

[Sermon notes developed from a paper by James K. Varner]

In Matthew 23:17 Jesus calls the Scribes and Pharisees, *blind fools*. In Luke 12, he calls the rich man a *fool*. When Jesus calls someone a *fool*, it would be wise for us to stop, look, and listen. It may be that his rebuke concerning their folly could serve as a warning to us today.

There are two significant facts to note as I share this message:

1. Jesus' judgment of their folly was something they failed to do. We usually think of God's judgment for doing something, as something to do with committing a serious sin.

While it is true that Jesus' judgment of the Pharisees suggests moral wrong, the abuse of the widows (23: 14), lack of mercy (23:23), and extortion (23:25), these men considered themselves very religious and proved it by faithfully giving their tithes. We must note their folly was not in what they did as much as in what they failed to do.

In the rich fool's story, there is no mention of serious moral failure (as in Luke 16:19), the rich man and Lazarus. He was very successful and could have been candidate for Man of the Year in the usual standards of character. His folly was failing to recognize the true value of material possessions.

2. Jesus' judgment was in relationship to their handling of money and material possessions. And their mistake is still with us today.

The Pharisees assumed that God was more interested in arithmetic than character. As long as they paid their tithes, they were *spiritual* men. Today, we still measure *spirituality* by what we do on Sunday – going to church, giving to the church, etc. Giving is important but is not the sum total of Christian stewardship.

The rich man made the mistake of, assuming that life consisted in the wealth he possessed (see Good news Bible), that all there was to successful living could be measured in a bank balance and business inventory. He invested everything he had in himself and in his happiness.

There is a story from the southern states about a man who was buried in a brand-new Cadillac. Someone remarked, *What a way to go!* The real question is, *Which way did he go?* And when a wealthy man died, the question was well asked, *How much did he leave?* The cryptic reply came back, *All of it!*

This morning I would like to consider Christian Stewardship to identify and apply some biblical principles which tell us how life is to be lived and how we must use our material resources so that we will not be judged as fools by God.

Simply stated, stewardship or Christian life management involves all of life – not just money or Sunday activities. It is interesting to note in the Bible that two times the word *steward* is used, in reference to spiritual gifts (1 Peter 4:10), and ministries (1 Corinthians 4: 1-2). But we will make a serious mistake if we give it only that narrow definition.

Our text warns us that God is interested not only in our religious activities including our giving, but the management of all life.

The Pharisees thought stewardship was measured only by tithing, but God was just as interested in their daily life and their relationships with each other.

The rich man thought he *owned and operated* his own business and gave no thought to the fact that someone else, namely God, could be involved. There is no more to raising crops than plowing, sowing, harvesting, storing, and selling. Who made the sunshine, the rain to fall, etc.

Stewardship will cause us to see all of life as a gift from God. Most of us divide life into neat little sections: we have God and the church; we have business and vocation; we have family and marriage; we have our recreation; we have social relationships with each other; and etc..

The only area where we consider God's will is that area we would mark as God / church / religion, unless you're a preacher or a missionary, then include vocation. All of life must be *in God's will*.

In financial stewardship, God is not only interested in tithes or gifts, but in what we do with the rest. Our *lifestyle* says more than we want said about what is first - most important in our life.

Jesus said God is to be first (Luke 12:31). Satan's most successful strategy is to convince us that God will take second, third, fourth place? The fact that He will be in first place or the *wrong place*. And we can't or will not decide what is second third or fourth until we know what is first. And that includes God's will in the use of material and financial resources.

Second, stewardship means we are accountable for all of life.

Most of us worry about having to answer to God for sins or wrongs. What a shame, when we have accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour and received his forgiveness. (That is not a license to sin).

We ought to be more concerned about Jesus' warning that we will give an account "for every idle word", and Paul's reminder that we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ and "everyone will give an account of themselves to God". (Romans 14:10, 12).

That is not to strike fear in and anxiety in our hearts, but responsibility and accountability. Implied in stewardship is being a trustee. Of course, if we believe we are self-made (as the rich fool did) and what we have is "ours", then we are accountable only to ourselves. But if we recognize that all of life and especially "eternal life", which by the way doesn't begin after we die, but when we are saved, is the gift of God (John 3:16) then we are accountable for all of life.

William Keech wrote The Life I Owe:

To talk about stewardship means to talk about a way of living.

It means using everything we are, everything we do, every cent we spend, every minute, all the power and influence we have within the will and purpose of God.

To be specific how it influences our life and credit buying, if we recognized that we are spending God's money? Or how many dresses, suits, kitchen appliances, recreation toys, etc., would we have it each one was purchased because "it was God's will".

I'm not being silly or simplistic. This is serious business our standard style of living will reflect either selfish, what I want, or godliness, what is God's will for me. And I'm talking to me as is the preacher, not just you.

Third, stewardship is judged by long-term investments as well as immediate uses.

The truth of the matter is that most of the things we spend our life getting don't last very long. A home, 30 to 35 years; a car, 5 to 10 years; a dress or suit, six months to two years; a movie, two hours; a smoothie, 20 minutes. In today's marketplace, harvest or environs will be worthless next week or next year due to inflation if it doesn't rot first.

I'm not sure I understand all the Jesus means in Luke 12:34, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Matthew adds, lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. Matthew five. 19 – 20.

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I do know that H meant that most of our investments are temporary and temporal. The tragedy is that not only do they decay and devalue, but they demand our time and energy. How many of you are working to pay for them? Are we really happier because we are making more money and have a higher standard of living than at any other time in history?

Don't misunderstand. I am not talking about going back to the so-called "good old days", because I remember some of the times that we called, "hard times".

Not denying ownership of property nor enjoyment of goods. Self-denial is not self-depreciation. We can use and enjoy material goods. Our goods must not become our gods.

But we cannot buy happiness, peace of mind, or satisfaction with life. Use material resources to invest in things that will last and will be productive for years to come in doing God's will and work.

It has been well said, "together we build", thus we will provide buildings for worship, evangelism, ministry etc. for years beyond my lifetime. My wife and I recognize recently for that for all our life we were ministered to in churches built and provided by others, including our parents. We decided it was time to make an investment in the lives of others. We decided to make an investment in a ministry that could last 50 - 100 years or until Christ comes again. And we have no way of knowing what God will accomplish through that small stewardship.

We do know that whatever is in houses, cars, the bank, or even in an estate will last only, as long as the dollars last and either we or our heirs own it. Either way, the material possession or the owner will die. And then as Jesus says, "*whose shall those things be, which (we) have provided?*"

STEWARDSHIP recognizes that all of life must be lived as a gift from God.

Again from William Keech, The Life I Owe, (page 20),

Christian stewardship is the dedication of all I am and have, under the control of God's Spirit in Christ, to the doing of His will, in recognition of His Lordship, and in gratitude for His love, in every area of my life, in the service of His redemptive fellowship.

If you have not succeeded, maybe new management is needed!

A poem from Helen Steiner Rice that some of you may be familiar with:

Nothing goes right, everything is wrong,
You stumble and fall as you trudge along,
The other guy wins, but you always lose,
Whatever you hear is always "bad news".
Well, here's some advice that's worth a try,
Businessmen use it when they want a New High –
So "old management" goes and the "new" comes in,
For this is the way BIG BUSINESS CAN WIN...
So if you aren't trying to manage your life,
Yet all around is chaos and strife,
Make up your mind that you too, need a change
And start making plans to somehow rearrange
The way that you think and the things that you do
And what are the things that are hindering you.
Then put yourself under God's "Management" now,
And when He takes over you'll find that somehow
Everything changes, "Old Things Pass Away,"
And "the darkness of night" becomes "the brightness of day" ---
For God can transform and change into "Winners",
The Losers, and Sceptics, and even Sinners! Amen.