



SERMON TITLE: A Strange Stewardship

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SCRIPTURE: John 12:1-8

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"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his own biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

What does it mean to be efficient? It has to include being resourceful, thoughtful, and economic at how we go about life, right? A key component is knowing that there is both task-oriented efficiency and people-oriented efficiency. And true efficiency is knowing which one is most important at any given time, especially because sometimes what might be relationally efficient might not be task-efficient. And it's hard to strike this balance. The term that Christians often use for all of them is "stewardship."

Stewardship is gospel efficiency that views all of life as a gift.

Being a steward is not about being an owner. God owns it. And whatever he has given us – whether a lot or a little – we're called to generously use it for him and his glory. That's stewardship. However, there's a problem. The problem is that our culture lies to us. We are told that efficiency and happiness are had by consuming, hoarding, and insulating ourselves with physical comforts. We fill our lives with wants and deceive ourselves by thinking they're needs. And all along, Jesus is saying things like, "Life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions," and "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Jesus even told one guy to "Go sell all your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me." So, what do we do when the invitations of Jesus seems contrary to how the world seems to think about efficiency, time, money, and possessions? Or better, What should it look to steward what we've been given in a way that displays the worthiness of Jesus? John 12 gives us a surprising answer to this question.

Shortly after Jesus raised Lazarus, Lazarus' family through a dinner party to thank and honor Jesus. As supper was drawing to a close Mary (Lazarus' sister) walked toward Jesus, stooped, let her hair down, poured out a jar of lotion on his feet, and began to use her hair as a towel for his feet. But this was no ordinary lotion or perfume. It was worth an entire year's salary! Doesn't seem like a wise use of money, right? This is definitely not efficiency or stewardship or even sanity for that matter. At least, not to us. Judas understood, so he spoke up, "Uh, why didn't we sell that, and then give the proceeds to the poor?" Now that makes total sense. But Jesus hushes Judas and tells him to leave Mary alone because she's doing something beautiful. He says, "You will always have the poor with you, but won't always have me with you." So, how does this story help us think well about Jesus-honoring stewardship?

John Wesley once wrote, "Whenever I get money, I get rid of it as soon as I can lest it find a way into my heart." Clearly, it's not wrong to have money and stuff. But it's absolutely wrong for money to have you, and money had Judas' heart. Verse 6 says that he was a thief. And so, one of the first steps into Jesus-displaying stewardship is to acknowledge that it's not yours, it can't have you, but rather that it's a gift from God. Just like Mary with the expensive lotion, we should learn to hold all our possessions in an open palm and not a clenched fist. Holding things like our time and money loosely in an open palm means that we want to trust God to use them as he sees fit, and we don't want them to move from a clenched fist into our hearts as idols. Furthermore,

Followers of Jesus should regularly be giving away their time, their money, and their lives to the poor and less fortunate that they might experience God's provision and love.

A surface reading of our passage might conclude the opposite. However, when Jesus says, "You will always have the poor with you," he's insinuating that the Christian norm should be loving and caring for the poor. Doing so is a natural and beautiful response to God's grace and love in the gospel. The early church was so good at this. For the first few hundred years after Jesus, when something like a plague or a Corona-like virus swept through a city, the rich people would up and leave, but the Christians would stay, risk their lives, love the poor, and meet their needs until it passed. We should think of ways to do the same. Rather than using what we have based on what we deem efficient, what if we simply prayed about what we should do with it before we used it. Again, it's all his to begin with!

But there's more. Our story has a unique emphasis. Mary's action here is one of overt, sacrificial extravagance. And Jesus commended her for it! And this extravagance is more than just the price tag on the perfume. In this scene, Mary is shameless in her worship. She's liberated from what people think of her. She's risking the anger of her sister who is busy in the kitchen. She's putting her reputation on the line because a woman letting her hair down like this was scandalous (it's what women often did when they wanted to sell themselves). And then she used her hair as a towel for feet! All to adore Jesus, to praise and thank and love and delight in him. Mary is generously using what she has been given for Jesus and his glory - to put him on display. So much so, that Matthew and Mark both say, "Wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." So, are you ever this shameless and generous in your worship of Jesus? Do you ever lavishly leverage what you've been given for Jesus' sake? Obviously, this will look different for different people, but as followers of Jesus, there should be clear points in our calendars and in our bank statements where it just doesn't make sense to the world. It might even seem reckless, but in reality, it's a step of massive faith to put a spotlight on Jesus. Simply put,

The truest test of Christian stewardship is not in what you have, consume, or acquire, but in *what* and *how* you give away in order to worship and reflect Jesus.

Jesus is not inviting us into something that he has not already done. The cross is the single greatest act of overt, sacrificial extravagance the world has ever seen. And it doesn't make sense to us. But through it, Jesus is calling us to live in the example that he left for us. We're called to do these things *for* Jesus because he has done them *for* us first. This gospel is the foundation and aim of Christian stewardship. We give our lives away for others because that's what he has done to make kingdom come, and make new creation spring forth.

So, let's be grateful that God doesn't use our definitions of efficiency because none of us deserve his love. And let us live with our time, money, resources, and energy in an open palm and not a clenched fist because that's how he held on to his own life. This is what it means to be faithful and wise stewards for Jesus' sake.

Discussion Starters:

1. How should followers of Jesus think about time and money differently than others?
2. Who is a Christian you know is always sacrificial with what they have? Why do you think they're like that?
3. What stood out to you most about this message or this passage?
4. What are ways that you can more intentionally consider and care for the poor?
5. In what ways is the passage forward-looking to the cross and resurrection?
6. What are things in your life that you tend to hold in a clenched fist rather than an open palm?