

In the Father's Heart

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Imagine for a moment that you have been invited to a large royal palace. A chauffeur drives you in a limousine through a remotely controlled, fifteen-foot-tall iron gate, the only opening in the twelve-foot-tall stone wall that embraces the entire estate. The long, cobblestone, tree-lined driveway passes acres of manicured lawn, elaborate gardens, and a cascading waterfall before culminating in a circular drive, in the center of which is an impressive free-flowing fountain. Your driver stops beneath the neoclassical portico that hangs over the circular drive at the entrance to the palace. He opens the limousine door and ushers you up the polished marble steps through the oak-framed, leaded-glass doors into the chandeliered gallery, where you wait on intricately woven Persian rugs for your Host.

Once your Host arrives, He begins a guided tour through the palace. You are enamored by the high ceilings, the intricately detailed trim, the carving on the spiral staircase, and the antique classical furnishings. Your Host, however, draws your attention away from those embellishments to the portraits of His children, which fill the palace walls, decorate the fireplace mantel, and are freely displayed in every room. Stories about His children flow from this Father's heart as He recounts the journeys and adventures of each one. In each account, a similar theme emerges, centered on the loving relationship and concern the Father has for His children. He tells you about the mountaintops and the valleys His children have encountered and how He was there with them through each step of the journey.

At one portrait He wears a proud smile and at another a generous grin. Another picture elicits a boisterous laugh, and yet another, a hushed moment. There are other portraits, however, that cause your Host to choke up a bit as tears trickle down His cheek. At these, He pauses momentarily before completing the narrative. Regaining His composure, He shares how this child refused His help in a financial crisis, how another returned His letters unopened although they contained the very support this child needed, and how yet another gave up on his Father's love, because another child made him feel that their Father had rejected him.

You can't miss the irony. Here in the most beautiful palace in the world there is brokenness and sadness—a mourning Father whose only wish is that His children would trust Him completely. Nevertheless, let's not forget those earlier stories, the ones that brought smiles to the Father's face. These are stories of trust through difficulties, memorable victories amidst forbidding circumstances. These are stories no less miraculous and intriguing than the narratives of Joseph and Esther.

Perhaps all of this doesn't strike you as the typical opening to a stewardship sermon. Perhaps it should. Stewardship is essentially a trust relationship with God. The very core of the concept of stewardship is rooted in the biblical concept of faith. Too often stewardship sermons have fallen into one of the three following approaches.

Some stewardship sermons try to cajole people into giving. Many years ago I worked with an internationally acclaimed evangelist. Toward the conclusion of his series he invited the crowd to a special afternoon service that he designed as an opportunity for the young associate evangelists (ministerial students and beginning ministers) to utilize their talents. Each part of the special service

was conducted by one of these associates—including the offering appeal. The student who called for the offering asked a series of responsive questions designed to elicit an enthusiastic audience response. Finally, he asked those in the audience to raise their hands high if they were happy. While their arms were still aloft, he added, “OK ushers, hit ‘em while they’re happy!”

Although God does love cheerful givers, cajoling people is an inadequate presentation of the trusting relationship that genuine stewardship entails.

Another approach in stewardship sermons employs shame and fear as motivational tools. Such sermons are strong on “shoulds” and sometimes contain implied threats about what will happen if listeners fail to give liberal offerings and return an honest tithe. This approach is sometimes justified on the basis of results. And it *can* cause short-term gains in a church’s bottom line. Fear, however, cannot motivate for very long and runs contrary to the principles of love and trust upon which authentic stewardship is built.

A third approach in stewardship sermons focuses on promised rewards. This is perhaps the most tempting, because there are elements of biblical truth undergirding this approach. The logic runs something like this: God promises blessings for those who faithfully return 10 percent of their income plus freewill offerings. If those listening will accept God’s offer, they will realize these blessings in great abundance. Conversely, those who refuse to participate will necessarily exclude themselves from these blessings. Such sermons can boast, “I’ve got Bible texts for it!” Certainly chapters such as Malachi 3 come to mind. Apart from minimizing the genuine trusting relationship that tithing should represent, the danger in this approach is that greed can become the motivation for returning tithe and offerings. In other words, “I’ll turn in my money to see how much I can get out of it.” The principles of love and trust are missing from the equation when greed and a mechanical understanding of tithing replace the proper emphasis on the Father-child relationship. What, then, forms the sure, uncompromising foundation on which we can build a biblical understanding of stewardship? Because love and trust are the bedrock upon which genuine relationships are built, we must ask: Why should we love God? What is it about Him that calls forth our love and trust? The biblical answer is threefold: First, God created us.

Second, He redeemed us. Third, He provides for us.

God as Creator. God alone is worthy of our praise, trust, and love because He created us. This concept is expressed in one of the shortest of all the psalms. Psalm 134 calls on us to “lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord” (verse 2).¹ The reason becomes apparent in the next verse, in which God is extolled as “the Maker of heaven and earth” (verse 3). David personalizes this understanding of creation in Psalm 139:

For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
your eyes saw my unformed body.

All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be (verses 13–16).

He goes on to express his appreciative response of love and trust for the God who created him:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting (verses 23, 24).

The apostle Paul recognized the universal appeal of this concept of God as the Creator. Speaking to the pagans of Athens, he appealed to them by pointing to God's creator-ship. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:24, 25).

Paul says that it is on this basis—the creatorship of God— that He calls on us to love and serve and trust Him. "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (verse 27). Belief that God is our Creator is a foundational principle of Christian stewardship. We belong to God, together with everything we own. He does not need our tithe or offerings, for indeed, He already owns them. He does not need anything from us because He has the absolute power to create anything He wants or needs. In this relationship with the Creator, we are the ones who are privileged to demonstrate our love and trust in meaningful ways through our care of those things God has placed in our trust.

When I return a faithful tithe, I am demonstrating my trust in God's ability to create everything that I need—not necessarily everything I may want due to cravings unnaturally stimulated by incessant advertising. When I care for my body or those things that God has placed in my care, I am acknowledging that these are all God-created and therefore worthy of my careful attention. When I care for the natural world around me, being environmentally respectful of God's creation, I am showing appreciation for those things that God has provided for my enjoyment.

God as Redeemer. Paul also based his understanding of Christian stewardship upon Christ's redemptive work—the second of the biblical answers to the question, Why should I love and trust God? Paul writes,

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the

coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:4–9).

Not only are we indebted to God for creating us, we are twice indebted, because Christ has redeemed us by sharing His life as our crucified Lord. Peter echoes this thought, recalling the sacrifice of Christ in these words, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (1 Peter 1:10, 11).

Using the metaphor of the temple cornerstone, Peter then goes on to describe the response we should have to this grace God has shown us. This builds to a crescendo that culminates in the next chapter:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Peter 2:9–12).

Several years ago, our son was drifting away from God. His actions and lifestyle showed that he carelessly disregarded the gifts and talents God had entrusted to him. Life centered about himself; God had no active role in his life. His associates seemed to have a similar disregard for God’s role in their lives. Returning from his workplace one day, our son encountered extremely strong winds. He went onto the right shoulder of the highway. Then he instinctively overcorrected and lost control of his vehicle. The car rolled three times, and he was ejected onto the pavement. The emergency medical technicians and trauma nurses who arrived on the scene later told us that they seriously doubted that he would survive.

They brought him to the nearest hospital, only to be told that it wasn’t equipped to handle injuries as serious as those he had sustained. He was taken by Life Flight to another hospital. When we left town to travel to this second hospital, we didn’t know whether he would be alive when we arrived. Most of his ribs had been broken; his spinal column was damaged; gravel was embedded in his skull; and the extent of his head trauma was not immediately discernible.

Those tense, anxiety-filled first days gradually gave way to new information about his injuries. He would recover, but it would be an extended process. First, he was transferred to a rehabilitation

hospital in yet another city. Weeks later, he returned home to continue his rehabilitation. For months he had to be driven everywhere. He suffered from excruciating headaches. He was unable to work. The medical bills began arriving. Unfortunately, he had allowed his automobile insurance to lapse and was not covered under any other insurance policy. It was twenty thousand dollars here, sixty thousand dollars there, and forty thousand dollars somewhere else. The air transportation alone exceeded a year's salary. We desperately wanted to help him, but we realized that if we sold our home and cars and added the value of all our other meager earthly possessions, we couldn't come even close to caring for the bills that were piling up daily. And it wasn't just the medical bills. The interest on our son's school loans and his personal credit was accumulating. Because he was unable to work, he couldn't make payments on these obligations.

But alongside the negative dilemma of the medical payments and other debts, another drama was unfolding—a positive one. Being incapacitated for months could have been a discouraging, even depressing experience. However, our son was finding time to reflect upon the direction his life had been going—and had gone for many years. He began reflecting on Christ's mercy in sparing his life. He thought carefully about the sacrifice Christ had made on his behalf. He marveled at the prayers and support he was receiving from believers all over the country. His heart was melting against the warmth of Christ's mercy so beautifully demonstrated at Calvary and in the lives of those who had accepted Christ's sacrifice.

God was issuing a private altar call to our son. And that call was being quietly accepted. Today, unbelievably, he would be the first to tell you that he is thankful that the accident happened. Although he still suffers side effects from the accident trauma that make learning more difficult than it used to be, he is completing a degree in elementary education, which will give him an opportunity to utilize his talents in youth ministry on a professional basis. He already has plans for graduate school after completing his bachelor's degree. He lives the message that Peter and Paul expressed so eloquently regarding God's redemptive grace. Because of the salvation Christ has provided for us, we can experience renewed joy, because we belong to Him.

Am I surprised that our son systematically includes God in his financial stewardship through tithes and offerings? Not at all! When he rededicated his life to God, he did so without reservation. Now that he belongs to God, everything he has belongs to God. This is the experience of every believer who truly acknowledges that salvation is God's gift—not the product of our good behavior. No one who is truly converted can consider withholding from God that which belongs to Him, because when a person surrenders to God, he or she surrenders *all*.

Although our son does not tithe from a greedy motivation, anxious for what he can get, he has received incredible financial blessings. In event after event, too numerous to chronicle here, the mountain of medical bills has been thrown into the sea! To this day we do not know fully how some of his bills were forgiven or paid. We do know that God honors His promises and helps those who cannot possibly help themselves. We have seen insurmountable medical indebtedness, hundreds of thousands of dollars, disappear as quickly as fog dissipates before the morning sun. We don't tithe to manipulate God or obligate Him to bless us. What foolishness! But as we have trusted Him in our darkest hour, we have seen Him work miracles and honor the promises made through the prophet Malachi. Incredibly, all our son's medical bills have been paid, and progress is being made on paying the accumulated interest on unpaid debts occasioned by his long layoff from work.

God as Provider. As God's people stood on the borders of the Promised Land, Moses gazed into the future. Knowing that God would provide abundantly for His people, Moses felt compelled to advise them regarding the third biblical principle of Christian stewardship—that we are indebted to God, not only for Creation and Redemption but also because He provides for us daily. Moses had witnessed the miracle of daily manna. He had watched water emerge from nowhere as God miraculously provided. For forty years God had cared for the needs of millions of people in a desert wilderness. They had had every opportunity to learn total dependence upon Him. Now it was time for them to inherit the Promised Land, filled with all they would need.

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today (Deuteronomy 8:10–14, 17, 18).

As Moses suggested, God's abundant provision would not always be appreciated. Psalm 106, written years later, details Israel's ingratitude:

They believed his promises
and sang his praise.

But they soon forgot what he had done
and did not wait for his counsel.

In the desert they gave in to their craving;
in the wasteland they put God to the test

(verses 12–14).

Nebuchadnezzar's vainglorious statement regarding his accomplishments (Daniel 4:28–30) is another glaring example of humans taking credit for God's abundant provision. God, however, is not amused. He understands that whenever human beings trust in themselves, He is unable to lavish on them His richest blessings. How many are wealthy with this world's goods, but anxious about the

future? How many have overflowing barns, but empty hearts? How many boast wealthy bank accounts, but impoverished heavenly ones? How much better is Christ's counsel, "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself" (Matthew 6:31–34).

Now imagine for a moment that as the Father conducts His guest through His glorious, heavenly palace, they come to *your* portrait. What is your heavenly Father saying to His guest as He views your picture? Is He telling him how the two of you walked side by side through thick and thin? Is He sharing the surprising miracles that He was able to work in your behalf, because you trusted Him completely when deep down you felt like giving up? Is He smiling because every morning you wake up rejoicing that He is your Creator, and every night you retire at peace because you know that He is your living Redeemer? Is He telling His guest how He enjoys providing for your needs because, like the cheerful givers of Corinth and the good stewards described by Matthew and Luke, you multiplied the resources placed in your care in order to help others and make your world a better place? Try to experience stewardship from God's perspective. It's not about your money. He doesn't need it. It's not about your accomplishments, but rather it's about what He wants to accomplish in you.

Now stop imagining and *believe* that you're a child who trusts in God and one in whom God can trust. That is the relationship known throughout the Bible as stewardship.

Endnote

1. All Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New International Version.