

“What Stewardship Means to Me”

If you watch a lot of pro football like we do at our house, you're probably familiar with the segment on ESPN's Monday Night Countdown called, "Co'mon Man." If you don't know what I'm talking about, it's this funny bit where each of the hosts talk through a clip of something that a player did—usually the day before in one of the Sunday games—that's either really unusual or really foolish. The clip ends with the host saying the words, "Co'mon Man." Like last Monday night and the one they did on Brown's quarterback, Baker Mayfield. They show him going into the stadium before the start of the game against the Broncos with a full beard. At kickoff, he had shaved it down to this "Fu Manchu" kind of thing. And then at the post game press conference, all he had left was a mustache. So between the time he arrived at the stadium and the time he left, he had shaved not once, but twice! The host's response? "Co'mon Man!"

Now I tell you this because I felt like saying these exact same words to Pastor Wayne when he ran the idea of our current sermon series by me. Four weeks and four different pastors each preaching a sermon titled "What Stewardship Means to Me?" "Co'mon Man!" I mean, few words have ever been spoken from pulpits across the church that make people as uncomfortable as the word stewardship. All I could think about were those sermons I heard growing up where stewardship was nothing but a disguise the pastor used to guilt people into giving more money. But the more I thought about it, the more it started to hit home because of this desire that all of us have to own things. We want stuff, don't we? And this isn't so bad, usually. But when we're called out on it—like this desire to own things can be a real way of wanting to be like God—we get uncomfortable. I know I do.

I think that's really why I wanted to say "Co'mon man" when I learned about this sermon series. Because I admit that I have struggled with what

God would have me remember—that everything I have is really his. All of my time...all of my “wealth”.... all of my talents is to be managed for his glory. But all too often I choose I forget this because I want to be in control. Five kids (two of which are on the west coast), a house, cars, braces, tuition—not to mention food, clothes, and utilities. Maybe, I start to think, if I can take care of all these needs, then I’ll be in a better position to give back to God. But this never works because you know just as well as me how people are. Our default setting is to trust in ourselves before we trust in the Lord.

But this is nothing new. Just look at our OT reading from the prophet Haggai. The Israelites in Haggai’s day decided to set aside their own needs and give back to God after returning from captivity. The Jerusalem walls were rebuilt. A new altar was installed on the Temple Mount. Soon, they would lay the foundations for a brand-new temple. But it wasn’t long before their own needs took priority once again. God’s house could wait, they chose to believe. But their own houses couldn’t. And what was God’s response to them through his prophet Haggai? “Why are you living in well-built houses while my house lies in ruins? Look at what’s happening to you! You have planted much but harvest little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but are still thirsty. You put on clothes but cannot keep warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in bags filled with holes” (1:4-6 NLT).

This was God’s call to the Israelites to examine their hearts. What they were doing with their time and their money, once again, was all about them. And it’s this same call to you and me today. Because aren’t we just as guilty of thinking and doing the same— that everything is about us and what we think we need first? We might hear what God would have us remember—that everything is his. But when push comes to shove, we get really uneasy about giving a portion back to him. Because if we give it away then obviously that means we have less for the well-built houses, the cars, the tuition, the soccer team, the dance team, the week at Disney, and the Christmas presents, right? I mean, we work hard and we want our stuff. It’s the default mode of our sinful nature to look out for number one.

The Lord knows this. He sees our foolishness and I imagine him shaking his head and saying, “Co’mon man.”

Because if anyone knows that there’s a better way, it’s him. And now more than ever in my own life, I know this is true. And I want to share with you why. Because it has a lot to do with my journey into full time ministry. Many of you know my story. But if you don’t, I want to you to hear this part. Because I believe it has a very real connection to what we’re talking about today. God wants us to trust him. That’s really what our giving is all about. Because when we trust that he is going to continue to provide for us, we can be generous with our our time, our talents, and our money.

And just to be honest, I really wasn’t sure if I would talk about this today because for one, it’s personal to me and my family. And two, I didn’t want any of you to think I’m using this as a way of guilting you into giving the church more of your money or your time, because I’m not. I’m sharing this because first and foremost trusting God is the basis for all of us growing in our stewardship. And I was even more convinced of this when I received an email from one of you after last Sunday’s adult ed. class that included the following: *“I feel you have an important story to tell about trusting God and his provision. I was deeply blessed by the way He provided for you and your family through your previous job to get you through seminary and into full-time ministry.”* So here it is.

I always thought that being a pastor was my calling. At the same time, I did all I could to shut that door. By the time I had graduated from college, I got married, started a family, and eventually landed a great sales job with a major international cooperation. Things were really good. For many years, my family enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle and I’m extremely grateful for that. But that call I felt to go into the ministry never went away. In fact, the more success I enjoy in secular terms, the more I struggled with this feeling that there was more for me and my family in this life than that. And so about ten years ago, God opened the door one more time. And finally I walked through it. I enrolled in Concordia Seminary through a special program for second career guys like me. I spent four years working at my

job and working on my certification, attending classes both remotely and on campus in St. Louis. A lot of people thought I was nuts. My wife, who gave me permission to say this, thought I was too during most of those years. Everything was fine, I was reminded. I had a good job. I had time to serve the church and share my gifts in many ways already. Why give it all up all that upward mobility for church work? On the outside, it didn't make a lot of sense, I admit. But on the inside it made all the sense in the world. Why? Because the relationship with my Savior that began at my baptism all those years ago, had become my life's priority. It was a beautiful thing. And so I walked through the door, trusting God would see me and my family through. He did. And he continues to do the same for us each and every day.

But it's not because we deserve it, or have some kind of special relationship with him that others don't have. He sees us through because he knows a thing or two not about upward mobility, but downward mobility. And there's no greater example of that than Jesus.

The throne of heaven to a dirty manger in Bethlehem. The descendant of David, but who is born into the family of a humble carpenter. The one who knew only love and affirmation from the Father and the Spirit took on friends and what did they do? They let him down, even betrayed him. The one who knew only glory was beaten and crucified. The one who is holy became our sin.

Why did he do all of this? "For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost" (Lk.19:10). That was me and it was you, which means we worship the ultimate giver. God gave us his first and his best—His Son Jesus Christ. Do me and my family struggle to trust Him above ourselves? Of course we do. And no doubt you do too.

But in Christ, God continues to graciously give and provide for all of our needs, even as we give back to him. I can attest to this in my life and I pray that you can too. It all comes to down to trust, my friends. That's what stewardship means to me. **Amen.**