

Message Notes November 15th, 2020

Stewardship Sunday

(Proverbs 3:5-10; 2 Corinthians 9:6-13; 1 Timothy 6:17-19)

• **Thriving and Flourishing**

- Today, we're going into a two-part series (before Advent) that will focus us inward a bit on our church: to understand where we're at and where we're going, so that we can enter 2021 with focus and passion for the ways God's calling us to live into His mission.
 - In these two parts we're talking first about stewardship and next week about our church vision of "thriving in Christ."
- Both of these messages operate with the Scriptural premise that God has created us to live *abundant, flourishing lives*. It's His desire for us, it's his purpose in redemption. Jesus said in John 10:10, "I have come that they might have *life*, and life abundantly." And in John 15:8 he said, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear *much fruit*, showing yourselves to be my disciples." Psalm 1 describes the life of a person who is rooted in God's truth as a tree planted by streams of water, bearing fruit and flourishing in all seasons.
 - So, while we're going to get into the more practical specifics of giving and stewardship as it affects our lives and our congregation, I also want to get you thinking big-picture about your life and where you are with this calling to an abundant, flourishing life with God.
- Two weeks ago, during *The Good and Beautiful Community* series, we talked about "Generosity." I introduced this idea of the "Wheel of Life" to help us think holistically about the well-being of our lives and our walk with God. Today, I actually gave you a copy that you can use for yourself: remember, it's a circle cut into eight equal slices like a pie, with each slice representing the areas of *spirituality, emotional health, physical health, family, friendships, finances, work or vocation, and recreation*. The idea is that, first, you think through what a ten would look like *for you* in each of these dimensions and *why* and second, rank your level of satisfaction in each of these areas.
 - The important thing about this exercise, for our purposes, is to realize that the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not concern just the "spiritual" slice of that pie. The Gospel of Jesus affects *every slice of the pie—it affects your whole life*. God created us as complex, composite beings made in His image: we have bodies, minds, spirits, souls. God cares about *all of it*—that's why He came *as one of us* to redeem us from the Fall—by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
 - As we reflect today on the idea of stewardship in the church and next week on the vision of *Thriving in Christ*, I would love for you to take time to work on this Life Wheel and talk about it with others. Because, next week, as we get into our vision, we're going to give everyone the opportunity to make a commitment to growth in 2021. We're giving everyone a commitment card that has both giving opportunities and spiritual growth opportunities that will help you discern how God is calling *you* to grow. You'll have a couple weeks to reflect on it and then bring it back during Advent to make a conscious commitment along with others. If you do the wheel of life this week, that will prepare you to think about how you're feeling called to commit to the next year. This is going to be a great experience for us and I'm excited!

• **Lives of Stewardship in a Kingdom of Abundance**

- That's a long way to frame today's topic: stewardship, giving, tithing. Here's the thing: too often, the motivation for talking about money in the church is *budgeting*. We carve out a few times a year to mention it so we can pay our bills.
 - But that's not meant to be our true motivation. Giving in the church is not a *budgeting* issue. Giving is a *discipleship* issue.
 - Followers of Jesus are called to live lives of *stewardship* in a Kingdom of *abundance*. Our Gospel is not a Gospel of *poverty* or of *prosperity*, but of God's provision of *enough*. God's Kingdom is not a Kingdom of *scarcity*, but of *abundance*.
 - A life of stewardship means we recognize that, because we are now *in Christ*, everything we have and everything we are *belongs to God*. We are stewards. Living in a Kingdom of

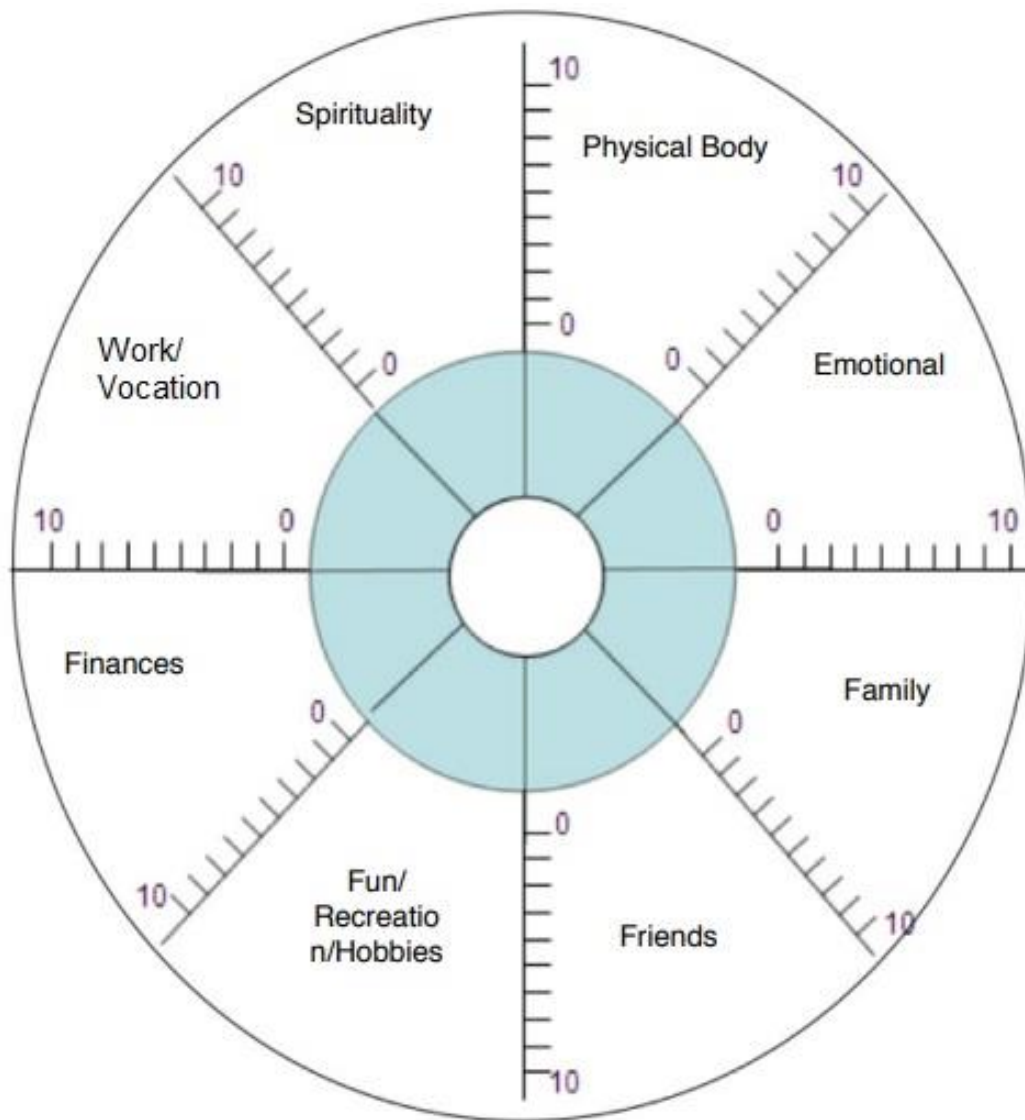
- abundance means that in a world driven by the dominant narrative of *scarcity*, we are driven by a trust in God's *abundance* to meet our needs and empower us to live *generously*.
- Now, let me show you what a life of stewardship in a Kingdom of abundance looks like.
 - Listen again to what Paul wrote to the Corinthians about giving. Listen to his imagery of sowing, reaping, and abundance--there are so many powerful statements here: *“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: ‘They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.’ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.”* (2 Corinthians 9:6-13 NIV)
 - When I read this passage in which Paul describes the generous, overflowing life of abundance in Christ, it makes me think about the abundance of plants and seeds in the natural world God created.
 - Did you know that those dandelions keep popping up in your yard every year because they are perennials and a single dandelion plant can produce *15,000 seeds* in its lifetime? *15,000 seeds!*
 - Some species of Oak trees have the capacity to live over *1,000 years* and produce *10 million acorns!* Every 2-5 years they have a “mast year” where they can produce *10,000 acorns*. There’s an Oak Tree Redding, PA called the “Sacred Oak” that’s over 500 years old.
 - The Norway Maple, which has those seedpods that look like propellers and spin around when they fall, can produce *100,000 seeds* in its lifetime and, depending on the wind, these seeds can travel up to a mile before they fall.
 - *So much abundance.* Notice that all those numbers and all those seeds are about *capacities*, but not every one of those organisms necessarily *reach* those thresholds—it depends on the health of the plant and its environment. You can count the seeds in an orange, but you can’t count the potential oranges in a seed.
 - In Christ, we have the *capacity* to flourish, the capacity to overflow in generosity, the capacity for abundant life.
 - Paul said, *“Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”* He said, *“God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all you need, you will abound in every good work.”* He said *“You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”* And these generous actions, like Kingdom Seeds, will produce not only the fruit of peoples’ needs being met, but they will overflow into all kinds of good fruit: *“in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the Gospel...”*
 - It’s these singular acts of faith and obedience—generosity—multiplying into an abundance of good that can’t be traced, that can’t be quantified, that can’t be stopped—like the seeds of that dandelion, that Oak Tree, that Maple Tree, falling to the ground, scattering to the wind all across the land. That’s what a life of stewardship looks like in a Kingdom of abundance.
 - Now, we need to remember, this isn’t so much an exhortation to those who are struggling and in need—it’s a word for those who have enough and more than enough, maybe especially for those who don’t realize that they *have more than enough* so that they can give for others who don’t.
 - Paul said to the Corinthians, *“Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality...”*

- And he said to Timothy, *“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor put their hope in wealth, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”* (2 Timothy 6:17-19)
- **Trust and Tithing**
 - Giving and tithing is not a church budget issue, but a discipleship issue, because it’s about how we’re called to live and what we value most.
 - Stewardship is about how we spend our *time, talents, and treasures*. And the truth is, what you spend your time, talents, and treasures on reveals *what you value*. And what you value determines the direction of your life. *“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*
 - It’s easy to have blind spots in our lives as followers of Christ. Look at that Life Wheel again: if I feel like I’m doing really well in the “spiritual” piece and the “work” piece, it’s easier to overlook other areas that maybe God wants to work on.
 - This is the challenging truth: if we say we trust God in our lives because we trust him “emotionally,” and with our “relationships,” and with your “spiritual disciplines,” but we don’t trust God with our “finances,” then *we don’t really, fully, trust God*. We’re just picking and choosing what feels good and convenient at the time. God’s claim on our lives is *the whole wheel*, not just the parts that are convenient to give Him.
 - Reread this passage from Proverbs 3. It shows how faith and trust connect with the life of stewardship: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.”*
 - This is where we get mixed up: a lot of times, we set our course, we plan our steps based on what makes sense to us and what we want, *then* we call upon God to bless our plans and make our paths straight. In contrast, the Way that leads to the *life that is really life* looks like, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”*
 - In the same way, *“Give your firstfruits,”* is the standard of the Old Testament. They were to give the firstfruits, the firstborn, the healthiest, unblemished to the Lord—not the leftovers or the duds. And this act of sacrifice is a beautiful demonstration of trust: if you give your first fruits, the best of your yield, to God, you have to trust that the rest of the harvest will come through—you *have to genuinely rely on God*. It’s a radical life of faith that was woven into the lifestyles of God’s Covenant people. God calls His people to this, not because He needs our stuff, *but because it creates a life of trust, dependence, and generosity in His people*.
 - And again, what do most people do? We look at our resources, we look at what we need and what we want, we make a budget, and then we figure out with what is leftover what we *can* give. Usually, with that approach, there is rarely much or anything left to give.
 - But the model of Scripture is “firstfruits,” because it’s only a firstfruits kind of attitude that requires *faith*. If you just wait to see what is leftover to give to God, that doesn’t grow much in the way of trust! But if you ask God, “Lord, with what you’ve given me, what do you want me to give this year? Is it 10% to my church, to help the mission of discipleship? Is it 5% to the church and 7% to the homeless ministry? Is it 15%? Lord, what do you want me to give this year?” And you give that much at the start, the firstfruits, trusting that if God is calling you to live this life of stewardship, He will provide for the other needs. And it’s amazing, friends, when you live in this way—with trust and generosity—how you begin to see God’s abundance and provision more and more—and your faith *grows*.
 - This is why giving and tithing in the church is a discipleship issue more than it’s a budgeting issue. This is why I wish every single Christian who was truly able would practice the discipline

of tithing and giving their firstfruits: set aside all the good that could be done in the world; I'm just thinking about the ways this would raise the level of faith in our congregation.

- I don't believe that tithing, giving a literal 10%, is a Law for Christians any more than I believe that the Sabbath is a Law for Christians: we live in a new system of grace where the Law is written on our hearts. And yet, I believe that the principle of tithing and generosity is just as important, beneficial, and relevant for us as the Sabbath is. We don't have to set it at 10%—we are called to something greater: *we are called to follow Christ in an every-growing life of generosity, trust, and surrender*. That's bigger than just 10%.
- But I'm asking you, for the sake of your walk with God first, and for the good of the church and the mission we're called to in this world: for the year of 2021, will you pray about your finances and your giving? Will you discern if you're called for the first time to *give something regularly*? To step towards tithing by giving 2 or 5%? Or to step into tithing at 10% for the first time all year, as an act of trust and gratitude? Or to give *beyond* 10% for the many needs and ministries and missions? To give not just to the local church, but to some other urgent, Kingdom cause?
- Whatever that ends up looking like for you, it comes back to your walk of discipleship and how God wants to lead you *in every part of your life* to deeper trust, to deeper abiding, to deeper surrender, that "you might bear much fruit" and that His praises would *abound in this world* because of the good fruit in your life.
- We want to live lives of abundance, lives that thrive in this world *even in the year 2020 and 2021 looks like*. Think about this, pray about this, and get ready to make your commitment for the coming year over these next few weeks. May God lead us. Amen.

Wheel of Life Exercise



- Think through each category: what would have to happen or be true for you to rate your level of satisfaction as a 10 in each area? Why?
- Rate each category with your current level of satisfaction, 10 being highest.
- How balanced is your wheel? As you pray about your life, do you find God calling you to focus on one or more areas specifically? Pray for one simple step towards growth and share it with someone.

Provided by Dr. Brian Russell - Deep Dive Spirituality