

Heart Audit — By Sonia Perez

[Editor's Note: This sermon commences with a skit.]

What does communion have to do with stewardship? The skit points us to the answer. In it, Jesus is excited to have a picnic with His friends, to spend time with them, and to shower them with abundance. (Hence the huge loaf of French bread and big goblets of "wine.") But the only thing His "*friends*" are excited about is getting what *they* want out of "communion." (Like showing off their fancy communion cups from Israel.) Jesus is forgotten in the background.

God has one resource to give us—Himself. He wants to give it in abundance. All other blessings flow from that. But too often we don't want it. Likewise, we have one resource to give God—ourselves. Unlike us, He is faithful, waiting always to receive us. Until we understand how to be stewards of our *selves* we cannot be trusted as stewards over anything else.

In Genesis, we are told that God created humanity, male and female, in His image. That is, *we* bear God's image. So, to follow Jesus's argument, *we* reflect God. We must give our *selves* to God. Jesus wants an intimate relationship with us.

For those in the skit, instead of giving of themselves they were more focused on the ceremony of communion, missing Jesus and the opportunity to enjoy the bounty He was prepared to spread before them.

One time I learned this sacrifice of giving of myself when a teacher asked me, "What is the job you would do for free?" Now this was a great question, I only wished he had asked me a lot earlier. When he asked me, I had plans to go to law school right after I finished the one last class I had in my Masters in Community Counseling. Only one class left! However, in that moment, I remembered in high school being asked what did I want to be when I grew up. I had responded a lawyer, and to be a youth minister in my spare time. Now in this pivotal question, I realized that my entire life I had been called to youth ministry. All of my spare time had been working at summer camps, volunteering for teen retreats and conferences, and even my major had been Religious Studies. In that moment, I had to decide if I was willing to give up all my plans and offer my life back to God to follow what He was asking me to do. Did I want to

be a Martha rushing around the career I thought was important or was I going to be Mary sitting at Jesus' feet listening for His calling? I want to follow Jesus with my whole heart. I want to care about what He cares about.

To be sure, standing in God's presence can be a scary thing. Putting our whole self in His hands can be difficult. When the "to do" list is overwhelming, when there are people to impress, or there's more month than money, stopping and sitting at Jesus' feet *feels* impossible.

I remember how hard it was for my mom year after year to go to the financial advisor to beg him to allow my brother and me to register for school, even though we had not finished paying our bill for the year before. Yet somehow every year my brother and I were registered. When I graduated from high school, in order to get my diploma and to be able to get my transcripts for college, my entire debt was placed on my brother's bill. That year my brother registered for school, and every time my mom received a bill, she saw that it said his balance was zero. This confused and bothered her, so after awhile, she went and asked what was going on. By some mistake, my brother was never officially registered, so though he received his grades and was seen as a student, he was not being charged. The miracle is when the mistake was caught, the decision was made to forget the entire debt. That debt would include not just my brother's but mine as well. I am here today because of God's provision for my life.

This manna story not only shows us that God *provides* but that *God* provides. In Exodus 16:6, we read " 'By evening you will realize it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt' " (NLT). God provided for them in that way so that they would know that *He* was their provider in all things, not them, but *Him*.

In Exodus 16:20, we read that if the Israelites collected more than they needed and tried to save it, that the manna would become maggoty and would start to stink. Some Israelites, fearing the manna would not come again the following day, chose to collect extra manna to assure that they were not left lacking. They found out the hard way that trying to "improve" upon God's plans for providence only makes things worse.

By collecting manna each day, they had a daily reminder that God could be trusted as their Provider and Creator to care for their needs. As we follow God's word, it sometimes seems like too much of a sacrifice when we are afraid of what returning to God could mean to our financial and emotional security. We wonder if what we have will last when

times are rough. But God has shown time and time again, as he did with the children of Israel, that when we put ourselves in His hands, *He* provides.

How often do *we* try to improve upon God's plans? We run out ahead of what He has told us He will do. We make unwise choices in trying to follow His plan. God is a God of wisdom. If we would pay attention to his faithfulness, we wouldn't have to worry about whether God provides or when God provides, we would just need to be attentive to *how* God is choosing to provide for us on any given day.

In Exodus 16:22-23, one exception to the "take only what you need" rule is explained. No manna would fall on the seventh day of the week. On the *sixth* day, and only then, the children of Israel were instructed to collect a double portion of manna so that they would have enough on the seventh day.

Since the beginning of the world, God has told his children to spend one day each week, the seventh, to just abide in His presence. God is calling us to stop focusing on His means of providence and to start focusing on *Him*, on "*His self*."

Lessons of manna show us how God offers all we need, but we sometimes mistrust Him and want to do things our own way. We get caught up in the ceremony of it all, only looking at our needs and wants, then forget that He has already promised to provide everything for us, including Himself. Jesus *IS* the bread of life. Moses and the children ate the manna and still died. But those who accept Jesus as the Bread of Life will live for eternity. He made the ultimate sacrifice as our Creator and kinsmen Redeemer. Today we can experience God's provision, His grace. God offers us Himself.

More than anything He wants us to cherish His relationship with us. He wants us to give Him our hearts. He wants us to recognize how deep His love is for us. He is our Provider, our Creator, and our Redeemer. This relationship goes beyond money; it is built on trust. Don't miss the biggest blessing that God has for you—His presence—while looking for the small blessings He chooses to send you every day.

Ever since sin entered the world, we have battled the loss of our role as stewards. We have lost our identity as God's chosen people to take care of this world with all of its people, animals, and resources. Self-preservation has taken the place of stewardship. We have lost control of ourselves, so instead, we try and control everything around us. We no longer have the intimate, trusting relationship God had planned for us. So we wander in the wilderness of self-

preservation, manipulating for our benefit, rather than enriching the world in front of us. God wanted the Israelites, and now us, to know we are no longer slaves to work or money. In the times of plenty, we are also reminded that God is our Redeemer.

Deuteronomy 8:14-18 reads, “Do not become proud at that time and forget the Lord your God, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt. Do not forget that he led you through the great and terrifying wilderness with its poisonous snakes and scorpions, where it was so hot and dry. He gave you water from the rock! He fed you with manna in the wilderness, a food unknown to your ancestors. He did this to humble you and test you for your own good. He did all this so you would never say to yourself, “I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy.” Remember the Lord your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful, in order to fulfill the covenant he confirmed to your ancestors with an oath’ ” (NLT). In following with the instructions on manna for the Sabbath, the Israelites were reminded that He is also their Redeemer. Redeemed from slavery, they were free. We are also reminded that God gives the power to get wealth (Deut. 8:18). God reminds His people their identity. This is who you are!

What kind of wilderness do you find yourself in? When times are tough and circumstances stress you, it is easy for you to try and do things your own way. When your student loans need to be paid, when you need to study for that exam, when you are not sure where that next meal is going to come from, you panic.

When we have chosen to put ourselves in His hands, when we have decided to trust that He is our provision, and when we recognize that it is *God* who is our reward, then and only then can we be stewards of what He has given us. This is our identity as God’s stewards. This is how we reflect God’s image in our lives!

In the skit, the couple did not treat God’s time like they treated their own. They wasted the time that God had set aside to be with them by arguing over irrelevant details of the experience. When the big game’s on TV, sport’s lovers don’t argue about whether the pizza is sliced perfectly. They don’t argue about which cups to use. When someone scores a touchdown, they don’t care if it’s a woman announcer who tells them. No, they focus on what’s important—the *game*.

That’s the first step to practical stewardship.

Do rules, tradition, shape everything we do? Do we do things just because that's how we have always done them or because that is what is expected of us, or do we do things out of love and our relationship with a living God? God calls us into an intimate relationship with Him. What is in our hearts will come out in our actions. But God also knew we would learn through experience. He asks us to act out our faith. Sometimes we don't see the full picture. Sometimes He just says trust Me right now, and you will understand later. Some of us mess up and then the negative experience (maggots in the manna or no manna available) will shape us in to doing better next time. Through it all, God continues to love us. The Holy Spirit helps mold our hearts into being more like Jesus, learning to trust our Father like Jesus trusted His Father. Like the children of Israel, we have lessons to learn in trust and obedience. We learn that Jesus is always faithful, and we can trust Him to take care of our lives and our hearts. The why is important to Him. Our heart's motivation is important to God. He hates our vain offerings (see Isa. 1:13-16). He wants us to do what we do out of love because we want to be with Him. John 6:35 says that Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus provides us with eternal life.

A story that moved me was circulating about an envelope found in a church collection plate that contained seven cents and a handwritten note. The note read, "Please don't hate me, I am homeless, and this is all I have." This person was trusting God with all they had even though life was rough for them. He or she chose to give to God instead of working out his or her own plan of what to do with the little money he or she had. Would I be as trusting in similar circumstances?

When Israel trusted Him, they had enough, but when they did it their own way, the food was rotten or was missing. Everything we go through is an opportunity to trust God more. When we focus on ourselves in times of plenty or what we don't have in tough times, we miss intimacy with Jesus. Everything belongs to Him. He has plenty to share. But we hold on to our material and monetary treasures and lose the blessing of what it means to be the heir of the King who owns everything and who gives everything to His children. I know that I need to grow in trusting Him more. How about you?

Today, I challenge you to completely trust God with everything in your life.

