

# **The Use of Law and Gospel in Stewardship: Stewardship Through the Scriptures**

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## **Introduction**

Much has been written on the subject of stewardship. Books and materials for stewardship programs abound.

It is relatively easy to find a Bible passage or two to support a mistaken notion regarding Christian giving. Unless one clearly sees all the basic doctrines of the Bible and how they fit together, the essential truths of God-pleasing stewardship can be distorted.

I have selected portions of Scripture that reveal how the law and the gospel are an integral part of God's dealings with his stewards. They are the saints in both the Old and New Testaments. The Spirit-inspired writers record the sins of the believers, but most importantly they reveal how God's grace in Christ captivated their hearts and enabled them to lead godly lives.

Some of the parables Jesus taught dealt with earthly blessings and how they were used. The epistles, especially those of the Apostle Paul, instruct Christ's church today how to use God's Word with God's people for the support of the gospel ministry.

Our understanding of stewardship is best acquired through God's plan of salvation as it unfolds on the pages of Holy Scripture. While the faith of the Old Testament and the New Testament believers is the same, the instructions God gave to each church is different, especially in matters of worship. Unless this is understood, Christians will be misled in their life as God's stewards.

This booklet is written primarily for the lay people in the congregation. It could be used as a basis for the study of stewardship in a Bible class. A stewardship committee may also want to study it, especially if it leads the congregation in a stewardship program.

May the Lord bless all who take their Christian stewardship life seriously and are always willing to be instructed in God's Word.

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# STEWARDSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT CHURCH

## 1. Stewards in the Old Testament

What is a steward? If you are a member of a labor union, a steward is one who takes care of union business in your workplace. If you have ever taken a cruise, the steward was in charge of the maids and waiters on board ship.

But the basic meaning of the word “steward” is one who manages the property or financial affairs of another. And that is how the Bible uses the word.

Every Christian is God’s steward. For “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights” (James 1:17). Everything we have comes from our merciful heavenly Father, who has entrusted these things to our care.

Old Testament believers serve as shining examples of what it means to be a God-pleasing steward.

### *Adam*

After he created Adam, God made him steward of the Garden of Eden. “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it . . . Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found (Genesis 2:15, 19, 20).

Also on the sixth day God formed Eve out of the rib of Adam. Both were sinless, holy and righteous, and they knew God as a loving, heavenly Father.

When God created our first parents, he established three institutions that we still have today: the home, the church, and the state. Adam was the head of the family, the church, and the government during the first years of this world’s history.

Adam led the first family in God-pleasing worship and services. He told his descendants how he was deceived by the Devil and fell into sin. But most importantly, he proclaimed how God would save them from the consequences of all their sins by promising to send his Son who would destroy the power of Satan.

### *Cain and Abel*

Cain and Abel were the first two children born to Adam and Eve. From their childhood they heard the story of God’s love from their mother and father. They were taught to love and honor and serve their Savior-God.

They not only worshipped the Lord by regularly hearing the Word of God from their parents, but they were also taught to praise the Lord with their gifts. “Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock” (Genesis 4:3,4). However, “the Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor” (Genesis 4:4,5). Why not? Didn’t both come to know the true and living and loving God through the Word spoken by their parents? Weren’t they both doing essentially the same thing with their offerings? Why wouldn’t God be pleased with what is done in his name? The New Testament gives us the answer. “By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did” (Hebrews 11:4). Abel’s sacrifice was in response to God’s gracious promise to send the Redeemer, but Cain’s was not.

Doesn’t this Bible story cause us to examine our own hearts? Why am I regularly hearing God’s Word, singing his praises, bringing my offerings? Is it merely because that is what Christians do? Or is it because I know that my Redeemer lives, that he has washed me clean of all my sin with his holy and precious blood, and

that he has conquered Satan and the grave for me? Worshiping the Lord begins in the heart. Only when it is done in faith, does it please the Lord.

Already in that first family the division that God had predicted, the enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of Satan (Genesis 3:15), took place. In some way Cain knew that God was not accepting his worship and sacrifice but that he was accepting Abel's. He "was very angry, and his face was downcast" (Genesis 4:5). His jealousy led to hatred for his brother, and his hatred prompted him to murder Abel.

Note how God dealt with Cain. First, God warned Cain. "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door, it desires to have you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:6,7). Because his stewardship life was only a sham, because he did not trust in the Lord, and because his heart was filled with anger toward his brother, God mercifully warned Cain of the dire consequences of his wicked thoughts. He preached only the law to this impenitent man, wanting to bring him to knowledge of his sin.

God's law is intended to cause the sinner to realize he has violated God's holy will and deserves his wrath and punishment. When we sin and sincerely confess our transgressions, God forgives us for Jesus' sake. Only by God's grace and the Spirit's help can we "master" our temptations.

God's warning did not penetrate Cain's sin-hardened heart. He murdered his brother Abel. But the Lord was not finished with Cain. He confronted him about his sin. Instead of repenting of his terrible crime, Cain felt sorry for himself. He was afraid that others would hear about his dastardly deed and murder him. But the God, who wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, spared Cain, extending his time of grace to repent. Sadly he never did.

The sacrifices of Cain and Abel reflected what was in the heart of each man. Abel believed that he was a sinner, deserving God's temporal and eternal wrath. But most importantly, he believed the promise the Lord made through his parents for all their descendants, a promise to redeem them from all their sins and their terrible consequences. Cain, on the other hand, only went through the motions of serving God with his sacrifices. He refused to acknowledge his sin, and he rejected God's offer of grace. As a result he was damned.

### *Noah*

Only a limited number of Adam and Eve's descendants are mentioned in the Bible. The Lord gave them another son, Seth. He looked forward to the coming of the Seed of the woman who would redeem him, for he believed the Word of God that his parents taught him. He trusted in the Lord God to be with him during his many trials in life. He also showed his love for him with his obedience and worship. Noah, a descendant of Seth, was also such a man.

We do not know how many people were living in the world at the time of Noah, but it must have been in the millions. As the population grew in the world, so did its ungodliness and wickedness. The people no longer knew or worshipped the true God. And God's patience was running out. Still he gave the world 120 years to repent before his judgment would come upon them. Not only did Noah and his sons build the ark during those 120 years, he also went about the earth proclaiming God's coming judgment (Hebrews 11:7). He and his family would be spared during the worldwide deluge. Why? Was Noah by nature better than the rest of the population? Not at all, for "there is no difference ... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22,23).

Noah, however, "found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8). Noah believed in the promised Messiah and knew that through him his sins were forgiven, and his home in heaven was assured. His obedience to God by building the ark and his righteous life were acts of faith. Because of God's mercy only Noah and his family were spared from the flood that destroyed all people living on the earth at that time.

We can rightly assume that during the year they were in the ark they continued to worship their Creator and Redeemer. When Noah and his family left the ark, they praised God with their worship. "Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it"

(Genesis 8:20). God was pleased with this free-will offering that came from this believer's heart. And the Lord promised never again to destroy the world with a flood.

But why did the first believers make sacrifices as a way to worship and praise God? We have no such command from God in the Bible that his saints should make sacrifices as a means of demonstrating their love for him. We are only told that it was an act of faith as was stated in the case of Abel. We can, however, receive an answer if we let Scripture explain Scripture.

In a general way, the stewardship life of the New Testament believers teaches us why God's first believers offered sacrifices. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth concerning a collection for the poor in Jerusalem, "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). And that was what Abel, Noah and the patriarchs after them did, namely, they cheerfully gave what they decided in their own hearts to do. Not until God gave Israel the ceremonial laws through Moses did the Lord tell his people what and how much to give. His purpose will be explained below.

### *Abraham*

After the flood, the world began to be populated with many people. But once again the ungodly soon greatly outnumbered the believers. We have many different languages today as a reminder of an arrogant generation living in disobedience to God. When the unbelievers built the tower of Babel to glorify themselves and refused God's command to spread over the face of the earth, he caused confusion among the people by giving them different languages, thereby forcing them to scatter into different parts of the world.

Abraham was the first patriarch whom God called to faith. He promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, that they would inhabit a glorious land, and, most importantly, that through him "all peoples on earth will be blessed...." (Genesis 12:3). God thereby promised that his Son and the world's Savior would be one of Abraham's descendants. At God's direction Abraham and his family left his homeland and settled in Canaan. In that way he demonstrated that he believed everything that God had promised him.

After Abraham arrived in Canaan, the Lord appeared to him and assured him that this is the land his descendants would some day possess. In loving response "he built an altar there to the Lord" (Genesis 12:7). On the altar he offered sacrifices, for they were an important part of his praise and thanks to God. And later when the family moved south he also built an altar and there "called on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 12:8). In this way he made public witness of his faith.

His nephew Lot accompanied Abraham to Canaan. Unfortunately Lot chose to live near the wicked city of Sodom. When kings from the north conquered and plundered it, they took the inhabitants captive, including Lot and his family. When Abraham heard of it, he armed his servants, recovered all the stolen goods and rescued Lot, the king of Sodom and his people. When Abraham returned from his conquest, he refused to accept anything from the king of Sodom as a reward, so that he could not say, "I made Abraham rich." (Genesis 14:23).

Melchizedek, the king and priest of Salem (later Jerusalem) suddenly appeared on the scene and blessed Abraham. Because he was a priest of the most high God, "Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder" (Hebrews 7:4). Why a tithe? For it wasn't until God gave his people his laws 400 years later that the tithe was made part of the ceremonial law. But at this time Abraham gave what he had "decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Abraham and Sarah waited 25 years for God to keep his promise to give them a son. What a joyous day it was in their home when Isaac was born! How dearly Abraham must have loved his son, not only because Isaac was his own flesh and blood, but especially because he knew that his God had kept his word.

Some years later God said to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Genesis 22:2). We are not told what went through Abraham's mind when he heard this command, but we do

know that Abraham did not delay carrying out God's command. For early the next morning he left for the place that God had chosen. There he built an altar, put Isaac on it, and was about to sacrifice him.

How could he be willing to do such a thing? It was an act of implicit trust in God. For "by faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac.... Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death" (Hebrews 11:17,19). He loved God even more than his son. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son should prompt us to search our hearts often to see who or what has first place in our lives.

### *Isaac*

After his father Abraham died, Isaac trusted all the promises that God had made to his father, especially the promise of the Savior who would also be one of Isaac's descendants. For he too believed that his sins deserved God's temporal wrath and eternal punishment. His only hope of heaven rested upon God's promise that the Savior would come and deliver him from the consequences of his sins.

Since there was no written Word of God, these promises were handed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. At times the Lord would speak directly to the faithful. We learn that the Lord appeared to Isaac and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid; for I am with you: I will bless you and increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham" (Genesis 26:24). Without any specific command from God but prompted by faith in the Lord and his gracious promises, "Isaac built an altar . . . and called on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 26:25). As a faithful steward he proclaimed the Word of God there and worshiped him with his sacrifices.

### *Jacob*

Two sons, Esau and Jacob, were born to Isaac and his God-chosen wife Rebekah. Even though Esau was the first-born, Jacob was selected by God to be the ancestor of Christ. In spite of his moments of weakness, he trusted in God above all things, and he believed that God had graciously made him his child. When he had to leave home, he went to live and work for his mother's brother, Labaan.

On the way, he stopped for the night to sleep. There he dreamed that angels were ascending and descending on a stairway reaching up to heaven. And there God promised Jacob, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land" (Genesis 28:15).

When Jacob awoke, he made a vow. "If God will be with me...then the Lord will be my God.... and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth" (Genesis 28:20-22). Like his grandfather Abraham, he used the tithe to express his love for God. Even though the Bible does not tell us he gave a tithe when he became rich, we may assume that Jacob kept his vow.

Since Jacob said he would give a tenth of all his earthly blessings long before God imposed the tithe on his people Israel, does that mean that the tithe should be promoted in the New Testament church today? Not at all. For the tithe is no different than the rite of circumcision and the sacrifices of the Old Testament believers. Christ has freed us from *all* the Old Testament ceremonial laws. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

The Divine Record relates that Jacob on special occasions built an altar and offered up sacrifices (Genesis 31:54; 33:20), thereby publicly worshiping and praising the God of his salvation. Especially noteworthy is the altar built at Bethel, where the Lord had first appeared to him after he fled his father's home. Twenty years later Jacob returned to Canaan a rich man. Then "God said to Jacob, 'Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God'" (Genesis 35:1). Sacrifices on such an altar were an important part of this patriarch's stewardship life.

## *Job*

Job was a faithful child of God; he trusted in God and led a life of thankful appreciation for all of his temporal and spiritual blessings. He had a large family, was a very rich man, and was “the greatest man among all of the people of the East” (Job 1:3). We do not know when Job lived, but it probably was during the time of the patriarchs.

Job worshipped God with his sacrifices. After his sons and daughters would party, “he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, ‘Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.’ This was Job’s regular custom” (Job 1:5). His mind was on the spiritual well being of his children; he was concerned about them, not about his wealth. His sacrifices reflected his faith in his Redeemer and his love for his family. He was a faithful steward of all that God had given him.

One day, the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8). Satan replied, “Does Job fear God for nothing?... You have blessed the work of his hands.... But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will curse you to your face” (Job 1:9-11).

Then the Lord let Satan destroy everything that Job had. In a matter of days, Job lost his children, his servants, and his wealth. Then Job “fell to the ground in worship, and said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised’” (Job 1:20,21).

How easy it is to praise and worship God when he has showered us with all kinds of earthly blessings and say, “The Lord has given me all these things.” Only a person of faith is able to respond like Job did and confess, “The Lord has done this; it is his will that I be rich and his will that I be poor. Whatever the case may be, God be glorified.”

Later Job suffered a painful malady and even his wife and so-called friends taunted him for trusting in a God that would let all this happen to him. Only one who believes in the living Lord God could say in the midst of all his troubles, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh will I see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27). Job rejoiced in the riches of God’s grace.

For our edification the Bible records how the saints in the Old Testament church lived a life of faith and service, a faith that was often reflected in the altars they built and the sacrifices they made when they worshiped their Savior-God. In this way they revealed that they were faith-filled stewards.

## 2. Stewardship in the Moral Law

God first wrote the moral law in the hearts of Adam and Eve when he created them in his own image. Before they sinned they knew God's holy will perfectly, but after the Fall, their consciences no longer functioned perfectly. Since then all people have the law written in their hearts, but their sinful nature confuses them as to what pleases God and what does not. Therefore through Moses God gave the children of Israel (a special name God gave to Jacob) his unchanging law written on two tablets of stone.

### *The Children of Israel*

After Jacob had left his father's home, he went to work for his uncle Laban. He worked fourteen years in order to marry two of Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel. He also married two of their maidservants. His four wives bore him one daughter and twelve sons. Even though he was not the oldest son, Judah was chosen by God to be the ancestor of Christ. Both Mary and Joseph came from the tribe of Judah.

Because of jealousy and hatred, the sons of Jacob sold their younger brother Joseph as a slave. He was taken to Egypt where the Lord directed events in his life, so that he eventually became ruler in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. When a severe famine spread through the region, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt. It was at that time that Joseph, who was in charge of the gathering and distribution of all the grain, recognized his brothers. When he finally revealed himself to them, they went home and told their elderly father Jacob. At Joseph's invitation and with God's blessing Jacob's family came to Egypt where the people of Israel lived for 400 years.

When the Egyptians observed that the Israelites were becoming a strong nation, they made them slaves. God chose Moses to lead his people out of this land of bondage. It was the Lord who bought them safely through the Red Sea and on the way to the land that had been promised to their father Abraham.

First, he directed them to Mt. Sinai where God gave his laws to the Israelites through Moses. They received laws that would govern them as a nation and laws that would guide their worship and remind them of the Savior who had been promised to them. And there they were given the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets. The Decalog is a summary of the moral law that is found in both the Old and New Testaments. We will study four of the commandments that have implications for the stewardship life of God's people.

### *The First Commandment*

One word summarizes the whole law---love, love for God and love for our neighbor.

In the First Commandment God says, "I am the Lord your God.... You shall have no other gods" (Exodus 20:2,3). Believers know who is speaking—the true and living God.

God revealed himself to our first parents and others by direct revelation and to future generations by word of mouth. He speaks to us on the pages of the Bible. Only through the Word of God have we come to know him as the Father who has created us, as the Son who has redeemed us, as the Holy Spirit who comforts us. The only true God is Triune, that is, three distinct persons in one godhead, as we confess in our Christian creeds. He is the One speaking to us when he says, "You shall have no other gods."

Dr. Martin Luther has explained this commandment, "**We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.**"

We **fear** him when we "hate evil" (Proverbs 8:13) and when we hold fast to his Word as God's truth.

We **love** him when we count him as our dearest treasure. "Whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you, I desire nothing on earth" (Psalm 73:25).

And we **trust** him when we rely on him more than anything or anyone on earth. "Our help is in the name of the LORD. The Maker of heaven and earth" (Psalm 24:8). In our hearts and lives we glorify God when we fear, love, and trust in him above all things.

But there are other gods in the world that take on many forms or have no form at all; worshiping them is idolatry. There are two kinds of idolatry—open and secret.



Open idolatry we observe all around us. The most obvious are the images that the heathen create, images made of wood or stone or gold. But in our society an idol is often a generic god, one that people conjure up in their own mind. They mistakenly believe that the god of the Jew, Muslim, and the Christian are the same, and they confess a faith in such a god.

Secret idolatry, however, is found in the heart and known only by God. One may love son or daughter more than God. A scholar may trust in his own reasoning powers if something in the Bible does not appeal to his reason, and he secretly rejects it. There are, no doubt, many cafeteria “Christians”: they pick and choose from the Bible what they want to believe.

But the most common idolatry, especially in times of prosperity, is money and material things. God warns, “Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them” (Psalm 62:10). “Do not love the world nor anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). And “greed . . . is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5). Before our stewardship is God-pleasing, we need to have our Savior-God in first place; therefore let us ask ourselves, “Do I love God above all things? Is he and he alone my dearest treasure here on earth?” If you profess to be a Christian, only two people know whether God has first place in your heart—you and God. Only the two of you would know whether or not you are practicing secret idolatry.

Daily we struggle with our Old Adam to worship God with our whole being, and we do not always win the battle that Satan and the sinful world is waging against us. But the Lord is there with his Word to lift us up, to graciously forgive us, and with his words of love in Christ to strengthen us.

### *The Seventh Commandment*

The Seventh Commandment teaches the proper understanding and the right use of our God-given possessions. With this commandment God builds a wall around all that he has given our neighbor and us. Job confessed, “The Lord gave. . . may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21).

The Lord gives us all that we need for our bodies and this life through our parents or guardians. As we grow older we begin to earn our own way until we are able to support ourselves. Remember, it is the Lord who gives us the opportunity, the wisdom and skill to earn a living, and the willingness to receive his gifts with thanksgiving. For “unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

We may receive gifts and, if it is God’s will, also an inheritance. Rightfully gained, all of it comes from the gracious hand of God. This is also true of what your neighbor has, whether he is a believer or not.

God is not only the Giver of all our gifts; he has instructions in his law about how he wants us to use them. First, God wants us to provide for our family. This will of God is accompanied with a strong warning. “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8).

In joyful response to God’s grace, Christians also help those in need, especially fellow believers. “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:9,10).

God also wants us to pay our taxes. “This is why . . . you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue” (Romans 13:6,7). To cheat on our taxes is also a sin against the Seventh Commandment. To pay them honestly is God-pleasing stewardship.

And God wants us to proclaim his Word to the entire world. In the Old Testament church the Israelites supported the priests with their tithes. In the New Testament church Christians support the gospel ministry with their free-will offerings. In either case, the child of God brings his offerings out of faith in Christ and love for every sinner.

God has entrusted us with all of our earthly possessions. We are *his* stewards, caretakers of all that we have. The most common way for us to disregard this responsibility is wastefulness. When we have an

abundance of earthly goods, we easily become careless. Have you ever thrown away edible food? Have you spent more than you should have simply because you have had the money to spend? But when we hardly have enough to make ends meet, it is easier to be good stewards than during prosperous times. Daily we need the spiritual strength to use God's gifts wisely.

Corporate greed and dishonesty make the headlines, but the stealing from an employer is a daily occurrence. If you own a business, you can take advantage of your employees by not giving them a fair wage in order to increase your profits. If you are employee, you could steal from your employer by not doing an honest day's work. The Bible encourages us, "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you are serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does" (Ephesians 6:7,8).

We may not be inclined to rob a bank, but we may be seriously tempted to steal from our workplace. Embezzlement might start with the intent to pay it back. When you do it often, the conscience is dulled, and stealing becomes a way of life. This also may take place where you would least expect it—in the church. The usher, the treasurer, the pastor or teacher might easily let his Old Adam get the best of him and be guilty of stealing. Remember Judas. The church needs to call such an unfaithful steward to repentance by using the law to condemn him. When there is godly sorrow over sin, the penitent needs to hear the comforting words of the gospel: "Be of good cheer. The blood of Christ has taken away the guilt of your sins."

Being content with what God has given us and, motivated by God's love in Christ, we will live more and more as faithful stewards. As employers we will do all that we can to reward our employees amply for their faithful service. As employees, we see Christ in our employer and desire to serve him faithfully.

Generosity should be the hallmark of our Christian life. Abraham was a rich man who believed God's promise of a Savior. When a dispute about land arose between his servants and those of his nephew Lot, he gladly gave Lot first choice. "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed" (Proverbs 11:25).

No one has been more generous than God, for he loved us so much that he sacrificed Him who was dearest to his heart, his one and only Son, to redeem us from all our sins, and those sins committed in our stewardship life.

Luther gives a simple, scriptural explanation to the Seventh Commandment.

### **You shall not steal.**

*What does this mean?*

We should fear and love God that we do not take our neighbor's money or property or get it by dishonest dealing, but help him to improve and protect his property and business.

### *The Ninth and Tenth Commandments*

Most of the commandments teach us the words and actions that are pleasing or displeasing to God. When both the Ninth and Tenth Commandments use the same words, "You shall not covet," they are directing our attention to our sinful heart.

With these two commandments God is impressing upon us that sin in our lives always flows from a sinful heart. "Out of men's hearts come . . . theft . . . greed" (Mark 7:21,22).

Coveting is a sinful desire, a craving for something that God does not want us to have. King Ahab of Israel is a classic example of coveting and where it ultimately leads.

Ahab was a wicked king of Israel. He tolerated idolatry among God's chosen people, and his wife Jezebel promoted it.

Naboth had a vineyard close to the palace of King Ahab, who wanted the vineyard for a vegetable garden. All Naboth had to do was name the price. But Naboth refused to sell this piece of property since it had been in his family for generations.

When Ahab sulked and refused to eat because Naboth refused to sell, Jezebel assured him that she would get the vineyard for him. She had two scoundrels falsely testify that Naboth had blasphemed God. He

was arrested and stoned to death. Then Ahab took possession of the vineyard. A sinful desire led to murder, and the perpetrators, Ahab and Jezebel, later died shameful deaths as God had warned.

When we learn “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house,” we are reminded of the oft-used phrase: living the American dream. While in and of itself there is nothing wrong with owning your own home, it is a sinful desire when it becomes the primary aim of our life. We may easily forget that wherever we live is only temporary housing, even when the mortgage is paid. Through Christ we have an eternal home awaiting us that we could never afford; but the holy sacrifice of Christ has paid for it in full. Therefore, he assures us. “Do not let your heart be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms [mansions]; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:1-3).

Luther explains the Ninth Commandment.

**You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.**

*What does this mean?*

We should fear and love God that we do not scheme to get our neighbor’s inheritance or house, or obtain it by a show of right, but do all that we can to help him keep it.

The Tenth Commandment condemns all sinful desires when it broadens God’s prohibition of coveting with “anything that belongs to your neighbor.” In today’s world that could mean almost any material thing, anything that money can buy—clothes, car, and cabin---the list is endless. It also means our neighbors wife and workers. How easily such sinful desires spring up in our hearts, and it is a daily struggle to have the holy desires for which God is looking.

Whether we are rich or poor and whatever our circumstances in life may be, let us emulate the attitude of the Apostle Paul. “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-13). Christ, who brings peace to our hearts by richly, daily and freely forgiving our sins, also empowers us with his Word to live peaceful and contented lives.

True, we do not have perfect happiness, for “who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?’” (Proverbs 20:9). But the Spirit strengthens our faith and helps us overcome moments of discontent. For “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24).

Scripture reveals that a Christian is holy and sinful at the same time. Even though we have become new creatures in Christ, we still have our sinful nature clinging to us. That nature is called our Old Adam because it has come down to us from our first parents. Our new man of faith has pure and holy desires that lead to God-pleasing words and deeds. The sinful nature we inherited from our parents provokes sinful desires that often leads to sinful words and deeds. Thus in our Christian hearts there is a daily battle between our Old Adam and our new man. And that struggle has been going on since the day of our conversion to Christ. Basing his words on Romans 6, Luther teaches us the significance of our baptism for our daily lives. “It means that our Old Adam with his evil deeds and desires should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die, and that day by day a new man should arise, as from the dead, to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity now and forever” (*Luther’s Small Catechism*). As faithful stewards of our Lord we wage a daily battle against greed and covetousness. But the victory is ours through Christ.

*Luther’s Small Catechism* summarizes the truths contained in the Tenth Commandment.

**You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, workers, animals, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.**

*What does this mean?*

We should fear and love God that we do not force or entice away our neighbor's spouse, workers, or animals, but urge them to stay and do their duty.

*Our Law Keeper*

Our reading of God's commandments quickly reveals that we have not kept them perfectly. We have not always loved God with our whole heart all the time. We have not always come to the aid of our neighbor in his time of need. And we have not been able to prevent sinful desires for things that belong to others from entering our hearts and minds. It is "through the law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:20).

God demands that we keep his commandments perfectly—a demand we are unable to keep. For that reason "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Galatians 4:4,5). Jesus did what we could not possibly do—he lived a sinless life. He obeyed every commandment of God perfectly. And he did it in our place to redeem us from our sins and their consequences. He is our Law Keeper, our Savior.

He did it so well that now, as children of God, he accepts our imperfect obedience to his law. What a gracious Lord we have!

### 3. Stewardship in the Ceremonial Law

We have a variety of ceremonies in our church today. We use different liturgies to guide us in our Sunday worship and have brief guidelines for morning matins and evening vespers. We employ special rites for Baptism and the Lord's Supper and follow prescribed rituals for marriages and funerals. In addition we have developed special services for the installations of those whom the church has called to serve it, either full time, part time, or donated time.

What is the source of these different formats? They are Scripture-based, but their precise wording is not found in the Bible. The Lord has not instructed his New Testament church what should be done and said when God's people gather for worship, except that his Word is preached and Christ's sacraments are rightly administered. He has given us the freedom to choose those worship forms that best fit the situation and serve the Christian assembly.

But God did not give such license to his Old Testament church. At Mt. Sinai God gave the Children of Israel more than the Moral Law which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. He gave them detailed instructions how they were to worship him. He even informed them that from the tribe of Levi the priests should be chosen. This is called the Ceremonial Law.

#### *Its Purpose*

When we read the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, we may ask: "Why did God spell out in detail what Israel's worship life should be? What purpose did they serve?"

First, the ceremonial laws were meant to teach the people. These laws constantly reminded the people of their sin and what they deserved because of them, and they learned through the various festivals what a gracious Lord they had. He alone was their God, and they alone were his people. He did not choose them from all the nations of the world because he could see in them a potential for greatness. Only by his grace did he make them his very own through the covenant he made with their father Abraham. Even in the face of their repeated disobedience he remained faithful to his promises. They and we have a God who always keeps his word.

#### *Laws of Uncleanness*

God imposed upon his people the laws of uncleanness as a constant reminder of their sinfulness. Whenever they would observe these ordinances it was show-and-tell time. In minute detail God instructed his people what they should and should not eat. He divided animals into two categories—clean and unclean. For example, they were allowed to eat mutton but not pork. Even touching a carcass of an unclean animal made them ceremonially unclean.

With these laws of uncleanness, God set the standard: "I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45). God knew that they could not reach the goal of keeping his ordinances. Their daily failures reminded them of their sins. They needed to realize that they were unclean spiritually. And through the ceremonial- cleansing laws God taught them that truth.

God also described for them persons who were unclean in his eyes. "At birth a mother was unclean for a time. Did this mean sex and childbearing were sinful? No! To hold such a view one would have to ignore the Lord's command to reproduce and to spurn the blessings of marriage. Rather, uncleanness at birth required parents, the mother especially, to contemplate the spiritual responsibilities of parenthood. A woman's uncleanness at childbirth was only for a short time. It was long enough, however, to ponder prayerfully that an innocent looking and perfectly helpless baby was a sinner in need of a Savior. In her seclusion, a mother had the time to map out a plan to raise her child in the training and instruction of the Lord" (*God's Master Plan: Old Testament*, Lesson 5, p. 2). In a tangible way these laws were teaching the truth that what is born of sinful parents is sinful. In general, God's purpose was being served, for only when one is convinced that he is sinful,

that he has repeatedly violated God's law, that he deserves only death and damnation, has his heart been prepared to hear of God's love for the unlovable.

### *The Festivals*

The festivals that the Lord instructed Israel to celebrate repeated and reinforced his promise of the Messiah. Unlike our festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, Israel received specific instructions concerning special days for worship. Two of them are especially noteworthy.

The first is the **Passover**. It was intended to remind the people each year how the Lord powerfully and mercifully freed their fathers from their slavery in Egypt. For many years the Egyptians had made the Israelites their slaves and murdered their male children because they felt the Hebrews were becoming too strong. Heeding the pleas of his people, God called Moses to lead them out of their bondage under Egypt's Pharaoh.

Moses repeatedly requested that the Israelites be permitted to go into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused, the Lord sent the angel of death through the land, killing the firstborn male in every Egyptian home. God commanded the Israelites to butcher a lamb, sprinkle its blood on their doorposts, and promised that the angel of death would pass over their homes. The Lord thereby freed his people from servitude and led them on their journey to the land he had promised to Abraham.

Annually the Jews celebrated the Passover as a constant reminder of God's merciful deliverance. The Passover was a meal of lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs. It was also a special, visible reminder of the Lamb who would come to shed his blood, thereby freeing Israel from the slavery of sin, the power of the devil, and eternal death.

The Lamb used for the Passover was to be a year old and "without defect." The Lord did not want an animal that the people might use for an ordinary meal. The perfect lamb was a reminder of the Lamb of God who was without sin and of his all-sufficient sacrifice for sin.

The **Day of Atonement** was another great annual festival for the Israelites. The word "atonement" means reconciling or bringing together persons who were enemies. The Bible teaches that people who have been separated from God because of their sin are now reconciled to him through Christ.

The Day of Atonement was instituted by God to show his people how this reconciliation takes place. On that day the high priest would follow instructions from God as to what he should wear and what he would sacrifice. All this activity took place in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple.

First, the high priest sacrificed a sin offering for himself, for he needed God's gracious cleansing of his sin. He would sprinkle the blood of a bull on the altar in the Holy of Holies for his own sins. Then, he would take two goats. The blood of one was sprinkled on the atonement cover of the Ark of the Covenant, thereby making atonement for the sins of the people. He put his hands on the other goat, confessed the sins the people committed during the past year, and sent the goat out into the wilderness to die. It was called the scapegoat.

This ceremony was a vivid reminder of another sin-bearer who would shed his blood for the sins of the world. But Christ, who was without sin, did not have to first offer a sacrifice for himself, and he did not need to make sacrifices repeatedly. For "he entered the most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

Both the celebrations of the Passover and the Day of Atonement were demonstrations of God's eternal love for his people. The Lord desires that all people believe the blessed truth that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses them from all sin. This is the good news of the gospel—then and now.

### *The Sacrifices*

In response to God's gracious forgiveness, the Israelites supplied the priests with that which was necessary for the sacrifices—a rich man might offer an ox, and a poor man might offer doves. But the atonement money required of each adult male needed for service in the tabernacle was different. Rich and poor

alike paid the same amount—a half shekel, the equivalent to our two days of work. Whether rich or poor it took the same amount to redeem our souls—the precious blood of Christ.

After David had repented of his sins of adultery and murder, he knew the kind of sacrifice God desired. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17). Receiving the full and free pardon for his sins, he could confidently pray: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Psalm 51:12).

After Christ came and offered himself as the one and only sacrifice for sins, the sacrifices of the Old Testament were no longer needed nor commanded. But the Apostle Paul urges us, “in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1). The author of a devotion on this Bible passage gives a simple explanation and a practical application of these words. “What does God want from us? No less than that we become living sacrifices for him. How much does God want us to sacrifice to him? Everything! In other words, all that we are. We do not give to God a percentage of our money. We wish to use every penny to his glory. We don’t give a percentage of our time. We wish to use every moment to honor him. We don’t offer to God a few of our abilities and talents. We place on the altar all our gifts as living sacrifices to him. These are sacrifices that are indeed holy sacrifices with which God is pleased” (*Meditations*, vol. 7, no.1, p. 39).

### *The Tabernacle*

Israel’s place of worship also taught blessed, saving truths. The Lord God was the architect and interior decorator of the Tabernacle, the tent church. He gave Moses specific instructions for its size and its materials. He wanted his people to focus their worship on him in the place where he dwelled among them. Wherever they would go, the Lord and his “tent” would accompany them. And through Moses and Aaron and their successors, the Lord would speak to them.

Three items were in the courtyard: an altar for burnt offerings, a wash basin for ceremonial cleansing, and a tent with two rooms—the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place.

The Holy Place had a seven-branch lampstand, a bread table for twelve loaves of bread, and an incense altar. Each pointed to the promised Savior, who would be the light of the world, the bread of life, and the only Way to the Father.

In the Most Holy Place was the ark of the Testimony or Covenant. It contained the two tablets of stone on which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai, manna that God had used to feed his people during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, and the staff of Aaron that confirmed his priesthood. These items pointed to Christ, who kept the Law for us and who sustains us on our journey to the Promised Land—heaven. He was both the Priest and the Sacrifice that reconciled us to God. For the Children of Israel the Sabbath and the entire Ceremonial Law was a constant reminder of the Christ whom the Lord would send for their eternal salvation. In a tangible way the Tabernacle and the activities that went on there were a proclamation of the gospel.

### *Gifts for the Lord’s House*

The stewardship life of Israel was evidenced when they made the Tabernacle according to God’s specific instructions. Its craftsmen made all of the items needed in the Tabernacle as well as the garments for the High Priest. The people willingly contributed what was required for the Tabernacle and its priests to the extent that the Israelites “were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do the work” (Exodus 36:6,7).

### *Solomon’s Temple*

Several centuries after the Israelites inhabited Canaan, the Tabernacle was replaced with the magnificent Temple of Solomon. Except for its permanency and its price tag, the Temple had all the essential elements of the Tabernacle. And most importantly, it was the center of worship for God's people.

When David assembled much of the material for the Temple, including his own personal wealth of gold and silver, he also involved the people and urged them to consecrate themselves to the Lord. The leaders in Israel responded by giving "freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord" (I Chronicles 29:9). This was God-pleasing stewardship for it flowed from hearts with love for their Savior-God.

Solomon, the Son of David, however, was chosen by God to build the Temple. It was a magnificent building. Gold and silver and precious stones were incorporated into the structure and its appointments. As ornate as the Temple was, it pales in comparison with the heavenly temple that awaits all believers in Christ. There in glory we will joyfully thank and praise the God of grace for all eternity.

Solomon's Temple does not stand today. Years later the great majority of the children of Israel denied the faith, worshiped idols, and led wicked lives. Then God used the Babylonians to destroy the city and its Temple and to take the people captive. But the Lord remained faithful even when the people were not. And there was always a remnant that trusted in the Lord and anxiously waited for the coming Messiah.

The priests in Israel played an important part in the faith-life of the people. The tribe of Levi, Aaron and his sons, were designated as the Israelites from whom the priests would come. They made the sacrifices on behalf of the people and were the mediators between them and God. They were given detailed instructions on how to carry out their official duties. And they wore special garments when they performed their services. "Both the everyday simplicity of the Levite in workaday clothes and the high priest in all of his finery provided Israelite believers with powerful shadows of Jesus, who simply, beautifully, purely, openly, and blamelessly carries our burdens, cares, and fears for us" (*God's Master Plan: Old Testament, Lesson 5, page 8*).

### *The Tithe*

While the gifts for the Tabernacle and later for the Temple were freewill offerings, the tithe was not. God commanded his people to give a tithe of their fields and their flocks to support the tribe of Levi from whom the priests were called. The priests devoted their time to the ministry of the Word among the people, to performing the sacrifices, and in carrying out the ceremonies as acts of worship to the Lord their God. With their tithes and their special gifts the faithful were praising the God of their salvation.

But the priests were not the only beneficiaries of the people's tithes and gifts. They were also used to support the orphans and widows in Israel. Even the aliens who had been converted to Judaism shared in the generous outpouring of the people.

The biblical history of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob record one sad chapter after another. God's chosen people repeatedly forsook the worship of their Redeemer and worshipped the idols of their heathen neighbors. The Temple worship was polluted. No longer did the vast majority in Israel willingly and gladly bring their tithes and offerings. The Lord refused to accept anything the impenitent people did. For "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6).

The last faithful prophet of the Old Testament records this observation by God: "Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?' "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me." "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty." (Malachi 3:7-12).

God is preaching the law to Israel. He condemns them for their unbelief and ungodliness. He promises to return to them if they return to him. He pledges to bless them if they tithe according to his law. The Lord



had repeatedly promised that he would be Israel's God and prosper them as long as they remained faithful to him. Sadly, the Israelites failed to heed God's call to repentance.

The promises of the law are always conditional. He threatens to punish those who hate him and promises to show mercy to those who love him.

The specific, conditional promises attached to the tithe were given only to the nation of Israel. Virtually every reference of the tithe in the Old Testament ceremonial law is tied to the service of the priests. After our great High Priest came, all the ceremonial laws were fulfilled by him and were abolished. In the New Testament there is not one word of instruction for God's children that they should tithe. Instead, Christ in his encounters with the Pharisees warned that the practice of tithing often fosters self-righteousness.

But won't promoting tithing prompt our people to give more? And look at all the good the church could do with the money.

God's law, however, was never intended to motivate people. St. Paul clearly warns, "The letter [God's law] kills" (2 Corinthians 3:6). When it comes to nourishing our faith, the law is our enemy, for the law kills spiritual life. When we improperly use the law in stewardship, we can never properly motivate God's people. Only the love of God in Christ does that.

Although Israel as a nation never returned to the Lord God, there were always some "who feared the Lord" (Malachi 3:16). For them Malachi records the gospel word of comfort. "They will be mine," says the Lord Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not" (Malachi 3:17,18). The Lord made them his own through the promised Messiah. Through faith in the coming Christ those who feared and revered the Lord were children of God and heirs of eternal life. By grace they were the Lord's "treasured possession" (Malachi 3:17).

Even in difficult times these faithful Israelites spent their lives serving their gracious God. With these gospel promises the Lord bolstered their faith, for he knew that they would suffer along with the impenitent as God meted out his judgment on Israel. Even though the faithful tithed we have no scriptural evidence they ever experienced the material prosperity promised their nation if it would have returned to the Lord. They already had their dearest treasure in their Redeemer.

On Judgment Day they, together with the believers of every age, will see the Lord come in all of his glory. They "will see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not" (Malachi 3:18).

When we see God's plan of salvation unfolding on the pages of the Old Testament, two truths keep repeating themselves—man's sin and God's grace. God in his wisdom has revealed the sins of an Abraham ("called God's friend," James 2,23), the transgressions of David (called a man after [God's] own heart," Acts 13:22), and the iniquities of others. As God freely and fully forgave them, they continued to trust in him and lead righteous lives. These blessed truths were written for our blessing and comfort, for we daily violate God's law. But when we confess our sins and trust in Christ, we are forgiven. Thus our hearts are filled each morning with praises for the God of our salvation. And what is in our penitent and believing hearts overflows in the words we speak and the deeds we do. By his grace alone are we made God's faithful stewards.

## STEWARDSHIP IN THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF CHRIST

### 4. The Childhood of Jesus

There is more than 400 years between the writing of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Men called by God to be his messengers and inspired by the Holy Spirit to record God's Word for future generations wrote both testaments. However, for the years between the last faithful prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ recorded by the evangelists, we must rely on secular historians.

#### *The Synagogue*

After the Jews were conquered by the Babylonians and had lived in captivity for 70 years in Babylon (modern day Iraq), they were permitted to return to their homeland. There they rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. Eventually many Jews settled in different parts of the Mediterranean world. Since they did not have easy access to the Temple in Jerusalem, they built synagogues and there the faithful gathered on the Sabbath and heard readings from the Old Testament expounded. This is important to remember because Jesus did most of his preaching either out in the open or in the synagogues.

When the Apostle Paul embarked on his missionary journeys, he first visited the synagogues. There he could preach Christ as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. When many of the Jews rejected the gospel, Paul turned his attention to preaching the Word of God to the Gentiles. That was his primary calling, for the Lord had called him to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

#### *The Silent Years*

The 400 years between Malachi and the first indication that the promised Messiah was about to appear are called the "silent years." The Lord sent no prophet to his people during these four centuries. Even though no new God-inspired revelations are recorded, nevertheless God used world events to prepare for the arrival of his Son.

When Alexander the Great conquered most of the civilized world, he introduced Greek culture and the Greek language in many countries. Greek became a universal language. Paul preached and wrote in the Greek that the people in foreign lands could understand. That is why God inspired the authors of the New Testament to write in a Greek that the common people could understand. All of this was part of God's plan to have the gospel spread quickly in the first century after Christ.

As the Roman Empire grew, it built roads and controlled trade in its conquered lands. This made travel relatively safe. Later this enabled Paul and the other apostles to carry out their mission activities. In preparation for the coming of Christ, God used secular rulers to carry out his divine purposes during the silent years.

During this time a Jewish group called the Pharisees developed. They believed the Old Testament to be God's Word for his people. They knew God's law and diligently tried to keep it. But over time they neglected the truth that they stood condemned in the eyes of God because they could not keep his law perfectly. The devil, allied with their own sinful nature, convinced them that only by their outward obedience to the law could they get right with God. To make their salvation certain by the works of the law, they added their own rules and traditions to God's inspired Word. That is why they became bitter enemies of Christ when he asserted that only through him could sinners be saved.

Another group of religious leaders that was formed during the silent years was the Sadducees. Their reasoning displaced God's Word even to the point that they denied that there would be a resurrection from the dead. Although at odds with the Pharisees, the Sadducees joined them in their opposition to Christ and his message. By the time Jesus was born only a few Jews looked for a Messiah who would redeem them from their sins. In their unbelief the Jews hoped for a deliverer from their earthly enemies, that is, freedom from Roman rule.

The Pharisees made keeping the law of God their ticket to heaven, and by denying the resurrection of the dead, the Sadducees rejected a fundamental truth of the gospel. These religious leaders were damned because they rejected Jesus as the promised Savior, for “whoever believes in him [Christ] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18).

### *The Birth of Christ*

The appearance of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah as he was performing his priestly duties was the first indication that the long-awaited Messiah was soon to be born. The angel announced to Zechariah that his wife would have a son who would be the one to prepare the way for the Christ. The angel also appeared to the Virgin Mary and told her that she would be the mother of the Promised One. First John, who later was called the baptizer, was born. Six months later Jesus was born in Bethlehem. “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Galatians 4:4,5).

We needed Someone to redeem us from the curse and condemnation of God’s law. Thus the Son of God became man and he himself lived under God’s law. He did what we have so miserably failed to do; he kept God’s law perfectly.

Mary and Joseph knew what God’s law required when she had her first-born Son. On the eighth day they had Jesus circumcised. Thirty-three days later they went to Jerusalem for the purification of Mary and the presentation of the child in the Temple. They offered a sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons, according to the ordinances God imposed upon his Jewish believers. Even though they were poor, their obedience reflected willing and God-pleasing stewardship. What Mary and Joseph did was a joyful expression of their faith in their newborn Savior. And by having Mary’s Son circumcised, Jesus began fulfilling every aspect of God’s law perfectly.

With the advent of Christ the ceremonial law was nearing the end of its God-given purpose. The Lord had treated his Old Testament believers as children by giving them the ceremonial laws. They served as a guardian for God’s chosen people to keep them a separate nation until the Christ would come. Not until Jesus obeyed his Father’s will by his innocent and atoning death was God’s purpose for the ceremonial laws completed.

### *The Wise Men*

Since we are focusing on the stewardship life of God-fearing people, we will omit the well-known Christmas story. Rather, our attention is directed to the Magi. The Bible tells us very little about them. We do not know with certainty from which country they came, but it is a fair assumption that it was in the region of Babylon, our present-day Iraq and Iran. There the Jews had been taken captive about 600 years before the birth of Christ and lived in Babylonian captivity for 70 years. When they were allowed to return to Judah and Jerusalem, some of them remained in Babylon where they had established their homes and businesses.

This would also explain how the Magi had heard of the promised Messiah-King. They were Gentiles, but their contacts with believing Jews would introduce them to the true and living God and his promises to send his Son as the world’s Savior.

In some way God revealed to them that the Savior had been born and that a special star would lead them to the place where Jesus was. These were learned men, but they had become humble believers trusting in the Lord and his Word. That faith prompted them to make the journey hoping to find the Christchild.

However, when the star seemed to be nearing Jerusalem, they must have reasoned. “If the new-born King of the Jews is to be found, we should look in the capital city and the Temple.” They soon were made aware of their mistake because no one on the streets of Jerusalem had heard of the royal birth.

But the heathen ruler, Herod, learned from the Jewish scribes that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. He related this to the men from the east and told them to return to inform him about the newborn King.

Once again they saw the star and followed it to Bethlehem where it stopped over the very house where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were now living. “They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him” (Matthew 2:11).

This is a remarkable description of true Christian faith. These were learned men and such people are prone to rely on their reasoning powers in matters of religion. What they saw was a tiny baby, completely dependent on his mother. But they worshiped him. Why? They believed that he was the mighty Son of God who came into the world as a lowly human being to save them from their sins and to make their graves the doorway to heaven. Only Spirit-worked faith could cause them to see in this infant their Savior-God.

When they saw the baby Jesus, they honored him with their gifts. And what costly gifts they were! In a tangible way they showed that Jesus was their priceless treasure. Their gifts came from a heart overflowing with love for God.

The Wise Men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. And through a dream God told Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt, thus avoiding Herod’s slaughter of many infants in Bethlehem. The gifts of the Wise Men, no doubt, helped provide for this holy family during their stay in Egypt. Their gifts were a prelude to the stewardship life of the New Testament church.

## 5. The Sermon on the Mount

Jesus was a preacher. For three years he traveled among the chosen people of God, proclaiming by words and deeds that he was the promised Messiah. His heart longed for his people to believe in him and to trust his word. He established a “seminary” when he chose 12 apostles who spent all their time listening to him and observing how he was carrying out his God-given mission on earth. He had a larger following called “disciples” composed of men, women and children. They were small in number compared to the thousands who heard him during his earthly ministry. All of his followers needed his instruction before he would end his personal earthly ministry. For they were to be his witnesses after he ascended into heaven by telling others of the marvelous, saving works of God done through Jesus Christ his Son.

On one occasion Jesus left the crowds that had been following him, went up on a mountainside and taught his disciples. The message in his Sermon on the Mount was meant for those who believed that he alone was their Lord and Savior. They loved him and enjoyed the Word he spoke to them.

The Sermon on the Mount, then, was intended primarily to instruct his followers in what it means to lead a Christian life. Included in that instruction was the matter of God-pleasing stewardship, what it was and what it was not.

### *First Things First*

Jesus wanted his listeners to have more than a superficial understanding of the Ten Commandments. He emphasized the importance of having a loving and forgiving heart, not one that harbored hatred and anger toward one’s brother in the faith. Therefore Jesus admonishes, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in the front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23,24). You may be contributing liberally to the church, but your gift is not acceptable to God if you have an unforgiving heart. However, when we forgive those who have sinned against us because God has forgiven us for Jesus’ sake, our stewardship life pleases him.

### *Giving in Secret*

Giving in secret would seem, at times, difficult to do. Most Christians use church envelopes on a weekly basis to support the Gospel ministry. Usually someone in the congregation counts the money, records it, and issues quarterly and/or annual statements. If charitable gifts are used as a deduction when filing the income tax, the IRS may demand evidence of such contributions. The proof is the church’s financial statement.

Still we expect that our contributions be kept in confidence. Let us take seriously what Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount about our gifts for church and charity. “Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:1-4).

This would seem to contradict what Jesus had said before in his sermon. “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The emphasis here is that people will see the godly life that you lead and “praise your Father in heaven.” When we lead a righteous life, we do so because we desire to glorify our Lord, not to seek the applause of the world.

Jesus is warning us not to parade our good deeds before the world, seeking compliments. Then we would not be glorifying God but ourselves. Instead, Jesus is urging us not to dwell on the good that we have done. Do it and forget about it. That is what he means when he says, “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret” (Matthew 6:3,4). Such

lapses in our memory please God, for when Jesus will relate on the Last Day all that we have done in faith for him, we will have to ask, “When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?” Jesus will reply, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me” (Matthew 25:37,40).

Why does Jesus warn us not to boast of our giving and our good works? He knows that our Old Adam delights in letting people know how generous we are. Rather, let us remember that even our best works are tainted by sin. And the reward that God promises is not earned, but it is purely a reward of his grace. What that reward is specifically we are not told. It could be the cross now and the crown later.

### *Treasures in Heaven*

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

Jesus' warning applies to the rich and the poor alike, but it is especially appropriate when we are enjoying prosperity. As this is being written, America is enjoying a standard of living unprecedented in the history of the world. The average American has an abundance of material goods and continues to accumulate more. The Christian, too, is easily caught up with the idea that the “good life” is all about accumulating things—cars, clothes, and creature comforts. Cars rust out, clothes wear out, and creature comforts are easily stolen. Natural disasters can easily destroy everything we have. Our worldly goods are here today and could be gone tomorrow.

Jesus is not saying that we cannot have any of these things, but he is warning us that these are not the things that should make us happy. Such earthly joy is short lived. We are not to live for them or set our hearts on earthly treasures no matter how precious they may seem. Rather, Jesus urges us to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.”

And just what are such gifts from God that we should treasure and that no one can rob us of? They are the full and free pardon of all of our sins that we receive through faith in Christ. It is the knowledge that we are saved alone by God's grace through Christ's sufferings and death upon the cross. We have the hope to someday enter the heavenly mansion that Christ has prepared for us. Then all our tears will have dried up, and we will no longer experience pain, suffering and heartache. For we will be in the company of the angels and enjoy the fellowship of our Savior whom we will see face to face. We will have treasures in heaven that are hard to imagine, but they will be ours because Christ promises them to us. Let us not, therefore, set our hearts on earthly things but on heavenly treasures.

### *Earthly Blessings*

In Luke's account of the Sermon on the Mount, we read, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38). Some have used this passage to convince people that by giving to the church they will receive material gain. People are easily misled into believing that the more they give to charity the more the Lord will reward them with earthly blessings.

First, we note that Jesus' words contain a general promise. Nowhere in the New Testament church is there an example of someone that gave generously and then was rewarded with a prosperous and comfortable life. In fact, the very opposite is true. What did the apostles gain by giving up their earthly vocations and following Christ? They were persecuted, and most of them died a martyr's death.

Then what does Jesus mean with the words, “Give and it shall be given to you”? The context gives us the answer in one of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Again, we are not told how the Lord will show us mercy, but we do know that his mercies are new for us every

morning. And to motivate us properly to give, he encourages us to “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Note that Luke records these words of Jesus before he said, “Give, and it will be given you” (v.38).

In his explanation to the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, Luther summarizes all the things that God provides for our body and life. And then he reminds us, “All this God does only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it.” Our motive for giving and for showing mercy is that the Lord has shown us mercy repeatedly. We need to pray often, “Lord have mercy on us; Christ have mercy on us; Lord, have mercy on us.”

If anyone imagines that becoming a Christian results in having a prosperous life, the Bible reminds us, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). And the Psalmist observes, “I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Psalm 73:3). Doesn’t it seem that the rich and famous have it all even though they lead ungodly lives? “Why,” we may ask, “does God let them prosper?” He knows what he is doing, for the ungodly’s Day of Judgment will come. The Lord is concerned, however, that we do not forsake him by no longer trusting in his promises; therefore, he lets us be willing to go through much tribulation before we enter our eternal home.

### *No One His Own Master*

Have you ever been in complete control of your life? We may think we are, but it never happens. In this world we are either under God’s control or Satan’s. We either serve Satan and our own sinful passions or follow Christ who has redeemed us from them.

Jesus is describing such a situation in our stewardship life. “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” (Matthew 6:24). What controls you or who rules your life? Is it God or the demon Money? Certainly we need money to live, but we should not live *for* money. Money is a means whereby we are able to support our families and ourselves. We work hard for our money, but we should never forget, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1). If the Lord would no longer our ability to labor today, we could no longer work. We would need to rely on others to sustain our lives. That aid would also come from the merciful hand of God.

Is your purpose for working to acquire money so you can become financially secure? Or is your heart resting on the Lord, the Giver of every good and perfect gift? Either our lives are centered on earthly wealth, whether little or much, or they are focused on our God who has blessed us with all that we have. No middle ground here. “You cannot serve both God and money.”

### *Why Worry?*

Jesus encourages us by saying, “Do not worry about money. I will see that you have enough to live on.” He has and he will.

Yet worry seems to be our constant companion. We worry about ourselves; we worry about our family; we worry about things that have happened or we think are about to happen. Worry came into the world the moment the first humans fell into sin. Adam and Eve foolishly tried to hide themselves from God in the Garden of Eden. Why? They were afraid of what God would do to them. But God in his grace assured them that they did not have to worry, that he was still their God, and that he would reveal his everlasting love for them by sending his Son into the world who would destroy Satan’s power and would save them. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

Jesus has much to say about worry while at the same time revealing the antidote for worry—trust in the Lord. “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do

not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:25-27).

Today you may not be worrying about your next paycheck. But do you worry about your health coverage and medical bills? Do you worry whether you will have enough for your retirement? Or if you are retired, do you worry if your income is going to be able to support you the rest of your life?

Jesus not only urges us to stop worrying, he also promises, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). When we hear and believe God's Word, when we trust in Christ's righteousness for our eternal well-being, we are also assured that the Lord knows our daily needs and will mercifully supply them the rest of our lives.

While worry will never be completely eradicated from our minds because of our weak, sinful nature, let us daily read God's Word and meditate on it to be reminded of his constant love. For it is God's Word that removes our fears and worries; it is the gospel that strengthens our holy Christian faith.

Pastors, teachers, missionaries, and leaders in Christ's church need not worry about material things as they carry out their ministries. When Jesus sent out his 12 apostles, he gave them these instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff--no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town" (Mark 6:8-10). We may not stay in our hearers' homes, but through fellow Christians the Lord takes care of the bodily needs of his ministers. For the Lord moves grateful hearts and willing hands to support the gospel ministry. That is Christian stewardship.



## 6. Jesus' Lessons on Stewardship

During three years of public ministry Jesus taught his disciples a number of important truths concerning their lives as God's stewards. The twelve apostles were the primary recipients of Jesus' instruction during their years of seminary training. This was evident when he called his apostles to full-time ministry.

### *Call to Ministry*

When Jesus was preaching near the Sea of Galilee, the people were so eager to hear him that they pushed him to the shore. He got into Peter's fishing boat and finished his sermon. Then he told Peter to go out into the deep water and cast out his nets. Even though it was the wrong time and the wrong place to fish, Peter and his partners did as Jesus instructed them. The catch was so great that it filled two boats.

At the Sea of Galilee Jesus called Peter, James and John into the full-time ministry when he said, "From now on you will catch men" (Luke 5:10). With a response of faith in Christ, they left their thriving fishing business behind and followed Jesus immediately. For their hearts were not set on material gain but only on Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior---a God-pleasing example for all those who serve in the ministry of Christ's church.

Jesus called his apostles to preach the good news of the kingdom, to call sinners to repentance, and to assure them that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. To confirm the truth in the hearts of those to whom the apostles preached, Jesus empowered them to perform miracles. "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or staff, for the worker is worth his keep" (Matthew 10:8-10).

Jesus wanted his disciples to carry on a worry-free ministry; he did not want them to be concerned where their next meal would come from. Rather, they were to rely on the fruits of faith that would flow from the hearts of those who heard the Word of God and believed it. The converts would provide for their daily needs. They went to cities, trusting Christ's promises.

Today the ministers of Christ live in a different world. We are surrounded by an abundance of material things. It is a daily battle for us not to set our hearts on them. Rather, we should be grateful for all that we have and confident that the Lord will satisfy our every physical need. For "he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all---how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things" (Romans 8:32).

"The worker is worth his keep" (Matthew 10:10) is a truth we still practice today. A part of our congregation's worship services is the offering. We rightly call church offerings free-will offerings given by those who hear and believe the gospel. In the spirit of the New Testament church we are confident that the Holy Spirit through God's Word will move the hearts of our people to bring their gifts for the support of our ministry without coercion. In times of plenty let us not set our hearts on earthly things. In times of poverty let us not complain and blame God for our misfortune. Like the apostles, let us trust in the Lord and his promises for our earthly well being.

Jesus also sent out seventy-two disciples to prepare the hearts of the people for his coming. He gave them essentially the same instructions he had given the apostles. They called the people to repentance and performed miracles. "The seventy-two returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.' He replied... 'Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven'" (Luke 10:17,20).

How easily we are overjoyed when we see some outward success in our ministry---our church attendance and offerings---forgetting that we only plant the seed of the Word and do the watering with the gospel; the Lord gives the increase. We need to battle our sinful, self-righteous hearts that easily deceives us into thinking that only through our faithful work do we have success. Rather, Christ wants our joy to be found in his grace. He chose us from eternity to be his own, called us to faith through the gospel, and inscribed our names "in the book of life" (Revelation 13:8).

## *Fruits of Faith*

Before Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist was called by God to prepare the way for Christ. He called the people to repentance by first condemning them for their sins. And those who realized their sins and their dire consequences he pointed to Christ as the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). John baptized those who confessed their sins and believed the Word of God.

He urged the believers to live their faith. When they looked to John for guidance to live a life that pleases God, he told them, “The man who has two tunics should share with his who has none, and the one who has food should do the same” (Luke 3:11). To the converted tax collectors he said, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to” (Luke 3:12); for many of the tax collectors overcharged the people and lined their own pockets. He instructed some soldiers who became believers, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay” (Luke 3:14). Each was encouraged to bring forth fruits of faith according to his place in life. Once a sinner has been brought to faith in Christ, he desires to show his love for God.

Jesus explained: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love” (John 15:5-9).

In a vineyard the vine is essential for growing grapes. The branches attached to the vine produce the fruit. We were attached to the vine, Christ, the moment we were converted. The power of the Word in our baptisms as infants or hearing the gospel of Christ as adults planted the first seeds of faith in our hearts. By faith we now live in him and he in us. And through faith we receive every blessing Christ has earned for us. Even as a vine receives its nourishment from the sun and the rain on the soil enabling the vine to bear fruit, so the saving Word of God nourishes us. Thus our Christian faith-life is strengthened; it produces fruits in the good works we do. We do not show our love for God and our neighbor to merit God’s favor, for we already have been redeemed through the blood of Christ. Rather, the love of God in Christ moves us to love others. Jesus urges us, “Remain in my love” (v. 9).

Jesus also issues a warning. “Apart from me you can do nothing” (v. 5). We can perform all kinds of charitable deeds; we can help the poor and give generously for the spread of the gospel, but it will be unacceptable to God without faith in his Son. We would be like a dead branch that has been separated from the vine; we would be unable to please God no matter how much good we do.

## *The Question of Taxes*

The Pharisees and the Jewish religious leaders hated Jesus and despised the Roman government that occupied Palestine. They came to Jesus and tried to “trap him in his words.” First they flattered him and then asked, “Is it right to pay taxes or not?” (Matthew 22:17). If Jesus had answered yes to paying taxes, he would invite the ire of the Jewish people. If Jesus had answered no, he would have been labeled an enemy of the state. “But Jesus knowing their evil intent, said, ‘You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.’ They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, ‘Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then he said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s’” (Matthew 22:18-21). It is not an either/or; rather it should be both/and.

Jesus not only foiled his enemies’ attempt to trick him into saying something that would discredit him; he was also stating an important principle. There are two God-ordained kingdoms. One is secular; the other is spiritual. The law is used to collect taxes; the gospel prompts Christians to give to God. Our taxes are used for the protection and benefit of all citizens; our gifts to God help our neighbor and support the mission of the church.

## *Confronting the Pharisees*

The Pharisees prided themselves in keeping the Law of Moses. They even added hundreds of rules and regulations of their own that the pious in Israel should follow. They were convinced that by such obedience they made themselves right with God. But Jesus reserved his harshest words for these self-righteous hypocrites.

On one occasion they accused Jesus' disciples of not following one of their man-made rules. Jesus came with his own accusation. "Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'" (Matthew 15:3-8).

What was going on here? Instead of taking care of a father or mother in time of need, their children were encouraged by the traditions of the Pharisees to tell their parent, "I would like to help you out, but I have already pledged to give to the church the money that could help you." For the Pharisees and those who followed them it was more important to follow man-made rules than to keep God's Fourth Commandment. Jesus applies Isaiah's words to the Pharisees. "They worship me [God] in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Matthew 15:9).

On one occasion Jesus miraculously fed 4,000 plus women and children with seven loaves of bread and a few fish. Later the Pharisees and Sadducees came to him to test him by asking for a sign from heaven. He refused to give it to them. Then Jesus warned his disciples, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6). The disciples thought that Jesus was talking about the yeast used in the baking of bread until Jesus corrected them. " 'How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:11,12). These religious leaders claimed that they believed in the God of their father Abraham, but both trusted in something else.

The Pharisees were convinced that their obedience to the Law of Moses and their own traditions made them righteous in God's sight. The Sadducees followed their reason and refused to believe, among other things, in the resurrection of the dead. Both, therefore, rejected Christ. Trusting in one's own goodness and only believing what seems to be reasonable destroys true Christian faith. Only faith in Christ and his redeeming love revealed on the cross and confirmed by the empty tomb make us Christians. For we are saved alone by God's grace through faith in Christ.

Jesus did not try to appease the Pharisees. Rather, some of the harshest words Jesus spoke during the three years of his earthly ministry were spoken to these outwardly pious religious leaders. Seven times Jesus condemned them, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites" (Matthew 23:15). He called them blind fools. He accused them of trying to keep even the smallest details of the law, but neglecting justice, mercy and faithfulness. He told them, "On the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Matthew 23:28).

The Pharisees did not hear good news from Jesus. He did not flatter them to try to win them over. He did not try to prove to them that he was the Messiah by quoting the Old Testament scriptures; rather he condemned them with the law. He refused to dull the sharp rebuke of the law regardless of what they thought of him and how they would react. He preached God's law and withheld the gospel from them. He thereby gives us a lesson in the proper use of the law and the gospel. Let us remember this when dealing with the self-righteous and impenitent.

Jesus is also warning us. How easy it is for us, who have been churchgoers all our lives, to imagine that faithful church attendance and generous contributions in themselves make us acceptable to God. Pride and self-righteousness also dwells in our sinful nature. Daily we need the reminder that without Christ we stand

condemned before God, but through faith in Christ his righteousness covers our sinfulness. And through Christ God sees us as his holy people, his faithful stewards.

### *Look Who's Coming to Dinner*

When a prominent Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, he used the occasion to instruct his host and guests. "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14).

We enjoy the company of friends and family. When someone has hosted a meal, we want to return the favor. We feel one good deed deserves another. But we are tempted to neglect those who are not able to repay us with their hospitality because they simply do not have the ability to do so. We have the promise that we will be "repaid at the resurrection of the righteous," for such deeds of faith and love will follow us into eternity. Ours is a God-pleasing stewardship when we follow these simple instructions of Jesus.

### *The Value of Good Works*

While it is true that even our best deeds do not take away the guilt of even one of our sins, that does not mean that good works are of no value. Your life as God's faithful steward is filled with opportunities to let your "light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Our faith in Christ and our love for our gracious God move us to those works that are pleasing in his sight. In the moral law God gives us guidelines of how we should show our love for our neighbor.

*You Can't Take It with You* was a play presented on Broadway during the depression. Humanly speaking that is true. But our God sees it differently. The Bible says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them" (Revelation 14:13). When Jesus comes in all his glory on the Last Day, we shall hear him say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). Heaven is our inheritance, a gracious gift God gave us through his Son Jesus Christ. And yet Jesus reminds us that when we give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, care for the sick, and visit someone in prison, we are doing it for him. Whatever we have done through faith in Christ will be remembered by him on the Last Day.

### *Rewards*

When a reward is posted for information leading to the capture and conviction of a criminal, the person who turns in the wanted man is given the promised compensation.

In the instructions Christ gave to his apostles, he promises them a reward. "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.

Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:40-42).

What are these rewards? Jesus does not explicitly say. But we can arrive at an answer when we examine the ministries of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. In neither case did they receive great material gain because they proclaimed the truth, called sinners to repentance, and invited them to believe in the Christ as the only way to salvation. The people and their leaders often rejected the faithful prophets and worshiped other gods.

The apostles suffered martyrdom because of their gospel ministry. They were rewarded when their Spirit-born faith enabled them to be Christ's witnesses and even rejoiced "because they had been counted

worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [Christ]" (Acts 5:41). Christ says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:10-12). Possessing the kingdom is a spiritual reward that is ours only through grace, without any merit on our part. That is a reward that comes to those who believe the gospel and bear witness to it.

However, the law also promises temporal blessings that are called rewards. The believer and the unbeliever alike receive them. The Lord "causes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). But such rewards are only received because of God's goodness and mercy, not because anyone has earned them or deserves them. Only the Christian receives material blessings with God-pleasing thanksgiving.

When we give a little child a cup of water, Jesus promises we will not lose our reward. For Christ on Judgment Day will not forget such a seemingly insignificant deed of love; such works will follow us into eternity.

### *The Symbol of the Torn Curtain*

Two symbols, the cross and the empty tomb, teach the most blessed truths in Christian doctrine. The cross reminds us the great price it took to free us from our sins and the power of the Devil. For on Calvary Christ carried out his last battle with Satan. He knew that mankind could only be saved from the eternal consequences of its sins because "Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). On the cross "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). On the cross Christ suffered the agony of hell that we may enjoy the eternal joy of heaven.

One of the miraculous events that happened when Christ died on that first Good Friday was the tearing of the temple curtain from top to bottom. That curtain separated the rest of the temple from the Most Holy Place, so named because it signified the presence of God. Only the high priest could enter that sanctuary once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day he would make a sacrifice first for his own sins and then make a sacrifice for the sins of the people, each time sprinkling blood on the altar.

The temple curtain reminded the people that their sins separated them from God. Once a year the high priest would use the blood from a sacrifice and sprinkle it on the altar of the Most Holy Place to make atonement for the people's sins. By his death on the cross Christ completely removed our sins and reconciled us to God.

In a symbolic way the Lord told his people they no longer needed the priests to be their go-between them and God. His Son fulfilled that office to perfection when he became both the priest and the sacrifice. He did "not need to offer sacrifices day after day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed once for all when he offered himself" (Hebrews 7:27). Now every day is a day of atonement for us, as Christ our High Priest richly and daily forgives our sins.

God had designated the tithe to support the tribe of Levi from whom the priests in Israel came. Since Christ is now the fulfillment of that office and we have been designated a "holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), the tithe and all of the ceremonial laws have been fulfilled by Christ and abolished by God. "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:16,17). All the minute regulations of the ceremonial law have been fulfilled in the life and death of our Savior. The ceremonial law is no longer prescribed for the New Testament church.

Instead, God's people practice a new kind of stewardship today. It is not of the law, but "in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). The gospel of Christ alone makes us faithful stewards.

Since we still have our sinful nature clinging to us, and we sin daily, the law is there reminding us that we have violated God's holy will in our lives. The law continues to expose our moments of greed with, "You

shall not covet.” But when we daily repent of our sins and trust in the cleansing power of Christ’s blood for our forgiveness, our lives are renewed. As we review the ministry of Christ and the activities of the early Christian church we learn that the love of God in Christ motivated the saints to lead a God-pleasing life as his faithful stewards.

## 7. Examples of Stewardship in the Gospels

The holy writers of the gospels relate a number of memorable examples of those who knew how to use their material blessings as witnesses to their faith in Christ. But others misused what the Lord had entrusted to them.

### *Guiltless by Association*

Guilt by association is a common belief. Most people do not want to be identified as a friend of a person with a bad reputation. We might easily forget that by nature there is no difference among mankind, for all have sinned and stand condemned in the sight of God.

Jesus associated with all kinds of people, including notorious sinners and Pharisees alike. Jesus accepted the invitation of Simon, who was a member of the group that was the bitterest enemy of Jesus—the Pharisees. While he was there, a woman who had lived a sinful life “stood behind him at his feet weeping [and] began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them” (Luke 7:38). He did not try to restrain her, for he knew that she believed in him as her Savior.

The Pharisee thought to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know... what kind of woman she is” (Luke 7:39). Jesus not only knew what kind of reputation this woman had but also what Simon was thinking. He told a parable to illustrate the truth: those who have been forgiven much, love him much.

The woman knew that she had lived a sinful life and did not deserve God’s forgiveness. She believed that Jesus was her only hope of God’s gracious forgiveness. When other guests criticized Jesus for saying her sins were forgiven, he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:50).

Jesus treated his host and the woman differently. He rebuked Simon, contrasting how he treated Jesus, with the love this woman lavished on him. Simon did not give Jesus water to wash his feet; the woman washed them with her tears and dried them with her hair. The Pharisee did not give Jesus the customary kiss of greeting; the woman repeatedly kissed his feet. Simon did not put oil on Jesus’ head; the woman poured perfume on his feet. Jesus had only the harshest words of the law for this unbelieving Pharisee.

On the other hand Jesus did not condemn this woman for her shameful life. She had already come to the knowledge of her sin. Rather, Jesus spoke the comforting words of the gospel, “Your sins are forgiven.... Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 48,50).

Jesus thereby taught us the proper use of the law and the gospel. The law is needed to condemn the impenitent; the gospel alone comforts the penitent with the good news in Christ the Savior.

The demonstration of her love for him did not prompt Jesus to say to this woman, "Your sins are forgiven." Only his atoning sacrifice wipes clean all transgressions. Jesus did not say, “Because of your love and your good works you have been forgiven”; instead he assured her, “Your faith has saved you.” Through faith in Christ alone sinners receive their heavenly Father’s gracious forgiveness.

If Jesus had no word of comfort for us who have sinned, we would be lost. Instead we have received God’s grace through our Lord Jesus Christ. When we remember that it is our great debt of sin that Christ’s blood stamped, “PAID IN FULL”, we too will shed tears of repentance and find joy in living the life of faithful stewards. For we, too, are guiltless through our association with Christ.

### *Women Serve Jesus*

Women played a prominent role during the ministry of Jesus. When Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha, Mary sat at the feet of Jesus listening to his Word while Martha prepared the meal. When Martha complained about Mary not helping her, Jesus reminded Martha, “Only one thing is needed” (Luke 10:42). Jesus was not saying that he would not accept Martha’s service. He was simply telling her that she should have her priorities straight when it came to Christ, his church, and his Word.

Jesus miraculously fed people on a number of occasions. In his humility, however, he did not use his divine powers to take care of his daily needs and those of his disciples. Rather, they were supported by the gifts

of grateful disciples, including faith-filled women. “Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases.... These women were helping to support them out of their means” (Luke 8:1-3).

These women had become disciples of Jesus; some of them he had healed. They believed only God could have such miraculous power. They believed that he was the promised Savior and demonstrated their love for him by contributing money for the daily needs of Jesus and his disciples. We do the same in the church today for our called ministers through our contributions. When such monies are given out of love for Christ, the Lord is pleased with our stewardship.

Women served Jesus during his earthly ministry in a variety of ways to show their love for him. Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, is a notable example. They were guests with Jesus at the home of Simon, whom Jesus had cured of leprosy. (This is a different account than the one above.) A dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. While the guests were reclining at the table, Mary took a bottle of expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair.

In the face of criticism from his apostles, Jesus defended Mary’s action and called it a good work, an act of love for her Savior. Apparently she understood Jesus’ explanations of his impending death better than the apostles did, for Jesus said, “She did it to prepare me for burial” (Matthew 26:12). A deed motivated by faith in Christ and out of love for him is never a waste, regardless of how it might appear to the casual observer. Rather, it is God-pleasing stewardship.

### *The Rich Young Man*

Every person is a steward; God has entrusted everyone with material wealth, some more and some less. Whether rich or poor, only those who believe in Christ are godly stewards.

A rich young man came to Jesus. When he called Jesus a good teacher, Jesus replied, “No one is good—except God alone” (Mark 10:18).

Jesus did not try to correct him by saying, “I am the Son of God and the world’s Savior.” Instead he reminded him of God’s law, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery....” (Mark 10:19). This young man believed he had kept all the commandments. He imagined that this was the only way he could be in good standing with God. And he probably felt that he should be doing more to please God. But Jesus demonstrated that the man had not even begun to keep the commandments in a way that is acceptable to God. For Jesus said to him, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). The young man went away saddened by Jesus’ answer. He failed to see his damning sins and in Jesus his only hope of forgiveness and eternal life. His heart was firmly attached to his riches. They had become his god.

Jesus used God’s law to expose this young rich man’s covetous heart, attempting to bring him to acknowledge of his sin. But the man refused to abandon his riches and follow Christ, and thereby lost the inheritance that Christ offers to all sinners.

Jesus taught his disciples a valuable lesson when he said, “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” (Mark 10:25). But he also told them, “All things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). The Bible relates a number of God-fearing men whom God made rich and by his grace and the power of his Spirit kept them in the true in saving faith. They found in their Lord their priceless treasure.

If the Lord has blessed us with an abundance of worldly goods, let us be careful not to set our hearts on them. Rather, let us gladly use them for the benefit of our neighbor and to the glory of God.

### *Zacchaeus*



Near the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus passed through the city of Jericho. “A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy” (Luke 19:2). He collected taxes for the hated Roman government, and he, no doubt, overcharged the people and made himself wealthy.

Somehow he had learned of Jesus. Curiosity prompted him to want to see the Lord when he came to Jericho. Since he was a short man, he climbed a tree. When Jesus came to the tree, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5).

While Zacchaeus welcomed the opportunity to listen to Jesus and serve him, the people criticized him. For in the eyes of the people tax collectors were social outcasts. But Jesus’ word touched Zacchaeus’ heart. No longer was accumulating wealth his purpose in life; he showed it by his words and actions. “Lord, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount” (Luke 19:8). According to Mosaic Law (Leviticus 6:5) he was willing to repay those whom he had cheated. And his generous gift to the poor also came from a heart that overflowed with love for his Savior.

Jesus was pleased with the words and actions of this tax collector, and he said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus had not tried to buy God’s favor with his generosity. Rather, salvation came to him as it comes to all sinners—through faith in Christ alone.

Jesus did not need to preach the law to Zacchaeus, for he had already come to the knowledge of his sins, had repented of them, and now embraced Jesus Christ as his Savior. Therefore Jesus reassured him that his sins were forgiven and that a place in heaven awaited him. His faith in Christ prompted him to become faithful in his stewardship. Such gifts of Christians are pleasing to our heavenly Father.

### *The Widow’s Offering*

Jesus did not hesitate to talk to his church about money. He wants us to remember that he has given us all that we have in this life. When we trust in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we joyfully and willingly dedicate our lives to him. We have no better example in the Bible of such love for God than the widow who worshiped and glorified him with her offering.

Only days before his sufferings and death, Jesus observed the people “putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in ... a fraction of a penny” (Mark 12:41,42). That doesn’t seem to be out of the ordinary until we hear what Jesus told his disciples. “This poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she out her poverty, put in everything—all that she had to live on” (Mark 12: 43,44).

The widow lived what Jesus taught: do not worry what you will eat or drink or what you will wear. God, who takes care of the birds of the air and beautifully clothes the fields with flowers, will certainly also provide for us. Do not worry about tomorrow. The widow’s heart was so filled with love for her gracious Lord that she trusted he would take care of her in the future as he had done in the past. Like Christians in the New Testament church she “did not do as ... expected, but [she] ... gave [herself] first to the Lord” (2 Corinthians 8:5). When we give ourselves to the Lord, we welcome opportunities to show our love for God and our neighbor.

Christ is able to look into the heart of the giver, and when faith in Christ is there, the gift is acceptable to God. Jesus did not say that the gifts of the rich were unacceptable. Rather, he wants the widow to be an example for us as one who trusted in the Lord and was moved by faith to give what she had. She was not looking for praise; she, no doubt, thought that no one noticed her. With the same confidence we also live our lives for the Lord.

### *An Unfaithful Steward*

Every person is a steward—some are good and some are bad. Some waste the money that has God has entrusted to them and others devise ways to steal another’s possessions. The church is not immune to those

who have greedy hearts and sticky fingers. Some church leaders have betrayed the members' trust and stolen from the church's treasury. Even one of Christ's apostles was guilty of such a sin.

Jesus had chosen Judas along with eleven other men to accompany him full time during his ministry. Judas believed that Jesus was the Messiah; he trusted in him as his Savior. But sometime during Jesus' earthly ministry greed replaced faith in Judas' heart.

When Mary had generously and lovingly anointed Jesus with expensive perfume, Judas led the criticism when he said, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages" (John 12:5). As reasonable as this observation seems to be, the evangelist gives us the motive for Judas' remarks. "He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it" (John 12:6).

Sin has its origin in the sinful heart. And when sinful desires go unchecked, they become evil deeds. "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:14,15).

The sinful heart has an ally—Satan. The Bible tells us, "Satan entered Judas.... And [he] went to the chief priest...and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus" (Luke 22:3,4). Judas agreed to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. His greed led to embezzling from the apostle's treasury and to betraying Jesus. In spite of Jesus' warnings when they were celebrating the Last Supper, Judas could not wait to complete the deal. That very night Judas led Jesus' enemies to the Garden of Gethsemane, and betrayed Jesus with a kiss.

But God used the evil deed of Judas and the hatred of Jesus' enemies to carry out his plan of salvation for all sinners, including the sin of Judas. Even though Judas was sorry for what he did, he did not repent. For he threw the 30 pieces of silver at the feet of the Jewish officials, and went out and hanged himself. The seed of greed led this former apostle to perdition. He refused to accept the gospel of Christ's free and full pardon for his sins. He died in despair under the condemnation of the law. This is a warning for all unfaithful stewards.

### *Service at the Cemetery*

In addition to a regular burial service in church or at the funeral home, a brief graveside service is held. Jesus had a burial service like none other.

Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man and member of the Jewish council that had condemned Jesus to death. But he was not present when the vote to kill Jesus was taken. Nicodemus was also a member of the Jewish council and a secret disciple of Jesus. He had come to Jesus at night to learn more about him. He had heard Jesus speak the most comforting and faith-empowering words, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

After Jesus died on the cross both men boldly professed their faith in Christ as their Lord and their Savior. Joseph went to Pilate and received permission to take Jesus' body from the cross. Then both disciples participated in Jesus' committal service.

Joseph and Nicodemus took Jesus body down from the cross, wrapped it in expensive linen and placed it in Joseph's tomb. No longer were they afraid to confess their faith in Christ by their actions. They only desired to show their love for their Savior.

They were not the only ones who wanted to perform what they considered their last tribute for their Lord. "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body" (Mark 16:1). Early on the first Easter morning they hurried to the grave, for they had watched where Joseph and Nicodemus had buried Jesus. But the women only found an empty tomb and heard an angel announce, "He is risen." Even though they could not anoint the body of Jesus for burial, their desire to serve their Lord was an act of love. God is pleased when we want to do something for him but find it impossible to act on our desire.

The men and women disciples were willing to spare no expense to show their love for Christ. They did not worry what others would say or even do to them. Christ had changed their hearts, and they were intent on living for him who died for them.

## 8. Parables on Stewardship

One day Jesus' "disciples came to him and asked, 'Why do you speak in parables?'" (Matthew 13:10). Jesus' answer was twofold.

On the one hand there were those who heard Jesus preach and even saw him perform miracles; they had every opportunity to learn from the Old Testament who he was and why he came to earth, but they refused to believe the Word of God he proclaimed. Quoting the prophet Isaiah he observed, "This people's heart has become calloused" (Matthew 13:15). Since they had rejected Jesus as their Savior God, they would not have the spiritual insight to understand the parables of Jesus and the lessons they taught. Such was God's judgment on them.

On the other hand Jesus assured his disciples, "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear" (Matthew 13:16). By God's grace the gospel of Jesus Christ had convinced them that Jesus was the promised One of God. They took seriously their natural depravity revealed to them in God's law, and they followed Jesus, trusting alone in him for their salvation. Because of the gracious workings of the Holy Spirit through the Word, they heard the words of Jesus' parables and grasped their meanings.

When we read a parable we should not get bogged down with the details, for each parable has one primary lesson to teach us. Often it is introduced with the words: "The kingdom of God (heaven) is like etc." With these words Jesus is telling us, "This is the way I rule in your hearts with My Word." The parables below in some way relate to our life as God's stewards.

### *The Sower and the Seed*

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some . . . . seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.

The seed is the word of God . . . . The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. (Luke 8:5,7,8,11,14,15)

In the parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus is teaching: This is what happens when you proclaim My Word. In brief, some will believe and others will not. Some will reject it when they hear the gospel; others will believe it for awhile and then fall away. But there will always be some who believe the Word of God and remain faithful.

The Lord abundantly blesses some Christians materially. They become wealthy. Everything they do seems to prosper. But more and more they are drawn away from God and his Word. They may still profess to be Christians, but their riches and pleasures have choked their faith. Again, Christ is warning us, especially during times of prosperity. How easily the pursuit of riches and pleasures can rob us our faith! For a few fleeting years of the "good" life we can easily forfeit heaven and its eternal riches and pleasures.

But the seed of the Word has taken root in our hearts. We hear and heed God's call to repentance in his law and we believe his gospel. We confess our faith in Christ as our Savior; we strive to lead a godly life.

Why do we believe when so many others do not? A casual reader of the parable might draw the conclusion that it all depends on the kind of heart a person has. Jesus does describe seed that fell on good soil as those with "a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (v.15). But the Bible teaches that the nature of every person is the same—thoroughly corrupted by sin. The gospel of Jesus Christ alone cleanses us of all sins and gives us "noble and good heart[s]." The gospel alone empowers us to believe in Christ and his word. And the gospel alone will "produce a crop."

And what is that crop? It is all the good works we do out of fear and love for God. The crop includes the money that we contribute to the church and that we use to help the poor and unfortunate.

## *The Good Samaritan*

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' ; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37)

Jesus always knew when to use the bad news of the law and when to use the good news of the gospel. For he always understood the spiritual condition of those whom he was addressing. Such was the case of an expert in Mosaic and Jewish law when he tried to trick Jesus with the question, "What must I do to inherit life" (Luke 10:25). Jesus did not answer, "I am the promised Messiah and your only hope to inherit eternal life. Believe in me." For he knew that the man, in spite of the question he asked, falsely believed that there was only one way to heaven and that was by obeying the law. His "what *must I do*" tells us that.

Jesus went on the offensive, "How do you read [the law]?" (v.26). When the man gave a Scriptural answer, "Love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself," Jesus replied, "Do this and you shall live" (v.28). Why would Jesus give such an answer when he taught that no one is justified in God's sight by keeping the commandments? He knew that only God's grace and his sufferings and death save sinners. Jesus perceived that, if the man was not convinced that he had broken the law, his heart would not be ready to hear of Christ's gracious forgiveness.

But the man "wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (v. 29). In reply to that question Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan.

A man on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho was beaten and robbed by thieves. As he was dying on the road a priest came by, saw the man, and "passed by on the other side" (v.31). A Levite who was from the priestly tribe in Israel also saw the man and refused to help. But then a Samaritan came by; he was from a group of people who had a mixture of Jewish and heathen religion. Thus the Jews despised them. But it was the Samaritan who had pity on him. He dressed his wounds, put him on his donkey, and took him to an inn. He acted as the man's health insurance carrier by paying for all the man's expenses.

Then Jesus asked the expert in the law, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man" (Luke 10:36). Jesus was not answering the question, "Who is my neighbor?", but which of those men acted in a loving and neighborly way. When the man correctly answered, "the one who had mercy on him," Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (v.37).

We should view this parable in the bright light of all the Scriptures. Jesus was not teaching, “If you show mercy, then God will show your mercy.” That would be work righteousness of the worst sort. Rather, Jesus was trying to convict the man of his sins.

We need this story as a reflection of our own lives. How easy it is for us to look at our life and imagine that who we are and what we are doing merits God’s favor. With a little soul searching we can remember times when we “passed by on the other side,” neglecting to help someone who was in need. When we acknowledge and confess those sins, let us remember that they have been freely and fully washed away in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ.

Our trust in Christ and love for our gracious God will prompt us to show our love for those in need regardless of their ethnic background or what they might have done to us. For Jesus has instructed us, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Motivated by our Savior’s love for us, let us act as a neighbor for those in need.

### *The Rich Fool*

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:13-21)

Before Jesus told the parable of the rich fool he had warned of a sin that leads to greed. Someone came to Jesus and wanted him to settle a dispute that he was having with his brother over an inheritance. Jesus answered him with, “Who appointed me a judge...between [the two of] you” (v. 14). Although it was customary for rabbis to settle such disputes, Jesus clearly distinguishes between two kinds of ministers---the one that takes care of human affairs and the other that is concerned with spiritual matters. Jesus was called to be Teacher of the Word, not a probate judge.

But Jesus saw more in this man’s request. Therefore, he issued the warning, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed” (v. 15). He understood that the heart was the source of all sins and gave us two commandments to emphasize that truth. Both the Ninth and Ten Commandments begin with the words, "You shall not covet." Greed can easily possess the heart of the wealthy who place their trust on what they have earned and accumulated. It can also occupy the thoughts of the poor who simply have the desire to be rich, imagining that then all their problems will be solved.

But Jesus reminds us that our life does not consist in what we have—a comfortable home, a successful business, a solid pension plan, etc. To make this point Jesus told a parable.

A farmer had a bumper crop. Since his barns could not hold all the produce, he planned to tear them down and build larger ones. He said to himself, “I have plenty to take care of me for the rest of my life. Now I can take it easy and enjoy the fruits of my labor; I will eat drink and be merry.” But he did not add the words of the philosopher, Epicurus, “for tomorrow I die.” That was the farthest from his mind. However, “God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself’” (v.20). He had set his heart on riches. The Lord had blessed him, but he refused to

acknowledge it with thanksgiving. Before he could enjoy even one day of his retirement, God took his life; he sent him to eternal perdition. Instead of joy he experienced continuous sorrow; in the place of experiencing amazing glory, he had torment and tears for all eternity.

Then Jesus issued a warning. "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (v. 21). Does this mean that Jesus is condemning your 401k plan? Does this mean that we are not practicing good stewardship when we set something aside for our retirement? Not at all. What he is warning us about is letting those things replace our trust in God. If someone "is not rich toward God," he is a worldly-minded, impenitent sinner. For being rich toward God is to realize that our real treasure is Christ. Our spiritual wealth is found in the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that Christ has won for us on Calvary. Those riches become our very own through faith in Christ. And in the words following this parable Jesus urges us not to worry, for our heavenly Father will take care of us even if we should lose all our earthly possessions.

It is only a generation or two ago that our fathers (and this is especially true of those who were ministers) had no opportunity to have Social Security and little or no savings. That's why we heard the expression that leaders in the church usually "die with their boots on." But if they were forced to resign from the ministry for health reasons, the Lord took care of them often through their children or other family members.

This parable should cause us to pause and do some soul searching, especially when we are prospering. Is my heart beginning to rely on my earthly wealth or is it trusting in the riches of God's grace in Christ?

### *The Shrewd Manager*

Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'

"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg—I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

"'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

"The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.'

"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' "'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied.

"He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'

"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"  
(Luke 16:1-12)

This is one of the more unusual parables of Jesus. That is why it is especially important to focus only on the point that Jesus is making.

When a rich man learned that his manager had wasted his possessions, he was ready to fire him. But first he wanted him to give an account of what happened to his property. Since the manager did not want to do

manual labor or beg for a living, he devised a plan that would take care of him after he lost his job. He called in each of his master's debtors and reduced what they owed. In that way they would be indebted to him.

Surprisingly his master commended him, not for his dishonesty but for making a shrewd business decision. Then Jesus observed. "The unbelievers are more shrewd in their worldly dealings than the believers are in their use of their money." The worldly-wise devote their energy, time, and money trying to make their earthly future secure. On the other hand, we believers do not always show the same dedication when it comes to using our talents, time and treasures in the best interest of Christ and his church even though he has made our eternal future certain.

Then Jesus tells us how we may be shrewd with the earthly gifts God has given us. "Use your earthly wealth to gain friends for yourselves." He encourages us to support the cause of the gospel ministry wherever the need may be and with the means he has entrusted to us. When we are bound together in Christian love, there is no closer friendship. That ministry also includes helping those who are in need. And those gifts we use to glorify God will accompany us into eternity. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.... For their deeds will follow them" (Revelation 14:13).

### *The Talents*

The kingdom of heaven] will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.

The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more."

His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

The man with the two talents also came. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more."

His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

Then the man who had received the one talent came. "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."

His master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 25:14-30)

A talent in New Testament times was not a coin but a unit of worth. It measured 6,000 working days, a sizeable amount. We often use the word talent to describe a person's special ability. When we understand that every talent is a gift of God, we begin to comprehend what Jesus is teaching in this parable.

Jesus used the days just before his sufferings and death to prepare his disciples for his Second Coming in judgment. He gave them signs when the end would be near. He described the horror of the unbelievers when

they would see the heavenly bodies shaken as the Ruler of heaven and earth comes to judge them. But joy will fill the hearts of his faithful as they see their Lord come in all his glory to take them to their eternal, heavenly home. In the parable of the ten virgins Jesus exhorts the Christians, "Be prepared at all times for I may come at any time." In the parable of the talents Jesus urges us to make faithful use of our spiritual and physical gifts before the end comes.

Jesus describes the activity in his kingdom of grace as that of a prosperous man who entrusted his property to his servants. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to still another one. He expected them to make good use of them while he was gone. The first two made wise choices with the talents they had and doubled their value; the one who had one talent did nothing to increase its value. He buried it in the ground.

When their master returned he asked each of them what they had done with their talents. Two of them could give a favorable report, for which their master commended them. "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (v. 23). The one who did not use his talent, but only made the excuse he was afraid of his master, especially if he would lose it, received condemnation. "You wicked, lazy servant" (v. 26). He was thrown into the outer darkness and torment of hell.

The master is Jesus himself who will judge the living and the dead on the Last Day. We are the servants who have been given various talents. The talents represent the gifts that the Apostle Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12. In Christ's church today we may describe one as the gift to know and expound in simple terms the gospel of Jesus Christ; that is usually done by Christian pastors and teachers. Another may be the gift of being able to give timely applications of Scriptural truths. One may be able to comfort someone, who is in great distress, with an appropriate Word of God. Another has the ability to encourage people who easily become discouraged.

A Christian may also have the expertise to earn an above-average wage. Another may have received an inheritance. These gifts are not only used to support one's family and pay taxes, but also to give generously to those in need and for the support of Christ's church. When this is done out of love for our Savior he will say to us on the Last Day, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

With the servant who received one talent, Jesus is warning us of hypocrisy. Even when we have been given limited talents, we should not make excuses and refuse to use them. Let us remember that there will come a day when we will have to give an account of our stewardship. Being baptized and confirmed and attending church in itself does not make our salvation certain. Only faith in Christ does. And that faith prompts us to serve the Lord with our talents. What an eternal tragedy it would be to hear our Lord say to us on Judgment Day, "Depart from me."

The law Jesus proclaimed at the end of this parable warns us not to neglect using our God-given gifts. The Lord wants us to live our faith. For "faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26). On the other hand, only the power of the gospel has made us faithful, fruit bearing stewards.

### *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)



The Pharisees appeared to be the most devoted church members in Israel. They accepted the Old Testament as the inspired Word of God. They were especially well versed in the Law of Moses. They not only prided themselves in keeping the Ten Commandments but also religiously observed all the ceremonies that God had given to his people. And they did even more. They added their own rules and regulations to the law of God and strictly observed them also. They were confident that by such obedience they were righteous in the sight of God.

The hated Roman government hired local citizens as its tax collectors. The Jews despised them and classified them as immoral.

Jesus taught this parable for those “who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else” (v. 9).

Both the Pharisee and the tax collector went into the temple to pray. When the Pharisee prayed, he compared himself with others who had led notoriously ungodly lives. And he included the tax collector among them. He proudly reminded God that he fasted twice a week, much more than God required. And he gave more to the church than the ceremonial law required. He carefully assessed everything he had to the minutest detail and gave one tenth of it. Certainly God would be pleased with such conscientious stewardship.

Because of our sinful nature it is easy for us to reflect the same self-righteous attitude. We can always find someone that seems to be a much greater sinner than we are. In matters of stewardship we can easily harbor the self-righteous thought, “If everyone would be giving to the church as much as I am, we wouldn’t have financial problems.”

The tax collector, however, was so ashamed of his sins that he did not lift up his eyes to heaven. He simply pleaded, “God, have mercy on me a sinner” (v. 13). He had looked into the mirror of God’s law and saw himself as God saw him – a sinner. He remembered he had a gracious God and prayed for mercy. Jesus said, “This man, rather than the other, went home justified before God” (v. 14).

What does it mean to be justified before God? The word “justify” pictures a court scene where the judge renders a verdict. God is the judge and perfectly just. Every sin of every person, therefore, needs to be punished. But he solved the sin problem that separates us from God when he sent his Son into the world to keep the law that condemns us. He made his Son “who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). When the Father raised his Son from the dead, God declared the whole world righteous. God reconciled “the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Does that mean that everyone will go to heaven? Not at all. Jesus made that clear to the Pharisee Nicodemus when he said, “Whoever believes in him [God’s Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18). The Apostle Paul wrote, “Know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16).

Finally, Jesus issues a warning because of everyone’s self-righteous sinful nature. “Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled” (v.14). Those who trust in themselves will be humbled for eternity in hell. But to encourage us as his children, he says, “He who humbles himself will be exalted” (v.14). Confessing our sins and trusting alone in the grace of God in Christ, we are exalted as God’s dear children and heirs of heaven.

According to the law we all stand condemned as unfaithful servants. But through faith in the God’s grace revealed in the gospel we are his faithful stewards.

### *Christ’s Office*

Whenever Jesus taught the people in parables, he was acting as *the* Prophet sent by God. Like the prophets of the Old Testament he was anointed into his office, for the name “Christ” means “the anointed One.” Christ was anointed at his baptism. His Father said, “Listen to him” (Matthew 17:5), for he has the “words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Although Christ preached the law in all its damning force as he did against the Pharisees, the good news of the gospel proclaiming God's grace, forgiveness, and eternal life was his primary calling as our Prophet. And just before he ascended into heaven he instructed his church, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15).

Jesus also fulfilled the office of priest. In the Old Testament the priests represented the people as they made their sacrifices. The Bible explains, "Such a high priest [Christ] meets our needs—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priest, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (Hebrews 7:26,27). The spiritual and eternal blessings Christ won for us on the cross have become ours through faith in him. Christ's redeeming love motivates us "to live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness" (Luther's explanation to the Second Article). And living under him includes our stewardship life.

He is also our glorious King for he has won the victory over sin, death, and the devil for us. Now he rules in our hearts through his Word and promises, "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

### *The Risen Christ*

Christ's resurrection is not a parable as some claim, but it is a truth clearly taught in the Bible.

After Christ was crucified, died, and was buried, his purpose for leaving the glory of heaven and joining the human race was accomplished—to reconcile the world to God. This includes all sinners. There is no exception. The Father confirmed that his divine justice was satisfied when he raised his Son from the dead.

What proof do we have that Jesus Christ arose from the dead and still lives today? We have the testimony of the angel, "He is risen." His disciples saw him alive on the third day. He spent forty days reassuring them that they are worshiping a living Lord and not someone whose body had returned to the dust of the earth. The Apostle Paul explains how Christ's resurrection together with his holy life and sacrificial death is the foundation of our Christian faith. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.... But Christ indeed has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:17,20). Paul also reported that the living Christ "appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time" (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Now we know that everything Jesus teaches in his Word is true, that he is the God-man and our Savior, and that someday he will call us from the grave and take us to our eternal home. In the meantime Paul encourages us to be God's good stewards, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

## STEWARDSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

### 9. The Acts of the Apostles

A new era for Christ's church was about to begin. The prophecies of the Old Testament had come to fruition during the life, ministry and passion of the Christ. All the ceremonial laws had served their purposes and were no longer valid.

Jesus spent the time between his resurrection and ascension giving his disciples "convincing proofs that he was alive" (Acts 1:3). His church no longer would have any territorial or ethnic limits. He commissioned his followers to be his witnesses throughout the world. But before they would begin to spread the good news concerning their Savior, he told them to wait for a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit. After that Jesus ascended into heaven. He left them visibly, but he would still be with his church "to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples were together in Jerusalem on Pentecost when suddenly they heard the sound of a mighty rushing wind, and they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire on their heads. "And all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them" (Acts 2:4). Boldly they began preaching in Jerusalem and proclaimed what they knew and believed about Jesus the Christ. When the people were amazed and perplexed, Peter addressed them. First he preached the law in all its severity when he accused them of rejecting the very One whom God had promised to redeem them. And when they acknowledged their sin, he simply stated, "Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38). Through the Spirit-empowered Word of God 3,000 souls were converted on that day.

The book of Acts relates how the church grew through the preaching of the gospel despite fierce opposition and terrible persecution. We will restrict ourselves to a number of observations of how the law and the gospel touched the hearts of these early Christians and how their faith was evident in their stewardship life.

#### *Fellowship in the First Church*

The first New Testament church in Jerusalem was a large congregation, and it had its priorities straight. The apostles continued to teach the Word of God to these early believers. They prayed together; they celebrated the Lord's Supper often; they regularly had a fellowship meal. They came from many different cultures, but their differences melted away in their common faith in Christ.

They not only heard the Word; they also lived it. They were so overjoyed in their newfound freedom in Christ that they "had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (Acts 2:44,45). The well-to-do did not selfishly use their God-given wealth for their own pleasure, but welcomed the opportunity to help fellow believers who were in need. They even willingly sold their earthly possessions so that no one among them would be without the essentials of life. They, no doubt, did not worry about their financial future for they entrusted that to the Lord. They were not doing good works to earn God's favor. For they were convinced that the Lord in love had delivered them from the condemnation of the law and from the power of death and the devil when he shed his holy, precious blood. They treasured their fellowship in Christ, whether they were the givers or the receivers. Their life was a litany of praise to the God of their salvation.

And the apostles did not try to enrich themselves because of the generosity of the people. For example, when Peter and John heard a cripple plead for money, Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you" (Acts 3:6). Then in the name and with the power Jesus alone gives, he healed the man. The apostles did not even have pocket change, but they possessed the gift of healing, and they used it to confirm that the gospel they proclaimed is a message coming from God.

### *Sharing Possessions*

The fellowship of the church in Jerusalem was a remarkable demonstration of what happens to sinners who believe that they have become saints by the grace of God through faith in Christ. They had true unity. “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was with them all. There were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:32-34). This was not a form of communism or any new social order that the apostles developed. Rather, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ so filled their hearts that these early Christians gladly shared what earthly possessions they had so that no one went hungry. A member named Barnabas sold a field he owned and gave the money to the apostles, who, in turn, distributed it to the poor among the believers.

### *Hypocrites Exposed*

Such generosity caught the attention of two members, Ananias and Sapphira. They also sold a piece of property. They kept some of it for themselves and gave the rest to the apostles. By itself what they did was not wrong. But they sinned when they claimed that they had given to the church the entire sum that they had received from the sale of their property.

In some way, God made known to Peter their deception. He accused them of lying to God. He reminded Ananias, “Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal?” (Acts 5:4). No one had required them to give it all or even a portion of it to the church. They could have done what they wanted with their money. They, no doubt, wanted to appear to be as generous as Barnabas was. Their actions revealed hearts of unbelief once they were exposed, and God’s judgment was swift. First Ananias fell over dead; then three hours later Sapphira died, causing great fear in the church. All the members, no doubt, did some soul searching.

This has been written for our learning and warning. How easily we can live and speak as Christians while secretly imagining that our own character and good deeds make us right with God. We regularly hear the Word of God; we pray and sing his praises, and we put our envelopes in the offering plate. Because we can so easily play the role of a hypocrite, we need Jesus’ warning: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15:8).

On the other hand we should be careful not to judge someone’s motive. Yes, we need to evaluate his words and actions, but only the Lord knows what is in his heart.

The apostles continued to preach the gospel and confirmed their message as God-sent by performing many miracles, and the church in Jerusalem continued to grow. This provoked jealousy on the part of the Jewish religious leaders, so they arrested and jailed the apostles. When they were threatened and instructed not to preach Christ crucified, Peter and the other apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29).

### *Dissatisfaction in the Church*

Lest we have an idealistic view of the early church, the Bible describes one of its growing pains.

The preaching of the gospel attracted two kinds of Jews who were converted to Christianity. The Hebraic Jews were those who were raised and lived in Palestine. They spoke Aramaic. The Greek-speaking Jews were those who had returned to Jerusalem after living in some other country in the Roman Empire. They complained that their widows were being neglected in the distribution of food (Acts 6:1).

When the Twelve heard of the problem, they called a congregational meeting. They told the assembly, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:2-4).

The apostles did not feel that such activity was beneath them. Any service of the faithful is God-pleasing. Rather, it was a matter of priorities. They were called to preach and spread the Word, and they needed to be better stewards of their time. The congregation agreed and elected seven men to distribute the food fairly among the needy members. Today we should not burden our pastors and teachers with duties to the neglect of their primary calling. For stewardship is not only about how we use our money but also what we do with our time.

### *Persecution in the Church*

As Christ had warned them, the apostles and early Christians were severely tested when persecuted by the Jewish leaders. Stephen, a member of the first church council, boldly confessed that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ and the world's Redeemer. As a result, he was brought before the Sanhedrin where he was able to bear witness to God's saving promises made to their father Abraham and through Israel's prophets. He clearly demonstrated that Jesus was that promised Christ and accused them of resisting the Holy Spirit by refusing to believe in him. Enraged they stoned Stephen to death. Why? He had used the condemning force of God's law against those who rejected the gospel. He gave up his life, the ultimate gift to his gracious Lord.

### *The Gospel Spreads*

The Lord uses his believers to spread the good Word. Today a portion of our church's contributions is sent to our missionaries throughout the world. Instead of money, God used persecution of the early Christians to spread the Word. In the face of death the believers fled to other regions, and "those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:41). Jesus has called all of his disciples to be his witnesses, wherever we may live and whatever we may do. Many a person has been won for Christ by the faithful confession of a friend or by an invitation to hear the Word by a stranger. Mission work—we are all in this together.

### *Not for Sale*

Philip, another deacon in the early church, proclaimed the gospel in Samaria. He held the people's attention by the word he preached and the miracles he performed. A man named Simon, who amazed people with his magic and was thought to have divine power, also heard the Word of God and was converted.

When the apostles heard of Philip's successful witness among the Samaritans, Peter and John joined Philip in this ministry. Through them the Samaritan converts received a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit that included miraculous signs, signs that the Holy Spirit bestowed on the church on Pentecost.

When Simon saw the special gifts that came from the apostles, he offered to pay them for the same power. But Peter told him, "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money.... Repent of this wickedness" (Acts 8:20,22). Simon did repent. Such conduct today is called simony, named after the man who first tried to buy something spiritual. Spiritual gifts are not for sale; they are God-given gifts.

### *From Persecutor to Apostle*

One of the most vigorous persecutors of the Christians was Saul. He was a zealous Pharisee, convinced that Jesus had been an imposter. When Saul was on his way to Damascus, looking for Christians to imprison or kill, the ascended Christ confronted him. First Jesus spoke the law, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me" (Acts 9:4). Then he ignited the first spark of faith in Saul's self-righteous heart by simply saying, "I am Jesus" (Acts 9:5). Saul, who later was named Paul, was converted by this special revelation and went to become the

greatest missionary the Christian church has ever had. The fruits of his labors are recorded in the book of Acts; his fearless testimony is found in his Spirit-inspired letters.

The Apostle Paul did not receive a large salary. In fact, he refused most offers of financial support. When he needed money, he resumed his trade as tent maker. Why? Paul explained: "I was not a burden to anyone" (2 Corinthians 11:9). He was not a financial burden to any of the congregations he founded and served. He did not want to leave the impression with any of them that he was in the gospel ministry for the money. Paul made that clear to the elders in the church at Ephesus. "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:33-35).

On the other hand Paul confirmed what Jesus taught when he sent out his disciples, "The worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7). Paul is also referring to the Christian ministry when he states, "The worker deserves his wages" (1 Timothy 5:18). Today we support our called workers with our free-will offerings.

Chen Tong Ke was a missionary in Taiwan. He was born there and during World War II was forced to work for the Japanese in Shanghai. When he witnessed the atrocities that the Japanese inflicted on his people, he deserted. A Christian family hid and befriended him. They taught him the Word of God, and he came to faith in Christ. His heart was so moved by the truth that he was saved alone through faith in the Crucified One that he became a missionary. He lived among the poorest of Taiwan, supporting himself and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. When asked why he so eagerly did this without any compensation, he simply explained, "Because I am a Christian." Like Paul he did not want to be a financial burden to anyone.

### *Tabitha*

When we believe and teach that we are saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ, we might leave the impression that good works are of little value. While an exemplary life will not save the sinner, he cannot help but serve his Redeemer once he becomes a disciple of Christ. Tabitha is an example of one who has a living and vibrant saving faith. She is described as one "who was always doing good and helping the poor" (Acts 9:36).

When she became sick and died, her fellow believers summoned Peter. When Peter came, the widows were crying. They produced the evidence of her faith by showing Peter the robes and other clothing Tabitha had made for the needy. When Peter was alone with the body of Tabitha, he prayed and called her by name and she came back to life. The joy in her salvation prompted her to perform deeds of kindness.

### *Two Significant Visions*

The ascended Jesus appeared to Saul and called him to faith and to be an apostle. God also used other ways to speak to his infant church. He appeared to Cornelius in a vision. Cornelius was a Roman captain in the Italian army stationed in Palestine. He learned the Old Testament Scriptures and trusted in God's saving promises. "He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly" (Acts 10:2). An angel appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to send men to Peter to bring him to Caesarea.

About noon the following day, Peter had a vision. Three times he saw a large sheet containing all kinds of birds and animals descending from heaven. Then he heard the Lord's voice: "Kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). Peter refused because there were animals in the sheet that were unclean. According to the Old Testament ceremonial laws the Jews were forbidden to eat such animals. Peter called them unclean. But the voice said, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15).

While Peter was still wondering what this meant, men from Cornelius came to his door. They told Peter about the vision Cornelius had. The next day Peter went and visited this Gentile army captain. By then Peter realized what the Lord was teaching him and his church: the ceremonial laws that God had imposed on the Jews

in the past were no longer valid. No longer were the priesthood and the sacrifices essential for worship now that the divine High Priest had come and sacrificed himself on the altar of the cross. No longer were the believers obliged to observe the Sabbath law, the Passover, and other feast days. No longer did God's children need to be circumcised, for baptism with water and the Word made them God's children through faith in Christ. The tithes that supported the Old Testament priests were replaced with free will offerings of God's people for the gospel ministry.

### *Prisoners Free a Jailer*

The second missionary journey of Paul took him and Silas to the city of Philippi. There they found some women worshiping along a river bank. They joined them and began instructing them in the Word. The Lord opened Lydia's heart, and she and her household were baptized. In grateful response to her new faith, she asked the apostles; "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house" (Acts 16:15).

But the apostles also had a different response to their witnessing in that city. A slave girl, who was making a lot of money for her owners by her fortunetelling, annoyed Paul and Silas and had interfered with their ministry. When Paul healed her of her evil spirit, her owners were furious because of all the money they were losing. With false accusations, they convinced the authorities to have the apostles severely flogged and thrown into prison. While they were there, they prayed and sang praises to God.

In the middle of the night an earthquake shook the prison, and its doors flew open; all the prisoners' shackles fell off. When the jailer awoke and saw what had happened, he was ready to commit suicide. He knew that he was as good as dead if the prisoners had escaped. But before he could fall on his sword, Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" (Acts 16:28). Trembling the jailer asked the all-important question, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). The apostles answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). The jailer believed, and through the gospel message the apostles freed a jailer from sin and its consequences---eternal death and damnation.

Note how altogether different this answer was from the one Jesus gave the rich young man who had asked a similar question. To him Jesus said, "Obey the commandments" (Matthew 19:17). Why two different answers? Jesus spoke only the law to a money-loving, self-righteous man; he was trying to convince him of his sinfulness. But the jailer, already guilt-ridden and filled with fear, needed only the comforting assurances of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And as evidence of their new faith in Christ the jailer and his family took care of the apostles' physical needs.

### *Paul, Missionary for the Gentiles*

After Paul's conversion, he learned from Ananias, a fellow-believer, what God had revealed to him. "This man [Saul or Paul] is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15). This summarizes Paul's mission and ministry.

Paul made three missionary journeys. At God's direction, he traveled to various cities. The first place he would usually visit in a city was the Jewish synagogue. There he could remind the Jews what the Old Testament taught concerning the Messiah; then he could teach them how Jesus of Nazareth was the perfect fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies. Most often the Jews refused to accept Paul's message that salvation is by God's grace alone through the redemption of Jesus Christ. That message caused their hatred even as it did when Jesus preached. Paul and the apostles were falsely accused of rejecting Moses and the prophets; they were often beaten and jailed.

Spurned by most of the Jews, Paul carried out his primary calling by turning his attention to the Greeks or Gentiles. He preached the good news concerning Christ to them, and many of them believed. Thus Jews and Gentiles were joined together by a common faith and expressed that faith in the life they led and the good deeds they performed. During his most distressing times Paul confidently knew and experienced what God promised:

“My word ... will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

That same confidence Christ’s church has today. With our free-will offerings we send out missionaries to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some hearers, who were spiritually dead, are made alive in Christ and their life produces fruits of their faith.

Through his letters Paul continues to instruct the church. The Word of God he wrote to the congregations he founded has been preserved in the Bible. A study of Paul’s epistles gives us insight into how to encourage one another in the proper use of God’s gifts.



## 10. The Epistles of the Apostles—Part 1

The apostles not only spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ wherever the Spirit would lead them; they also wrote epistles to the congregations they had founded, letters to individuals and to the Christian church in general. Inspired by the Holy Spirit they strengthened the faith of the believers with a clear presentation of the gospel. They admonished and corrected the congregations when necessary; they guided the saints in godly living, and they refuted the false teachers. All this they did with the Word of God. As is the case with all of Scripture, the epistles of the apostles enlighten the church of all ages. Today we find these epistles condemning sin, proclaiming the grace of our God in Christ, and urging believers to do God's will. In restricting ourselves to the important role God's law and the message of the gospel have in our stewardship life, we will focus our attention on pertinent portions of the epistles.

### *Letters to Young Pastors*

The Apostle Paul trained two young pastors, Timothy and Titus, in what it means to be a minister of Christ and how that ministry should be carried out. He wrote two letters to Timothy and one to Titus, so that future generations of Christian pastors may also benefit from Paul's Spirit-inspired seminary instruction.

Repeatedly Paul warned them about false teachers and the importance of exposing them as servants of Satan. "If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain"(1 Timothy 6: 3-5).

### *False Promises*

False teachers also make false promises. The most glaring error ever taught is that man is able to save himself, that he can make things right with God by his piety and good works. Some will also teach, "Yes, faith in Christ is important, but just as important for your eternal salvation are the good works that you perform." And included in their good works is their constant appeal for money, making people "think that godliness is a means of financial gain" (1 Timothy 6:5). It was the sale of indulgences, the forgiveness of sins, that touched off the Reformation. Today some TV evangelists are not only preaching a perverted gospel, but they are promising their listeners that if they contribute to their ministry they will experience financial gain. While we may chafe when the unchurched claim that all we do is ask for money, it would be good for us to examine carefully in the light of God's Word what we are teaching and practicing in our stewardship efforts.

### *Real Contentment*

We live in an age of discontent. Most of us have become so prosperous that we have had to redefine "the necessities of life." Today we need a comfortable home with the latest appliances and gadgets. Our automobiles are loaded with amenities that we take for granted—some for our safety, others for our enjoyment. Many of us have well-paying jobs, and we do not have to struggle to make ends meet if we practice good stewardship. And yet because of our Old Adam we find ourselves discontent all too often.

Contentment needs to be learned. Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:11-13).

Paul, therefore, encourages us, “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and we cannot take anything out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that” (1 Timothy 6:6-8). Through faith in Christ we enjoy the riches of his grace and our earthly blessings. Whether we have many or little earthly possessions, let us be content. If we have clothes to wear, enough food and drink, and a roof over our heads, let us praise and thank God for his many blessings. Such godliness with contentment is “great gain.”

The admonition, “Be content with what you have,” applies to us as individual Christians and to us collectively as Christ’s church on earth. We could reason, “Look at all the good we could do if we had more money. We could help more of the less fortunate; we could send out more missionaries.” But the Lord has seen fit to give us what he knows is for our benefit as individual Christians and as his church. Let us be content with it.

And we have this sobering reminder, “We brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it” (1 Timothy 6:7). Job also states, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart [this life]” (Job 1:21).

### *A Warning*

Worldly-minded people are constantly looking for financial security. They want more than just enough money to get by. They want a worry-free life that has no financial problems. They want enough to live comfortably after they retire by building up their estate.

That word “want” is what the Apostle Paul is warning about when he writes, “People who want to be rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction” (1 Timothy 6:9). Being rich isn’t a sin, for God has blessed the rich with everything they have whether they believe in him or not. God “causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). But the warning is for those who *want* to be rich, whether they are poor and want to be wealthy or they are rich and desire more.

When greed captures the heart, a person “falls into temptation.” For example, an embezzler might think that he is clever enough not to get caught. When he steals over a long period of time, his conscience becomes dead to his sin. When he is caught, his good reputation has been destroyed. But what is worse, he will experience eternal ruin unless he repents, trusts in Christ alone for his forgiveness, and patiently accepts the consequences of his sin.

Paul wanted young pastor Timothy to bring this warning to the people whom he served. For by nature Christians also have a deceitfully sinful heart and, when it becomes allied with Satan, they can easily be overcome by the love of money. Some Christians who were “eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10).

God’s Word strikes at the source—the sinful heart when it mentions “love of money” and “eager for money.” That’s where it all begins. Without a desire for something that isn’t ours, we would not indulge in a sinful action. That is why “our old Adam with his evil deeds and desires should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die, and that day by day a new man should arise, as from the dead, to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity now and forever” (*Luther’s Small Catechism*). That is how God empowers us to “keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have” (Hebrews 13:5).

### *A Word for the Rich*

“Tell those who are rich in this world not to feel proud and not to trust anything as uncertain as riches--- but to trust God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. Tell them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be glad to give to others, and to share. In this way they are storing up for themselves a treasure, as a good foundation for the future, that they may take hold of the life that is really life” (1 Timothy 6:17-19--- GWN). Paul is not urging young Timothy to use the law so that the rich will be more generous. Paul knows

that the demands of the law may get some results in matters of stewardship, but they will not be God-pleasing if the rich are coerced to give generously. Rather, the rich should be patiently instructed and constantly reminded how easy it is to be proud of the wealth they have accumulated. Rather, they should be “rich in good works”, and share their wealth with those who are in need, especially the impoverished in the community of believers.

The Bible also warns the church not to give special attention to the rich. “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here's a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:1-4). The church is tempted to favor the big contributors by putting them in positions of influence and forgetting that Christ himself chose some lowly fishermen to be leaders in his church.

How easy it is for the rich to put their hope in wealth that is here today and can be gone tomorrow. How easily such hope raises its ugly head in our hearts. “I hope I will have enough money to retire. I hope I will have enough to pay for a nursing home if I have to go there. I hope that I will be able to pay for my medication.” That doesn't mean that it is a sin to save for our retirement or take out nursing home insurance. But in doing so we should still put our trust in the Lord for our well-being. When we are tempted to worry about such matters, let us “cast [our] anxiety on him because he cares for [us]” (1 Peter 5:7). Let us teach the rich “to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17). To put our hope in God is not mere wishful thinking, but it is based on the sure promises he makes to us in his Word. When we are reminded of the great gift God has already given us in the person of his Son, how can we doubt his love for us in earthly matters? For “if God be for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:31,32). And those “all things” includes everything that we need for this body and life.

When God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment,” he is not referring to the sumptuous living of the worldly rich. The Christian's enjoyment is found in doing good, in being rich in good deeds, in being generous and willing to share (1 Timothy 6:18). The Lord may have blessed you abundantly in your business, your profession, or through an inheritance. Motivated by the love of Christ, the Christian welcomes opportunities to help the less fortunate. “In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:19). Is Paul suggesting that such good deeds will merit eternal life? Not at all. For in his epistles the apostle makes it clear that we are saved alone by God's grace through faith in Christ without any merit on our part.

While good works will not save us, they do have their value. They are evidence of our love for God and our neighbor, and they bring glory to our Lord. And on Judgment Day we will hear the Savior's voice calling us from the grave, giving us “life that is truly life,” and saying, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me” (Matthew 25:34,40). Be assured whether you are rich or poor: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.... They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them” (Revelation 14:13).

### *Letters to a Young Congregation*

In reading the epistles of the apostles, we observe the power of the gospel at work through their God-inspired message. Congregations were formed away from Jerusalem, many of them established by the Apostle Paul. Both Jews and Gentiles were converted. Their faith united them into a common bond unlike anything that had happened heretofore.

But in every congregation problems arose. Many were disturbed by false teachers who claimed to be followers of Christ but preached a perverted gospel that undermined the faith of the members. Other difficulties arose because of members' weaknesses in faith. This was especially true of the church in Corinth.

Paul had ministered to the Corinthian congregation for almost two years and had witnessed the fruits of his labor. But the Lord had more work for him to do in other cities. After he left Corinth, however, serious problems arose. Cliques were formed, each claiming to be a follower of a favorite teacher. Also, instead of quietly settling disputes among themselves, some were going to heathen judges, inviting the disdain of the heathen. Others were abusing their Christian freedom and began reverting to their heathen ways. And most seriously others were denying the resurrection of the dead.

After addressing these and other problems, Paul reminded them of God's grace in sending his Son to be their Savior, and he urged them to stand firm in the true faith. And he assured them that when they gave their full attention to the true gospel ministry, the Lord would abundantly bless their efforts.

### *A Stewardship Program*

A famine invaded the region around Jerusalem and many fellow-Christians there were in desperate need of the necessities of life. Paul, therefore, appealed to the Corinthians, as well as to other congregations, to take up a collection for the poor. He suggested, "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made" (1 Corinthians 16:2).

This is a custom that we still use today. The advice Paul gave was not a legal requirement of the moral law anymore than worship on Sunday is the only way to keep the Third Commandment. Being freed from the Old Testament Sabbath law, the New Testament church chose the first day of the week for their regular worship services. No doubt they did so because that was the day of the week when Jesus arose. Today a Christian congregation may choose other days of the week in addition to or even in place of Sunday for its worship.

The same is also true of our stewardship life. Many members regularly use the weekly envelope for the support of the ministry. Some choose to give monthly or even annually. A few use stocks or bonds as gifts to the Lord on a regular basis, convinced that that is good stewardship for them. And Paul encourages each one of us to give "in keeping with his income." When the Christian remembers how the Lord has so graciously blessed him, he desires to put the first fruits of his labor into the Lord's service. And our stewardship does not begin and end with the passing of the collection plate. It also includes anyone who needs our help, especially fellow believers.

As long as it is not done in a legalistic way and as long as its members are motivated by a gospel-generated faith, the apostle's proposal enables a congregation to carry out its stewardship program in an orderly way. It will feature regular giving ("on the first day of the week"), planned giving ("saving it up"), individual giving, young and old like, ("each one of you"), and proportionate giving ("in keeping with his income").

When we read 2 Corinthians, we learn that the Corinthian congregation did not complete its offering for the poor in Jerusalem. Although he is not specifically referring to the collection, Paul states a most important principle that pastor and people need to keep in mind when they speak of money matters. "He [God] has made us as competent ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

The word "covenant" as it is used here is not an agreement between two parties. Rather, it is more like a last will and testament where only one person establishes the agreement. God has made a new covenant with us through Christ. He gave his Son as our Redeemer with the promise: "Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The word "letter" is the law; the word "Spirit" refers to the gospel. The law kills; it condemns us for our sins; it cannot produce spiritual life but can destroy it. When we use the law, then, to motivate our people to give more of their money to the church, we are wrongfully using this Word of God. It is destroying spiritual life rather than building up faith. But we are ministers of the "new covenant." The gospel alone has the power to save. For the Holy Spirit uses only the gospel to create faith and strengthen our resolve to lead godly lives. It is faith in Christ alone that will enable us to live what we often sing, "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" (CW, 485:1).

When we are tempted to promote tithing as a law and imagine that it will increase contributions, let us remember, “the letter [law] kills.” The tithe was part of the Old Testament ceremonial law that God imposed upon the people of Israel. But the Lord has now freed us from those rules and regulations. Therefore Paul urges us, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). Although Paul is teaching that Christ has freed us from the entire law, he made a specific application to circumcision. False teachers came to these Christians and undermined Paul’s teaching that sinners are saved alone by God’s grace through faith in Christ. By insisting that the Gentiles must also keep the Old Testament ceremonial law of circumcision, they were robbing the Galatians of their Christian freedom. What Paul wrote about circumcision is just as valid for tithing. Instead, he underscores the freedom we have in Christ and touches the Christian’s hearts with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## 11. The Epistles of the Apostles—Part 2

St. Paul devotes two chapters of 2 Corinthians to stewardship. His Spirit-inspired words are a blueprint for those who desire to have a Scripture-based stewardship program. Chapters 8 and 9 are especially important for a pastor who is determined to lead his members evangelically in such an effort.

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part (2 Corinthians 8:1-6).

### *Giving Oneself First to the Lord*

The grace of God permeates Paul's stewardship appeal. God's grace alone prompted him to ransom us from slavery to Satan through the redeeming sacrifice of his Son. And this grace is given to us that we may respond to his love. That is what the churches in Macedonia did. Even though they had experienced a "severe" trial, even though they were extremely poor, they rejoiced that the Lord had given them the opportunity to take up a collection for the needy in Jerusalem.

The translation of the word "generosity" may be misleading here. They were by the grace of God generous. But when it came to this offering, they were "single-minded"; they were able to collect the money by focusing on their gracious God and his gracious will. They gave more than it was seemingly possible. Paul did not have to beg them to bring their gifts. Rather, they pleaded with him because they so eagerly wanted to express their love for the saints in Jerusalem.

And how were they able to do this? By God's grace "they gave themselves first to the Lord." When the Christian first gives himself to the Lord in faith, the gifts to the Lord and his church flow freely, without compulsion. Doesn't this expression of true Christian faith please the Giver of all gifts? And doesn't such activity strengthen the bond of fellowship between those who give and those who receive? Let us welcome such opportunities as they come into our lives.

### *The Grace of Giving*

But just as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us --see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. (2 Corinthians 8:7-12)

First, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the spiritual gifts they have received from the Lord. The Holy Spirit had worked faith in their hearts, and they had been kept in the faith even when false apostles tried to lead them astray. With their speech they also were able and willing to confess their faith. And they did so with the knowledge of the abundant blessings they had received through the gospel. Even though weaknesses appeared

in their personal and congregational life, they were earnest in living their faith, especially in their love for the apostle who had first taught them God's Word.

There is one more spiritual gift that Paul wanted them to enjoy—the grace of giving. Even the heathen are generous in people's eyes, but only a Christian focuses on God's grace when it comes to giving. "For it is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13).

Paul is not wielding the condemnation of the law in order to make them complete the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. Instead he wanted "to test the sincerity of their love." How easily "I love Jesus" falls from the lips, while the heart remains far from him. The Christian loves God and cannot help letting his light shine before others, not for his own praise, but that others may glorify God.

What follows is the heart of the Christian's stewardship life. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). From all eternity Christ was rich in power, majesty, and glory. All creation was his. Yet for our sakes he became poor when "he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on the cross" (Philippians 2:8). Christ's cross proclaims God's grace.

His shame and humiliation, his being forsaken by his Father (that is the ultimate agony of hell), his willingness to endure the full wrath of God's justice by becoming sin for us, has made us rich. Not rich in worldly things, but rich in God's forgiveness, rich in being adopted children of God through faith, and rich in the hope that our heavenly home has been prepared by him. When we have such riches, nothing else really matters. We are rich in God's grace.

The year before, the Corinthians were the first to respond to Paul's appeal to help the famine-stricken saints in Jerusalem. They were not only the first to give, but they strongly desired to take up the collection. But false apostles had disturbed the congregation and interrupted their collection. Now that they had resisted the temptation to forsake the gospel ministry Paul had established among them, he urges them "to finish the work." He observed how eagerly they had wanted to do their part and advised them to give "according to their means."

Let us also respond willingly when a need in the church arises. For the Lord is giving us the opportunity to put our faith into action. No one is left out of a God-pleasing stewardship effort when we remember that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ moves the heart of every Christian.

### *Equality*

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little." (2 Corinthians 8:13-15)

All people are equal when it comes to their spiritual nature. All are under the curse of sin, but by God's grace Christ has redeemed all mankind by his innocent sufferings and sacrificial death. And Christ's resurrection prompted his Father to declare that the whole world has been reconciled to him "in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Paul speaks of another kind of equality when it comes to Christian stewardship. This does not mean that each should give the same amount. That would be an unreasonable request and hardly in keeping with the spirit of godly giving. For to whom the Lord gives much, much is expected. The entire financial burden should not fall on a few, but there should be equality. The equality is that each are blessed—the giver and the receiver. Our hearts are filled with joy when we aid others; and our joy is also there when we are the recipients of the help from other believers. Such are the fruits of our fellowship in Christ.

I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift.

For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.

In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it. (2 Corinthians 8:16-24)

The Corinthians needed help in completing the collection for the poor in Jerusalem; therefore Paul sent three experienced ministers to guide and aid the congregation. Titus, Paul's young companion, was one of them. Paul did not have to talk him into going to Corinth; he wanted to go. Titus was enthusiastic about his work, and the other churches called him to serve the Corinthians. For what purpose? "To honor the Lord and show our eagerness to help" (v. 19).

These stewardship counselors were not sent out with sure-fire techniques to get Christians to give more. They were ministers of Christ armed with the gospel, which would make their mission successful, "not only right in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (v. 21).

These apostles were faithful confessors of the truth and shared Paul's zeal to serve God's people. They were going as representatives of Paul and the other churches, and they would be an honor to Christ. The Christians in Corinth should demonstrate their love for them by gladly receiving them as ambassadors of Christ.

As a congregation of believers, we do not live in isolation from other congregations in our fellowship. A display of independence does not strengthen the bonds of faith that a unified stewardship program should accomplish. On the other hand, such an effort should not be a power play on the part of the leaders of the church imposing a certain methodology that all congregations should follow. Neither extreme will be found when the Word of God is rightly taught and practiced. When the church sends out its stewardship counselors to assist the believers in their stewardship life and when the members receive them as fellow-believers in Christ, unity in the gospel will be strengthened.

### *Boasting*

There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints. For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we--not to say anything about you--would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given. (2 Corinthians 9:1-5)

We might be surprised to hear Paul boast. But he is not bragging about the great work he has done in the church and how much money he has raised for the poor in Jerusalem. And he certainly is not gloating that his ministry in itself has secured salvation for himself. For he wrote, "By grace you have been saved, through



faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9)

But he boasted to other Christians about the eagerness of the Corinthians to take up a collection for the poor when the need was presented to them. The Corinthians did begin their collection, but troublemakers undermined the confidence that they had in the Apostle Paul and his ministry. This interrupted their stewardship effort. Paul was praising “their eagerness to help” (v.2) when the offering was first proposed. Since he did not want to “be ashamed of having been so confident,” he was sending three co-workers to help them complete the collection. He wanted their offering to be “an expression of praise and thanks and not of miserliness” (v. 5—GWN). Stewardship counselors who have a proper understanding of the Law and Gospel are a blessing to the church.

Paul’s God-inspired words should cause us to stop and reflect on the attitude of our hearts when an appeal is made in the church. We need to battle our selfish and self-centered Old Adam, so that our faith willingly springs into action when we see the need. And when it does, let us not boast of how much we have given, but praise God for his grace and his Word that gives us hearts focused on pleasing him and benefiting our neighbor.

### *“God Loves a Cheerful Giver”*

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. (2 Corinthians 9:6-11)

The cheerful giver whom God loves is one who freely and willingly and happily gives in response to God’s grace in Christ.

The picture of the sower and reaper is easily misconstrued to mean: the more you give to God, the more earthly wealth God will give you. That is why we must not lose sight of the main theme of these two chapters—grace---the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the grace of giving. Grace excludes meriting God’s blessings, both spiritual and material gifts.

A cheerful Christian decides in his own heart what he wants to give. If he were giving reluctantly or under compulsion, he would hardly be giving cheerfully. With the freedom Christ has secured and given to his New Testament church and in the privacy of our own hearts, let us gladly give as the opportunities present themselves. For “God is able to make all grace abound” in us, so that we may “abound in every good work.”

To be a cheerful giver is a constant struggle. By nature we are greedy, selfish and materialistic. But by daily contrition and repentance and by daily strengthening our Christian faith with God’s Word, the Lord enables us to serve Christ by helping our neighbor. That is what Paul means when he says that we “will be made rich in every way” (v. 11). The riches of God’s grace in Christ have saved us. God’s grace prompted him to send his Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we believe his holy Word. And it is God’s grace that empowers us to help willingly and cheerfully the needy and support the gospel ministry.

Let us also remember that the Lord supplies the “seed.” He has given us what we have that we may share it with others. In doing so the Lord will bless us; we “will be made rich in every way” (v. 11). We are not being promised earthly riches because we are cheerful givers. How would you explain this to a faithful member of the church who has lost his job or who has lost his worldly goods through some disaster? Rather, we should assure him that he still has the riches of God’s grace: faith in Christ, the forgiveness of his sins and a

glorious home in heaven prepared by Christ. Those are the riches that we possess no matter what happens in our life.

### *Praise and Thanks to God*

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (Corinthians 9:12-15)

We praise and thank our God whenever we gather together for worship. We worship the Lord when we hear the preaching of his Word, when we sing his praises, when we pray to him, and when we honor the Lord with our wealth (Proverbs 3:9). When we put our money into the collection plate, our contribution is also an important part of our worship. It is a spiritual activity.

And that is what Paul is impressing on the Corinthians when he calls the collection a “service.”

Two needs were being filled with the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. The obvious need was to help the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. Not only the recipients of the money but also the givers had a need—a need to glorify God with their gifts, the need to exercise their faith in Christ, and the need to strengthen the bond of fellowship they had with fellow believers. The Christians in Corinth were Gentiles; the faithful in Jerusalem were Jews. In accordance with God’s will for his Old Testament believers, the Israelites were kept separate from the Gentile world. But at Pentecost and thereafter the New Testament church was made up of both Jew and Gentile through the preaching of the gospel. Their fellowship in Christ was strengthened when these Gentiles in Corinth cheerfully gave to the destitute Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul saw how the bond of Christian love and fellowship were strengthened throughout his ministry. He wrote to the Christians in the city of Philippi, “It was good for you to share in my troubles.... For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need” (Philippians 4:14, 16). When we share our earthly goods and the gospel with our fellow believers, the bond of our fellowship in Christ is strengthened. For us there is no stronger bond, a bond that unites us with our gracious God and with one another. The hymn writer leads us in our praise and thanks to God:

Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above. (CW 494:1)

When others see that our focus is not only on making a confession of faith in Christ with our words but also on deeds of charity, they will praise the God whom we are glorifying. “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). As God’s stewards we should not seek the kudos of others. Rather, let us confess with the Apostle Paul, “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Corinthians 15:10). And by the grace of God we will do what is pleasing to him.

When we consider what the grace of God has done in our hearts and for our lives, we join in saying, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (v. 15).

### *Competent Ministers*

The Apostle Paul was the most competent missionary the church has ever had. He was well educated and had boundless energy. But he put his competency in perspective when he wrote, “Such confidence as this

is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:4-6).

Paul had a great deal of confidence in his gospel ministry. He was certain he would get results from his efforts even in the face of much opposition and persecution. But he did not generate that self-assurance on his own. He received it “through Christ before God.” His faith in Christ, the call from him into the ministry, and the promise that his efforts would accomplish the desired results God had promised gave him confidence. He was convinced that nothing could separate him from the love that God had for him in Christ Jesus, and he was persuaded that his ministry would accomplish its God-given purpose. He expressed such confidence when he appealed to the Corinthians to take up a collection for the impoverished in Jerusalem.

Paul’s boldness in stating that he was a competent minister was not a claim that he was a self-made man, for he knew that it was by God’s grace alone that he had been converted to Christianity. He believed that the Lord had called him to be a world missionary. And he was convinced that God was his Savior and his Enabler.

God speaks to us only through his Word. The ability to accomplish God’s purposes in our lives comes from him. It is the message not the messenger that gives the gospel life-giving power. And it is the right understanding and the proper use of God’s Word that makes our stewardship life acceptable to God.

Therefore, we are competent ministers of Christ only when we distinguish between God’s law and Christ’s gospel. While both are God’s holy Word, they are as different as night is from day. The law condemns us for our sins, and the gospel declares us holy through faith in Christ. When Paul refers to the “letter” (2 Corinthians 3:3), he is referring to the law of God, and with the “Spirit” he means the gospel. The law kills spiritual life; the good news of Jesus Christ alone creates and strengthens our life of faith.

This distinction is needed when we appeal to our members in matters of stewardship. We are tempted to use only the law when we become frustrated when our members do not seem to be responding as generously as we think they should. Or we use the gospel in a mechanical way. For example, we might imagine we should always use the law to condemn greed and then use the gospel as a follow-up. When we study how the apostle Paul approached the Corinthian Christians in their giving, he did not use that method. With the gospel of God’s grace, he appealed to them as penitent believers, for he knew that it alone would produce fruits of faith in their lives.

The Lord has given us a glorious message to proclaim as ministers of the New Testament---the grace of God in Christ our Lord. And that word “grace” is truly amazing when we consider who we were--lost and condemned creatures-- and what God the Holy Spirit has made us through faith--children of God and heirs of eternal life. What a joy to be able to sing with Johann Frank,

Jesus, priceless treasure,  
Fount of purest pleasure,  
Truest friend to me. . . .

Hence, all earthly treasure!  
Jesus is my pleasure,  
Jesus is my choice.  
Hence, all empty glory!  
Naught to me the story  
Told with tempting voice.  
Paine no loss  
Or shame or cross  
Shall not from my Savior move me  
Since he deigns to love me.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### Stewardship Through the Bible

#### **1. Stewards in the Old Testament**

##### *For Discussion*

1. How has mankind's fall into sin affected our stewardship life?
2. Describe how two children raised by Christian parents could be two completely different stewards?
3. How alone is it possible to lose everything one owns and every loved one and still praise God?
4. Agree or disagree? Work is a blessing of God.
5. Comment: The Old Testament believers could be better stewards than we are because they did not have as many temptations and distractions as we have today.

## **2. Stewardship in the Moral Law**

### *For Discussion*

1. How can money become your God?
2. Evaluate: I should “fear . . . God” if I don’t give enough money to church.
3. When we display a generous spirit, what are we tempted to believe? Why is this such a grievous sin?
4. Agree/disagree: It is a sin to desire a house of our own.
5. Why is it difficult to be a Christian during time of prosperity? When there is severe economic depression?

### **3. Stewardship in the Ceremonial Law**

#### *For Discussion*

1. The law declares that by nature we all are unclean. How does that affect our stewardship life?
2. How did the celebration of the Passover proclaim the gospel to the Children of Israel? How did the Passover meal motivate the believers in the Old Testament to be God-pleasing stewards?
3. Explain the difference between the Old Testament high priest and Christ our High priest, especially as it pertains to our stewardship.
4. Agree/disagree. The tithe plays an important role in the life of the church. (We will also discuss this statement after our study of the New Testament.)
5. Read Malachi 3. Discuss how God proclaimed the law to the nation of Israel and the gospel to the believers in Israel. What were the law and the gospel each intended to do? Why is this important to remember when we promote God-pleasing stewardship in the church?

#### **4. The Childhood of Jesus**

##### *For Discussion*

1. Roads and a universal language (Greek) aided the early church to spread the gospel. What modern means of communication enables us to spread God's Word? How is it paid for in the church?
2. Mary and Joseph were poor. Nevertheless they were faithful stewards. How did they show this after Jesus was born?
3. The Magi were wealthy. How did they demonstrate that the newborn Baby in Bethlehem was their dearest treasure? How do we?
4. Discuss. An important part of our worshipping and praising God is our support of missions.
5. Compare the fruits of faith of Mary and Joseph and the Wise Men with the fruits of faith of true Christians today.

## 5. The Sermon on the Mount

### *For Discussion*

1. What do we pray for in Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer? See Luther's explanation. How does this prayer affect our stewardship life?
2. Agree/disagree. Christians give in secret.
3. Contrast our earthly goods with our heavenly treasures.
4. Evaluate. "Want to get? Give. The getting always comes whether it's a matter of money or love. But *after* the giving."
5. Discuss the difference between concern and worry.



## 6. Jesus' Lessons on Stewardship

### *For Discussion*

1. Give specific ways the church applies the biblical principle, "The worker is worth his keep" (Matthew 10:10)?
2. Describe charitable works. Then evaluate: Two people do the same thing, but they are not the same.
3. What are the two God-ordained kingdoms in the world? How is each supported? What God-pleasing purpose does each kingdom have? Why is it important to keep this distinction?
4. What is self-righteousness? How does it plague you in your stewardship life? How is reason a blessing from God? How is reason an enemy of our faith? How might it hinder your stewardship?
5. Evaluate: God rewards all people.

## 7. Examples of Stewardship in the Gospels

### *For Discussion*

1. Agree/disagree: When you are a guest in someone's home, the proper protocol is to agree with what they say and condone what they do.
2. How do women provide valuable services in the church today? What do their Christian services and faithful stewardship demonstrate?
3. As this is being written a horrific hurricane destroyed everything in its path. What does such a natural catastrophe tell us about our God? What do such tragedies remind us about our earthly possessions?
4. What alone motivated Zaccheus' generous response to Jesus' visit? Why was the widow willing and able to give all that she had to the Lord? What lesson for our own stewardship lives do these two believers give us?
5. How should the law and the gospel be used when a leader in the church is caught stealing from its treasury?

## 8. Parables on Stewardship

### *For Discussion*

Each parable teaches a vital lesson for the Christian faith and life. What important truth does each parable listed below teach? What does each mean for our lives as God's stewards?

- The Sower and the Seed.
- The Good Samaritan.
- The Rich Fool.
- The Shrewd Manager.
- The Talents.
- The Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

## **9. The Acts of the Apostles**

### *For Discussion*

1. What creates the bond of fellowship in our church? How does Christian fellowship express itself in our congregational life?
2. Agree/disagree. It pleases God when people share their earthly goods and wealth with others.
3. Mention the various gifts we cannot buy with our money.
4. Evaluate: Faithful pastors and teachers are not a financial burden for the congregation.
5. What does Peter's vision teach us about our stewardship lives today? What does Paul by word and example teach pastor and people about the proper attitude concerning wages in the church?

## 10. The Epistles of the Apostles—Part 1

### *For Discussion*

1. How does discontent manifest itself in our lives?
2. Give examples of how the “love of money” easily enters your heart. What alone will overcome such evil desires?
3. What value do our good works have in this life? In the life to come?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 16:2. How might this passage be used in the wrong way? How should this Word of God be used in an evangelical or God-pleasing way?
5. What freedom do we have in matters of stewardship? See 1 Corinthians 16:2 and 2 Corinthians 9:7. How could we abuse this Christian freedom?

## **11. The Epistles of the Apostles—Part 2**

### *For Discussion*

1. In what way do we first give ourselves to the Lord? How does this effect our stewardship life?
2. Discuss the ways that the sincerity of our love for Christ is tested in matters of our stewardship.
3. Agree/disagree. Stewardship counselors are need in the church.
4. What is the Apostle Paul's definition of a cheerful giver?
5. Who is a competent minister of Christ? Give some practical example of how he will conduct his ministry.