

Christian Stewardship

What God Expects from Us

By Philip C.L. Gray

ISSUE: What is Christian stewardship? How can I be a faithful steward of God's gifts?

RESPONSE: Christian stewardship is a way of living in which we recognize that everything belongs to God. All resources must be used for His glory and the common good. Solidarity is the fruit of stewardship.

DISCUSSION: Stewardship is a rather popular term used by Catholics and non-Catholics alike when religious leaders want their followers to give something. It is often associated with the words "tithe," "generosity," and "money." While these associations are not wrong, stewardship means much more than simply giving time, talent, and treasure. Stewardship demands a way of life that encourages virtue and bears the fruit of solidarity among peoples.

Stewards of the Earth

A steward is someone who handles affairs for someone else. In ancient kingdoms, stewards ran the country in the absence of the king. Upon the king's return, the steward gave a full accounting for his actions. Even when the king was present, the steward often handled the daily affairs of the kingdom. However, a steward did not own the kingdom. And, the king determined when and how long a steward served him.

In Sacred Scripture we find many examples of stewards being placed over the affairs of their masters. Abram had a steward. He was Eliezer of Damascus, a slave born in the house of Abram. Were Abram not to have offspring, Eliezer would receive his freedom and inherit all Abram's possessions (cf. Gen. 15:2-3). In Genesis 41, we find the story of Joseph and how Pharaoh made him steward over the land of Egypt. Joseph was not part of the royal family, and he would not inherit the throne. Yet, because of Joseph's wisdom and discretion given by God, Pharaoh entrusted the entire kingdom to his care. "[Y]ou shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only as regards the throne will I be greater than you" (Gen. 41:40).

This concept of stewardship dates from the beginning of time, when God entrusted the earth to Adam and Eve and their offspring (cf. Gen. 1:26-28). All men are stewards of the earth's resources (cf. Catechism, no. 2402). In a new way, all Christians are stewards of the earth and of the spiritual graces given through Christ's death and Resurrection. We have received not only the earth, but also many spiritual riches to be used to advance the kingdom of God (cf. Lk. 19:11-27). Our Lord expects that we will use all for His glory and the salvation of souls.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:26-28).

This passage from Sacred Scripture provides the essential foundation for understanding what Christian stewardship means. Imagine a world of no violence, no sin, and complete tranquility among all people. That's what Adam and Eve had before the Fall. This was the setting within which God spoke the words above.

While some may consider the term "dominion" in this passage to be the only direct reference to "stewardship," the entire passage reveals that the stewardship expected of Adam and Eve and all of us has three essential characteristics. It is collective; it respects the purpose for which things exist; and it respects the

dignity of each person.

Collective Bargain

God did not expect only one person to be the steward of all creation. Rather, He blessed Adam and Eve and made them fruitful. Filling the earth is the means by which the earth becomes subdued by man. This essential truth is embodied in the right to life. Each person born contributes to the well-being of society. Through prayer, work, and discovery, each person allows others to grow in knowledge and holiness. Thus, no one person rules the earth. Collectively, we are stewards of the earth.

Nonetheless, each of us has opportunities and resources at our disposal that others do not have. You may own property to which no one else holds title. However, understanding that stewardship is collective requires us to find ways in which we can collaborate with others to make the resources in our possession work for the good of all as intended by God. In other words, the resources at our disposal should help us to fill the earth and subdue it.

For example, inviting the poor or elderly into your home for dinner not only provides a good meal for them, but also company that they may not otherwise have. And, we learn to appreciate what their lives contribute to our salvation (cf. Lk. 14:14). The same can be said for helping a neighbor repair his house or care for his lawn, or lending tools to someone in need. Our time, talents, and possessions are all resources that should be shared.

As explained in Catechism, no. 2402:

In the beginning God entrusted the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of mankind to take care of them, master them by labor, and enjoy their fruits. The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race. However, the earth is divided up among men to assure the security of their lives, endangered by poverty and threatened by violence. The appropriation of property is legitimate for guaranteeing the freedom and dignity of persons and for helping each of them to meet his basic needs and the needs of those in his charge. It should allow for a natural solidarity to develop between men.

“The LORD has made everything for its purpose” (Prov. 16:4)

Stewardship respects the purpose for which things were made. When God commanded Adam and Eve to subdue all creation, He was not implying that creation and man are adversaries. There was no sin, and the creatures of the earth did no harm to Adam or Eve. The created order was given by God to man so that man might achieve his temporal purpose in preparation for heaven’s glory. It was expected that Adam and Eve would subdue the earth by using its resources for the advancement of humanity. As they filled the earth, they would need its resources to provide for their posterity.

In their act of disobedience, Adam and Eve used the fruit of the tree of knowledge for something other than what God intended—they did not respect its purpose. As a result of the Fall, “subdue” took on an added meaning. The creatures given by God to help Adam sustain his life became opposed to him. Adam and his offspring would have to struggle for their survival. Although this added struggle resulted from sin, the initial demand that all creation be respected for its intended purpose remains.

The primary purpose of all creation is twofold: to give glory to God and to serve man’s needs in preparation for the beatific vision of heaven. Because stewardship is collective, the service provided to man by a particular resource is not intended for only one man. Rather, the resources of the earth are intended for all humanity, and our use of them should reflect this solidarity. In other words, it’s not just *what* we use it for, it’s also *how* we use it. For example, a car is intended to get us from one point to another. If we run stoplights and race at exceeding speeds, we endanger the lives of others. In the same way, when we use resources for our own good, we must always keep in mind the common good. As Catechism no. 2415 notes:

The seventh commandment enjoins respect for the integrity of creation. Animals, like plants and inanimate beings, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present, and future humanity. Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced

from respect for moral imperatives. Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation.

Man's Dignity

"The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God" (Catechism, no. 1700; cf. Gen. 1:26). Because of this, the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor (cf. Mk. 12:29-31). These two commandments are inseparable. You can't fulfill one without the other. As St. John admonishes, "If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn. 4:20).

Christian stewardship is the only way we fulfill these commands of God. Our Lord challenges us to consider the dignity and freedom of each person. We must not think of other people as "problems" or as "expendable resources." Rather, we must recognize the fundamental rights of every human person: These include the right to life, adequate housing, clothing, food, and moral respect. Respecting these rights means we must consider that all resources were created for all, to serve all. As the Catechism admonishes in no. 2426:

The development of economic activity and growth in production [is] meant to provide for the needs of human beings. Economic life is not meant solely to multiply goods produced and increase profit or power; it is ordered first of all to the service of persons, of the whole man, and of the entire human community. Economic activity, conducted according to its own proper methods, is to be exercised within the limits of the moral order, in keeping with social justice so as to correspond to God's plan for man.

A Way of Life

When Jesus saw the widow putting her two pennies in the Temple treasury, He told His disciples, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living" (Mk. 12:43-44). And that is what God expects from us.

God gave us life and the gift of eternal life. He created us for Himself, and He wants our total person (cf. Mt. 19:16-24). How we use the resources in our control expresses our gift of self to God. In short, God doesn't want our resources, He wants us.

Stewardship does not mean giving generous gifts from our possessions. Stewardship means that we recognize God owns it all. We have been entrusted with the goods of the earth, yet we own nothing. How can we give what we do not own? Rather, we must make those resources we do not need available to others.

We have an obligation to provide for ourselves and our families and to maintain a way of life that respects our own dignity as persons (cf. Catechism, no. 2404). While this is true, most of us in North America have opportunities and resources at our disposal that other people will never have. The following is a true story that illustrates the principles of Christian stewardship.

A young man was driving home from work and saw an older, poor man on the side of the road. He offered the poor man his lunch, and also offered to take him several miles to a truck stop where he could get a ride. While driving him to the truck stop, the young man suggested that it was getting close to dinnertime, and invited the older traveler home for dinner. During the meal, the younger man and his family enjoyed conversation with the older man, and learned that he was an itinerant farmer on his way West to help with a walnut harvest. As it was getting late, the couple suggested that the traveler should stay for the night. They gave up their room, complete with attached bath, for the night. When the traveler protested, the couple pointed out that the young children would awaken during the night, and it would be better if the couple slept on the couch so the older man would not be disturbed. After dinner, the wife washed the man's clothes while he enjoyed sitting on the porch with a cool drink. Early the next morning, the wife prepared a hearty breakfast and packaged a good portion of food for him, and her husband drove him to the truck stop to help him find a ride. Before parting, the young man offered the poor man all the money in his wallet, which was less than

\$20.00. The traveler refused the money with the words, “You have given me more than anyone has ever given me in this life. You have given me my dignity as a human being.”

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