

Ancient Stewardship

The most familiar teachings on biblical stewardship appear in the New Testament. But, the concept of the faithful administration over a domain that is not our own is as old as creation itself.

²⁶Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." - Genesis 1:26-28

There are two distinct aspects to what is often referred to as the "charter of creation". One is to be fruitful. The other is to "*subdue*" (or, rule, exercise dominion over) creation. Fruitfulness refers not only to the multiplication of the race, but also to bringing forth the fruit of labor. Rule over creation means to learn from it and to master it so that we can be as productive as possible. A supremely productive God created man in His own image and He immediately called His image-bearer to be productive, imitating Him in this regard. A concern for productivity is rooted in creation.

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that issues of labor and productivity ceased to be critically important when the New Testament came into being. Some tend to think of the New Testament as more concerned with spiritual and relational matters like loving one another, getting along, prayer, *etc.* But, I would suggest to you that issues of loving one another, getting along and in many instances, even prayer are rapidly rendered meaningless when divorced from the mundane and down-to-earth issues of how we produce and manage our resources with an eye to how we can do good with them.

³²All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. ³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. ³⁴There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. - Acts 4:32-35

... If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? - 1 John 3:17

Through the Law of Moses, the Old Testament was quite specific as to how much of this and that the Israelites were to turn back over to God. It was also specific as to how the community was to care for its poor and fund its religious life. God took a financial risk when He released the New Testament Christian from the Old Testament Law. To us, it almost seems speculative on His part to rely on His people to simply do the right thing with wealth they are so easily tempted to consider their own. Still, any professed believer who uses the fact that we are not under law as an excuse to be selfish, miserly, irresponsible with resources, slothful, insensitive to the plight of the poor or indifferent to the work of the church has missed the point of why Christ cancelled the written code. That person should critically examine his love for Christ.

God could take this risk of releasing His people from the Law because He would now inscribe the essence of His law, eventually, over the course of their sanctification, upon their hearts. In the meantime, Paul wrote to the Corinthians about simply giving what they had decided in their hearts to give. That was as high-handed as he wanted to get with them. He knew that where hearts were right with God, resources for ministry would always be sufficient. And, if giving has to be a matter of arm-twisting, manipulation or guilt-piling, God does not desire such resources, for His people learn nothing through such tactics.

The highest incentive toward proper Christian financial stewardship is never some preacher or elder trying to shame you as he wrings his hands over some ugly end-of-the-month report. It is the people of God wanting to do the right thing by God, not just in issues pertaining to the local church, but in all areas of financial management, because they understand that they are only stewards of what is His. They understand that they are not title-holders to anything that they can call their own.

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