

Trustees of God's House

October 20, 2002

Background Study

It is fall and all of us long-time church-goers know that this is the time of year for football, falling leaves, and stewardship campaigns. Thus, you might think that this set of studies will focus on our role and responsibilities as stewards of God's creation, tithing, and the need to be cheerful givers. These are all important topics, but we are going to look at them from a fresh perspective ~ our responsibilities as trustees of God's household and how hard it is for us to be cheerful receivers! Specifically, we'll look at (week 1) the charge given us by God to manage wisely his house, (week 2) our reluctance to be cheerful receivers, (week 3) how we can go about being wise trustees, and (week 4) the challenges faced by the St. Andrew community as we move from a little house to a big house.

A Key Scripture Passage – Hebrews 3:1-6 (NRSV)

¹Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, ²was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also “was faithful in all God's house.” ³Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. ⁴(For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) ⁵Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. ⁶Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.

God's House

The notion of God's house is woven through the Bible, taking on several layers of meaning. First, the tabernacle and temple of Israel¹ are referred to as God's house, such as when Jesus confronts corruption in the temple saying, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” (John 2:16). Second, the people of God are God's household. In the above passage from Hebrews, the writer reminds us of Moses' servant faithfulness in God's house,² a house built by God and presided over by Jesus Christ. So long as we hang on to a bold confidence in God and the work of Christ, we're the house! For Peter, Christians are “living stones” in a “spiritual house,” for which Jesus is the “cornerstone” (see 1 Peter 2:4-5). Third, this idea of God's house extends to the earth and all of creation. At least a half-dozen times in the New Testament, a Greek word based on the word for “house” is translated “world,” because we live in an inhabited world that is God's house (e.g., Matt 24:14 & Acts 17:6). Finally, Jesus paints a heart-warming picture of heaven as God's house where a place will be prepared for each of us (John 14:1-4). From the temple, to the people of God, to the earth, to all creation, to heaven – all these are encompassed in God's house.

¹ After turning away from the Promised Land in fear, Moses led the Israelites through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. During this time of wandering, God gave them instructions for building a tabernacle, a large rectangular tent enclosing a curtained area in which would reside the Ark of the Covenant. The tabernacle was suitable for a nomadic people and it was not until 1000BC that Solomon built a permanent temple, the dwelling place of God. The Israelites understood that God could not be confined to a particular space, but they also knew that, in some mysterious way, God dwelt in the temple as he did not dwell elsewhere.

² In verse 2, the writer quotes from Numbers 12:7 – “Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house.”

Our Responsibilities in God's House

Often, when we speak of our responsibilities in God's house, we speak of our "stewardship." In Greek, the word for house is *oikos* and the person who oversees the house, who manages it, is called an *oikonomos*.³ This word is used ten times in the New Testament and is translated variously (based on the context) as steward, or manager, or treasurer in the NRSV⁴. Jesus tells a parable about a bad steward (Luke 16: 1-13). This is the story of a trusted steward who squanders the property of his master, which was a particularly despicable crime in Jesus' day. The moral of the story is something like this: use what you possess to serve people because everything you have was given you by God!

When writing to a congregation he founded in Corinth, Greece, Paul referred to himself as "a servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God," and as a steward, was required to be "trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:1-2). Peter reminds us that we, the people of God, are to be "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). Clearly, Paul and Peter knew that their responsibilities to God extended far beyond their possessions.

Leonard Sweet⁵ suggests that "steward" is probably not the best way to think about this. After all, he notes, who really uses the word anymore, other than to refer to someone you might meet on a cruise ship! Instead, Sweet suggests that "trustee" is more meaningful for us and would be a better translation of the Greek. Many of us have some experience with trusts and the responsibilities held by trustees, even if it is simply some sort of family estate. When we think of ourselves as God's trustees, the message of the Bible becomes a little clearer. We are given dominion over God's creation, not so we can rule as a tough or selfish taskmaster, but so we can be effective trustees of God's wealth, managing it wisely, helping it to grow and flourish. God's creation is not ours, we don't own it; rather, we hold it in trust. We hold the Christian faith in trust and we are charged with guarding what has been entrusted to us (1 Timothy 6:20). We, God's people, the body of Christ, the church, have received a treasure, a trust, given by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14). This treasure is the truth about God and the proclamation that Jesus is Lord!

Understanding our responsibilities as being those of a trustee turns fall stewardship campaigns on their heads. I've been in many Sunday school classes and when stewardship time rolls around, we always end up talking about tithing. Pretty soon, somebody would ask the inevitable question – do we tithe on pre-tax or after-tax income! But this is all backwards. It assumes that all the stuff and money we have is ours and the challenge is to figure out how much we want or need to give to God. Do I give 1%, 2%, 5%, or even 10%? Tithing is a long tradition in the Christian church, but it has always been more talk than tithe! We could spend a lot of time talking about tithing in this study, but we're not. You see, tithing is not the approach of the trustee. Trustees of God's house recognize that everything we have – all the money, cars, houses, stuff – is a gift from God. We use what we need and then grow the rest for God. Do we need to keep for own use 80% of what God entrusts to us? 85%? 90%? 95%?

John Wesley understood this. When he was a young man he made 30 pounds a year. He figured out that he needed 28 pounds a year to live on and gave two pounds to the church. When his income increased to 50 pounds, he kept 28 and gave 22. When he made 100 pounds a year, he kept 28 and gave 72. Let those who have ears, hear!

³ This is a compound word – *oikos*, house + *nomos*, law

⁴ NRSV stands for *New Revised Standard Version* and is the translation most commonly used in United Methodist churches.

⁵ From "Freely You Have Received, Freely Give," by Leonard Sweet. A copy of the article is available at <http://www.leonardsweet.com/sweetened/articles.asp> This is an excellent and well-footnoted article. Many of the ideas and information in these studies come from Sweet's article.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Psalm 27 Protection in the temple of the trustworthy Lord	Day 2 Micah 4:1-5 The final establishing of God's house, his kingdom
Day 3 John 2:13-22 Jesus at the temple	Day 4 Luke 16:1-13 The parable of the dishonest manager
Day 5 1 Peter 2:1-12 Jesus is the cornerstone of our spiritual house	Weekly Prayer Concerns

