

The Disciple as Steward

Sharon Hueckel

A six-week, small group study of the Stewardship
Pastoral, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*

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Introduction

This 6-week study of the United States Catholic bishops' pastoral on stewardship, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, was written by Sharon Hueckel, Director of Stewardship, for use in the Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana. Most parishes in the diocese had been participating in the RENEW process developed under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Newark, New Jersey, beginning in the fall of 1991. That process would have ended in Advent, 1993. This effort, "The Disciple as Steward," was written to introduce the bishops' pastoral in the spring of 1994, using the format and small groups established during the preceding five seasons of RENEW. It attempts to include as much as possible of the substance of *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, and direct quotations from that letter have been used liberally throughout.

"The Disciple as Steward" could also be used as an intensive 6-week introduction to stewardship by a parish stewardship committee before a parish embarks on a formal stewardship "program."

Stewardship Prayer

*Oh Lord, giver of life and source of our freedom,
we are reminded by the Psalmist that Yours is
"the earth and its fullness;
the world and those who dwell in it."
We know that it is from Your hand that we
have received all we have and are and will be.
Gracious and loving God, we understand that
You call us to be the stewards of Your abundance,
the caretakers of all You have entrusted to us.
Help us always to use Your gifts wisely
and teach us to share them generously.
May our faithful stewardship bear witness to
the love of Christ in our lives.
We pray with grateful hearts, in Jesus' name.
Amen.*

Session 1

Stewardship: The Challenge and the Choice

Focus

The pastoral defines stewardship as “a sharing, generous, accountable way of life rooted in Christian discipleship” (*Stewardship*, 5). It is not optional; it is a necessary outcome of the faith we profess.

Sharing Experience

BACKGROUND

The word “stewardship” sometimes carries considerable baggage. Very often we equate stewardship with simply giving money. But the U.S. Catholic bishops had something much more broadly encompassing in mind when they wrote the stewardship pastoral, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*. In the introduction to that pastoral letter, they spell out what they mean by stewardship and the understandings that are the basis of their definition:

“Three convictions in particular underlie what we say in this pastoral letter. 1. Mature disciples make a conscious, firm decision, carried out in action, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost to themselves. 2. Beginning in conversion, change of heart and mind, this commitment is expressed not in a single action, nor even in a number of actions over a period of time, but in an entire way of life. It means committing one's very self to the Lord. 3. Stewardship is an expression of discipleship, with the power to change how we understand and live out our lives. Disciples who practice stewardship recognize God as the origin of life, the giver of freedom, the source of all they have and are and will be . . . They are grateful for what they have received and eager to cultivate their gifts out of love for God and one another” (*Stewardship*, 1).

Although the bishops have defined discipleship and stewardship in a single, short paragraph, the challenge to live that life of stewardship is by no means simple. In fact, it may be more difficult in our time and in our culture than ever before. The bishops talk of a number of destructive “isms”—materialism, relativism, hedonism, individualism, consumerism—which exert a powerful influence on our society and make it more difficult for us to grow as disciples and for the Church to live out its mission. They see themselves, and us, as “Catholic citizens of a wealthy, powerful nation facing many questions about its identity and role in the waning years of a troubled century, members of a community of faith blessed with many human and material resources yet often uncertain about how to sustain and use them” (*Stewardship*, 5-6) And they invite us to accept the challenge and make the choice “to renew our commitment as the Lord's disciples and as stewards of his bountiful gifts.”

QUESTION

What do you see as the major obstacle(s) to practicing stewardship in the context of Christian discipleship?

Listening to the Word

INVOCATION

Begin the reading of the Scriptures with this short prayer (or another of your own choosing) followed by a few moments of silence: **Enlighten us, oh Lord, with the light of Your truth. Help us to see and know what You would have us learn in the reading of Your Word. Amen.** Then read the passages aloud.

Luke 12:35-48

"Gird your loins and light your lamps and be like servants who await their master's return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them. And should he come in on the second or third watch and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants. Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour when the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You must also be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come."

Then Peter said, "Lord, is this parable meant for us or is it for everyone?" And the Lord replied, "Who, then, is the faithful and prudent servant whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute [the] food allowance at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom the master on arrival finds doing so. Truly, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property. But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, to eat and drink and get drunk, then that servant's master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him to a place with the unfaithful. That servant who knew his master's will but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will shall be beaten severely; and the servant who was ignorant of his master's will but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating shall be beaten only lightly. Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.

1 Corinthians 4:1-2

Thus should one regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Now it is of course required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

BACKGROUND

"An *oikonomos* or steward is one to whom the owner of a household turns over the responsibility for caring for the property, managing affairs, making resources yield as much as possible and sharing the resources with others. The position involves trust and accountability" (*Stewardship*, 20).

Both readings clearly imply that it is possible for a steward to be unworthy of his position. Jesus suggests that a servant might betray his master's trust in any number of ways—from failure to be ready for the master's coming to drunkenness and abuse of the other servants. And He says explicitly that such failure to exercise proper stewardship will be met with severe penalties. But it is also worth noting that poor stewardship which results from ignorance, from the failure to understand the master's will, is also deserving of punishment. If we are to be good stewards, we must both *know* and *do* the will of God.

Sharing the Word

QUESTIONS

(Read the Scriptures again silently; then share your responses to these questions:)

- What does stewardship mean to me?
- The Gospel reading equates stewardship with readiness—the good steward is found ready and waiting to serve when his master returns. In what ways does the Lord call me to stand ready? If I truly expected the Lord to return at any moment, what things might I have to change to be ready for His coming?
- The steward in the parable is the one in charge of distributing the food allowance at the appropriate time (Lk 12:41). What gifts do I have the responsibility to distribute, and do I see clearly when, and to whom?

Prayer

Lord, we thank You for bringing us together in Your name. We have come to speak and to listen, to pray and to share, that we may better understand what it means to be Your disciples, to be the stewards of Your many gifts. We believe that You are present among us as You promised, Lord; and so with confidence, we bring our prayers before you:

That like the good steward in the Gospel, we may be ready when the Master comes, we pray to the Lord . . .

Lord, hear our prayer.

That we may know and do what You ask of us, and so be found trustworthy, we pray to the Lord . . .

Lord, hear our prayer.

(Here give opportunity for other intercessions . . . and then conclude with the bishops' petition from the stewardship pastoral and the Stewardship Prayer:)

"That the Holy Spirit, whose gracious action conforms us to Jesus Christ and to the Church, will enlighten us all and help us to renew our commitment as the Lord's disciples and as stewards of his bountiful gifts," we pray to the Lord . . .

Lord, hear our prayer.

Oh Lord, giver of life and source of our freedom, we are reminded by the Psalmist that Yours is "the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it." We know that it is from Your hand that we have received all we have and are and will be. Gracious and loving God, we understand that You call us to be the stewards of Your abundance, the caretakers of all You have entrusted to us. Help us always to use Your gifts wisely and teach us to share them generously. May our faithful stewardship bear witness to the love of Christ in our lives. We pray with grateful hearts, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Follow Through

Together, we have read and reflected on parts of the bishops' pastoral letter on stewardship, we have heard and meditated on portions of Scripture in order to better understand the life of discipleship and stewardship to which our faith calls us, and we have shared our insights, our experiences, and our prayers. But the Bible reminds us that "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:26). Ideally, our sharing should lead each of us to constructive, concrete actions to reinforce what we have learned and encourage our growth in faith. The following are some examples to spur your thinking:

- Demonstrate readiness by reading and reflecting on the materials for the next meeting.
- Be conscious of—and record—the times this week when you make a commitment and follow through with it. The faithful steward is trustworthy!
- If, during the sharing, you thought of things in your life you would change if you believed the Lord's return was imminent, choose one and take the first steps toward changing it this week.
- Make a list of the gifts that are yours to share. Determine which you are most hesitant to share and reflect on the reasons for your reluctance.

Because those intentions we have defined most clearly are the ones we are most likely to act upon, write your "follow through" intention here, and share it with the group if you are comfortable doing so.

Date: _____