

## **OIKANOMIA: Advancing God's Work of Stewardship – Bonita Joyner Shields**

"Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith" (1 Timothy 1:4, NIV).

### **DIGGING**

My husband and I have done our fair share of home improvements. Our first home was a 1932 Colonial that we renovated for his business in order to build a retail store onto the front. So, over the years, we've watched a lot of home improvement shows. The typical format of these shows is that they find an older home to renovate for a family, and create a plan—and budget—to transform it into their dream home. After they begin the renovations, it never fails that they run into disturbing and costly discoveries as the workers dig into the walls, ceilings, and floors of the home. Of course, if the shows didn't include this high drama, no one would watch them!

It's *kind* of the same way in studying the Bible. It's definitely full of high drama—it's not the boring book some people make it out to be! But as we dig, we sometimes find *disturbing* discoveries. The story of the dismembered concubine in Judges 19 falls in the latter category for me. That's on my list to talk to the Lord about when we get settled on the new Earth. However, a more recent biblical study gave me an unexpected—and pleasant—discovery.

In the book of 1 Timothy, the apostle Paul was writing to the young man. Paul loved Timothy as a son. It's believed that Paul converted him during his first missionary journey, and Timothy then accompanied Paul on his second and third journeys for much of the time.

Paul was encouraging Timothy to stay where he was in Ephesus so he could stop certain people from teaching false doctrines, as well as what Paul called "myths and genealogies." A practice existed at that time amongst Jews to trace their family ancestries back to a Davidic or priestly heritage.<sup>1</sup> I would imagine the one-upmanship went something like this:

"I'm related to David by 10 generations," said proudly by one. "Oh, but I'm better than you are. I'm only seven generations away from the King." "Now, now, now, I'm better than both of you combined. I come from the tribe of Levi, the *priestly* tribe." Of course, *nothing* of that sort takes place today! Well, let's see, "I'm a fifth-generation Adventist." ☺ You get the idea.

Paul then told Timothy in chapter 1, verse 4, in reference to this practice, "Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith" (NIV). It was at this point that I decided to delve into the Greek to find out how this phrase, "God's work," was translated. What did Paul consider "God's work"? Did he use the Greek word from which we derive our term "evangelize"? Did he use the Greek word that means "work, perform, do, acquire by labor"?

No. He used the Greek root word *oikonomia*.

"What does *that* mean?" you ask.

"Stewardship."

"Where did *that* come from?" you ask again.

My sentiments exactly.

Paul was in essence saying that *stewardship* is God's work. *How could that be?* Evangelism is our main work, according to many in the church. Of course, evangelism is important—and central to the gospel—but where does stewardship fit in? I got to wondering, "If we have evangelists, should we also have stewardists?!"

Thus began my search into the New Testament to find other references to this word *oikonomia*, and to answer some questions:

*What do these other verses have to say about stewardship?*

*Is the concept of stewardship outdated like many people think?*

*Or is it really an active, dynamic principle for the Christian that has long been misunderstood and even ignored?*

## **DISCOVERING**

I found the word *oikonomia* (or its derivatives) in six places in the New Testament. I intend to share with you those six references, and draw from them principles from which we can form a big picture of stewardship.

### **1. Luke 16:1-9 – The Parable of the Unjust Steward**

Verses 1 and 2 state, “He also said to His disciples: ‘There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, “What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward” ’” (NKJV).

Whether from fraud or ineptness, we don’t know, but when the owner discovered his manager was wasting his goods, he asked his manager to give him an account of his management (stewardship): In other words, “Show me the books.” It wasn’t a matter of this manager redeeming himself; it was merely to reveal his unjust conduct. This manager was on his way out.

In verse 3, the manager said to himself, “ ‘What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg’ ” (NKJV). And McDonald’s hadn’t been created yet.

So, the fraudulent manager decided to “cook the books.” The manager shrewdly decided to make it appear that his owner’s debtors owed less than they actually did so he could make some friends who might be useful for him after he lost his job. Even his owner commended him on his shrewdness—of using worldly goods to benefit people. But it didn’t make it right. He still lost his job.

Often, this parable is spiritualized away from the topic of money. But the fact is that this parable *is* about money. And it teaches us that if we are not faithful in the management of earthly wealth, how can we be faithful in the management of heavenly wealth? How we handle money is a spiritual conversation.

### **2. Ephesians 1:10 – The Blessedness of Redemption in Christ**

Basically, here’s the context of chapter 1 that leads up to verse 10:

The Father has *blessed* us with every spiritual blessing.

He *chose* us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in love.

He *predestined* us to adoption through Christ Jesus—as we accept His plan of salvation.

He *forgave* us according to the riches of His grace.

After this listing of the blessings we have in Christ, Paul tells us in verse 10 that He made known to us the mystery of His will “that in the dispensation (stewardship) of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him” (NKJV).

God was *intentional* regarding His revelation of the plan of salvation through Christ. He *planned* it before the creation of the world. He knew exactly when it was going to happen. There was nothing left to chance.

He operates the same way today in our lives, although I know that's hard for us to believe. Time seems to go sooooo slowly when we are waiting for an answer to our prayers. But God's timing is intentional. His timing is right on time. His timing is perfect.

One of our most valued resources from God is time. Actually, life is made up of time. And the 24 hours we receive today we will never see again. In our modern age, though, with all its helpful but distracting technological advances, it's so easy to allow time, to allow life, to be "frittered" away. Wasted. This isn't a call to work ourselves to death—all in the name of Christ. (That's another sermon!) Yet, I see in these verses a God who is intentional about time. He plans His time. Not rigidly. Just intentionally.

### **3. Ephesians 3:2 – Paul's Stewardship of Grace**

The people in Paul's day had larger attention spans than we do now, so I don't think they understood the term "run-on sentence." For you to understand the context of verse 2, I'm sharing vss. 1-8 with you—which is *one, long sentence!*

"For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation (*stewardship*) of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that *the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel*, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power" (NKJV, emphasis added).

How do we steward God's grace—especially to those like the Gentiles whom we don't think are deserving of it? Just like tangible possessions, such as money, homes, and finances, we need to ask ourselves, "Do I give grace freely, or do I hoard it for myself? Do I recognize it as a gift from God, or do I think that somehow I've earned it?"

One of the most striking stories for me regarding the faithful stewardship of God's grace is that of a man whose daughter was murdered by Gary Ridgeway, the Green River Killer. This criminal was convicted of 48 murders of young women during the 1980s and 1990s; however, later he said that the total was closer to twice that number.

[To see a video of the courtroom scene in which a victim's father extends forgiveness to Ridgeway, and see its impact on him, go to [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2\\_00aP763k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2_00aP763k).]

### **3. First Corinthians 9:16, 17 – Paul's Call**

"For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship" (NKJV).

The context of this verse in chapter 9 is that of compensation for doing the Lord's work. Paul is saying that those who give others spiritual food should be able to receive physical food and compensation for that work. However, he chose to forego his right to receive a wage. His argument is this, as I see it: If he chooses to preach voluntarily, he should receive a wage, a reward. However, if he does so because he feels compelled, he is merely accepting his responsibility

of administering, or stewarding, God's household affairs. I don't think he means that he doesn't preach the gospel willingly. I think it means that God has placed such a burning in his soul that he cannot NOT preach the gospel. And, for him, the reward for this sacred stewardship is that of the privilege of being able to do it!

The New Living Translation puts it this way: "If I were doing this on my own initiative, I would deserve payment. But I have no choice, for God has given me this sacred trust. What then is my pay? It is the opportunity to preach the Good News without charging anyone. That's why I never demand my rights when I preach the Good News."

#### **4. Colossians 1:24, 25 – Ministering to the Body of Christ**

I see this fifth reference being related to the fourth one I just mentioned.

"I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, *for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God*" (NKJV, emphasis added).

God's stewardship involves our receiving a ministry through which to build up the body of Christ. Here, the apostle Paul is revealing *his* joy in the sacrificial giving of himself in the ministry to which God has called him. And, as we know, we are *all* called to ministry, as revealed in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians. The Spirit is given to *each* of us for the profit of all. We aren't all called to be an apostle, pastor, or teacher. But we are *all* called to build up the body of Christ.

As I mentioned previously about Paul's feeling compelled to preach the gospel, I believe when we receive our spiritual giftedness from the Lord, we will feel the same way. That is, we will want to use that gift to serve others because we can't help it!

Arlantha was one of my ministry leaders when I pastored at the local church. She felt her calling was prayer ministry. She determined that she would take no other leadership position except that of prayer ministry, so she could give her full attention to it. She LOVED to pray—especially for her church family. And, I must say, I think she was the most effective prayer ministry leader I have ever known.

Now we return to the text that began my search.

#### **5. 1 Timothy 1:3, 4 – Stewardship is God's Work**

"As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than *advancing God's work*—which is by faith" (NIV, emphasis added).

Stewardship—the management of God's resources—is not one of legalistic requirements or as a means to earn God's approval. God can't be bought. He wants us to trust Him.

Martha wanted to help her small group of Hispanic believers in Madison, Tennessee find a church home. The group had been drawn from area Anglo-American churches in the area, and, eeafter they were organized, needed a place eo meet for worship on the following Sabbath.

They discussed several options. The easiest would be to hold their Sabbath services in homes, but they believed that their church should be a beacon in the community. They decided to put their *stewardship of faith* to the test. They asked God to provide a suitable place to worship the next Sabbath.

The Lord gave Martha a very clear dream that He wanted them to meet in a picturesque little church close by. It belonged to a Sunday-keeping group. She had never visited there, nor knew any of its members. To go there and ask to rent the church was the last thing she had expected to do, but conviction is conviction!

When she drove onto the property, the office was closed. But a man passing by told her who she should contact. He wasn't a member, but he was absolutely certain that the sanctuary would not be available for rent.

Several phone calls later, she spoke with a member of the congregation. But he, too, told her that he couldn't conceive that the sanctuary would be available for rent.

Martha told him, "But I had a dream that I should come and ask you."

"Sorry. In any case, it would have to go through the higher organizational authorities in Texas. They meet every few months."

"But I need to be able to start using the sanctuary for Sabbath School and church this coming Saturday. Do you think you could do anything?"

"Ma'am, today is Tuesday already!"

On Thursday night, Martha received a phone call, inviting her to come to the church on Friday at 3 p.m. to sign the contract.

Their little group met in the church the next morning.

Martha said, "I have long felt that the true rewards of stewardship are inherent in the stewardship itself. No extrinsic benefits surpass the sense of fulfillment derived from being a faith partner with God."<sup>2</sup>

So, to recap, what are the stewardship principles that we draw from these Scriptures?

1. We are to be faithful in the management of God's wealth—earthly and heavenly.
2. We are to use our time wisely, and with intentionality.
3. We are to offer His grace to others.
4. We all have a work to do in His household of faith (the body of Christ) that we can't help but give to others.
5. God's work of stewardship is advanced by faith.

## **DOING & DREAMING**

In 1961, President-elect John F. Kennedy gave the following speech to the Massachusetts Legislature:

*For of those to whom much is given, much is required.* And when at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each of us—recording whether in our brief span of service we fulfilled our responsibilities to the state—our success or failure, in whatever office we hold, will be measured by the answers to four questions:

First, were we truly men [and women] of *courage*—with the courage to stand up to one's enemies—and the courage to stand up, when necessary, to one's associates—the courage to resist public pressure, as well as private greed?

Secondly, were we truly men [and women] of *judgment*—with perceptive judgment of the future as well as the past—of our mistakes as well as the mistakes of others—with enough wisdom to know what we did not know and

enough candor to admit it?

Third, were we truly men [and women] of *integrity*—men [and women] who never ran out on either the principles in which we believed or the men [and women] who believed in us—men [and women] whom neither financial gain nor political ambition could ever divert from the fulfillment of our sacred trust?

Finally, were we truly men [and women] of *dedication*—with an honor mortgaged to no single individual or group, and comprised of no private obligation or aim, but devoted solely to serving the public good and the national interest?

Courage—judgment—integrity—dedication—these are the historic qualities . . . which, with God’s help . . . will characterize our government’s conduct in the four stormy years that lie ahead.<sup>3</sup>

*“To whom much is given, much is required.”* Courage. Judgment. Integrity. Dedication. These are also characteristics of God’s kingdom, and are required to fulfill our roles as faithful managers of His wealth and resources. And the greater the generosity and sacrifice, the greater the joy.

That’s oikonomia. That’s stewardship. That’s God’s work.

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<sup>1</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Vol. 7* (Review and Herald Publishing, Washington DC: 1980), p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Knott (Editor), *Over & Over Again 2, “Faith Finds a Place,”* (Silver Spring: North American Division, 2000), pp. 197, 198.

<sup>3</sup> President-elect JOHN F. KENNEDY, address to the Massachusetts legislature, January 9, 1961.—*Congressional Record*, January 10, 1961, vol. 107, Appendix, p. A169.