

# STEWARDSHIP OF LIFE

By Rev. Will Nelken

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We are God's creation; He made us. He created the very matter from which we are formed.

He also made us with the capacity to know Him personally, intimately, as a friend knows a friend. He made us in His image—spiritual DNA—a likeness that makes Him recognizable to us, and potentially makes Him recognizable in us.

I say, “potentially,” because our human nature is bent away from Him (due to sin). But when we have been born again He gives us His nature again and, as we submit to His efforts, begins to rebuild our character in His likeness, revealing Himself through us, and preparing us to live with Him eternally.

Through Jesus Christ, who died to put away the impediment of our sins and bring us back to God, we have been redeemed and are being transformed.

Therefore, as a result of our creation and our redemption, God has given us life—a mortal life and an immortal life—to steward. We are responsible to the Lord; we must give Him an account of how we have conducted our lives.

Stewardship is management, but it is more. It is not management technique or skill alone; it is management heart. It is the personal care of an owner; but of course, you may own something that you never personally use, like a rental property, or a share in someone else's business. Stewardship is the caring management of a resident owner.

This was the heart behind share-cropping, which came into wide use during the Reconstruction that followed the United States Civil War. A share in the harvest and its profits, gave incentive to the sharecroppers to be diligent and wise in their work.

An ancient example of this is found in the Book of Genesis (chapter 30), when Jacob agreed to continue working for his Uncle Laban in return for the spotted or streaked sheep of his flocks. Jacob devised ways of breeding the sheep so the stronger ones would be spotted or streaked, so he became wealthy.

A modern example of this is the “employee-owned” business, in which every employee receives a percentage of the business profits, with the expectation that they will care for the entire business, not just their department, and all of its workers, not just themselves, as if the company is their own.

Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:6), *“If you lay all these instructions before the brethren, you will be a worthy steward and a good minister of Christ Jesus, ever nourishing your own self on the truths of the faith and of the good [Christian] instruction which you have closely followed.”* Here we may see that it is God's plan that His stewards also partake of the “profit” of their service. And he wrote again to him (2 Timothy 2:6), *“hardworking farmers should be the first to enjoy the fruit of their labor.”*

Elsewhere, Jesus teaches us about the heart of a steward, whether godly or selfish.

Luke 12

<sup>42</sup> *And the Lord replied, “A faithful, sensible servant is one to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his other household servants and feeding them. <sup>43</sup> If the master returns and finds that the servant has done a good job, there will be a reward. <sup>44</sup> I tell you the truth, the master will put that servant in charge of all he owns.*

Jacob was put in charge of all of Laban’s flocks on this basis. Joseph, a slave, was put in charge of all the affairs of the nation of Egypt on this basis. Daniel, also a slave, was put in charge of the affairs of Babylon on this basis.

Luke 12

<sup>45</sup> *But what if the servant thinks, ‘My master won’t be back for a while,’ and he begins beating the other servants, partying, and getting drunk? <sup>46</sup> The master will return unannounced and unexpected, and he will cut the servant in pieces and banish him with the unfaithful.*

<sup>47</sup> *“And a servant who knows what the master wants, but isn’t prepared and doesn’t carry out those instructions, will be severely punished. <sup>48</sup> But someone who does not know, and then does something wrong, will be punished only lightly. When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required.*

Here is an example of a steward who lacked the heart for the job—after all, it wasn’t *his* household or *his* crops or *his* flocks. Consequently, he took what he wanted *for the moment*, without regard to the long-range impact or result of his actions. It seemed like he was “living the high life” for awhile, but then the owner returned and made him account for his behavior.

There will always be some people who try to take advantage of a good thing and abuse their privileges. Some Christians flatter themselves that they are the “owners,” that the gracious provision of God in their lives is of their own creation, and they can do with it as they please. Such behavior is detestable, but do not hate them for it, nor become bitter or disenchanted with the Church. The True Owner will soon return and set things in order. Wait for Him.

Jesus described this “steward’s heart” for us:

Matthew 20

<sup>25</sup> *Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. <sup>26</sup> But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. <sup>28</sup> For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

In other words, Biblical greatness is defined by servanthood. The measure of spiritual maturity is your willingness to serve as needed.

Today, I want you to consider three areas in which to focus your stewardship and balance your accounts: toward God, toward others, and toward yourself. Each of them has five facets of expression, corresponding to the five aspects of balanced health (relationship, diet, rest, exercise, and environment).

## **To God, Who Made You**

2 Timothy 2

<sup>4</sup> *No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer.*

Godly stewards make themselves available to serve. They avoid pursuits that could limit their readiness or fitness to serve. Their chief aim is to please the Lord.

Colossians 3

<sup>23</sup> *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,* <sup>24</sup> *since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

Your stewardship toward God should be evidenced by five things: awareness, devotion, trust, obedience, and worship.

We cannot live the life God wants us to if we are unaware of His presence or promptings. Gaining and maintaining this awareness should become a primary goal of your everyday journey. Spiritual awareness is akin to stimulation of the natural senses, without which your physical life would decline. Through Bible reading, prayer, and worship, if you intentionally open your heart to Him and invite interaction, the Holy Spirit will awaken and enhance your spiritual awareness.

The natural outflow of developing awareness is increasing devotion—our attention-factor. A good steward gives focused attention to the one he serves, learning to recognize the slightest signal. Devotion makes the “awareness exercises” a regular part of the spiritual diet, and spiritual diet is as important for life as physical diet.

Devoted attention to God leads to increased trust in God, for the better you know Him, the more you trust Him. And trust is the very core of our relationship with Him and the link to our salvation. You have trust, but do you have *growing* trust? Did you know that this is the aim of all the tests and trials you face (regardless of their apparent source)—to improve your trust in God? Trust is more necessary for your spirit than rest is for your body. Your objective should not be to see how little you can get by with, but how much you can develop.

Obedience is the demonstration and proof of trust, just as our strength and stamina for physical exercise demonstrates adequate or inadequate habits of rest. Without exercise your physical body will lose its usefulness and become more difficult to manage. In a similar way, obedience serves to keep your spiritual life in good shape. It is the necessary and beneficial activity of the soul.

Worship is the environmental element of your spiritual life. By personal acts of worship you are transported into heavenly places, where the air is clean and the light is bright. Don't relegate worship to the few minutes each week that you may spend in church; that would be like living in a dark, dank cave, and emerging into the light of day only once a week! Make worship part of your everyday activity: a few moments when you first awaken, a prayer before breakfast, praise on the way to work, thanksgiving throughout the day, praise on the way home, a prayer before supper, and a few minutes of devotion before bed—at the minimum. This will contribute powerfully to the other four elements of your stewardship toward God.

### **To Others, Who Have Encouraged You**

None of us has become the person we are today apart from the input and help of many other people. They have contributed to who we are. We owe them part of the stewardship of our lives.

Galatians 6 (NLT)

<sup>10</sup> *Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith.*

Opportunities to serve come, and go. If we lack sensitivity or spontaneity, we will fail to seize many of the opportunities we are given. Set aside your own desires, in order to seize the moment that is before you.

Ecclesiastes 9 (NASB)

<sup>10</sup> *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.*

Jesus specialized in menial tasks that others often tried to avoid: washing feet, helping children, fixing breakfast, and serving lepers. Nothing was beneath Him, because He came to serve. It wasn't in spite of His greatness that He did these things; it was *because* of it, and He expects us to follow His example (John 13:15).

Your stewardship toward others should be evidenced by five things: attention, forgiveness, listening ear, caring, and giving thanks.

To truly appreciate people—any people—you must give them your attention. We all crave for attention—not merely because we are self-centered, but because we are human. God has made us that way to stimulate fellowship and community. Life, today, is filled with distractions—some we dislike, but most we find entertaining. Don't let "life" shortchange you on the fellowship God has ordained for you. Pay attention, before you pay in other ways. Become aware of the people around you—as people—not merely as useful tools or annoying hindrances. This takes time, of course, but less than you imagine once you stop resisting.

When you pay attention, you will surely realize how much other people need forgiveness—not just yours, but God's. Their lives are hobbled by guilt and shame. Be sure that you are not hobbling them yourself, but be ready and generous to forgive. If you are not ready to acquit them authoritatively (John 20:23), at least transfer their case to a "Higher Court" (let God take care of it). Your own forgiveness depends on this (Mark 11:25-26). We are to forgive as freely as Christ has forgiven us. This is a matter of spiritual dietary balance (Luke 11:3-4).

If you pay attention and forgive, then you are ready to actively listen. Everyone needs a listening ear. People are willing to pay huge amounts of money annually for therapists to listen attentively to them, and much of psychology recognizes that a listening ear can help lead many people to their own resolution, without the need of any other specific intervention. Many people require talking things through in order to mentally process all of the feelings, experiences, and information they have to deal with. Your listening ear provides a place of spiritual rest for them to process and resolve, or at least advance.

Just as rest enables exercise, and exercise reveals the quality of our rest, so also caring actions reveal the quality of our listening. If no compassionate action follows a "listening session," then we have failed to really listen; we simply "zoned out" while others talked. Compassion moved the heart of Jesus; let it move yours, too—and not just to feelings, but to actions! Exercise compassion toward others in your life regularly—family, friends, and strangers.

Giving thanks lifts the heart. Everyone craves appreciation, not only for what they've done or accomplished, but even more so for who they are. Giving thanks is a simple, inexpensive, and time-efficient way to bless the people around you, lift their spirits, and improve the general atmosphere of your relationships. Ultimately, of course, our thanks belongs to God, who gives us life and works through those around us to reveal and accomplish His will in our lives. But if you thank the messengers also, you will encourage them to become even clearer channels for God to work through in the future. Everyone gets blessed!

## To Yourself, Who You Truly Are

You also have a responsibility of stewardship to yourself, to your truest self—the self God is growing inside of you (1 Corinthians 10:17).

1 Corinthians 15

<sup>58</sup> *So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.*

Godly stewards don't promote or call attention to themselves. Instead of acting to impress and dressing for success, they "put on the apron of humility, to serve one another" (1 Peter 5:5, TEV). If recognized for their service, they will humbly accept it, giving thanks to God for His grace, but won't allow the recognition to distract them from their work.

The Pharisees elevated this error into an art, constantly trying to impress people with how spiritual they were. They turned helping, giving, prayer, and even fasting into a performance for others. Jesus hated this attitude and warned, *"When you do good deeds, don't try to show off. If you do, you won't get a reward from your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 6:1, CEV).

Godly stewards don't serve for the approval or applause of others. They live for an audience of One. Paul wrote: *"If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ"* (Galatians 1:10).

Godly stewards finish their tasks, fulfill their responsibilities, keep their promises and complete their commitments. They don't leave a job half undone. They don't quit when they get discouraged. They are trustworthy and dependable.

Your stewardship toward yourself should also be evidenced by five things: carefulness, commitment, thoughtfulness, passion, and enjoyment.

Paul urges us to "walk circumspectly" in life (Ephesians 5:15), which means to try to view our situation from many angles. Only a fool would run ahead without looking where he puts his feet. This is not a license to worry, which he elsewhere forbids. On the other hand, "carefreeness" among Christians is over-rated, and dangerous. We do have an enemy who is on the prowl to deceive and injure us. You must guard your own heart, for no one else will, or really can.

Just as your commitment to a balanced diet is valuable for your physical life, your commitment to a "balanced you" increases the value and usefulness of your spiritual life. Spiritual maturity doesn't happen automatically or by accident; it requires an intentional initiative on your part, to which the Holy Spirit responds with grace and power. The fact remains that no one can appreciate the value of a commitment before they have made one and kept it. God only invites to His "holy hill" those who keep their word "even if it hurts" (Psalm 15:4). Your word (your commitment to your promises) is what defines you as a person. It opens doors of opportunity for you, or shuts them.

In our hyper-active, over-entertained world, few people still take the time to pause and reflect, to sit and think ("How lazy!"). But thoughtful reflection—and its twin children: wise insight and courageous action—is the activity that builds spiritual strength. Physically, growth takes place during rest; spiritually, growth takes place during prayerful reflection. Don't be lazy, but do be thoughtful about your spiritual life. Your forward progress depends on it.

Thoughtfulness also develops passion, as rest develops energy for action. God gives you a heart (passion) for certain issues and opportunities in the world around you. Do not neglect them, no matter

how far-fetched it seems for you to pursue them. Knowledge can be gained and skills can be developed; you are capable of more than you have imagined. Don't forget to take care of your mundane responsibilities, but do not fail to pursue your passions in life. It is a major part of your stewardship toward yourself.

God provides us all things "to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17). The "pursuit of happiness" is not merely a political slogan; it is the heart of our Creator toward us. Therefore, it should also be the stewardship of our life toward ourselves. Of course, I am not promoting simple selfish pursuit of pleasure, but rather, of those things which bring true joy and happiness, those things which are in harmony with God's will. From the smallest wildflower to the grandest sunset, from the grasp of an infant's tiny hand to the embrace of your spouse, from the fragrance of a blossom to the flavor of a favorite dish, from the tender mercy of God's cleansing forgiveness to the overflowing gratitude for a single new birth, from the gracious protection of an accident averted to the humble amazement of a divine healing—all these things are to be enjoyed, not overlooked, not underestimated, but richly enjoyed, thoroughly enjoyed, deeply enjoyed, simply enjoyed. You know that a gift ignored is a wound, but a gift enjoyed is a thrill. Try not to ignore *any* of God's gifts; develop an increasing enjoyment of your life. Your joy will spill over into the atmosphere of your every relationship, lifting everyone God-ward.

These then, are the three facets of your stewardship of life—toward God, toward others, and toward yourself. Be a faithful steward.