

Stewards as Managers

Stewards in biblical times were often slaves who, despite their bondage, possessed exceptional learning and ability. Many had once been people of rank and status. Perhaps bankruptcy had reduced them to slavery. Indebted families were commonly sold at auctions and the income used to satisfy the creditors. Others were enslaved as a result of war. The Romans offset the cost of military campaigns by selling captives as slaves. These included men and women from all social strata.

People of wealth regularly procured such experience, highly-trained slaves for positions of special trust. These “slave-stewards” might be placed in charge of the owner’s children, his business, or portions of his estate. Their enslavement notwithstanding, these stewards had sweeping responsibilities.

To be sure, not all stewards were slaves. In the parables of Jesus, we find both bond-servants and free men serving as stewards. But the doctrine of Christian stewardship draws on the analogy of the steward enslaved to his master.

It is hardly fashionable for Christians to think of themselves as slaves. We prefer the word “servant.” It is softer in tone, and far less demanding. In our language servants are wage earners who negotiate their working conditions and are free to seek other employment. They yield some prerogatives to their employer, but otherwise retain basic control of their lives. Perhaps that explains our preference for the word “servant.” We are not yet ready to relinquish total control to Christ.

To call ourselves “bond-slaves,” however, confronts us with the probing question, “Who owns my life?” The first principle of Christian stewardship is the realization that “I am not my own; I have been bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). But Jesus has not made me his bond-slave to demean me. He instead wants to entrust me with splendid responsibilities. That is why he emphasizes stewardship in his parables.

The Qualities of a Steward

In the ancient world not every slave could be made a steward. Many lacked the aptitudes and the strength of character which the function required. From the parables we learn that good stewards were:

- trustworthy
- self-starters
- always aware of their accountability
- diligent in carrying out their master's expectations
- ready to give a reckoning at any moment

These same qualities, of course, are hallmarks of Christian conduct. That is why Jesus borrowed so many stewardship analogies when he taught about discipleship. For him stewardship encompassed one's total existence and how it was managed.

Unfortunately, we have not retained that emphasis. Christians today rarely hear of "stewardship" apart from financial contexts. More often than not, sermons on stewardship center on budgetary shortfalls and the need for greater contributions. We have reduced Christian stewardship to the issue of how we use our money.

Nor must we neglect the financial implications of stewardship. But it has implications which are equally urgent in other arenas of life. *Properly understood, stewardship is a matter of Christian living, not just Christian giving.*

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Excerpted from *You Are Not Your Own: Becoming God's Steward* by Dr. Mike Armour, published by College Press.