

Stewarding God's Gifts



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Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, CA, on Sunday, July 11, 2021

Last Sunday, during our block party, I spoke for a few minutes about Biblical freedom—the freedom to give oneself away.

The idea of freedom is usually advanced for self-serving purposes—freedom to live where I want, to marry whom I want, to play as I want, to protect myself from others, and to enrich myself as I choose. Generally speaking, there is nothing improper or ungodly about those goals—it's just that they are sharply focused on oneself. We tend to think of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as MY life, MY liberty, and MY happiness.

Is that really any different than anyone anywhere would like? There's certainly nothing particularly Christian about such pursuits.

Radical Freedom

God has proposed a radically different perspective in the Bible: not the freedom to get for oneself, but the freedom to give oneself away.

According to Jesus, *“There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.”* (John 15:13)

But before we consider such extreme sacrifice as that, God asks us to give ourselves to HIM, as a living sacrifice.

“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him.” (Romans 12:1)

This is a unique offering—dead (as a sacrifice), yet somehow still alive. We must die, while we continue to live.

From the example of Jesus, we discover that that means to die to self-determination and self-will, and live to do what God wants us to do. Jesus explained, *“the Son can do nothing by Himself. He does only what He sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.”* (John 5:19)

Beyond the Law

Paul, an apostle of Christ, proclaimed our freedom from the Old Testament laws: *“But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power.”* (Romans 7:6)

As I said to you last Sunday, if you still live by “shoulds” and “oughts,” then it’s not God you’re serving, but some image of Him that you hold in your thoughts. Images of God are idols—substitutes for God, of human construction, whether imaginary or material. And idolatry is forbidden.

The problem may not be with the rules or rituals—for the Law of God is good and holy—but with the fact that you serve them, instead of Him. Some people are always looking for ways to replace the living God—to lead you out of personal fellowship with Him into remote conformity of behavior to an image of what He wants (and the devil loves this, and lends his considerable persuasion to the goal). That’s idolatry, be it ever so religious.

“But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. (And here’s the intended result:) Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit.” (Romans 7:6)

The Law has not been abolished, but it is no longer our master—Jesus Christ is. We may not follow a rulebook, but we still keep the rules, as the Holy Spirit applies them and leads us.

Jesus said, *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away.”* (Mark 13:31)

It’s not about different rules, or no rules—it’s about daily fellowship with the Rulegiver. If we walk closely with Him, His rules don’t seem arbitrary; they seem appropriate—they make sense.

I suggested that our American freedom is not freedom from being governed, but from the manner in which we had been governed—monarchical privilege, taxation without representation, and forced religion. Based on the Bible’s teachings, we created, instead, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

We still have rules, if we want to avoid chaos.

We still pay taxes, if we want good roads and dependable services.

We still have authorities over us who can call the shots, but we have a say in who they are and what shots should and should not be called.

None of this works perfectly, because, needless to say, we ourselves don't work perfectly. We are flawed people, operating in flawed systems.

Hope is Found

Our hope of improvement is not primarily in fixing the rules, for there is no end of that process. As an example, "the law of the Lord is PERFECT," and you know how poorly we've done with keeping that!

And our hope cannot be found in changing behavior, which our endless rules and educational indoctrination attempt to achieve, as our overcrowded courts and prisons attest.

Our hope lies in improving our relationships—first, with the Lord, and then with one another. And the key to relational improvements lies, not in simply finding the best one, but in growing them. For instance, one common relational myth is "love at first sight." I'm not suggesting that love never strikes "at first sight," for I'm sure it does, if by "love" you mean strong attraction.

I'll never forget the day that Martha Stearn walked into our church in San Francisco. My pastor called me over and introduced us and asked me to show her to our Sunday School class. Before me stood an attractive young woman with bright eyes and a warm, winning smile—and I was struck. She became part of our young adult group, a member of our church, and a close friend... maybe too close.

Often, when I would kneel to pray, I was interrupted by the image of her face, smiling at me. So distracting! I would rebuke the devil for interfering with my prayers, and move on. It was some weeks later when I mentioned this to Martha, and she said the same thing was happening to her! We were struck!

From that point on, I began to wonder—since it happened to *both* of us, and it didn't go away, though we both prayed it would—if it might be a God-thing. Lo and behold, it was. And we agreed to marry.

But, looking back now (47 years, this month), that was both the most exhilarating and the most shallow love we have shared, for our continuing relationship has demanded of us both improvements too numerous to count. Please notice, I didn't say "personal improvements," but "relational improvements."

“Personal improvements” would refer to changes in personality by one or both of us—like the one who is more spontaneous becoming more regimented, or the one who is more punctual becoming more relaxed, or the one who is more messy becoming more tidy, or the one who is more cerebral becoming more verbal. In fact, many just such changes HAVE occurred, but not nearly as often or as quickly as we would have liked. Personality growth often takes years to become second nature—and even then, it remains SECOND nature.

Behavioral change happens much more quickly—it can be almost instantaneous—but it doesn’t last, until personality growth takes place to undergird it. In the meantime, relational improvement or growth is the bridge over troubled waters. I’m referring to apologies, forgiveness, patience, understanding, and yielding.

Apologies. Forgiveness. Patience. Understanding. Yielding. These actions—both inward and outward—are the keys that improve our relationships, right now, while our personalities incrementally adjust.

Curiously, these same actions also improve our relationship with Jesus Christ, even more quickly than they do with other people, for He is always agreeable and receptive of such entreaties. It is by these means that we learn to give ourselves away—to the Lord and to each other. And every time we do, our relationship takes a giant step forward (even if our personality only inches ahead). That is real love in action.

And that’s why Jesus said that all the rules of the law and the nagging of the prophets are fulfilled (and will seem to go away) if we follow these two commands:

“ ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

When you do these two things from the heart—love God supremely, and love others sacrificially—you are no longer a compulsory slave to this world. You are becoming, instead, a responsible steward in God’s free Kingdom.

Responsible Stewardship

That’s real freedom—the freedom to give yourself away.

Are you free to give yourself away? Because that’s the only freedom that matters. If you balk at giving yourself away... If you lock up when an opportunity arises... then you don’t know true freedom yet.

If you won't do your part, then others may not be able to do theirs, because the Kingdom to which God has welcomed us is thoroughly interconnected and interdependent. As Paul explained (1 Corinthians 12):

"To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (verse 7), "so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another" (verse 25). This describes life in the Spirit of Christ and the purpose for which God provides spiritual gifts, but that's not a new truth.

Hezekiah was king of Judah about 700 B.C. and was responsible for reforming the spiritual practices of God's people, who had fallen into brazen idolatry and religious heresy. He revived the faith of Jehovah among the people, and restored the priests to their sacred duties.

The priests had laid aside their sacred duties. They had given up guiding the people; instead, they accommodated the people's wishes. Instead of proclaiming the supreme holiness of Jehovah, the priests themselves also worshiped other gods and practiced idolatry.

The people had ceased supporting the priests, so the priests had to support themselves however they could. Thus, their thoughts were also turned toward self-support instead of priestly duty. Hezekiah's vision for revival included a transformed priesthood. They had become priests in name only; the focus of their vision and deliberateness of activity had to be restored. So...

2 Chronicles 31:4; AMP He commanded the people living in Jerusalem to give the portion due the priests and Levites, that they might [be free to] give themselves to the Law of the Lord.

While you may not hold a leadership title in the organized and structured local church, God has called ALL of His people to function in a priestly manner—that includes interceding with God in prayer on behalf of others (representing people to God), and caring for one another (especially the weaker ones among us) by helping in various ways (representing God to people). In a word, SERVING.

Service is our stewardship of God's gifts.

Gifts for the Church

You will find three lists of God's gifts to His people in the New Testament—in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. They are not exhaustive lists, but suggestive. The three categories are described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 as gifts, ministries, and expressions. I generally call these:

The Father's gifts (Romans 12:6-8) – motivational or perceptual expressions (how we perceive life's meaning and the values that move us):

Prophesying, serving, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, showing mercy

The Son's gifts (Ephesians 4:11) – ascension ministries (gifts Christ gave for the interim of His absence):

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, teaching pastors

The Spirit's gifts (1 Corinthians 12:8-10) – supernatural gifts (to achieve a supernatural unity of the body of Christ):

A word of wisdom, a word of knowledge, faith, healings, effecting miracles, prophecy, distinguishing spirits, kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues

To thoroughly discuss these marvelous manifestations of God's grace to His church is beyond a Sunday morning message, but I do want to say four things about them:

1. *Supernatural gifts are given for specific opportunities.* That is, they are not possessions of the recipient to use at will, although some may demonstrate certain gifts frequently. *"One and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills."* (1 Corinthians 12:11)

2. *Ministry gifts are for equipping the church.* They are leadership gifts designed to impart grace and understanding to God's people for their service. *"For the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."* (Ephesians 4:12-13)

3. *Motivational gifts are universal (everyone's got one).* They express how God made each of us and the values we bring to the table. *"We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly."* (Romans 12:6)

4. *Find your S.H.A.P.E. and discover how God has wired you.* In summary, S.H.A.P.E. is an acronym for five areas of reflection:

S – *Spiritual gifts* (What gift operates in my life?)

H – *Heart* (What am I passionate about?)

A – *Abilities* (What do I naturally do, better than others?)

P – *Personality* (How has God wired me to navigate life?)

E – *Experience* (Where have I been? What have I learned?)

As you reflect on each of these areas, and begin to identify how God has framed you and formed you, ask yourself, "Am I living according to the Creator's design, or have I resisted or rebelled against Him?" This will give you a roadmap for prayer, for personal growth, and perhaps for counsel with a pastor, to learn how to shift in the right direction.

The sum of your findings will sharpen your focus on how God has framed and formed you, and give you a handle for applying the three lists of gifts to your own life and service.

Remember, your service in and through the church is your stewardship of God's gifts. And, as Paul reminded us, *"Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful."* (1 Corinthians 4:2)

Today, let us close by asking the Lord to help us identify His gifts in our lives, and grow in our faithfulness in these areas, so that we may contribute effectively to the church that the Lord Jesus Christ is building.