

## **February 15th: The Kingdom of Stewards**

Welcome friends, to our final meditation in our series called Kingdom Economics–this is a series that we put together to combine our annual Stewardship Campaign with the conversations that our Social Justice Book Group has been having surrounding faith and economic justice. That means that over the past seven weeks, we’ve learned about all things related to money, resources, and how to build a better community using those gifts. The Bible has a lot to say about these topics, because God is fundamentally interested in a more equitable world, and we get to be a part of that important work. So if one of your New Year's resolutions is to work on a better relationship with money, or you’re unsure of how to use what you already have—we hope this series has given you some things to think more deeply about.

As we prepare to wrap up all of these thoughts and engage with this topic one more time, I invite you to take a moment and pray with me.

*God our Eternal Steward, you have shown us the way towards a kingdom where all resources are cared for and shared. Through the ministry of Jesus, you have demonstrated what it looks like to hold your blessings and multiply them. As we gather in this space to reflect on your example and grow as your disciples, we pray that your wisdom would enter and fill our hearts. Empower us to serve with our whole selves, so that your will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. In your name we pray, Amen.*

Growing up in my home church, both of my parents had stints on the Council—my mom was in charge of Sunday School and the Acolytes, and my Dad often served on the Finance team helping with Stewardship campaigns and fundraising. I started to pay some attention to all of this when I was in elementary school, but I was pretty confused by some of the language that I was hearing. For starters, whenever someone like my Dad would get up in front on Sundays, they’d talk about how everyone in our community was called to be one of God’s stewards, but I heard that everyone was called to be

one of God's Stewarts. This was compounded by the fact that there was a man whose name I thought was Stewart in our congregation and he always sat up near the front, nodding his head along to these announcements and sermons, so it really seemed like he had a handle on this, he was fully on board with all of us being God's Stewarts. I didn't really understand how this would work—I didn't exactly dream of growing up to be a slightly curmudgeonly 60 year old man, but I figured someone would explain more when I got to the next level in Sunday School. Boy, was I relieved to find out that I was mishearing all of those instructions!

But here's the thing: steward isn't a word that many of us hear any more, it's not a common term that we're used to. It sounds a little old fashioned, doesn't it? We might occasionally talk about it at church, especially during Stewardship season, but I'm willing to bet that most of us are a little fuzzy on what it actually means to be a steward.

So here's what the Merriam Webster dictionary says. First of all, steward is both a noun and a verb. Classically speaking, the noun form refers to "one employed in a large household or estate to manage domestic concerns (such as the supervision of servants, collection of rents, and keeping of accounts)" and the verb form describes the action of being a steward. So yes, a steward is a type of manager, but not the corporate type that we might think of when we imagine middle management. Being a steward is an active process, deeply involved in all aspects of daily life. In many different eras of history, it was the steward who acted like a financial secretary, head of household, and the one who procured items like food, clothing, and other basic needs. Stewards were organized, responsible, and attentive—keeping track of everything that needed to be in place for a healthy, productive, and economical existence.

So suffice it to say, being a steward is a responsibility, not just a position. Being a steward is a calling, not just a role.

With that in mind, let's go back to our scripture reading.

Our passage for this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew, towards the end of Jesus' ministry. Right after Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem, he gathers with his friends in the temple, and shares his last bit of teaching. He's already on the path towards being betrayed and arrested, but he's spending these last few free hours making sure that the disciples fully understand the truth of the gospel. Except, he doesn't make a big speech, with lots of sweeping statements or pithy one liners that the disciples could remember him by. Instead, he tells stories, specifically parables, because he's inviting the men and women who have been following him to start to think for themselves. They need the critical thinking skills to lead the next generation of ministry, so Jesus shares these complex analogies and metaphors to test the limits of their understanding.

So if you've got your Bible with you, you can open up to Matthew 25, and we'll take a closer look.

The parable right before this one, the Parable of the Ten Virgins, begins with Jesus attempting to describe the Kingdom that his ministry has inaugurated. That's the context of our parable too: Jesus is using this story to illustrate how his followers will act in God's Kingdom.

He begins with this introduction, "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. **15** To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. **16** The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. **17** So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. **18** But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money."

So we have these three servants, all of whom are given the same task—they are each to act as a steward for the money that was given to them. Two of these men take their bags of gold and immediately put them to use—but one of the men chooses to bury the money instead. This prompts a major conflict when the man returns from his journey and calls his servants together. The man who

turned five bags of gold into ten is told, “well done, good and faithful servant!” The same is true of the man who turned two bags of gold into four—he is also told, “well done, good and faithful servant!” But the last man, the one who buried his bag of gold does not receive the same warm welcome.

The servant tries to justify his decision by saying, “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 gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.” His master responds with this harsh rebuke: “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. So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Wow. Brutal, right? What could this possibly teach us about God’s kingdom?

Well, biblical scholars and theologians have debated this passage for centuries, and they acknowledge that Jesus’ irritation towards and punishment for the third servant is peculiar. It’s hard to imagine our sweet, kind Jesus saying something so abrasive, but he does. And that’s probably for a good reason: he’s trying to communicate how serious it is to be one of God’s stewards. He doesn’t want his disciples, or any of us, to take lightly this call to manage and care for God’s kingdom. These words that Jesus shares right before his death are designed to provoke us—to jolt us out of our apathy, to inspire us out of our comfort zones! This parable is a challenging call to action—one that we aren’t meant to minimize or ignore.

In the Gospel of Luke, specifically chapter 12, we get another parable about stewards—and that one ends with this wisdom from Jesus: “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has

been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” The New Living Translation puts it another way: “When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required.”

When Jesus entrusts his ministry to his disciples, knowing that they will need to carry out God’s mission after his death, he’s handing them something powerful. He’s passing down something precious. These disciples took Jesus’ message and built a whole global church—small congregations that over time turned into the largest religion the world has ever seen. Brick by brick, buildings were constructed. Relationship by relationship, communities were formed. Word by word, our Bible was written down and shared. And now we are the inheritors of that work—the ones who have received this powerful and precious gift of Jesus. We hold God’s church in our hands—we are the leaders who carry the message that the world needs to hear. We are the ones who manage the resources of a worldwide movement, we the ones who bear the responsibility of sharing Jesus’ ministry with our neighbors.

You might think that you’re just an ordinary person, in a small town, with no real influence—but this parable tells us something different. This story tells us that each of us—yes you, are a steward of this divine mission. Together, we are stewards of God’s upside down, jubilee, generous, communal, heavenly kingdom—and we should not forget the responsibility and calling that this entails.

When we are stewards of God’s church—it’s not just our financial resources that matter, although they are important. Being the stewards of a spiritual community means that each of us has a holy obligation to manage what has been entrusted to us—and that’s everything from our physical space, to our personal gifts, our collective energy, and our vision for the future. If we were to sit down and think about it, we have so many blessings that we should not let go to waste. We have tangible and intangible assets! We have talents! We have community networks! We have this property and proximity to our neighbors! We have 127 years of faithful history! We have passion! We have resilience! We

have willing volunteers! We have a building perfectly designed to serve young families! We have open hearts, open hands, and open doors!

We have been given so much, my friends. And because we have been given so much, there is so much that Jesus knows we are capable of—much is required of us. Jesus knows that we have the power to transform our community using our gifts. Jesus knows that we have the ability to multiply what we've been given and turn it into opportunities for growth. Jesus knows that we are uniquely prepared to do the work that is in front of us. Do we believe this? Do we trust this?

If we don't, and if we turn our backs on this calling and instead choose to bury our treasure in the ground, Jesus would tell us that we have misunderstood his instructions. Jesus would tell us that being scared is not a reason to do what we've been told. Jesus would tell us that the Kingdom of God does not play it safe. God's kingdom is made to be bold, brave, and expansive. God's kingdom isn't meant to be hidden away or concealed.

So my question for us as we wrap up this series is this: what kind of steward are we going to be? What kind of steward are you going to be?

I invite you to think about this week, as you further reflect on this story and consider what God might be asking of you.

Ask yourself: am I stewarding my time well? Am I using my skillset in the best way possible? Am I taking this responsibility to care for God's kingdom seriously? Do I really trust that God has given me and all of us what we need to accomplish our mission?

Remember that this isn't just about our money or literal bags of gold. The job description of a steward is about a more comprehensive responsibility—it has to do with how we manage all aspects of our life. If we take Jesus seriously, or faith in general seriously, then we need to understand that our role as a steward isn't something we can neglect or disregard—it's a fundamental part of

our discipleship and leadership. As we continue this calendar year, finish our Stewardship campaign, and move into new seasons, this call to be God's stewards does not go away—it's always with us. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow—it is our holy obligation—it is both a responsibility and a privilege. Even if our parents didn't name us Stewart, we were born to be stewards.

So let's get to work!

Amen.