardship plans encompass an eternal time frame. Three questions that can help shape an effective plan are 1) What is our personal plan for glorifying God with our money 2) How are we doing right now? 3) What can we do to close the gap?
10. **Stewardship is a gifting.** In Romans 12, Paul is going through the 'different gifts' and says, "*if it is in contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously.*" All are called to stewardship just as all are called to praise God, but in the same way that some are gifted singers who can help all of us in praise – some are gifted in stewardship, and can help others in this area. Like all gifts, however, stewardship needs to be developed. As Aristotle observed, 'the things we need to learn to do, we learn by doing.'

Steve Gaultney
Community Church, 2011