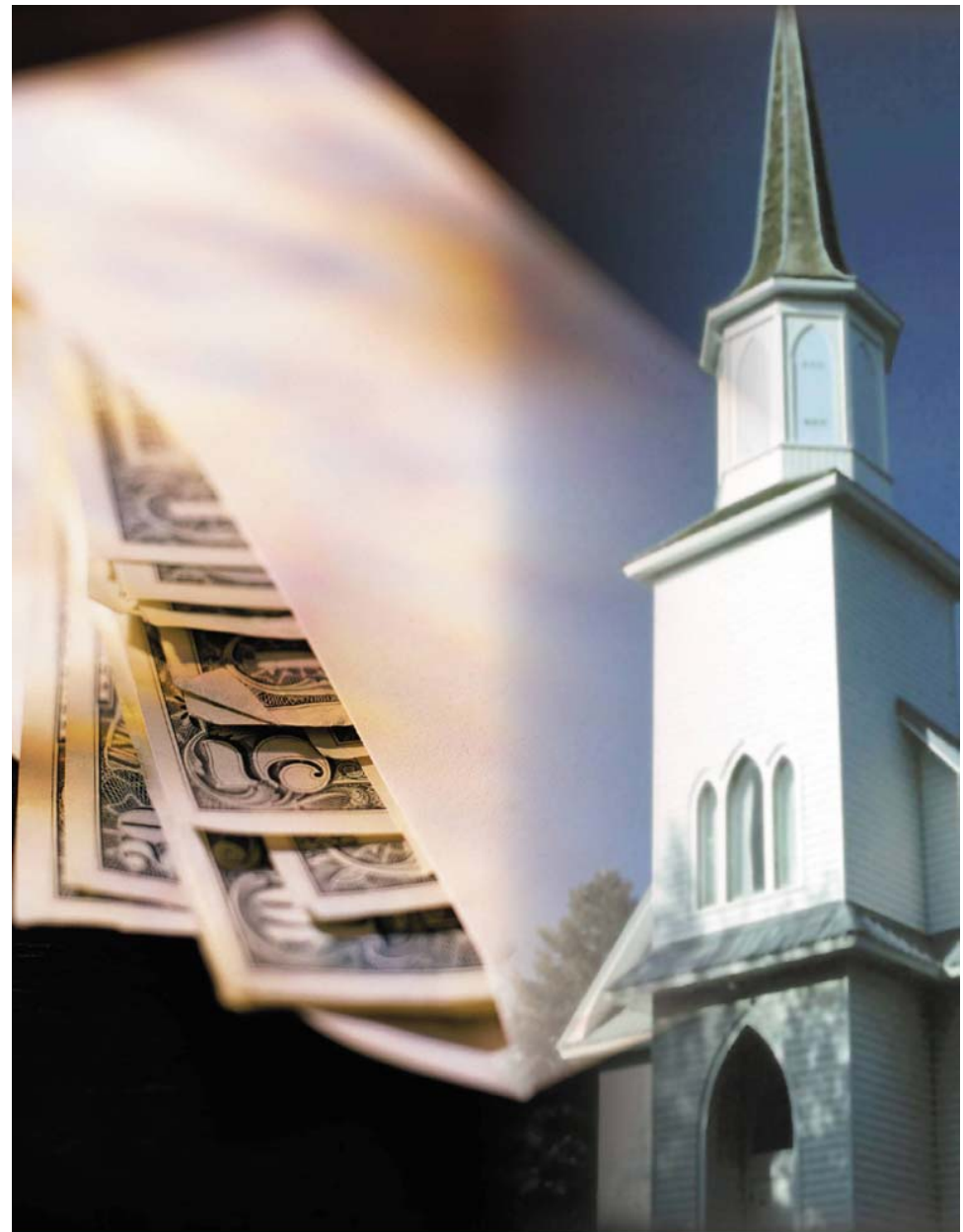


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# **Stewardship... God's Way**

**Sermons**

give the required offerings to follow through with Godly living, which may cancel their effect. Finally, the judge of what is a blessing from God is not the spectator's, but the individuals, and ultimately God's. Some of us are blessed *not* to be rich. The Bible represents riches as an impediment to godliness, especially in the life of someone who loves money and possessions.

<sup>4</sup>This is a well known verse applied commonly to a wide range of situations. It is valid to apply it widely, for it is stated in a general and sweeping way. But it arises in this context for a specific reason, which is to address the matter of believers slipping into the mould of the world and running their own lives. Presuming on God's goodness, and being essentially insubordinate before the Lord. In this setting, the verse clearly implies procrastination. For it is putting off the good things one knows to do, not simply ignoring them, that concerns James here.

Consequently this verse speaks directly to the matter of opportunity. When opportunity is presented to us and is discernable by us, we sin when we say, "Not now."

about giving. Giving the first, giving the best, giving your all. Giving your time, giving of yourself through your opportunities. God promises we will never lack for what we need if we give, but that He will out give us at every turn.

The Marquis de Lafayette was a rich and influential French general on America's side during the Revolution. After the war and back in France, surrounding villages were suffering from a poor harvest. Lafayette's estate had done well, and his manager commented that the demand had pushed up the price of wheat, and he recommended, "This is the time to sell." Lafayette responded, "No, this is the time to give."

How many of us think like that? How many of us would deny that we ought to?

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<sup>1</sup>According to *Word Biblical Commentary*, "the first of the harvest was to be given to Yahweh, both as an indication that the crops came as his bounty to Israel and also to prevent a waiting for Yahweh's part that might eliminate it altogether." (vol. 3, p.334).

<sup>2</sup>The basis for this is the OT understanding of the first fruits offering. The part represented the whole. The first part showed the priority of God's claim on the whole. "First fruits" is an agrarian or reproductive reference, since Israelite economy was based on crops and livestock. By extension, the concept applies to whatever economic means sustain our lives.

<sup>3</sup>A wooden reading of such promises would force one to evaluate every life and possibly conclude that many people who are faithful in worshipful giving have not experienced an influx of wealth, but have persisted at the edge of poverty. This is not a disproof of the scripture's promises. The proverb is hardly meant to draw a blueprint for every person's life before the fact. Nor does it account for the failure of some persons who

## Giving as a Way of Life

### Sermon Number Three

#### Proverbs 3:9-10

A woman in a church handed her pastor a letter she had received, and asked him to tell her what he thought of it. The letter advertised a little book about "seed giving," promising that it had been specially blessed, and if placed alongside bills, would result in God's providing money for them to be paid. It promised that if the person would not only buy the book, but also make regular gifts to the letter writer's "ministry," the donor would become wealthy.

The pastor naturally told the woman that the only person who might get rich was the person selling the book, and that he would only do that if gullible people ordered it and started sending in their money.

There are charlatans everywhere, and there are plenty of people hungry enough for riches, solutions, or help, that they will believe charlatans and keep them successful.

Churches meet their financial obligations through the giving of their members, but few churches make false claims. We ask our members to give, and do so without apology. However, church members cannot be expected to be regular, much less generous, in their support unless their lives are founded on a bedrock belief in the principles of stewardship found in the Bible. Stewardship must be based on more than emotional appeals, and certainly it must be a response to something other than ministerial trickery.

Four principles of stewardship already laid down are that God owns everything, shares what is His with us, holds us accountable for its management, and has as His priority the advancement of His kingdom. There are some other principles that will convince us that our stewardship is necessary.



Two of these principles are stated in a single passage of scripture, Proverbs 3:9-10:

**Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine (Proverbs 3:9-10).**

God has established certain principles as ways that He works in His world. We need not only to learn them, but *internalize* them, so that we become giving people, and learn first-hand that nobody can out-give God.

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## Our Best, Our All

There are two principles of stewardship in the verse we just read. The first is the principle of first fruits: ***Giving the first and best of our increase to God is an exercise in worshipful obedience representing our whole lives.***

Solomon tells us to **honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all.** That's a restatement of a much older commandment to **bring the best of the first fruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God (Num.34:19).** Deuteronomy 26:1-10 says to bring these first fruits to the place of worship and **bow down before Him.** The first fruit is the first of the harvest, or the first offspring of an animal.<sup>1</sup>

At the baseball All Star Game a few years ago, Ted Williams, a great star of a past generation, threw out the first pitch. He could hardly get out of his golf cart, and there were two players there to make certain he stayed standing as he threw. He found his mark at the plate, to thunderous applause. In baseball, even every game, there is some honor given to the first ball to be thrown in the game. It's a ceremony, honoring people whom baseball teams think deserve some praise.

Ask yourself some questions:

- Is there something which needs to be done for the Lord?
- Am I gifted or interested, or simply available to do it?
- Is there any reason for me to believe God does NOT want me to do it?

When circumstances present the *occasion* of service, and your gifts, resources or availability present the *possibility* of service, there is in all probability an *opportunity* for service. Whether or not it is for you is up to the providential leadership of God.

Rarely can anyone tell you what God is leading you to do. You must learn to sense that for yourself. He may not impart that will outside of your discipline in prayer and the study of His word. The lazy Christian may miss many opportunities simply because he is not spiritually minded or disciplined.

The bottom line may be well expressed by a general principle of God's leadership given in James 4:17:

**Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.<sup>4</sup>**

If we took a quiz right now on our stewardship of things, time, and opportunity, and then exchanged papers to grade them, would you be embarrassed? I'm not saying I myself wouldn't. Which of us does not have a way to go in these things?

Someone once said, "You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give." Jesus put it this way: **"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mat.20:28).** It's all

you have used your time. Other than on Sunday, would there be other times you could identify as being used for Christian witness or other activity?

Are you normally a part of the full range of activities planned by your church? Do you excuse yourself from many because you want the time for yourself? Most churches do not over-schedule. It's us who under-participate. Are we being good stewards of our time?

Part of what happens in the time we have each day is that opportunities appear. So, closely related to the discipline of spending our time is the discipline of seizing our opportunities.

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## Seizing Our Opportunities

***The Christian must train himself to recognize the opportunity to serve God, and seize it as God may providentially guide.***

Galatians 6:10 says, **As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.** God has given each of us certain opportunities in life, some continuing, some repeated, some occasional, some once in a lifetime. Some are opportunities at work, some at home, some along the way. Some are from relationships, some from business, some come out of chance meetings. Undoubtedly a great many of these opportunities to serve Him go unrecognized and disappear into the com-trail of our lives. It may be the blessing of God that we do not realize how many opportunities to do good and Godly things we have missed.

This is what is meant by the first fruits offered to God. First fruits, eagerly anticipated, are not to be kept, but offered to the Lord. It is vital that we should recognize the Lord comes first. When we obey in giving the first fruits, we recall that all we are and have belongs to God, and we symbolize our turning over everything to Him.

I don't know if you've thought about it, but an offering is to do far more than help the church pay bills. An offering is to be a symbol of gratitude representing a much larger gift — ourselves. It isn't just our *best* we owe God, but our *all*.<sup>2</sup>

Remember the old hymn, "Our Best?" Some nit-pick its theology, but the hymn has a simple and powerful point, in its ending words: "unto Him is due our best, our all... do then the best you can, not for reward, not for the praise of man, but for the Lord."

Let's put it simply: a gift of money does not *satisfy* our obligation to God: it only *symbolizes* it.

If we truly belong to the Lord to do His will, then another of God's principles of stewardship comes into play: the *principle of returns*.

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## You Can't Out Give God

The principle of returns is simply that **generous giving of self and means, not hoarding what God has lent, ultimately returns more than what was given.**

Another way of putting that, which many of us have heard, is that you can't out give God. Try it, and prove Him true.

This principle literally runs throughout the Bible. The Proverbs are filled with variations on this promise, that God rewards those who live right and are generous and helpful. Our text says it: **your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine (Prov. 3:10).**<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' repetition of this principle is in Luke 6:38: **Give, and it will be given to you.** Not only will they get something back, but it will be much more than they gave. Note the details of His promise:

**Good measure** - This is like saying "a heaping table-spoon."

**Pressed down** - This is like measuring out a cup of brown sugar. You press it down to fill every cranny of the container.

**Shaken together** - Ever pack boxes to move, thinking they were full, only to arrive at your destination to find the box a third empty?

**Running over** - This is like pouring too much water into a glass and then trying to drink it without spilling.

When you have coffee ground, and then try to put it in a can, don't you have to fill it full first, then tap it on the counter to make it settle, then add some more, and repeat the process? Then you put the cap on top, and press down the bulge. Then you add more, and usually there is still ground coffee in the bag.

This is the image Jesus gives us: if we are generous with God, God will be generous with us. God's generosity is greater than ours, because He has much more to be generous with.

B. H. Carroll, the first president of Southwestern Seminary, used to write ministers near and far for support of the struggling school. On one occasion he wrote a letter asking for financial help saying, "I'm up a tree. Can you and your fine men help?"

One minister wrote back, "I'm in a hole. How can a man in a hole help a man up a tree?"

Carroll wrote back, "When you come up the tree to help me down, you will be out of your hole."

What he was saying was that the very act of giving *invokes the principle of returns!* You can't expect God to make good on His promise to out give you until you begin fulfilling the condition of giving to Him.

Obviously these principles of first fruit giving and the promise of divine returns make some demands on our living. There are two disciplines of stewardship we need to develop as a response.

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## Spending Our Time

The first is how we spend our time. Few of us have *not* wished for more time, and some of us think we don't have as much time as someone else. All of us have the same — 24 hours per day. The difference is not in how much we have, but in how and for whom we use it.

The discipline of spending our time can be expressed this way:

***Under God's direction, time is to be used wisely both for oneself and toward others, because of the brevity of life and the evil of the world.***

Our text speaks of honoring the Lord with **your wealth (Prov.3:9)**. This covers not just our money, but all our resources, including our time. The Bible says, **Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time (Col.4:5)**.

Why is this so important? Because time is easily lost to the wrong pursuits or to nothing at all. It must be redeemed, or bought, or saved from something else. Time is easily wasted, and has to be seized and used for God.

How we use our time has a tremendous impact on what kind of effect we have on people for Christ, and whether or not we will pass on an inheritance of spiritual values. Carry a little notebook with you sometime and log every period of five minutes or more in your day. Study it after a week and see how