

CALLED TO BE GOD'S MANAGERS

We are called to be God's managers. Though the biblical term is "steward" I believe we understand the imagery of managing slightly better. Even so, to presume to be a manager is to take on great responsibility. Many of us would be happy to let someone else manage or lead. That does not change the reality that in God's kingdom each of us is a manager of something God has entrusted to each one.

The best illustration of this comes from the world of farming. My brother-in-law, Robert, removed himself from farming a couple of years ago. He felt that the input was greater than the output to make it worth it to keep on planting crops year after year. Low grain prices, machinery costs and sweat equity were overwhelming and so he decided to drive a delivery truck. He did, however, keep the land.

Robert rents the land to another farmer whose intention is to plant crops. One assumes that an arrangement was made where the renter pays Robert a share of the crop or a set price for the use of the land each year.

Now the renter farms the land as his own, investing his wisdom, money and effort to make the land as productive as possible. He works the land, chooses what crop to plant, applies the fertilizer, and eventually harvests the crop. From that harvest comes a guaranteed return to Robert as the owner. Even though the renter does not own the land, he is able to enjoy the fruit of his investment and share it with others. And since the renter has a long-term interest in the land, he takes good care of it. He can't sell the land, he can't turn and rent the land to someone else, and he can't keep the owner's share of the crop. Despite these limitations, the renter has freedom to manage the land to yield the best possible result.

It is in this way that God has assigned to us the management of his gifts. We don't own our bodies, our time, our abilities, the gospel, or our earthly possessions. God owns them. But he has called us to be managers of these gifts with the understanding that we can invest in these gifts for the good of his kingdom. We get the benefits of the "rented land" but God ultimately receives the first-fruits of it all.

Let's look even closer at the essentials of this calling we have received.

1. Understanding our Qualifications for Management

How is it that we are qualified to be managers? What is it about us that we are granted the opportunity to manage something for God?

That is where we turn to Psalm 8 as the foundation of this great calling. This psalm brings us back to the beginning so that we understand our qualifications to manage.

a) Whose we are – When it comes to understanding anything about our world, as believers we must always start with God. In him we find the source for all wisdom and understanding.

David insightfully captured the majesty of the Creator who owns all things: **"O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens..."** (v. 1). In a sense, David recognized that God has put his name on all of creation. Like a piece of art that is signed by its maker so that it is known as a Rembrandt or a Picasso, God has left his mark on everything from people to mountains.

Is God the owner of the "field" we plow and plant? Yes, and what's more, we belong to this owner as those he has also created. This qualifies God to rent out his "fields" to whomever he chooses and for whatever purposes.

b) Who we are – Based on this we turn to God's choice in whom he rents to. Who are we that we are qualified to manage his fields? David wrote, **"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor"** (3-5).

What qualifies us to be managers? Nothing! That is, nothing in ourselves. We take credit for our own intelligence, our skills and our abilities. But these too are gifts from God. You receive an “A” on your essay, a bonus from work, or an award for an achievement and you say “look what I did.”

David realized that in comparison with all the wonderful works of God, we are microscopic little beings. Yet God has crowned us with supreme authority over his creation. We human beings are the ones he chose to govern his property.

c) What we are – By God’s appointment we are managers of his great possessions. David declared of man, “**You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet...**” (6). God’s choice for management positions is astounding – we were born for this position.

We humans are cursed with split personalities. While we like to take credit for our accomplishments, we also like to shirk responsibility. Some of us shy away from being in charge so that we might be free from the blame or failure. But this is not something you can run away from. God has made you a manager of something; you are chosen to take care of God’s possession and it is a great privilege. You are qualified by God’s divine appointment to be a manager.

2. Honing our Management Skills

Pick up a John Maxwell book and you will find a readable and useful writing on leadership. Maxwell is the guru of leadership in our times. There are scores of books out there on the subject of managing well and so I do not pretend to be an expert or to be able to add to what they have said.

I do know that as managers, born to the task as we are, we need to hone our skills and understand what’s involved in managing the good gifts of God. For some solid biblical principles on management we now turn to Matthew 25.

Matthew 25 is a trilogy of parables Jesus told that have a common theme of stewardship running through them. In the first, the parable of the Ten Virgins, five of the women waiting for the bridegroom to appear are wise, and five are foolish. Part of the story deals with managing the resource of oil. The second story, the parable of the Talents, is the very familiar tale of a man who leaves on a journey and gives his three servants his property to look after. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to the last he gave one talent. Then the last story is the end times vision of Jesus returning and separating the sheep from the goats, or the righteous from the unrighteous.

What ties the three stories together are the recurring themes of servants entrusted with a resource to look after and the expected return of the owner to take account of his property. Let’s consider some of these principles.

a) Manage according to your ability – While the ability of the foolish virgins is not evident, we do see that in the Parable of the Talents, ability is key. The man who went on the journey called his servants together: “**To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability...**” (25:15).

What is readily apparent is that God knows us intimately and is aware of our abilities and our limitations. He is not going to give you a task that is beyond your ability. God may stretch you within your ability to show you that you are capable of much more than you realize, but he will not burden you with a task that does not match your abilities.

It is also clear that God has entrusted us with something of great value to him. The talent in the parable is a measure of silver or gold and was worth 6000 days of labor. Even though the last servant was given only one talent he was still entrusted with a great amount. He might have looked at the others and felt belittled. He might have said to himself, “The master doesn’t trust me like the others so why should I try?” But the master did provide an opportunity for the servant to prove trustworthy and able to do more in the future. Manage according to your ability and prove faithful with what you have been given.

b) Manage as one held accountable – These three parables concur that there will be a time when the master, Jesus, will return and ask to see what we have done with our trust. In each parable we can see different aspects of what Jesus meant. The virgins possessed oil, a common symbol for the Holy Spirit in the Bible. Did they fail to fan into flame the gift of faith that was entrusted to them? The talents could represent anything from faith to spiritual gifts. What Jesus wants to know is what you did with what you were given. Did you develop your gift of hospitality? If you know how to make money, did you work at philanthropy?

In the story of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus gets very specific with what he expects. He will say, **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance...For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me”** (34-36).

Of course the good servants were bewildered and wondered when they done these good things to Jesus. You know the answer, **“...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me”** (40). God’s greatest treasure that we are entrusted with is humankind.

The question then will be: what did we do with these treasures? What did you do with the “field” I gave you? The talent was given over to the servants, but not given to them. It was entrusted to them. And the English word “entrust” means to give in “good faith” with the expectation that there will be some kind of gain.

Recently when we went away we left our dog with a friend who happens to be a good dog trainer. My expectation was that when I returned for the dog he might have a new trick or better obedience. My friend was not aware of this expectation so she didn’t do anything. That’s okay. But with Jesus we must manage his good gifts as managers who prove faithful with that trust.

c) Manage with the final assessment in view – In each parable there is a day of reckoning. The five foolish virgins who were late were told by the bridegroom, **“I tell you the truth, I don’t know you”** (12). The servant who went and buried his talent instead of investing it, he had a terrible conclusion. He didn’t just bury the talent, he dug what the Bible indicates as a hole the size of a Jacuzzi to bury the money. Jesus said of him, **“...throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (30). And those who failed to recognize Jesus in the face of humanity, those who did not feed, clothe, or care for the needy? Jesus said, **“They will go away to eternal punishment...”** (46).

This is scary stuff. It’s frightening because that is what will happen if we fail to do something with the “field” God has rented to us. This is what will happen if we hoard and ignore the responsibility God has entrusted to us in faith, gifts, money, authority and people.

What is really surprising is that the servant with the one talent would have been forgiven if he had tried and failed. It would have been okay. The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, and is nothing. They may avoid suffering and sorrow, but they cannot learn, feel, change, grow, love, or live. Chained by their attitudes, they are a slave, they have forfeited their freedom. Only a person who risks is free (Victor Yap).

3. Defining our Management Goals

In today’s highly educated market a manager must be absolutely clear on what his or her goals are. Even in seminary we are taught to formulate goals and objectives for the ministries we are in. As managers of God’s good gifts we have goals too, very clear purposes for what we do.

a) One: To Serve Others – The Apostle Peter speaks about gifts in this way: **“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.**

If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and even. Amen” (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Whatever gift you have been given, whatever resource has been entrusted to you, it is not for your benefit and enjoyment alone. God gave it to you to use in helping others. God’s grace comes in many forms. This grace has been shown to us, not only in salvation, but in our life’s work as well. With our skills, our resources, our opportunities and our money we can share the grace of God with others. That is how we are to spend our lives.

b) Two: To Glorify God – Do we farm so that God may be praised through Jesus Christ? Do we make business deals with this intention in mind? Do we sell a product with the hopes that people will be brought to think of God through our integrity and service?

It would surprise me if any of us were so intent on this goal that it is all we thought of in our work. Sure we want to have a good reputation with the customer so that they will come back. But do we have God’s ultimate goal in mind as we work or utilize our gift? Probably not, and that’s okay. What is important is to understand that God is glorified when we use our gifts for their rightful purpose. God’s purpose in entrusting us with the management of his gifts is to bring glory to God.

Final Thoughts

A certain king had a task to accomplish. He called two of his servants and gave them the same wages. He told them to fill a basket with water from a nearby well, saying that he would come in the evening to inspect their work.

After dumping one or two buckets of water into the basket, one of the men said, “What is the good of doing this useless work? As soon as we pour the water in, it runs out the sides.”

The other answered, “But we have our wages, haven’t we? We are called to do it until he returns. It is the master’s business, not ours. He is a wise king, and must have his own purpose that we do not understand.”

“I’m not going to do such foolish work,” replied the first. Throwing down his bucket he went away.

The other man continued until he had drained the well. Looking down into it, he saw something shining at the bottom – a diamond ring.

“Now I see the use of pouring water into the basket!” he exclaimed. “If the bucket had brought up the ring before the well was dry, it would have been filtered out in the basket. The king was actually looking for the ring. Our work was not useless.”

We are called to be God’s managers. Sometimes our work may not seem as significant as the next guy’s but it is important to God. He sees something in our work and stewardship of great value. God is hoping we will be faithful with what has been entrusted to us and to produce the results he expects of us. What will the Lord say when the job is done?

AMEN