

Stewardship

by Charles Finney

As God's stewards, individuals are accountable for their actions, talents, influence, and property, and must use them to serve God's interests and advance His kingdom.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:9-10, Matthew 6:19-21, Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 16:2, Romans 14:12, 1 Corinthians 10:31, 2 Corinthians 9:6-7, Galatians 6:7-10, James 4:17, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Accountability", "Stewardship"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the concept of stewardship, explaining that all individuals are stewards of God's resources and must account for their time, talents, influence, and possessions. He warns that neglecting God's business for personal gain is a serious offense, equating it to fraud against God. Finney urges listeners to recognize their responsibilities in using their resources for God's glory and the welfare of others, rather than hoarding wealth or pursuing selfish interests. He concludes with a call to repentance, reminding everyone that they will ultimately be held accountable for their stewardship before God.

Transcript

Luke xvi. 2.--"Give an account of thy stewardship."

A steward is one who is employed to transact the business of another, as his agent or representative in the business in which he is employed.

His duty is to promote, in the best possible manner, the interest of his employer. He is liable, at any time, to be called to an account for the manner in which he has transacted his business, and to be removed from his office at the pleasure of his employer.

One important design of the parable of which the text is a part, is to teach that all men are God's stewards. The Bible declares that the silver and the gold are his, and that he is, in the highest possible sense, the proprietor of the universe. Men are mere stewards, employed by him for the transaction of his business, and required to do all they do for his glory. Even their eating and drinking are to be done for his glory, i.e. that they may be strengthened for the best performance of his business.

That men are God's stewards, is evident from the fact that God treats them as such, and removes them at his pleasure, and disposes of the property in their hands, which he could not do, did he not consider them merely his agents, and not the owners of the property.

1. If men are God's stewards, they are bound to account to him for their time. God has created them, and keeps them alive, and their time is his. Reader, should you employ a steward, and pay him for his time, would you not expect him to employ that time in your service? Would you not consider it fraud and dishonesty, for him, while in your pay, to spend his time in idleness, or in promoting his private interests? Suppose he were often idle, that would be bad enough; but suppose that he wholly neglected your business, and that, when called to an account, and censured for not doing his duty, he should say, "Why, what have I done?" would you not suppose that for him to have done nothing, and let your business suffer, was great wickedness, for which he deserved to be punished?

Now, reader, you are God's steward, and if you are an impenitent sinner, you have wholly neglected God's business, and have remained idle in his vineyard, or have been only attending to your own private interests; and now are you ready to ask what you have done? Are you not a knave, thus to neglect the business of your great employer, and go about your own private business, to the neglect of all that justice and duty and God require of you?

But suppose your steward should employ his time in opposing your interest, using your capital and time in driving at speculations directly opposed to the business for which he was employed? Would you not consider this great dishonesty? Would you not think it very ridiculous for him to account himself an honest man? Would you not suppose yourself obliged to call him to an account? And would you not account any one a villain who should approve such conduct? Would you not think yourself bound to publish him abroad, that the world might know his character, and that you might clear yourself from the charge of upholding such a person?

How, then, shall God dispose of you, if you employ your time in opposing his interest, and use his capital in your hands, to drive at speculations directly opposed to the business for which he has employed you? Are you not ashamed, then, to account yourself an honest man; and will not God consider himself under an obligation to call you to an account? Should he not do this, would not the omission be an evidence, on his part, of an approval of your abominable wickedness? Must he not feel himself constrained to make you a public example, that the universe may know how much he abhors your crimes!

2. Stewards are bound to give an account of their talents. By talents, I mean here the powers of their minds. Suppose you should educate a man to be your steward, should support him during the time he was engaged in study, and be at all the expense of his education, and that then he should either neglect to employ his mind in your service, or should use the powers of his cultivated intellect for the promotion of his own interests; would you not consider this as fraud and villany? Now, God created your minds, and has been at the expense of your education, and has trained you up for his service; and do you either let your mind remain in idleness, or pervert the powers of your cultivated intellect, to the promotion of your own private interest, and then ask what you have done to deserve the wrath of God?

But suppose your steward should use his education in opposition to your interest, and use all the powers of his mind to destroy the very interest for which he was educated, and which he is employed to sustain; would you not look upon his conduct as marked with horrid guilt? And do you, sinner, employ the powers of your mind, and whatever education God may have given you, in opposing his interest; perverting his truth; scattering "fire-brands, arrows, and death" all around you, and think to escape his curse? Shall not the Almighty be avenged upon such a wretch?

3. A steward is bound to give an account for the influence he exerts upon mankind around him.

Suppose you should employ a steward, should educate him until he possessed great talents, should put a large capital into his hands, should exalt him high in society, and place him in circumstances to exert an immense influence in the commercial community, and that then he should refuse or neglect to exert this influence in promoting your interest; would you not consider this default a perpetual fraud practised upon you?

But suppose he should exert all this influence against you, and array himself with all his weight of character and talent and influence, and even employ the capital with which he was intrusted, in opposing your interest--what language, in your estimation, could then express your sense of his guilt?

Reader, whatever influence God has given you, if you are an impenitent sinner, you are not only neglecting to use it for God, to build up his kingdom, but you are employing it in opposition to his interest and glory; and for this, do you not deserve the damnation of hell? Perhaps you are rich, or learned, or have, on other accounts, great influence in society, and are refusing to use it to save the souls of men, but are bringing all your weight of character and talents and influence and example, to drag all who are within the sphere of your influence, down to the gates of hell.

4. You must give an account for the manner in which you use the property in your possession. Suppose your steward should refuse to employ the capital with which you intrusted him, for the promotion of your interest, or suppose he were to account it his own, and to use it for his own private interest, or apply it to the gratification of his lusts, or the aggrandizement of his family; in bestowing large portions upon his daughters, or in ministering to the lusts and pride of his sons; while at the same time your business was suffering for the want of this very capital; or suppose that this steward held the purse-strings of your wealth, and that you had multitudes of other servants, whose necessities were to be supplied out of the means in his hands, and that their welfare, and even their lives, depended on these supplies; and yet this steward should minister to his own lusts, and those of his family, and suffer those, your other servants, to perish--what would you think of such wickedness? You intrusted him with your money, and enjoined him to take care of your other servants, and through his neglect, they were all dead men.

Now, you have God's money in your hands, and are surrounded by God's children, whom he commands you to love as you do yourself. God might, with perfect justice, have given his property to them instead of you. The world is full of poverty, desolation, and death; hundreds and millions are perishing, body and soul; God calls on you to exert yourself as his steward, for their salvation; to use all the property in your possession, so as to promote the greatest possible amount of happiness among your fellow-creatures. The Macedonian cry comes from the four winds of heaven, "Come over and help us;" COME OVER AND HELP US; and yet you refuse to help; you hoard up the wealth in your possession, live in luxury, and let your fellow-men go to hell. What language can describe your guilt?

But suppose your servant, when you called him to account, should say, "Have I not acquired this property by my own industry?" would you not answer, "You have employed my capital to do it, and my time, for which I have paid you; and the money you have gained is mine." So when God calls upon you to use the property in your possession for him, do you say it is yours; that you have obtained it by your own industry? Pray, whose time have you used, and whose talents and means? Did not God create you? Has He not sustained you? Has He not prospered you, and given you all his success? Yes; your time is his; your all is his: you have no right to say the wealth you have is yours; it is his, and you are bound to use it for his glory. You are a traitor to your trust if you do not so employ it.

If your clerk take only a little of your money, his character is gone, and he is branded as a villain. But sinners take not only a dollar or so, but all they can get, and use it for themselves. Don't you see that God would do wrong not to call you to account, and punish you for filling both your pockets with His money, and calling it your own. Professor of religion, if you are doing so don't call yourself a Christian.

5. You must give an account for your soul. You have no right to go to hell. God has a right to your soul; your going to hell would injure the whole universe. It would injure hell, because it would increase its torments. It would injure heaven, because it would wrong it out of your services. Who shall take the harp in your place, in singing praises to God? Who shall contribute your share to the happiness of heaven?

Suppose you had a steward to whom you had given life, and educated him at great expense, and then he should wilfully throw that life away; has he a right thus to dispose of a life of so much value to you? Is it not as unjust as to rob you of the same amount of property in any thing else? God has made your soul, sustained and educated you, till you are now able to render him important services, and to glorify him forever; and have you a right to go to hell, and throw away your soul, and thus rob God of your service? Have you a right to render hell more miserable, and heaven less happy, and thus injure God and all the universe?

Do you still say, What if I do lose my soul, it is nobody's business but my own? That is false; it is every body's business. Just as well might a man bring a contagious disease into a city, and spread dismay and death all around, and say it was nobody's business but his own.

6. You must give an account for the souls of others. God commands you to be a co-worker with him in converting the world. He needs your services, for he saves souls only through the agency of men. If souls are lost, or the gospel is not spread over the world, sinners charge all the blame upon Christians, as if they only were bound to be active in the cause of Christ, to exercise benevolence, to pray for a lost world, to pull sinners out of the fire. I wonder who has absolved you from these duties? Instead of doing your duty, you lie as a stumbling-block in the way of other sinners. Thus, instead of helping to save a world, all your actions help to send souls to hell.

7. You are bound to give an account of the sentiments you entertain and propagate. God's kingdom is to be built up by truth, and not by error. Your sentiments will have an important bearing upon the influence you exert over those around you.

Suppose the business in which your steward was employed, required that he should entertain right notions concerning the manner of doing it, and the principles involved in it, of your will and of his duty. And suppose you had given him, in writing, a set of rules for the government of his conduct, in relation to all the affairs with which he was intrusted; then if he should neglect to examine those rules, or should pervert their plain meaning, and should thus pervert his own conduct, and be instrumental in deceiving others, and leading them in the way of disobedience, would you not look upon this as criminal and deserving the severest reprobation?

God has given you rules for the government of your conduct. In the Bible you have a plain revelation of his will in relation to all your actions. And now, do you either neglect or pervert it, and thus go astray yourself, and lead others with you in the way of disobedience and death, and then call yourself an honest man? FOR SHAME!

8. You must give an account of your opportunities of doing good.

If you employ a steward to transact your business, you expect him to take advantage of the state of the market and of things in general, to improve every opportunity to promote your interest. Suppose at the busy seasons of the year, he should spend his time in idleness, or in his own private affairs, and not have an eye at all to the most favourable opportunities of promoting your interest, would you not soon say to him, "Give an account of thy stewardship, for thou mayest be no longer steward?" Now, sinner, you have always neglected opportunities of serving God, of warning your fellow-sinners, of promoting revivals of religion, and advancing the interest of truth. You have been diligent merely to promote your own private interests, and have entirely neglected the interests of your great employer; and are you not a wretch, and do you not deserve to be put out of the stewardship, as a dishonest man, and to be sent to the state prison of the universe? How can you escape the damnation of hell?

REMARKS--1. From this subject you can see why the business of this world is a snare that drowns men's souls in destruction and perdition.

Sinners transact business to promote their own private interests, and not as God's stewards; and thus act dishonestly, defraud God, grieve the Spirit, and promote their own sensuality, pride, and death. If men considered themselves as God's clerks, they would not lie, and overreach, and work on the Sabbath, to make money for Him; they would be sure that such conduct would not please him. God never created this world to be a snare to men--it is abused; he designed it to be a delightful abode for them--but how perverted!

Should all men's business be done as for God, they would not find it such a temptation to fraud and dishonesty, as to ensnare and ruin their souls; it would have no tendency to wean the soul from Him, or to banish Him from their thoughts. When holy Adam dressed God's garden and kept it, had that a tendency to banish God from his mind? If your gardener should all day be very busy in your presence, dressing your plants, consulting your views, and doing your pleasure continually, asking how shall this be done, and how shall that be done, would this have a tendency to banish you from his thoughts? So, if you were busy all the day, seeking God's glory, and transacting all your business for him, acting as his steward, sensible that his eye was upon you, and were this your constant inquiry, how will this please him? and how will that please him? your being busy in such employment would have no tendency to distract your mind, and turn your thoughts from God.

Or, suppose a mother, whose son was in a distant land, was busy all day in putting up clothes, and books, and necessities for him, continually questioning, how will this please him? and how will that please him? would that employment have a tendency to divert her mind from her absent son? Now if you consider yourself as God's steward, doing his business; if you are in all things consulting his interests and his glory, and consider all your possessions as his, your time and your talents; the more busily you are engaged in his service, the more will God be present to all your thoughts.

Again. You see why idleness is a snare to the soul. A man that is idle, is dishonest, forgets his responsibility, refuses to serve God, and gives himself up to the temptations of the devil. Nay the idle man tempts the devil to tempt him.

Again. You see the error of the maxim, that men cannot attend to business and religion at the same time. A man's business ought to be a part of his religion. He cannot be religious in idleness. He must have some business, to be religious at all, and if it is performed from a right motive, his lawful and necessary business is as much a necessary part of religion as prayer, or going to church, or reading his Bible. Any one who

pleads this maxim is a knave by his own confession, for no man can believe that an honest employment, and pursued for God's glory, is inconsistent with religion. The objection supposes in the face of it, that he considers his business either as unlawful in itself, or that he pursues it in a dishonest manner. If this be true, he cannot be religious, while thus pursuing his business: if his employment be wicked, he must relinquish it; or if honest and pursued in an unlawful manner, he must pursue it lawfully; or in either case he will lose his soul. But if his business is lawful, let him pursue it honestly, and from right motives, and he will find no difficulty in attending to his business, and being religious at the same time. A life of business is best for Christians, as it exercises their graces and makes them strong.

4. That most men do not account themselves as God's stewards, is evident from the fact that they consider the losses they sustain in business as their own losses. Suppose that some of your debtors should fail, and your clerks should speak of it as their loss, and say they had met with great losses, would you not look upon it as ridiculous in the extreme? And is it not quite as ridiculous for you, if any of your Lord's debtors fail, to make yourself very uneasy and unhappy about it? Is it your loss, or his? If you have done your duty, and taken suitable care of his property, and a loss is sustained, it is nor your loss, but his. You should look at your sins and your duty, and not be frightened lest God should become bankrupt. If you acted as God's steward or as his clerk, you would not think of speaking of the loss as your own loss. But if you have considered the property in your possession as your own, no wonder that God has taken it out of your hands

Again. You see that in the popular acceptance of the term, it is ridiculous to call institutions for the extension of the Redeemer's kingdom in the world, charitable institutions. In one sense, indeed, they may be called such. Should you give your steward orders to appropriate a certain amount of funds for the benefit of the poor in a certain parish--this would be charity in you, but not in him, it would be ridiculous in him to pretend that the charity was his. So, institutions for the promotion of religion, are the charities of God, and not of man. The funds are God's, and it is his requirement, that they be expended according to his directions, to relieve the misery, or advance the happiness of our fellow-men. God, then, is the giver, and not men; and to consider the charities as the gift of men, is to maintain that the funds belong to men and not to God. To call them charitable institutions, in the sense in which they are usually spoken of, is to say, that men confer a favour upon God; that they give him their money, and consider Him as an object of charity.

Suppose that a company of merchants in the city should employ a number of agents to transact their business in India, with an immense capital, and suppose these agents should claim the funds as their property, and whenever a draft was made upon them, should consider it begging, and asking charity at their hands, and should call the servant by whom the order was sent a beggar; and farther, suppose they should get together, and form a charitable society to pay these drafts, of which they should become "life members," by paying each a few dollars of their employers' money into a common fund, and then hold themselves exonerated from all farther calls; so that, when an agent was sent with drafts, they might direct the treasurer of their society to let him have a little, as a matter of almsgiving. Would not this be vastly ridiculous! What then do you think of yourself, when you talk of supporting these charitable institutions, as if God, the owner of the universe, was to be considered as soliciting charity, and his servants as the agents of an infinite beggar? How wonderful it is, that God does not take such presumptuous men, and put them in hell in a moment, and then with the money in their hands execute his plans for converting the world.

Nor is it less ridiculous for them to suppose that by paying over the funds in their hands for this purpose, they confer a charity upon men: for it should all along be borne in mind, that the money is not theirs. They are God's stewards, and only pay it over to his order--in doing this, therefore, they neither confer a charity upon the servants who are sent with the orders; nor upon those for whose benefit the money is to be expended.

Again. When the servants of the Lord come with a draft upon you, to pay over some of the money in your possession into his treasury, to defray the expenses of his government and kingdom, why do you call it your own, and say you can't spare it? What do you mean by calling the agents beggars, and saying you are sick of seeing so many beggars--disgusted with those agents of charitable institutions? Suppose your steward under such circumstances should call your agents beggars, and say he was sick of so many beggars; would you not call him to an account, and let him see that the property in his possession was yours, and not his?

Again. You see the great wickedness of men's hoarding up property so long as they live, and at death leaving a part of it to the church. What a will! To leave God half of his own property. Suppose a clerk should do so, and make a will, leaving his employer part of his own property! Yet this is called piety. Do you think that Christ will always be a beggar? And yet the church is greatly puffed up with their great charitable donations and legacies to Jesus Christ.

Again. You see the wickedness of laying up money for your children, and why money so laid up is a curse to them. Suppose your steward should lay up your money for his children, would you not consider him a knave? How then dare you take God's money and lay it up for your children, while the world is sinking down to hell? But will you say, Is it not my duty to provide for my "own household?" Yes, it is your duty suitably to provide for them, but what is a suitable provision? Give them the best education you can for the service of God. Make all necessary provision for the supply of their real wants, "till they become of sufficient age to provide for themselves"--and then if you see them disposed to do good in serving God and their generation, give them all the advantages for doing this in your power. But to make them rich--to gratify their pride--to enable them to live in luxury or ease--or to provide that they may become rich--to give your daughters what is called a genteel education--to allow them to spend their time in dress, idleness, gossiping, and effeminacy, you have no right--it is defrauding God, ruining your own soul, and greatly endangering theirs.

Again. Impenitent sinners will be finally and eternally disgraced. Do you not account it a disgrace to a man, to be detected in fraud and every species of knavery, in transacting the business of his employer? Is not such a man deservedly thrown out of business; is he not a disgrace to himself and his family; can any body trust him? How then will you appear before an injured God, and an injured universe--a God whose laws and rights you have despised--a universe with whose interests you have been at war? How will you, in the solemn judgment, be disgraced, your name execrated, and you become the hissing and contempt of hell, for the numberless frauds and villanies you have practised upon God and upon his creatures! But perhaps you are a professor of religion: Will your profession cover up your selfishness and vile hypocrisy, while you have defrauded God, spent his money upon your lusts, and accounted those as beggars, who came with drafts upon you to pay over into his treasury? How will you hold up your head in the face of heaven? How dare you now pray; how dare you sit at the communion table; how dare you profess the religion of Jesus Christ, if you have set up a private interest, and do not consider all that you have as his, and use it all for his glory?

Again. We have here a true test of Christian character. True Christians consider themselves as God's stewards; they act for him, live for him, transact business for him, eat and drink for his glory, live and die to please him. But sinners and hypocrites live for themselves; account their time, their talents, their influence, as their own; and dispose of them all for their own private interest, and thus drown themselves in destruction and perdition.

At the judgment, we are informed that Christ will say to those who are accepted, "Well done, good and faithful servants." Reader! could he truly say this of you, "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things," i. e. over the things committed to your charge. He will pronounce no false judgment, put no false estimate upon things; and if he cannot say this truly, "Well done, good and faithful servant," you will not be accepted, but will be thrust down to hell. Now, reader, what is your character, and what has been your conduct? God will soon call you to give an account of your stewardship. Have you been faithful to God, faithful to your own soul, and the souls of others? Are you ready to have your accounts examined, your conduct scrutinized, and your life weighed in the balance of the sanctuary? Are you interested in the blood of Jesus Christ? If not, repent, repent now, of all your wickedness, and lay hold upon the hope that is set before you; for, hark! a voice cries in your ears, "Give an account of thy stewardship, for thou mayest be no longer steward."

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