

How Do You Spell Stewardship?

by Father Harry Pappas

Unfortunately, when most of us hear or read the word “Stewardship,” we instinctively think of it spelled as “\$tewardship,” a code word for giving money to church. It may be politely asked for. It may be clothed in pious language. It may be linked to giving of time and talents. But, in the end, stewardship still means, for most of us: “I must give some of my money so that we can operate the church.”

However, we may have not yet learned to spell this key word as “**S**+ewardship.” The Bible from beginning to end identifies what we now call stewardship as *a way of life centered on God*. And for Christians, this means discipleship centered on *Jesus Christ as Crucified and Risen Lord*. The cross thus dramatically signifies both our identity as *disciples of Christ* and our calling to *a life of sacrificial giving* directed toward God, others, and all creation.

Many people know how to raise money. There are professional experts who work full time. There are more opinions and ideas than parishes know what to do with. And, in fact, raising funds has become a favorite American pastime for public and private schools, political parties, charitable organizations, and legions of athletic and recreational activities. Who needs another fund-raising campaign when we are already inundated with them!

But while there are legions of experts, opinions, and efforts, how many of us are genuinely committed to Christ and the Church and have learned a sound teaching about stewardship based upon Holy Scripture?

In the Old Testament, our Hebrew ancestors based their very existence upon what God had first done for them: through the promises given to the patriarch Abraham, the sacred covenant at Sinai given through Moses, and messianic kingship through David. Since God was their Creator, Savior, and King, ancient Israel worshiped him regularly and on special feast days. They considered the very land upon which they lived as a precious gift from God, and not the result of their own hard work or of their pious virtue. This meant that all products of their livelihood ultimately belonged to God. The biblical tithe (10%) meant that the first and best portion of these material assets were to be returned to God for support of the sanctuary or temple, the ordained ministers, and various human needs (including charity). The rest (90%) was not to be used as each person decided, but rather according to the will of God through each person’s family, home, and vocation. Further, as emphasized by the prophets like Amos and Isaiah, the people of God were to seek justice and righteousness in all their relationships –through business, commerce, legal courts, government, and society. In particular, ancient Israel was to protect, support, and advocate for the poor, oppressed, and weakest members of society.



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In the New Testament, Jesus Christ affirmed this Old Testament stewardship as a way of life based upon God's gracious salvation and his natural gifts through creation. He clearly approved of worship, of tithing, of seeking justice and righteousness in all human relationships, and of service especially to the poor, oppressed, and needy. However, Jesus went way beyond these in offering himself as the perfect steward of God's gracious gifts by his voluntary suffering and death on a cross. In this event, he exemplified that true sacrifice for the sake of others has absolutely no limits. The one who truly loves God and passionately seeks the truth is called to die to self, take up the cross of unjust suffering, and be prepared to live and even die for others, especially those who are hardened in sin and blinded by ingratitude.

In the Church, everyone is called to be a disciple of Christ. This involves conversion – and inward turning of mind and heart toward Christ – and a conscious and deliberate commitment to follow the Lord, no matter what the cost. And true Christian stewardship springs very naturally from such faith and obedience, since it recognizes God as the origin of life, the giver of salvation, and the source of all blessings, visible and invisible. The deeper the conversion and commitment to Christ, the deeper the thanksgiving for these spiritual and material gifts that we have received, and the greater the readiness to use them to show our love for God and those around us.

Jesus Christ sets the true standard of Christian stewardship by which we can measure ourselves. Our stewardship of the good news of salvation should be shown in the following ways:

- *Creation* - joyful appreciation for the wonder and beauty of nature; protection and preservation of the environment; bringing the gifts of creation to the Church for blessing (altar bread, wine, fruits, oil, incense, etc.); development of the material world through holy work (physical labor, professions, arts and sciences); respect for and protection of the sanctity of human life from conception to death.
- *Vocation* - fulfillment of our God-given calling in life as married or single people, adult or child, working or retired, clergy or laity, to extend the love and truth of God in Christ to those around us.
- *Church* - becoming active participants in working out our salvation as members of the Orthodox Church through the Christian nurture of children, regular worship and fellowship; spiritual formation through on-going education; service to one another and to the poor, sick, and needy; cooperating to make our parish a vibrant source of faith and work; and supporting Metropolitan, Archdiocesan, and international ministries that link us to the worldwide Church.

In a culture that frequently encourages us to focus on ourselves, Jesus Christ challenges us to reorient our priorities according to the Kingdom of God breaking into this world. The antidote to greed and selfishness, even when it is masked by religious piety, is genuine repentance and conversion toward Christian stewardship as a new way of living. And what joy there is now for those who turn toward God, learning and living as stewards of the manifold grace that has been offered to us through Christ in the Church!

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