

## The Haves Versus the Have Nots — Bonita Joyner Shields

### Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

Many years ago, my husband and I were in the market for new windows for our home. We met with the window salesperson and discovered that the cost of the windows was much higher than we had thought. As the salesperson questioned us, we stated, "Honestly, we don't want to spend that much money on windows." He replied, "Thank you for your honesty. So often people will say to me, 'We can't afford it,' when I know they can. They just don't want to spend the money."

That conversation has stuck with me because it reveals that *too often we focus on what we need rather than on what we have*. Sure, the cost of the windows may have been a hardship for many people, but more often than not, the problem is not "I can't afford it," but "I have money, but I don't want to spend my money in that way."

What does that have to do with stewardship and giving? As Christians, we also tend to focus more on what we *need* rather than what we *have*. And rather than we believing that God has already blessed us immensely, express gratitude for those blessings, and believe that He will continue to bless us, *we often talk and live as if it's never enough*.

What is "enough"? What would our lives look like if we were to view them through the lens of abundance and sufficiency, rather than scarcity and insufficiency? How can an understanding of stewardship be a means for us to focus on our abundance (what we have) rather than our scarcity (what we don't have)?

### THE TRUE NATURE OF STEWARDSHIP

The dictionary definition of stewardship is "the conducting, supervising, or managing of something. . . the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care"<sup>1</sup>. Thus, a steward is one entrusted with the management of property or affairs not his or her own.

That's the foundation of stewardship: *our stuff is not really ours*. Whether it's our time, our abilities, our possessions, our money, our bodies, they all are gifts on loan from God. For many, though, the thought that our stuff is not really ours is not a welcomed thought. *I worked for my stuff!* However, I believe a clear understanding of the true nature of stewardship will replace this indignation with gratitude and joy and allow us to experience the abundance that Jesus spoke about in John 10:10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (NIV).

What is the true nature of stewardship? There are three aspects of being a Christian steward that can help us to answer that question.

1. Being a Christian steward begins with the knowledge of who God is and who we are.

*Who is God?*

CREATOR: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1, NIV). David also tells us in Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (ESV).

*Everything* we have in life comes from God. Genesis 1 also tells us that He entrusted us with the *management* of everything He created. But it doesn't make it any less His.

It reminds me of the story about how God was once approached by a scientist who said, "Listen God, we've decided we don't need you anymore. These days we can clone people, transplant organs, and do all sorts of things that used to be considered miraculous."

God replied, "Don't need me, huh? How about we put your theory to the test. Why don't we have a competition to see who can make a human being; say, a male human being."

The scientist agrees, so God declares they should do it like He did in the good old days when he created Adam.

"Fine," says the scientist, as he bends down to scoop up a handful of dirt."

"Whoa!" says God, shaking his head in disapproval. "Not so fast. Get your own dirt."

While the foundation of stewardship is that our stuff is not our own, keep in mind that it's not because we have a selfish God who hasn't learned to share; it's because *we* are selfish and have a difficult time sharing. Acknowledging God as Creator, and, thus Owner, teaches us gratitude. It reminds us that we have a loving heavenly Father who is able and willing to meet all of our needs. It also reminds us that we don't have to live in a scarcity mindset of never having enough *for ourselves or for others*; our Father owns it all. Even the dirt.

Billy Graham once said, "Heaven is full of answers to prayers that no one has thought to ask." Why don't we ask? Because we view the world—and God—through the lens of scarcity. "It's too petty to ask God for that." OR "It's too much to ask." But, at the heart of the matter is the fact that we're really not sure He can or will do it. We forget the words of Jesus: " 'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matt. 7:7-11, NKJV).

Of course, this text is not intended to say that we will get everything we ask for. God is not a celestial Santa Claus, and our prayers are not Christmas lists to be filled. This text tells us that we can ask for anything, and our heavenly Father will give it if it is a *good gift* for us.

Which brings us to the question:

*Who are we?*

HIS CHILDREN: "See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1, NLT).

We are also sinners, and we lost our God-given stewardship of His creation when we chose to believe Satan's lies about God's true character and identity. Thus, many view God as doing everything He can to find fault with us. And if He finds some flaw, it's over. However, for those who know the true character of God, they know that He is doing everything He can to save us and to reinstate us as stewards of His creation and blessings. His grace is abundant—and sufficient! And this act of stewardship is one way that He employs to assist us in this salvation. "And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? And if you are not faithful with other people's things why should you be trusted with things of your own?" (Luke 16:11, 12, NLT).

Whether it's managing God's money, His property, His household, His creation (us and the earth), our relationship with His other children, or His grace, have we been faithful? Have we cared for them wisely? The physical world is a reflection of spiritual reality. Thus, how we handle another person's stuff (and treat their children) tells a lot about our souls.

Which brings us to the second aspect of being a Christian steward:

2. Being a Christian steward involves the management of our heavenly Father's affairs on earth, which includes not only tangible but intangible possessions.

When people hear the word *stewardship*, they often just yawn and give that dear-in-the-headlights look. But stewardship is life-changing! Stewardship involves our entire being. And, yes, it involves money. I hear you saying, "Now you've gone to meddlin'!" But did you know that the Bible contains more than 2,000 verses that deal with money. Our use of money—not how much we have—is a barometer of our priorities and spiritual condition. Christian writer and theologian, Jim Wallis, states it quite strongly: "A budget is a moral document."<sup>2</sup>

For example, one church I know said that they valued children. Yet, when you reviewed the budget, you realized that when \$16,000 was given to the music ministry and \$1,000 was given to children's ministries, children were *not* a priority. Or, let's get personal. We may say that we value God's kingdom work and giving to worthy causes. However, if our budget reveals that we give five percent of our earnings to God's work and charities, yet we spend 15 percent of our earnings on entertainment, what is truly our priority?

But stewardship encompasses not only tangible possessions, such as homes, property, money; it also encompasses intangible possessions, such as our time, our abilities, our health, our relationships, our planet, and even God's grace. In all of these areas of our lives, we often live half-empty, insufficient lives. For example:

*"I don't have enough money."*

Have you ever seen the show, *Hoarders*? It's very sobering. It shows people who have allowed things to take over their lives. Hoarders surround themselves with stuff—whether it be things, animals, you name it. The emotional attachments to their stuff prevents them from letting go. They feel safe. Unfortunately, hoarded stuff stagnates, and it can bring distress, disease, and decay of homes and relationships.

When I speak of abundance, I'm not talking about abundance in the sense of acquiring more and more and mo. That's the definition of consumerism. Nor am I talking about hoarding possessions in an attempt to find security or to meet emotional needs. Rather, I am talking about living our lives with the knowledge that God is *sufficient* to meet *all* of our needs—physical and emotional. Managing His resources according to His will is enough. We don't have to fall prey to consumerism.

Two anonymous women, known only as the Two Listeners, wrote a devotional titled, *God Calling*. In it, they write:

"Do not be afraid of poverty. Let money flow freely. I will let it flow in but you must let it flow out. I will never send money to stagnate—only to those who pass it on."<sup>3</sup>

Picture an arm extended with the palm of the hand open flat. Then picture abundance flowing down from the shoulder, down the arm, over the hand, and onto others. However, then picture the same arm, but with the hand

clenched tight. When the abundance flows down the arm, it has nowhere to go. So it stops. This is what these Two Listeners were talking about. When we continue to give, the gifts will continue to flow. But when we stop, the flow ceases because it has nowhere to go but to stagnate.

James and Janice (not their real names) were some of the poorest members of my church. Yet one day I saw them pull up to the front door of the church with their back seat full of stuff. I went out to meet them and they told me, "Pastor Shields, we brought these things over to give to those who are needy." They had enough stuff.

*"I don't have enough time."*

Last time I checked—I'm just sayin'—we all have the same 24 hours in a day. I have come to realize that often my lack of time is due to my lack of good management of the time I have. Even when I have "extra" time, I've not always spent it on those things for which I say, "I don't have time."

Example: Exercise. You know, the E word! I often hear people say, "When my kids are grown I'll have time to exercise," or "When I retire, then I can really exercise." Well, I have discovered in my life, as well as observing others' lives, that if it's not important today, it won't be important tomorrow. And I've put off the E word enough times when I *do* have the time to know that I have a problem with making it a priority. I know It's important, and I need it. And it's not that I have insufficient amount of time; it's that my stewardship of my time is insufficient.

*"I don't have enough ability."*

It sounds so humble, doesn't it? Actually, it's one of the most faithless statements believers make. God's Word tells us that *everyone* is gifted. First Corinthians 12:7, says, "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all" (NKJV). Granted, some people are more gifted than others, but we all are gifted. It may be because those people used their gifts when there were few, and thus, their gifts multiplied to many. I also believe it's pride that keeps us from managing our gifts when we see others more gifted than we are and we compare ourselves with them. When we refuse to acknowledge our giftedness and manage it for God's kingdom, we miss out on the abundance received through service to others.

3. Being a Christian steward is expressed through our generosity.

When we view life through a lens of scarcity rather than abundance and generosity, it reflects on the character of God. It tells the world that our God is *insufficient* to meet our needs. It tells the world that our God doesn't care about us. It tells the world that our God isn't generous with His children, and thus, we can't be generous with others.

Actually, generosity has been called the "new evangelism." Christian authors, Chris Willard and Jim Sheppard, write, "Generous behavior is the best validation that Christians believe what they profess about God, faith, the Bible, an eternity. This practice of generosity is authentic and becomes magnetic to people who do not accept the Christian faith."<sup>4</sup> Isn't this what happened at Pentecost, as described in Acts 4? Generosity was intertwined with the massive evangelism that took place.

"Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who

lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need (vss. 32-35, NKJV).

The story is told that one day a beggar by the roadside asked for alms from Alexander the Great as he passed by. The man was poor and wretched and had no claim upon the ruler. Yet the Emperor threw him several gold coins. A courtier was astonished at his generosity and commented, "Sir, copper coins would adequately meet a beggar's need. Why give him gold?" Alexander responded in royal fashion, "Copper coins would suit the beggar's need, but gold coins suit Alexander's giving."<sup>4</sup>

What suits God's giving?

HOW CAN WE LEARN TO LIVE FULL, ABUNDANT LIVES?<sup>5</sup>

1. We must learn to receive graciously.

The idiom, "Tis more blessed to give than to receive," contains truth. However, learning how to receive it is integral to the gospel.

Humanly speaking, giving gives us a one-up on someone else. Think about it. During the Christmas season, someone unexpectedly gives you a gift. What's your first thought? *Oh no, I didn't get them anything. How can I give them something without their thinking I only did it because they gave me something?* It's very difficult for us to accept gifts without feeling indebted or feeling the need to repay. I'm guilty of this.

It's the same thing with God's gifts to us—especially His gifts of grace and salvation. *How can I work to repay Him? If I accept it without doing anything, I'll be indebted.* Christians speak much about grace. Unfortunately, more often than not, we don't want to admit we need it as much as the next person. But whether it's grace, salvation, or material possessions, our challenge is to embrace them as gifts from God without feeling guilty or feeling the need to repay Him.

When we learn to receive graciously, we can then truly manage those gifts.

2. We must learn to manage responsibly.

To manage something is to care for and make decisions about the growth and development of that particular thing.

For example, when we receive intangible gifts from God such as grace and salvation, do we spend time caring for and developing those gifts? Or when we receive tangible gifts such as healthy bodies and material possessions, do we spend time caring for and developing those gifts? Do we responsibly manage those gifts?

If you remember the unfaithful steward in Luke 16, you'll note that he did not care for the possessions of his master. He did not look after the development of them. He wasted them. If we waste the possessions given to us by our God, we will have nothing to share and to invest in His kingdom.

It's an all-too-common scenario: TV evangelist eliciting funds from his or her viewers. They build an empire, only to crash-and-burn after they've used up those sacred funds for matching Rolls-Royces, mansions, and mistresses. And how does the world view God after experiencing such betrayal? Used.

But when we receive graciously and manage responsibly God's gifts for His glory, not our own, we will have possessions to share with others—revealing a God who is sufficient to meet all of our needs.

### 3. We must learn to share justly.

I was visiting a church member at the Washington Adventist Hospital in Takoma Park, Maryland one morning when a woman came over to my car from where she was sitting. "May I help you?" I asked her.

She handed me a blue-colored prescription and said, "I have AIDS. I need money for my medication." I looked at it. It seemed legitimate. The question to myself at that moment was, *Do I give her money?* I thought briefly, and then remembered that Washington Adventist Hospital has a pharmacy on the premises. So I said to her, "There's a pharmacy right over there," and I pointed in that direction. "Let's go over there and I'll buy your prescription for you."

We began walking in the direction of the pharmacy when she turned to me, took the prescription from my hand, and said, "That's OK," and walked away from me. I went into the hospital to visit my church member, and when I returned to my car, she was sitting in the same place she had been before she approached me earlier, waiting for the next person to approach.

As you might imagine, I learned a valuable lesson that day: *A person's stated need isn't always their actual need.*

As I moved on from that experience, I didn't want to become desensitized to human suffering. I didn't want to become jaded. I wanted to help people. But I didn't think merely doling out dollars was the answer. How could I truly help them?

I chose to begin handing out "blessing bags" at street corners to those asking for money. They included food, sometimes socks or gloves in the winter, and a spiritual book or pamphlet. Since many of these people are "regulars" on their street corner, I have been blessed to see them using some of the things I have given them.

After we have received graciously, managed responsibly, and shared justly, it's time to return abundantly.

### 4. We must return abundantly.

Stella sat alone in her church, holding her husband's \$25 tightly in her hand. It was all they had for groceries to feed their family of seven. Her thoughts darted through the 25 years that she spent away from church. Now she was back home, vowing to give her all to the Lord.

The moment of decision had come. How could she be tested so quickly with such a major decision? She knew \$25 would not buy enough food to feed them for the whole week, but if she tried to spread it around in her own power, she knew it would fail. She also knew she had nothing else to return for tithe.

Tears spilled out as she sat there in silence, pleading with God for direction. Soon the answer became very clear as the story of the widow and her mite came to mind. Yes, that is what she would do. She would give the whole \$25 to her faithful Lord, who had just welcomed her home again to stay.

Trying to explain to her husband and children what she had done was hard, but surprisingly, they seemed to understand.

The dreaded day came. All she could find in the house to feed the clan was one large potato. She cooked it, cut it in seven pieces, and called the family to the table. They bowed their heads in prayer as her husband gave thanks for the food they were about to share. Before he could finish the prayer, the doorbell rang. They quickly said, "Amen," and ran to the door in a group.

There stood Stella's new pastor and his wife with bags of groceries in their arms and stacked at their feet. Through thankful tears, Stella asked them how they knew they needed something, for she hadn't told anyone of their dire circumstances. They said they didn't know and were even afraid she might take offense at their gesture of goodwill. But the urge to take them food was so strong that they were simply compelled to do so.<sup>6</sup>

It is a biblical principle that says, "For whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7, NKJV). The principle is elaborated on in 2 Corinthians 9:6-8: "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having *all sufficiency* in all things, may have an abundance for every good work" (NKJV, emphasis added)

Stella and her family sowed bountifully, and God was their sufficiency.

#### IT'S ALL IN THE PERSPECTIVE

The story is told of a very wealthy father who took his son on a trip to the country for the sole purpose of showing him how it was to be poor. They spent a few days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family.

After their return from the trip, the father asked his son how he liked the trip. "It was great, Dad," the son replied.

"Did you see how poor people can be?" the father asked.

"Oh yeah," said the son.

"So what did you learn from the trip?" asked the father.

The son answered, "I saw that we have one dog and they have four.

"We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end.

"We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night.

"Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon.

"We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight.

"We have servants who serve us, but they serve others.

"We buy our food, but they grow theirs.

"We have walls around our property to protect us, but they have friends to protect them."

The boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, "It showed me just how poor we really are."

Too many times we forget what we have and concentrate on what we don't have. Sometimes it takes the perspective of a child to remind us what's important. It also takes the perspective of stewardship to help us realize how truly abundant our lives really are and how truly sufficient our God is to meet all of our needs, and the needs of others through us.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stewardship> on April 28, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from <http://beliefnet.com/columnists/godspolitics/2007/03/jim-wallis-budgets-are-moral-documents.html> on July 28, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Russell (Editor), *God Calling* (Barbour Publishing, Inc., Uhrichsville, OH, 1997), January 5 reading.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g-generosity.htm> on July 28, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Concept adapted from <http://www.newcatholics.org/pg/spiritualityStewardshipTheology.tpl> on April 12, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Alan Knott (Editor), *Over & Over Again! 2* (Silver Spring, Md: North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 2000), 25.