

10-19-25: “The ‘So What?’ of Stewardship” – Ps 24 & Deut 14

We continue our focus on stewardship today by turning to Psalm 24.

Psalm 24 has been christened as “the stewardship psalm,” largely because of its opening verse: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” Or as the International Commission on English in the Liturgy translates it, “God owns this planet and all its riches!”

This is the basic claim of Christian stewardship – that everything we have – our money, our time, our talents, our very lives! – ultimately belongs to God, and that we are stewards entrusted with these lives and possessions, to use them for God’s purposes. As the familiar hymn goes, “We give thee but thine own, whate’er the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone – a trust, O Lord, from thee.”

We use stewardship language so often in church that I think sometimes we forget just how radical this claim is. Stewardship flies in the face of concepts like ownership, private property, my right to do what I want with what is mine. It topples any illusions we might have of meritocracy. As Christians, we confess that we have not earned the things we have, but rather we have received everything as a gracious gift from God.

If all that sounds a little un-American, well...it is! This is a remarkably countercultural way to interact with the material world, to say that nothing we have is really ours. Not just our possessions, but our lives, our gifts, our time, our daily existence, the essence of who we are belongs, not to us, but to God.

This is a radically humbling way to live, if we take this message seriously. *[Smile]* And it’s also a little bit liberating, to right-size ourselves and name what we really are: creatures of a loving Creator God, radically dependent on God’s grace. And God *is* gracious, and generous, and kind – that is simply God’s nature. So we and everyone else, righteous and unrighteous alike, receive all that we have from God’s loving hand.

But there are some church thinkers asking if stewardship language is actually useful to us anymore. And they usually cite one of two reasons.

The first is that “stewardship” has been a little overused in church-speak. We have the stewardship committee, the stewardship campaign, stewardship season, minutes for stewardship...etc. They say this overuse has cheapened the word, reduced its meaning to simply “church money things.” Which means that some people are going to tune out as soon as they hear the word “stewardship” and miss all the good stuff. *[Smile]*

I don’t really buy that argument. I don’t think we should stop using a word just because we don’t know what it means. I think maybe that’s a sign we should *learn* what the word means, reclaim it, and better educate ourselves as to the deep and drastic claims that stewardship makes upon us.

But the other argument against stewardship language is one I find compelling. This argument is that while stewardship tells us that everything belongs to God, it doesn’t tell us what to do about it. As church business thinker Mark Sampson puts it, “Stewardship identifies the source, but not the direction.”¹ Stewardship makes a theological claim, but it leaves us wanting some sort of instructions for living.

And that problem...well, I think that’s true. The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it...great, but so what? The psalmist does not answer the “so what?” of stewardship: What exactly should we do with our stuff?

But while Psalm 24 provides no answer, I couldn't quite bring myself to believe that the Bible as a whole does not answer that question. So I went looking, and I found several answers, some of which feel a little less-than-practical for our everyday lives. For example, Jesus' instructions to sell everything we have and follow him, which most of us likely cannot or will not do.

But I did find one Biblical answer that felt realistic and compelling. And that is the text we just heard from the Book of Deuteronomy: Moses' instructions to the Hebrew people on the how to give their tithes.

Deuteronomy describes the practice of tithing, or taking the first tenth our harvest – what our work produces – and giving it back to God. And that's a-whole-nother sermon for another day – where that biblical directive comes from, why ten percent, etc. For now, suffice it to say that modern society did not make this stewardship stuff up.

But what struck me this week about this text is that it gives specific and practical instructions for how worshippers can give their tithes back to God. And these are instructions that stand the test of time so well that they can also tell us – a twenty-first century congregation – what to do with our offering money.

First, Moses says, take your offering to the Temple and “eat, there in the presence of the Lord your God – you and your household rejoicing together.”

This is worship and fellowship. It's a potluck, y'all! Our Reformed Christian worship today looks a little different than ancient Jewish temple sacrifice, but the basic idea is the same: Come into God's presence, give thanks and praise, and then feast with your community.

Second, Moses instructs, “As for the Levite residents in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you.”

That one takes a little more explaining. The Levites are one of the twelve tribes of Israel, the tribe tasked with working in the Temple. They assisted with priestly duties, music, education, Temple upkeep. And because they were assigned this special duty, they did not receive an apportionment of land, like all the other tribes; they could not grow food to feed themselves or bring sacrifices to the Temple. So the worshippers are instructed to feed the Levites, to make sure they have enough. Provide for those who work in the Temple.

And finally, Moses instructs the Hebrews to use their tithes to feed not only the Levites, but also “the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns – they may come and eat their fill.” Care for the foreigners, the poor, the needy – people in your land who don't have food to feed themselves.

Moses makes it simple for the people. Giving to God means three things:

- (1) Corporate worship and fellowship
- (2) Providing for those who make worship possible.
- (3) Taking care of the poor and vulnerable.

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. God is the true owner of all things. And this is what it looks like to be faithful stewards, to give God's things back to God.

It's almost funny to me how easily these simple stewardship instructions translate into our present context. Make possible worship and fellowship. Provide for staff. Care for those in need.

Actually, I think you could go line by line through our budget and assign each expense to one of these three instructions. Electric bill – make worship possible. Payroll expenses – provide for staff. Mission Budget, Deacons Fund – care for those in need. Some line items might fit into multiple categories: Are building maintenance expenses “making worship possible” (yes!) or

“taking care of those in need” when we think of all the groups that meet in our building throughout the week? (Also yes!)

Friends, I think this might be the so-what of stewardship.

The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.

Great! So what do we do with our stuff?

We give it back to God.

How?

We make worship possible. We pay the staff. We care for people in need.

That’s what stewardship is all about, Charlie Brown.

Except there’s one more thing that compels us in this text. And that is the word rejoicing.

Did you notice, *that’s* the word Moses uses to describe what we do together in the presence of God – not worship, not fellowship, but *rejoicing*. Invite the Levites and the poor to join you at the feast, because joy should be shared. Bring in the widows, the orphans, the aliens. Without them, the joy is not complete. The purpose of the gathering is not worship as much as it is...joy.

Maybe...maybe that’s the real so-what of stewardship. The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it. What do we give back to God? *Why* do we give back to God?

Perhaps the answer to both is simply: Joy.

Amen.

¹ <https://lakeinstitute.org/resource-library/insights/september-9-2025/>