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2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15
“Transformed by Grace”
Year A – Stewards Transformed: Week One
July 9, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, we begin our three-week series on stewardship, *Stewards Transformed by Grace, Faith, and Love*. Today, we focus on being transformed by grace. But, I think it's necessary that we have to ask and answer the question, what is stewardship? And why are we spending three weeks talking about it?

Some might have the misconception that stewardship is some sort of fundraising campaign, and while stewardship does involve how we use our money, it also involves how we use our time, and use the abilities and gifts God has given each one of us. In this series, you will not hear me ask for any money, so it's not a fundraiser. Rather, stewardship is a description of the Christian life. It is a consideration of all that God has given us, and how we live in response to that each and every day of our lives. So, the only thing I'll be asking of you over the next three weeks is to consider how God has shown to you and has given you great grace, faith, and love, and to consider how that then transforms your life and your living for Him.

So, what is a steward? A steward is another name for a servant, or a manager. It used to be when a wealthy owner had a large household or estate, there would be many things to oversee, and many people to manage. The owner would entrust the care of his household to a steward, a manager, to do just that on his behalf. It was a great responsibility.

And a Christian is much the same. We worship a Creator God who has made all things, the earth, the seas, the sky, the heavens, everything. He is unequivocally the owner of all things. But the amazing thing is, He has decided to share the responsibility of caring for His creation with us, His stewards. From the time He created Adam and Eve to help care for all things in the Garden of Eden, He has given us the job to help steward all that He has made.

There is nothing in this world, nothing that we have that isn't His. Every moment of every day. Every breath that fills our lungs. Every resource we have at our disposal. Every talent and every skill. Every task and every job. Every person He's put in our lives. Every dollar we have to spend. He's given everything to us. We don't own these things. We don't have a right to them as if they're only ours. Everything we have is a gift from God. He's entrusted these wonderful things to our care. And whether we have a lot, or only a little, we all have been given the same responsibility, to steward, or manage, the things we have wisely and to His glory.

If a steward or manager of a large estate would take his job lightly, and do a poor job, it would bring his employer, the owner, great shame and discredit among others, not to mention embarrassment to the steward. Yet, if the steward took his job responsibly, and did a good job with that which he had been given, it would bring the owner great honor, and honor to the steward, as well. The same goes for us and God. We are God's representatives in this world. What we do with the time, talent, and treasure He has given us, it matters. And we bring honor to our God when we manage those things well.

And today, as we talk about God's grace, we recognize that we are first and foremost stewards *only* by God's grace. It's not like we've earned the position, or earned the things we've been given. It's not like we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread..."

because You owe me that, God.” No, God “richly and daily provides [us] with all that [we] need to support this body and life” out of His grace; in response, it is our “duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him” (Luther’s Sm. Catechism, First Article). We are transformed by His grace, and we respond with stewardship

That’s what Paul was talking about with the Corinthians. He had been travelling all over the world, taking up a collection for the distressed Christians from the mother church in Jerusalem. That’s where the Christian Church had its roots, and from there, the apostles spread out all over the known world. But now the Christians in Jerusalem needed help. Usually the mother church is the one supporting the mission churches. But here, the Jerusalem church needed the mission churches to help.

There had been a famine in Judea, so the economy was suffering. On top of that, Christians were being persecuted, and many were losing their standing in society, losing their jobs, even their families, just because they followed Christ. Many were struggling to stay alive. So Paul went from church to church urging Christians to give generously to support those who were in need in Jerusalem.

But notice where Paul roots the reason for the Corinthians’ to give. If you have a bulletin or a Bible, look at our Epistle Reading, 2 Corinthians 8:9 – “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” Paul points the Corinthian Christians first and foremost to Jesus, that though he is the Son of God from all eternity, though he rightfully created, owned, and ruled over all things as God, he “became poor” for our sake. He gave up everything he deserves as God, so that he could come to this earth as a human, and offer his life as the perfect sacrifice upon the cross.

On the cross, Jesus took upon himself all the agony, pain, and punishment that we deserved because of our sin; that’s the poverty Paul is talking about. And in return, we became rich. He gave us all of his righteousness and blessings and life. And he did all this for us out of *grace*. By definition, grace is not earned. It is given freely. And *you* have been made rich, given eternal life, because of what Christ has graciously done for you.

And having received the riches of grace, it transforms us. Earlier in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul said, “And [Christ] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:15). Because Christ has done everything for us, we don’t need to live our lives, concerned with things as the world is concerned with them. We know we have a God who not only has taken care of every need for us in *this* life, but also in the life to come.

So, we can respond to grace with grace. Meaning, we are willing to give of ourselves in service to Christ, and for the benefit of others. Paul gives to the Corinthians an example of this when he talks about how the churches in Macedonia have been responding. Look at 2 Corinthians 8:2, though it afflicted them, though it was hard, the Macedonian’s “abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” to help the Christians in Jerusalem.

In fact, if you look at verse 4, they were “begging” Paul to take part in “the relief of the saints.” And in verses 6 and 7, Paul calls this act of giving of one’s self for another an “act of grace.” The Macedonians were willing to give because they had been given much by God. And even when they were technically “poor,” they still responded richly to God’s grace for them, with grace for others.

This is stewardship. God doesn't ask you to give anything or manage anything that He hasn't already given you. Rather, before we even ask, He's given us everything we need out of His grace through His Son, Jesus Christ. First, and most importantly, eternal life in Jesus. But He's also given us all our time, all our talent, all our financial blessings, and so we steward these things for His glory, and in service to one another.

And stewardship is not just a description for part of our life. It's a description for all of it. A misconception is that stewardship only refers to the things we bring to church, the time we volunteer here, or the money we give. In other words, "I give x % to God, I volunteer on Tuesdays, that's my stewardship. Which means, then, I can do whatever I want with the rest of my budget and the rest of the week."

And that's not quite right. Some people use the phrase "whole-life stewardship," which refers to the fact that just as God is not only interested in your life between the hours of [9 and 10 or 11 and 12] on a Sunday morning, so our lives as Christians involve our "whole life." How we use our whole week, how we use all our money in all its various ways, how we use every gift God has given us, all this matters to Him. And we honor Him with all of it.

In Luke chapter 19, we hear of a man whose whole life is transformed by his encounter with Jesus, and his name is Zacchaeus. He was a rich man, because he was a chief tax collector. And tax collectors were local people, employed by the Romans, and required to collect the necessary taxes for the government. But they were also given the go-ahead to take additional sums to keep for themselves. Suffice it to say, they were cheaters, and scammers, and you can see why they were not well-liked by anyone. They were everyone's quintessential definition of a "sinner."

But when Jesus came to town, something prompted Zacchaeus to climb a tree just so that he could get a glimpse of him. He had no idea Jesus would stop right below him, and tell him to come down, because he was going to be staying at his house. Zacchaeus was about to know the Lord who had made everything in the universe, and the Lord who loved him so much that he would seek out Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus came to know the grace of God. And in response to this transforming grace, he told Jesus, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." Zacchaeus, a man who had only ever known the scorn of others by his underhanded actions, now knew the Savior who valued *his* whole life, and forgave him all *his* sins. And as a result, he found something more valuable than any money. A gracious God who loves him. And Zacchaeus could now use what God had given him, and instead of using for shameful gain, could use to help others. To share just a fraction of the grace that Zacchaeus had been shown by Jesus.

Some, of course, were not pleased that Jesus would stop to stay with someone as despicable as Zacchaeus. If Jesus were truly who he said he was, surely he would know better than to be "the guest of... a sinner." But Jesus reiterates something, and mind you, this is now only days before his death on the cross for all our sins, he says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." It was precisely for lost people like Zacchaeus, like all of us, who are sinners, that Jesus came to seek and save, by his grace.

And when salvation comes to our house, when Jesus comes to us and graciously transforms us, seeks us out—we who were lost—and gives us life, how can we sit there acting as we did before, as if nothing had ever changed? Zacchaeus couldn't. Neither could the Macedonian Christians, who gave out of their poverty to help those in need. We can't either. We

are completely transformed, and every decision and every moment in our lives are impacted by who we are in Christ.

Over the next couple weeks, I ask that you take some time at home, and consider this idea of stewardship. First, consider all that God has given you. His Son, Jesus Christ. Everything that you need for this body and life. All this, out of His grace. Second, spend some time considering how it is you take care of the things God has given you. If He's given you money, even if it's not much, are you taking care of every dollar, so that you provide wisely for your household, for your future, sharing what you can with others, and also giving happily to God?

If He's given you time, and we all have the same amount of time each week, but we're required to use it in different ways, are you using it to honor God and serve others? Are you making sure you are regularly receiving the gifts God provides us in His Church? Are you honoring God with your work time as well as your free time? Do you take enough time to make sure you're rested, healthy, and doing healthy things? Do you make enough time for the important people God has given you, your family, and friends? And do you consider giving up some of your time, which is a very precious resource, to someone who needs it, or something going on here at church, as we serve others?

If He's given you a talent or ability, are you using it to glorify Him? Is there something or someone in this church that could be served by what you're able to do? You know, Zacchaeus was probably really good with money, and really good at getting it... you don't get to be a chief tax collector unless you are. Think of the impact he was able to have the rest of life when he stopped using his talents to rip people off, and instead used his skill with money to help those in need.

To help you consider how to best steward your time and talents, you'll be receiving a survey on your way out of church today. It will ask you what are some ways you might consider giving of your time and talents in service to what we're doing here at church. To help make an impact in our work of building up God's kingdom here in [Gaylord or Grayling]. And if you're a guest with us, and a member at a different church, you can use this opportunity to consider your time and talent in the community God has placed you. But remember, it's not just what happens here at church, it's how we use all that God has given us in our whole lives. And hopefully, this will help direct you in considering just that.

And as we journey through this series on stewardship the next couple weeks, please remember this, and I'll close with this: we all have been called to be stewards. That's what being a Christian means. We're Christians because God has chosen to show us grace. We receive His grace every day. And we are always living in the light of God's grace. And so we seek to respond with grace, as good stewards.

But at the same time, we all have room to grow, room to improve, which means none of us does a perfect job. God is a God who seeks and saves the lost, the sinners, the imperfect stewards. He will forgive our shortcomings, and we all have many of them. It is our privilege then, not a burden, but a joy, to respond to His grace, by improving in our stewardship, our management of what God has given us. Imagine the impact in our lives, in this church, if we all just took one step in that direction. And we look forward then, to the opportunity to get to share an "act of grace," serving our God and serving one another, knowing how much God has done, and continues to do, for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.