

## Authentic Stewardship Is Not

In November of 2002, the Evangelical Environmental Network generated a great deal of publicity by asking the question, "What would Jesus drive?" They developed an advertising campaign that was designed "to help Christians and others understand that transportation choices are moral choices, and to reflect upon the problems associated with transportation from a biblically orthodox, Christ-centered perspective."

Jim Ball, the Director of the Network stated, "Most people don't think the kind of car they drive has anything to do with their faith. We want to show them it does. . . . Jesus wants his followers to drive the least-polluting, most efficient vehicle that truly meets their needs -- though first he might look at other ways to get around. He'd definitely be in favor of us taking public transportation."

It was quickly apparent that the heart of the campaign was an attack on the large, gas-guzzling SUVs that dominate our streets and garages. These vehicles are considered unnecessary by environmentalists because they add more pollutants and consume more resources than smaller, more efficient cars.

Many of us within the church dismissed the question because it sounded like a liberal attack on our way of life. In fact, I suspect that in most of our churches the question of what Jesus would drive received very little consideration. I have never done an official count but it seems that most church parking lots have more than their share of large SUVs.

One of the more creative responses I read was provided by Laura Pulfer, writing in the Cincinnati Enquirer: *"But from what I've read about him, Jesus is just wrong for this particular campaign. He'd have been a terrible driver, stopping every few minutes to offer solace to beggars and to pick up litter and hitchhikers. He was always more interested in the journey than the destination, so it would be like getting trapped behind a Sunday driver, who stops to admire every flowering tree and stray dog. Plus, he was poor. He just kept giving everything away, so I can't imagine him coming up with enough money to buy a car. Even one without six cup holders and a Bose sound system. Even one that had a high fuel efficiency rating. Jesus wouldn't drive at all. He would take the bus."* ([http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2002/12/03/loc\\_pulfer03.html](http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2002/12/03/loc_pulfer03.html))

To be honest, I don't really know what Jesus would drive or if He would drive at all. It is an interesting question, designed to force us to focus on our responsibility as stewards of the earth. I have spent a great deal of time during the last decade trying to understand stewardship. I have read every significant book I could find on the subject. I have even written a few that are probably not too significant.

I have also visited with thousands of people in hundreds of churches. I have listened to numerous sermons, heard countless testimonies, and observed lifestyles on every end of the financial spectrum. I make this confession, not because I think I am an expert on the subject of stewardship. Quite the contrary, my intention is not to define stewardship but rather to tell you what I think stewardship is not.

## Stewardship is not tithing

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:23-24)*

In His rebuke to the Pharisees, Jesus provides an important truth about the tithe. The Pharisees were so meticulous in their tithe that many would call them super saints. They went far beyond the demands of the law. They even tithed on mint, dill, and cummin. Mint is a small aromatic plant that is used for its flavor and aroma. Dill is a plant with small yellow flowers that is used for seasoning. Cummin is Mediterranean herb in the parsley family. It has finely divided leaves and the seed is used for seasoning.

The Pharisees tithed on these small plants. In other words, as they would pick the small leaves from the mint shrub, they would take nine for themselves and set aside the tenth one for God. To put in that much effort, one would have to be truly committed to tithing.

I believe in tithing! Almost every Sunday, I enter a church pulpit and preach that Christians should be tithers. Along the way, I have met some very faithful tithers. I have even observed as people have calculated their tithe to the penny. Nevertheless, I have never met anyone who was as good at tithing as these Pharisees.

Jesus identifies them as “hypocrites” because of their tithing practices. A hypocrite is one who pretends to be something he is not, like an actor playing a role. In this case, the Pharisees pretended to be godly, spiritual people by their tithing.

They were meticulous with the tithe but they neglected more “weightier” matters. Jesus is saying that some things are more important than others. One of the grave mistakes made by legalists is that they tend to place the same value on every law. Jesus identifies the more important matters – justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

To illustrate his point, Jesus paints an absurd picture of someone using a strainer to capture a gnat, but ignoring something as large as a camel. Insects were considered unclean and not to be consumed. Certain insects actually breed in wine. Therefore, the Pharisees would strain their wine to insure they did not accidentally swallow a gnat. This was often accomplished by drinking the wine through a cloth.

Jesus refers to this practice of straining the wine. However, he shows the absurdity by saying when they put down the bottle of wine; they immediately swallow an entire camel, which was also an unclean animal.

In other words, it is not enough to tithe. There is nothing wrong with tithing and it should be done, but it is not enough. It is possible to tithe as you neglect more important things.

Imagine if an auto mechanic purchased a new car. He is so proud of his new vehicle that he takes it to the car wash several times a week, vacuums the interior once a week, and applies a new coat of wax every month. When he drives to the mall, he always parks away from the building so no one will park close and make a scratch on his car.

However, imagine that same mechanic who is so concerned about the appearance of the car, but he fails to change the oil, tune the engine, or replace any of the filters. The car would soon stop running in spite of the immaculate appearance.

There is nothing wrong with being concerned with appearance. In fact, we might even say that good automobile ownership involves keeping your car clean. However, it is not enough.

When it comes to stewardship education, the vast majority of the church's teaching has consisted of little more than an annual sermon on the tithe. Seldom does the church help Christians address issues like budgets, debt, lifestyle choices, responding to the poor, and environmental issues. Since the tithe is the sum and substance of the church stewardship curriculum, many have come to believe that if they tithe they are faithful stewards.

The result is that we have produced believers who give their tithe and then mismanage the remaining ninety percent. I am not sure that God is pleased with a Christian who tithes and then enjoys the same consumptive lifestyle as everyone else. Do we expect to please God with a tenth of our income while we then trash the planet? Can we ignore the impact of our lifestyle choices just because we have laid a tithe in the offering plate? Am I free to use the ninety percent according to my own desires after I have given my tithe?

Perhaps we might hear Jesus say, "You have done well in bringing the tithe, however, you have neglected other important matters."

### **Stewardship is not being frugal**

It is not unusual to hear people define good stewardship as being frugal. This opinion expresses itself in the belief that God is more pleased if we limit ourselves to the bare essentials. We tend to be critical of people who are wasteful and flamboyant. However, notice a different attitude expressed by Jesus in this story.

*While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head. But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? "For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. "For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. "She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand*

*for the burial. "Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her." (Mark 14:3-9)*

This event took place in the home of a man named Simon, who is referred to as a leper. It is likely that he did not currently suffer from leprosy because no one would have come to his home. In fact, lepers were not allowed to live in towns or be in contact with other people. It is possible that he is known as Simon the leper because Jesus had healed him of his disease on a previous visit. He might have proudly accepted the designation of leper because it was a perpetual testimony of Jesus' healing touch. Perhaps the hospitality was an expression of gratitude and celebration.

A woman entered the room with "an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard." Without going into all the detail of the terminology, let's just say that she had a very expensive bottle of perfume. In fact, its value is placed at 300 denarii, which is the equivalent of one year's wages for a common laborer. This bottle was worth about \$30,000.

The woman broke the vial, which probably means that she broke the wax seal that kept the perfume from spilling. Then she did the unthinkable; she poured the perfume on Jesus' head, irretrievably spilling the precious liquid. It was an extravagant act of worship and adoration. Such a gift went beyond all wisdom and practicality.

One of the interesting features of the New Testament stories is that we can always identify with the characters. In this particular story, I like to think I am like the generous woman. However, if I am honest, I must confess that I am more like the sensible disciples. After all, my job is to teach good stewardship. I teach people how to live frugally and save money.

The disciples could not comprehend how such a valuable resource could simply be poured out on Jesus' head. Jesus was the great advocate for the poor and needy; there is no way that he would appreciate such an enormous waste of money. This would be like clearing out two acres of rain forest in order to build a house for Al Gore. The disciples were confident they would be praised for their stewardship insight. Three phrases describe the disciple's attitude.

They were "indignantly remarking to one another." The word "indignant" literally means that they had "much grief." They were really upset. They describe the woman's action as a "waste" which is a very strong term that means destruction or utter ruin. From their perspective, there was nothing positive in this woman's gift. They even gave the woman a public scolding. This term is filled with emotion.

Sometimes you get mad at something but not mad enough to say or do anything. But, other times you get angry enough to act, to make a statement or take an action. This was one of those times for Jesus' disciples.

However, Jesus did not see things the same way, which should not surprise us. He teaches the disciples about the spiritual implications of the woman's actions. He points them to the fact that she was anointing His body for

burial. She was preparing Jesus for the sacrifice that He was to offer within the next few days.

The point that I want us to see is that Jesus essentially says that there is a time for extravagance and seeming waste. There is a time to save and there is a time to throw away. There is a time to give to the poor and there is a time to lavish on God. The logical stewardship position is that we should be meticulous with every nickel and carefully calculate every expense. Yet we must be careful not to miss the times when it is just as faithful to be excessive.

In the summer of 1995, a washerwoman named Oseola McCarty made headlines in newspapers across the country. Oseola was born in Mississippi, more than ninety years ago, with no silver spoon in her mouth. This was the pre-Civil-Rights-Movement South, so not only were her means limited, but also, quite likely, her dreams. Her mother worked long hours to support her and from an early age, Oseola learned the value of a hard-earned dollar.

As soon as she could work, she did. When she came home from days at Eureka Elementary School, she would iron clothes. When her aunt fell ill and needed her help, Oseola's formal education was halted -- after sixth grade. Oseola never married, and she lived for three-quarters of a century in a small, simple house, washing clothes for a living.

Not owning a car, she walked everywhere, pushing a shopping cart a mile each way to and from the grocery store. Over the years, she continued to put aside whatever money she could, and plunked her savings into local banks. Although Oseola placed a high value on education, even if she had had the money, she would have had trouble attending the local University of Southern Mississippi when she was young. It didn't admit African-Americans.

By the mid-1990s, she decided that along with leaving money to her church and some cousins, she wanted to give most of her life's savings to the University of Southern Mississippi. The amazing sum of \$150,000 stunned school officials and was used to establish the Oseola McCarty Scholarship Fund to help financially needy students.

Some people would say that Ms. McCarty was a good steward because she lived very frugally and saved money. Other people would say that she was a good steward because she gave her money away when she could have bought herself a new house or a car.

Good stewardship can be both frugal and extravagant. You can be the biggest tightwad in town and still not be a good steward, because sometimes, God wants you to be lavish with your money. A person who hoards is not necessarily a better steward than one who spends.

By definition, stewardship means to manage God's money according to God's will. Even though there is a great deal of financial guidance in Scripture, it is not possible to say that God always wants His people to be frugal or extravagant. In the story of Jesus' anointing, the woman is celebrated because she poured out the equivalent of a year's income. In the parable of the talents, the first two men are commended for investing the Master's money. At the Temple treasury, the widow is praised for giving away her final two coins. To be a good steward we must be students of God's Word and sensitive to God's Spirit.

## Stewardship is not accumulating wealth

*Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. "And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' "Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' "So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:13-21)*

Our first reaction is to commend this successful farmer for producing such a good crop. He has achieved the great American dream – to accumulate enough money to be able to retire and live a life of leisure.

It is always wise to interpret Jesus' parables within the context they were first told. In this instance, Jesus is asked to resolve a dispute between two brothers over an inheritance. We know very little about the specifics of the situation. However, what we do know is that two brothers were willing to throw away their relationship with one another over material possessions.

It is probably safe to say that the man's question was not a legitimate request for a legal ruling. Jewish law was very clear about dividing an inheritance. The elder son was to receive two times as much as the other sons. It seems that he had another agenda. He wanted Jesus to issue a ruling that he should have more than he was due.

Jesus chose not to address the legal question. Instead, he identified the man's real need – to rid himself of covetousness. To succumb to greed is a temptation that we all face. One of Aesop's Fable is "The Goose With the Golden Eggs"

*One day a countryman going to the nest of his Goose found there an egg all yellow and glittering. When he took it up it was as heavy as lead and he was going to throw it away, because he thought a trick had been played upon him. But he took it home on second thoughts, and soon found to his delight that it was an egg of pure gold. Every morning the same thing occurred, and he soon became rich by selling his eggs. As he grew rich he grew greedy; and thinking to get at once all the gold the Goose could give, he killed it and opened it only to find nothing.*

The brother who came to Jesus was like the countryman with the prolific goose. He had just received an inheritance, but it was not enough, he wanted more. The cure for greed is not generosity. The cure for greed is contentment. Contentment allows us to recognize when we have enough. Greed leads us to continue to accumulate, even after all of our needs are met.

The truth is that even if we have an abundance, life does not consist of our possessions. This is a revolutionary concept that Jesus is explaining. So much of our value, our self-esteem, and our worth to society are determined by our accumulation of wealth. Perhaps the man who posed the question to Jesus was simply striving for success. He wanted to be somebody. Jesus simply reminds him that accumulating wealth is not the goal of life.

Those who believe that accumulating money is the goal of life are like the man in Jesus' parable. This successful farmer amassed a great fortune; he reached the pinnacle of success. However, suddenly he faced the reality of eternity and his money lost all value.

The attitude of the world is that he who dies with the most toys wins. The consequence of that attitude is that you will enter eternity empty-handed.

*Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)*

A good steward might die broke or he/she might leave an enormous inheritance. Good stewardship is not determined by riches or poverty. The key is to understand the actions of faithful stewardship:

- Do good
- Be rich in good works
- Be Generous
- Be ready to share

Robert Barrett was the Superintendent for the Dollar Bay-Tamarack School District in Michigan. Like most school districts, administrators were considering cutbacks because of growing budget deficits. Barrett recommended that an administrative position be eliminated in order that the district not lose any teachers and be forced to cut back on programs.

Barrett's recommendation was that he be terminated and his position consolidated with that of Principal William Tarbox. The move would save the district more than \$100,000. It would be a major savings for the small district with 262 students and 19 teachers.

Good stewardship is determined by how we use possessions to help others. The problem with the man who posed the question to Jesus about an

inheritance is that he was interested in accumulating for himself (just like the successful farmer). When that is your goal, it is impossible to be a good steward.

Cecil H. Green was born in Manchester, England. After moving to America at a very early age, he had a very distinguished career as a scientist and entrepreneur. He is best known as one of the co-founders of Texas Instruments. The company's numerous inventions include the first silicone transistor, the first integrated circuit, and the first single chip computer. Consequently, he became a very wealthy man.

If you do an Internet search of Cecil H. Green you will discover dozens of places that bear his name – universities, libraries, museums, and a wide variety of service organizations. He has given away an estimated \$150 million to worthy causes. Green says that his objective is to give it all away, down to the last nickel.

Perhaps that is the goal of stewardship. It is not to accumulate, not to be lavish, not to be religious, but to live our lives in such a way that all that we have, down to the last nickel, is used in service to God and others.