

Entrusted with God's Property

MATTHEW 25:14-30 (NIV) *The Kingdom of Heaven will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. ¹⁵To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.*

The application is almost obvious; we are entrusted with God's property.

It's easier to talk about *us trusting God*. We're conditioned to think that way. The hymns of our faith: "*Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus*", "*Trust and Obey*", "*Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*." And we enter the fellowship of the church through a public confession of trust in Jesus.

It's the very foundation of all we hold Holy: "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths*" (PROVERBS 3:5). But in this parable, it's clear: God has "entrusted us." It's a whole new way of looking at things. When we say, "We trust God," we think of deliverance, salvation, peace of mind, security... Happy thoughts; warm, like a crackling fireplace on a frosty night.

But, when we say, "*God trusts us*," the focus shifts: it's heavy... dark, like a song played in a minor key. Duty, obligation, stewardship laced with "shoulds" and "oughts", spiced with lots of guilt. Those kinds of sermons are as depressing to preach as they are to hear. I've wrestled with this parable for years, now, and I think there's a more effective way of dealing with Christian stewardship.

This is a story about Stewardship. Most stewardship programs limit their effectiveness by assuming a level of motivation that doesn't fit where most of us live, most of the time. Let me explain:

A few generations ago a sociologist named Abraham Maslow said human behavior is motivated by needs. He identified five levels of need, and said each level must be met before moving up to the next; and once a need is met, it no longer motivates.

Let me share a story: Org, the caveman, hasn't had a bite to eat for days. He's starving! Tossing caution to the wind, he grabs a stick and goes after a saber-tooth tiger. It's risky business, attacking a saber-tooth tiger with a stick; but *survival* is at stake, and survival takes priority over all other needs. It motivates us to act in ways we don't normally act.

Well, Org succeeds in killing the tiger, and eats his fill. Now survival is assured for the present. It no longer is a motivator. He's not likely to go after another saber-tooth tiger. Now he can think about tomorrow: "I'll just get hungry again." Maslow calls this the need for "security; and security-motivated behavior is different than survival-motivated behavior.

Org knows a cave, deep and cool, and he drags the tiger carcass deep into the

cave, where it will be preserved by the cool and protected from scavengers.

Now he's secure; and he realizes: he's lonely. Social needs motivate a third level of behavior; but not until the first two levels are satisfied. Org plans a party; invites several other cave-dwellers; and, guess what he serves: tiger.

Well, Org's party's a success, and with his social needs met, he can move to the fourth level of needs. Several friends say, "Org, you really know how to give a party." And as they leave, Org thinks, "Hmm, if you think this is a good party, just come back next Saturday night. I'll show you a *real* party." Org is now motivated by the need for achievement and recognition.

The next Saturday there's another party at Org's cave, and this time he *cooks* the tiger! Now the people are *really* impressed, and as they leave, they tell him, "Org, you are the best tiger cook on the mountain!"

He has achieved. As he settles into his bear-skin, he's thinking: "You know, I guess I've achieved about everything I want to achieve in the art of cooking. I think I'll share some of my skill with others." He publishes a saber-tooth tiger cook-book, and thereby shares his accomplishments with the people of his world. Maslow called this final level, "self-actualization". Org has found and accepted his true identity, and in that identity finds a sense of calling: not to achieve or succeed, but simply to "be all he can be."

I know: there may be some here today thinking, "I come to church and get a sociology lesson." Well, it's not so much a lesson as it is a way we all can identify—a doorway into the message for today. Maslow speaks of needs. Well, there are spiritual needs, too.

As I said earlier, today's text is a message about stewardship—it's about being entrusted with God's property. You remember the story: the master gave money to three of his servants. One of those servants—the one who received one talent—wasn't ready to be a steward. He had other needs that took priority

Maslow said the most fundamental human need is to survive. For most of us, most of the time, that's not a real issue—survival is assumed. But there are people, lost in confusion, aimlessness and guilt who don't know if they'll survive today, much less eternity. They don't even know if they want to survive today.

They're not ready to be stewards, "*entrusted with God's property*". They need a Word of Grace: "God loves you; you are found." They need salvation.

But sometimes even those who've accepted that word of Grace struggle with doubt or loss or disillusionment. Christian mystics through the ages have talked about the "dark night of the soul", when even the faithful cry out in despair.

In those times *security* is the issue. Again, at this point one is not ready to be

a faithful steward, "*entrusted with God's property.*" The spiritual need is for a Word of assurance: "Remember our Lord, who, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, '*This is my body given for you... .*'" (LUKE 22:19 NIV)

Most of us live most of the time at levels Maslow calls "Social Needs" and "Achievement Needs". We assume survival and security; but we need to "belong"—to be a part of something significant and important, whether it's a winning little league team or a special musical group; a respected civic club, or just a small circle of friends who gather occasionally to play cards. We're incomplete, by ourselves; and yearn for a sense of belonging. We need fellowship.

And at this level we can begin to see demonstrations of faithful stewardship: people can be "*entrusted with God's property*". It may be shallow stewardship, practiced only because it's expected. Remember, the motivating need is social: being accepted. "What will people think of me?" It's a good start; but stewardship motivated by fellowship needs is inconsistent and won't be sustained over a long period of time.

Maslow's fourth level of need is for "Achievement"—for recognition and appreciation. That's where most of us live, most of the time; and that's why it's so important for the church to express appreciation for service faithfully rendered. We need to hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant." That's one reason the church should have goals that maintain a viable, effective ministry, recognized and appreciated in the community. It "confirms" us; and we need that.

And when that need has been met we can move to the highest level of motivation—what Maslow called "Self-Actualization". Self-actualized people have discovered that the greatest fulfillment and joy is to live out their true identity on behalf of others.

From the spiritual perspective, that means to live out our identity as children of God, created in God's image. This is where too many stewardship programs begin; while most of us struggle at the social and achievement levels.

At this highest motivational level we give simply because that's who we are. We are created in the image of the God who "so loved the world that he gave..." And we're not fully who we've been created to be until we also are giving. That's partly why so many people in our culture are empty and depressed, trying desperately to prove something about themselves. Ours is less and less a culture that encourages and confirms giving. Our culture is more and more about getting and accumulating.

Each Christian will be at a different place along that ladder of needs—and likely changing from one day to the next and he or she advances or regresses in faith.

Where are you? Wherever it may be, there's "Good News"! To one struggling for spiritual survival, lost in confusion and guilt, the "Good News" is "God Loves You

and Accepts You." To one who has accepted that word of Grace but continues to struggle to realize the peace of God's daily presence, the "Good News" is the reminder "This is My Body, Given for You."

To one seeking a sense of belonging, the "Good News" is a loving church. To one needing recognition, the "Good News" is a word of appreciation.

And the greatest "Good News" of all comes from within, as we allow the presence of God within us to radiate like a candle placed on a stand.

We're all moved by the video clips on Facebook or the stories on the 11:00 o'clock news that depict acts of selfless giving—giving without any concern about the worthiness of the one who is receiving—giving because somehow, something touched that "God" part of some person, and for a brief moment that person truly lived out that identity. We're moved and drawn to those stories, because those stories call out that part of us—that "image of God" that is our true identity. It is in those moments of awareness that we glimpse the Kingdom of God, which is *"like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them."*