

# Living Richly: The Upward, Inward, Outward, and Forward Aspects of Stewardship

## *Four Week Sermon Series*

By Konnie Vissers

**Overview:** We often think of stewardship in the church as either dominion over resources, or as the practice of giving money. But what if stewardship was more of a mindset about how we view money in relationship to God and others? When churches begin annual stewardship campaigns with an “ask” to meet the bottom line, they not only miss out on dollars and cents—they miss the point! We have an opportunity as believers to think holistically about stewardship and how money affects every area of our lives.

The Bible has a lot to say about money. Jesus had a lot to say about money. Money affects nearly everything in our lives. So churches must look at stewardship as more than a practical necessity to pay the bills, but as a faithful way to grow deeper in our faith and to engage the community around us with the love of Jesus. This series looks at what it means to “live richly,” which has much more to do with the heart than with the wallet.

**Week one** deals with the “upward” aspect of stewardship—stewarding our relationship with God, from God, to God, however you want to look at it. The scripture passage is Matthew 6:19-34, discussing the importance of seeking God first in all things.

**Week two** grapples with the “inward” aspect of stewardship—learning what it means to be content in all circumstances. Paul learned what it meant to be content and generous when he had abundance, and how to make do with joy when he had little. The scripture passage is Philippians 4:10-13.

**Week three** explores “outward” stewardship—how our relationships with others affect our money, and how money affects our relationships with others. The passage of scripture is Acts 2:42-47, where the early believers learned what it meant to hold people tightly and possessions loosely.

**Week four** finally considers “forward” stewardship—what we do with our money, time, and resources. The passage of scripture is the parable of the talents, found in Matthew 25:14-30. Jesus discusses the direct stewardship of financial wealth (which can be applied to spiritual gifts, time, and resources as well), and how we should play that out in kingdom on earth.

If our hearts are out of line with God, with others, or we are discontent in our spirit, then giving of our money does little for our own or others’ spiritual growth. So it is on that trajectory that the series ends with the *act* of giving.

## Week One: Upward Stewardship

### *Focus on God*

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-34 NIV

**19** “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. **20** But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. **21** For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

**22** “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy,[c] your whole body will be full of light. **23** But if your eyes are unhealthy,[d] your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

**24** “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

**25** “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? **26** 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? **27** Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life[e]?

**28** “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. **29** Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. **30** If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? **31** So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ **32** For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. **33** But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. **34** Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

### **Main Point:**

This is the most important week in the sermon series because it sets up the rest of the series. Living richly doesn't happen because you give, it happens because you orient your life toward God. Giving happens naturally out of that state.

### **Quote:**

From *Celebration of Discipline*, by Richard Foster

“Contemporary culture lacks both the inward reality and the outward life-style of simplicity... Because we lack a divine Center our need for security has led us into an insane attachment to things. We really must understand that the lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic. It is psychotic because it has completely lost touch with reality. We crave things we neither need nor enjoy. ‘We buy things we do not want to impress people we do not like.’... Covetousness we call ambition. Hoarding we call prudence. Greed we call industry.”

### **Illustration Ideas:**

1- Walking through a field of sunflowers on a sunny day, you can see their heads literally orient toward the sun. This should be our position with God, oriented toward relationship with Jesus.

2-If you have ever lost your keys, you know what it looks like to tear apart your house to try and find them. This is how you should seek God first...laying aside anything else in your life to pursue Jesus with single-mindedness.

## **Week Two: Inward Stewardship**

### *Contentment with Circumstances*

Scripture: Philippians 4:10-13 NIV

**10** I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. **11** I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. **12** 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. **13** I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

#### **Main Point:**

What does it mean to be content in all circumstances? This aspect of stewardship explores the state of your inward spirit regardless of your external situation. As believers rooted in Jesus, it allows you to be content in all circumstances. Historically, this passage was written by a man named Paul to fellow believers. But Paul's circumstances were far from positive. He was in prison at this point in his life, and depended on Christians to provide food and clothing in prison so that he could survive. This is a life of contentment!

#### **Characteristics of Contentment:**

- dependence on God
- a surrendered, rather than controlling, spirit
- a generous disposition
- a lifestyle of simplicity

#### **Two Types of Contentment:**

The first type of contentment deals with being content with who you are—the idea that you are neither too self-important nor too self-conscious. This attitude is important in allowing God to use you wherever you are. Timothy Keller wrote a short volume called, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, that explains this principle succinctly.

The other type of contentment deals with being content with what you have. This is the traditional idea of contentment—settledness with circumstances. But it is difficult to be settled with your circumstances without first being content with who God has created you to be.

## Week Three: Outward Stewardship

### *Relationships with Others*

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47 NIV

**42** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. **43** Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. **44** All the believers were together and had everything in common. **45** They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. **46** Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, **47** praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

#### **Main Point:**

The way we live today in our present culture, even as believers, is a far cry from the way that the early apostles and believers lived. They allowed their relationships with Jesus to permeate every aspect of their lives, sharing all of their possessions in common with everyone else in the community of faith. But it wasn't a forced form of communism, rather a generous spirit of commonality. The early believers were so focused on God first, that their attitude toward possessions was almost irrelevant. They knew what it meant to hold people tightly and things loosely.

**Communion:** If your congregation doesn't have communion every Sunday, this would be a natural point to celebrate the Lord's Supper. If your denomination allows alternative methods, I would recommend intinction, where each individual rips off a piece of bread and dips it in the cup. After the pastor has explained communion, blessed the elements, and prayed, pass the cup and bread from person to person and have each individual share in the words, "This is Christ's body broken for you," and "This is Christ's blood shed for you," as they pass the bread and wine to their neighbours. This is a physical representation of the communion we share in Christ with one another. A secondary reading may also be helpful from the wedding feast in the book of Revelation.

#### **Application Ideas:**

This is a particularly difficult passage to apply to life in 2018, where we are so far removed from a communal living mindset. Some of the intentional Christian living communities and the resurgence of Protestant monasticism/new monasticism set the bar pretty high for believers who live lives in the suburbs with their nuclear families. Perhaps a radical change in lifestyle is what is called for...but to bridge the gap, here are a few applications that may help the "average" First World believer.

1-Host a small group in your home weekly, gathering believers and non-believers alike to "do" life together. Resist the impulse to make it only a Bible study. But instead share a meal together, share your weeks (your triumphs and challenges), and pray for one another.

2-Opt for communal use instead of owning everything. If there are a group of individuals or families in your community that are at a similar stage in life, consider communally sharing parts of your life. Easy things to hold in common include: kid's clothing (since they outgrow it so quickly), baby toys and equipment, even adult clothing that is rarely worn (certain formal attire, maternity clothing, etc). If you can find even one other family who has kids slightly off in age from your own, you can pass clothes back and forth as well as toys, baby swings, strollers, etc.

3-Share your home. Most people in the United States and Canada live in a larger space than they need. Consider sharing some of the unused space in your home with another person or family. Examples may include a widow allowing a college student to reside with her, a family providing low-rent residence in their basement, housing an international exchange student, or temporarily housing a refugee family until they find a permanent space.

## Week Four: Forward Stewardship

### *Giving of Resources*

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

**14** “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,[a] 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. **19** “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. **20** The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’ **21** “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!’ **22** “The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’ **23** “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!’ **24** “Then the man who had received one bag of gold 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. **25** So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ **26** “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? **27** 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. **28** ““So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. **29** 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. **30** And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

### **Main Point:**

The series culminates in action. Once a person’s heart is aligned with God, their motivations for giving will be right. Once a person feels contentment with their circumstances, they may give cheerfully. And once a person understands the importance of community, possessions become secondary to people. It is then that the “ask” should be made. This final passage on stewardship may seem harsh, demanding a high level of wisdom in stewarding our resources on earth. But when our hearts are in the right place with God, giving away our money, time, and resources comes fairly easily. A secondary scripture (the Widow’s two cents) may be used here as well to remind people that the amount they give doesn’t matter, but what they do with what they have been given.

### **Quote:**

Frederick Buechner: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

### **Ways to Give:**

It is important to give of ourselves in multiple ways. Some people have more of one thing than another. Depending on age as well, some have quite a bit of time to give, but perhaps not as

much money; or more money, but lack the energy to invest time. People of all ages can be invested in the mission of God's kingdom on earth in each of these ways, and one "gift" is not better than the next. It is a matter of obedience to God that we do give, though, regardless of how much or how little we have. Giving our money refocuses our lust for wealth on the joy of sharing. Giving of our time refocuses our personal "busyness" on the truly important things in life. Giving of our resources reminds us that everything we have is a gift from God and meant to be shared.

**Time:** Giving of your time may mean volunteering at the church by hosting, leading children's ministry, or a small group. But it also may mean sewing blankets for a homeless ministry, leading Boy Scouts, or tutoring in an after school program.

**Resources:** Sometimes kids have the most generosity in giving resources. Since many kids don't have their "own" money to give, they may clean out their toys and clothes and donate a great deal. There are many farmers in our community who give a "tithe" of their resources like crops, meat, and even maple syrup. These resources can feed the hungry and provide for real human needs.

**Money:** Perhaps the most obvious way of giving is to give money. The Old Testament commands a 10% tithe, which many Christians today no longer practice. There are many joys in giving the first 10% of your money to God's cause, though. It is a reminder that everything you have is a gift from God. It frees you up to not feel so "bound" by your money. It is an act of obedience. It still allows you to use 90% of your money on yourself, which for most people is more than enough.

This tends to be one of the most difficult "asks," because many people are quite attached to their wealth. Some people use the excuse that they can't tithe yet because they have personal debt, or don't have enough money to tithe, or will tithe when they get to a certain place of settledness in their personal lives. If this is the case...they will likely never "make it" to a place where they are comfortable tithing.

I would recommend reading Art Rainer's *30 Day Money Challenge*. He suggests a "take-off" principle for people who have never given money before or who haven't made it a habit. This means that instead of suddenly giving 10% of your income, you start with 1% the first month, and so on, building up over six months or a year. For people who keep putting off giving their 10% because it is simply too much, this is a good way to begin the practice and gradually work their way up to 10% or more.

The final thing on giving is that the example must be set by the leadership first! You can read my story below,\* but I would encourage you to share your story with your congregation. Be "all in" yourself before you ask others to be "all in."

\*Personally, I have not always tithed, or even given what I should have, because I have used all of the above excuses and then some. When I got married and started ministry, however, my husband and I realized that we couldn't ask others to give to the church if we were not willing to as well. We started tithing first out of obligation, or obedience to God. But as we gave more, our money stopped being so much of a headache. We felt freer and freer, and now we give quite cheerfully. We continued giving our 10% to the church, but now give to other causes/ organizations as well.

It has been the most life-giving thing we could have done with our money. Though there have been months where we weren't sure how we were going to make our student loan payments and still buy food, we have never once gone hungry while tithing. God has been immensely faithful to us in this endeavour. And many prayers have been answered. Though I don't believe God answers prayers *because* we give (that's not good theology), God has always provided for our needs while we were giving.