

Knowledge, Commitment, and Transformation— the Making of a Faithful Steward

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As Christians, we have the opportunity to listen to sermons, read books such as the Bible, or attend seminars on topics like stewardship. Stewardship materials encourage us to put into practice the principles learned and invite us to make pledges to the Lord as faithful stewards. Many of us respond to these calls and see the blessings in our personal lives as well as in the life of our congregation. The tithe as well as the offerings begin to increase. The local and general needs of the church are met. The morale is high because the funds are flowing into the Lord's storehouse. Projects are started and completed; financial reports are encouraging. The future looks bright and promising. We are confident that as long as the people understand and practice what they are taught about the principles of stewardship, everything will be all right.

However, as time goes by, we often notice that we go back to our previous predicament. Pledges are broken, tithe and offerings are down, and morale is low. The situation is worse because a new element has been added—guilt. People feel that they have not been faithful to their vows to the Lord and many feel terrible about it. As leaders, we try to alleviate the situation by making appeals, giving more information, holding business meetings to report on the crisis. However, the situation does not seem to change or improve. We start asking ourselves what went wrong. We begin looking for scapegoats and question the leaders or the people's faithfulness. The outcome can be total disillusionment, and the survival mode takes control again.

As a pastor, I have witnessed this situation a number of times. After much prayer and analysis of this issue, I have come to the conclusion that the cause for this problem does not lie in the lack of communication or information about stewardship. Neither is it due to a lack of enthusiasm of our church members to be better stewards. Nor is the problem an absence of sincerity and honesty on the part of those who made a commitment and vow to the Lord. I believe that there are two reasons for this difficulty.

One reason is the belief that the presentation of information, manifestation of enthusiasm, and presence of sincerity are sufficient to produce and secure an enduring and unchangeable commitment to stewardship.

The other reason is the idea that an event such as a sermon, seminar, or a weeklong treatment of the stewardship subject is enough to transform a person into a solid steward.

These are good and necessary approaches to good stewardship, but there is still a missing element—discipline. We don't learn discipline overnight by attending a seminar or listening to a sermon. We don't create discipline on the spot by making a commitment or taking a vow. Discipline takes time—it is a learning process.

To help us understand and develop discipline, I propose that we learn from those who took the Nazirite vow as presented in Numbers 6.

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and *similar* drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from *similar* drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin.

'All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. *Then* he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow.

All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body. He shall not make himself unclean even for his father or his mother, for his brother or his sister, when they die, because his separation to God *is* on his head. All the days of his separation he shall be holy to the LORD. (Numbers 6:2-7)

We do not often hear about the Nazirite vow, but we can learn from it. We can learn lessons about stewardship that will enable us to have a positive view of God's creation, its resources, and how to manage them according to God's plans. There are three aspects of stewardship that were part of the Nazirite vow— knowledge, commitment, and transformation.

Knowledge

A person did not take the Nazirite vow lightly. Specific external and internal conditions influenced their decision. The knowledge of God's purpose for the people of Israel was central. The story of Abraham and his descendants, the captivity and liberation from Egypt, the miracles in the desert, the law, and the sanctuary identified God's relationship with His people. God called them to be His. On the other hand, they were aware of the nation's failures in fulfilling God's purposes and the corruption in the priesthood. Most Israelites knew God's expectation and, at the same time, the people's shortcomings. In spite of that, God reminded the Israelites of the special relationship between Him and His people.

And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and *how* I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth *is* Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' (Exodus 19:4–6).

God called His people to holiness, both the nation and the individuals. Even if the majority in the nation turned their backs on God, it was still the responsibility of each individual to be faithful to God. When the majority of the people of Israel rebelled at Mount Sinai, God still called the Levites to be His servants. God chose them to serve, even when they became corrupted, God still chose individuals like Samuel to be His servants. Each individual was accountable to God, and that was a key factor in the decision to become a Nazirite.

Joshua made a personal commitment to serve God and not worship the idols that the people around them were worshipping.

"But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:15)

Or in the story of Elijah when he thought he was the only one left who worshipped God, but God told Elijah:

“Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.” (1 Kings 19:18).

The principle of personal accountability still applies today— we are called to be holy even if other people are breaking their vows. Peter says,

“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people to be his very own and to proclaim the wonderful deeds of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9, ISV).

God has chosen and blessed His church in order to make her a light. We are called to be stewards of God’s richness in this world, but everyone does not respond. We participate in stewardship seminars and listen to stewardship sermons in order to learn how to be faithful stewards. While many in this world are choosing not to be faithful stewards, God’s people respond joyfully. They see themselves as stewards of God’s resources.

While knowledge was important to those taking the Nazirite vow, it does not stop with knowledge. Commitment was also needed.

Commitment

When my wife and I were buying a home, the attorney handling the paperwork explained to us why we had to sign so many documents. He told us that his first closing was more than forty years ago, and at that closing only one document had to be signed—the loan document. Over the years, he told us, more and more people defaulted on their loans and the banks required the signing of more documents. It seemed to him that people’s commitments to pay the loan decreased over the years. The challenge is not that people don’t know what they need to do—commitment calls for sacrifice and that’s why some people find it difficult to fulfill their commitments.

The person who took the Nazirite vow not only had knowledge, but also the willingness to sacrifice. For example, the individual was separated from daily activities in order to deepen their relationship with God. All other activities were secondary—God was the priority. Each person made a personal commitment.

The Israelites, while traveling to the Promised Land, all too often looked back fondly to Egypt, as if life had been good there. At the same time, they were in danger of falling to the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites. Today, we are surrounded by a materialistic society dominated by consumerism. We are constantly bombarded with media messages that put everything and everyone ahead of God. As with the Israelites, we are at risk of losing God’s vision for our lives. It is a danger as old as the entrance of sin into this world. The difference is that today things are magnified and widely spread by mass media. Jesus’ words are as true today as they were when He first pronounced them: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24, KJV).

Later in the same discourse, this appeal was made: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (verse 33, KJV).

This was exactly what the person who took the Nazirite vow did—he made a commitment to put God first and above everything and everyone. How do you exercise that kind of commitment? There are at least three ways:

First, set aside specific time for the purpose of consecrating totally and exclusively to God. The amount of time may not be the same, but each of us needs to set aside this special time.

Second, adopt a lifestyle characterized by total abstinence of bad things, things that are harmful to our spiritual development.

And finally, remember specific events in our spiritual journey that help us renew our commitment to God.

Transformation

We have focused on the importance of knowledge and commitment, and now we focus on the outcome—transformation. Transformation occurs because of the knowledge we obtain and the commitment we make. Transformation is part of our sanctification process, and this transformation has a lot to do with our stewardship.

Those who took the Nazirite vows help us see what it means to experience transformation. The behavior of those who took the vow changed dramatically. For example, their behavior after the death of a loved one was governed. The Bible states, “He shall not make himself unclean for his father, or for his mother, for his brother, or for his sister, when they die: because the consecration of his God is upon his head” (Numbers 6:7, KJV). This was emotionally difficult to fulfill but the individuals who took the vow did it. What was the basis for this behavior? Even though they experienced pain when a loved one died, it was a practical fulfillment of Deuteronomy 6:5: “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (KJV). Their comfort came from God and not from participating in the funeral of a loved one. Jesus said: “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me, is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37). A deep love for God is the motivation for our commitment. Paul said it to the Corinthians: “For the love of Christ, compels us.” (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Another example of how their lives were changed has to do with what they drank. The consumption of wine or any product of the vine was, and still is, associated with banquets, parties, and social gatherings. Wine is a social drink. What’s wrong with a banquet or party? Nothing intrinsically, however, for a Nazirite it was a potentially dangerous place or environment. Job offered sacrifices for his sons and daughters after they had their banquets just in case they had offended God (Job 1:5). We know that Samson violated his vows when he touched the dead body of a lion. We don’t know if he drank wine or any product of the vine, but he participated in banquets and social activities with the Philistines. The Nazirite was not asked to practice moderation, but rather abstinence. The mind of the individual was the first target of the devil. The body was still craving for those things that the vow excluded; however, the mind was in control. The goal was that, at the end of the process of change, the physical and emotional aspects of the individual were aligned and functioning harmoniously with reason. There was no place for indulgence. Only after the Nazirites fulfilled certain conditions were they allowed to practice moderation again (Numbers 6:19, 20).

The result of abstinence (total food fast) was transformational. When a person fasts for religious reasons, God changes a person from within. That is why Jesus told the disciples when they could not cast out a demon: “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29). Something about total abstinence from certain food that God changes a person and gives them power. Total food fast is key to experience transformation.

And finally, even the outward appearance of those who took the vow was transformed. The person taking the vow would let his hair grow. When the end of the vow would come and the person had to cut his hair and offer it as a sacrifice, the person would also go through a physical transformation. The Bible states, “After [the Nazirite] has shaved his dedicated hair . . .” (verse 19, NASB), the priest was to continue with the offering of the sacrifice. Even though the Bible does not mention what the social norm for the length of the hair in a man or woman was at that time, the vow of the Nazirite to God overruled any social requirement or norm in this regard.

These three examples show the radical transformation that took place in the lives of those who took the Nazirite vows. Someone could not uphold the Nazirite vow and keep it hidden from family and friends. As radical as they are, these examples teach us valuable lessons and principles about our duties

as stewards of God's resources. Those who took the vows experienced a radical change in their lives. But such radical lifestyle changes occur even outside religious lives. Think of the Olympic athletes. They often abstain from many things—even legitimate things. They do whatever it takes to be winners. If athletes make such deep commitments to their sport, what should we as followers of Jesus Christ do?

Paul said the Corinthians: "And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown" (1 Corinthians 9:25).

The best example

Transformation requires commitment, and those who took the Nazirite vows or the athletes are good examples of commitment. But there is another example that will help us make that commitment in our lives. That is the example of Jesus Christ and how He was victorious over the temptations He experienced.

When the devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread, Jesus replied, "The Scriptures say: 'No one can live only on food. People need every word that God has spoken' " (Matthew 4:4, CEV). When the devil challenged Jesus to throw Himself from the temple, Jesus responded with, "The Scriptures also say, 'Don't try to test the Lord your God!' " (verse 7, CEV).

And finally, when the devil tempted Jesus with the kingdoms of this world, Jesus told the devil, "Go away Satan! The Scriptures say: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him' " (verse 10, CEV).

Conclusion

What can we learn from those who took the Nazirite vows? What can we learn from Jesus' victory of temptations?

We learn that knowledge is important. That knowledge comes from God's Word, our prayer life, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Jesus responded to the devil's temptations with words from the Bible. If you and I know the Word of God, we can be spiritually strong.

We learn that commitment follows knowledge. The Nazirites made a commitment to put God first in their lives. Jesus did not allow the things of this world to be first in His life—He committed His life to fulfilling His mission.

Finally, we learn that transformation comes because Jesus Christ changes our lives. Without Jesus Christ, knowledge has no value. Without Jesus Christ, commitment is not possible. But, with Jesus Christ, we are transformed.

A transformed person is a faithful steward. Faithful stewards are not individuals who try harder—faithful stewards are individuals whose lives have been transformed. Once our lives are transformed, we are faithful with our time, talents, and possessions. We are not faithful stewards because of fear, but because transformation enables us to practice radical stewardship in our lives. We become God's disciplined stewards on this earth.