

Stewardship

Stewardship

Living a Biblical Call

Bernard F. Evans



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To the Basilica of Saint Mary (Minneapolis),
whose pastoral leadership, staff, and volunteers
so faithfully and effectively model
biblical stewardship

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Introduction

In the Gospel of Luke (12:16-21) Jesus tells the parable of a rich man whose crops were abundant and required larger storage bins. So the man tore down the old and built new ones, and then rejoiced that he had plenty of goods to last him many years and now he could “relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But that night his life ended.

This parable is not just about the uncertainty of life and the time of our death. It is especially about our relationship with God and how that relationship is formed by our attitude toward the things we own and the talents and abilities we enjoy. The story of the rich man raises particularly challenging questions about how we are to use these gifts as well as the many resources we come to possess throughout our lives.

It is these questions that this book addresses while exploring the biblical and theological meaning of stewardship. The Scriptures speak often and deeply about how we might respond to these questions, about how our standing with God is shaped by the way we utilize the gifts and resources with which God has blessed us. So do the earliest Christian theologians as they reflect on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ during the first four centuries. Fast-forward to modern times and we find that Catholic social teachings have much to say about ownership and use of our possessions as well. These three sources—the Bible, early Christian writers, and modern Catholic social teachings—provide the material for this book’s reflection on stewardship, on how we are to use the gifts and resources God has presented to us.

The first part of the book addresses the general foundations of biblical stewardship. It considers creation as a whole and our obligation to take care of what belongs to God while finding

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our place within the created order (chap. 1). This part recognizes the general obligation to care for all people—ourselves and all of God’s children (chap. 2). Finally, part 1 presents stewardship as a matter of justice (chap. 3). Sharing God’s resources and the talents God has placed within each of us is an expectation of biblical justice.

The second part explores various forms of stewardship, more specific ways to think about and practice the general biblical call to live stewardship. “Personal Stewardship” (chap. 4) discusses how we respond to God’s call by developing the gifts God has placed within us. “Stewardship of Our Gifts” (chap. 5) considers how we are to serve one another by following Jesus’ own example of love and service. “Local Stewardship” (chap. 6) speaks of loving God by loving, in practical ways, the neighbor who is in front of us. “Global Stewardship” (chap. 7) struggles with the challenge of loving the more distant neighbor, the one we will never meet. “Ecological Stewardship” (chap. 8) engages the obvious challenge of being good stewards of God’s wondrous creation. Finally, “Financial Stewardship” (chap. 9) considers sharing our monetary resources, and doing so for the right motive.

Each chapter ends with a brief section titled “Getting Practical.” The purpose of these sections is to provide down-to-earth practical suggestions on how, in our busy and demanding lives, we might live out the biblical call to stewardship in relation to the topic of the chapter. These suggestions are minimal and readers surely will come up with more and better ways to practice stewardship in the context of their own lives. The “Getting Practical” sections aim to offer a few directions for acting or living stewardship, but also to affirm that there are many ways for stewardship to become an everyday part of our lives.

Stewardship, then, is not primarily about giving money. Certainly it includes that, but it is at its core an attitude and a habit of using all the gifts and abilities God has granted us. That includes having the right attitude about the material things we own. The rich man in Luke’s gospel kept building bigger storage bins. Jesus presented this parable to remind us that we have other options.

PART I

1

Creation

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it.

—Psalm 24:1

Creation—the wondrous work of God, the playground of our lives, the starting point for our contact with God. Creation also is the entry point to our discussion of what Scripture says about stewardship, about using the gifts God has placed within us and around us. For it is here, within the rest of creation, that we define our relationship with God and with our neighbor. How we look at creation, how we see ourselves as belonging to this creation, leads us to know that everything we are, everything we possess, everything we become is because of God. This evolving appreciation of our place within creation molds the simple but firm conviction that we must care for all that God has made.

Creation Is God's

All of creation is God's, even our own lives. We speak of the right to life, and we acknowledge the care and compassion we owe to other human beings. We accept the general norm that in daily living no one has the right to take the life of another person. Human life is sacred and its ending should be the result of a natural process, not the action of another member of the human family.

But we also know that our lives are pure gift from God. None of us can claim that we have a right to continue living, as if life is something God owes us. We live simply because God has lovingly willed us to live. Everything within creation, including our lives, belongs to God—“The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, / the world, and those who live in it.” The psalmist could not have been clearer: creation is God’s.

It is not surprising that many of the earliest Christian writers repeated and developed this biblical claim in language and images that spoke to Christians of their day. The first-century *Didache* offered a brief instruction on Christian living for persons who wished to become members of the earliest Christian communities. This “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles” explained what it means for followers of Jesus Christ to live the Way of Life. Striving to live this life, for example, must include a willingness to share one’s possessions with persons who have little or none:

Do not turn away from the needy, but share all with your brother and do not claim that it is your own. For, if you are sharers in immortal things, how much more in mortal.¹

The *Didache* reminded future Christians that earthly possessions are not entirely their own. Everything belongs to God and must be used to glorify God through proper use.

Later in the second century St. Irenaeus of Lyons emphasized that point while commenting on what proper use of our possessions requires:

It is necessary, then, that we begin with the first and greatest principle, with the Creator God who made heaven and earth and all things in them.²

If we are clear on that starting point, we are less likely to lose our way in making sound judgments about the use and applications of our many gifts. But we must not forget who the owner is of all that we possess, use, and enjoy throughout our lives.

Around that same time St. Basil addressed the expectation that Christians share their goods with persons who lack what they need for living a decent life. In his homilies he scolded those Christians who seemed unwilling to share from their abundance. Such persons, he said, suffer a loss of memory. They forget that they are stewards, not owners of what they possess. Creation is made by God and belongs to God. Our use of all that God provides must reflect this fundamental biblical principle: “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it.”

For the Hebrew people their interaction with the land was an especially important place to live out this biblical sense of stewardship. The book of Leviticus is particularly clear when it instructs the Israelites regarding their tenure on the land:

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. (25:23)

Land held great importance for the Hebrew people—as it does for their descendants today. It was the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was the task of Moses to lead the Israelites to the land God was giving them. Yet even in that sacred place they were to see themselves as strangers and guests (“aliens and tenants”) upon this land. It is not theirs; it belongs to God.

That message is embedded in the sabbatical laws found in the book of Exodus:

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. (23:10-11)

Here too is a reminder to the people that the land—in which they now live and from which they receive food—belongs to God and is theirs only to use. Even in their use of this land, the people are to share its fruits with those among them who are poor, and with the rest of God’s creatures (“the wild animals

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may eat”). As they use what is given for their own sustenance the people of Israel must consider how this abundance might serve the needs of others besides themselves—other people and other species. This inclusive attitude regarding who should benefit from God’s creation, this humble recognition that it is not entirely for or about humans, likely positioned the Hebrew people to act as good stewards of the land and, in doing so, to honor the God who brought it into existence and guided them to it.

The Scriptures also suggest that the land—and all of creation—enjoys its own relationship with the Creator:

When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. (Lev 25:2-4)

So among the Sabbath laws there is one for the land. The land shall observe a year of rest and, as with the people, this time of rest is a time devoted to the Lord. It shall be “a sabbath for the LORD.” Creation has its own relationship with God, one not dependent on human mediation.

Psalms 148 jubilantly summons all creation to praise the Lord, to rejoice in that relationship:

Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created. (vv. 3-5)

Sun and moon, water and sea creatures; fire, hail, and snow; mountains and hills; trees, beasts, and birds—all should praise the God of creation. To God they owe their sustenance, their

beauty, their life. In return they offer praise to their Creator, the God to whom they belong and in whom they delight.

In modern society we often look upon the rest of creation as having value only insofar as it benefits humans. We drain wetlands so that farmers can plant crops and make that land useful and productive. We level mountains so that mining companies can extract deposits of coal needed to fire the great furnaces that heat our buildings. We spray our lawns so that we can enjoy only green grass on the little piece of creation we claim as our own. Our attitude toward nature sometimes reflects a mistaken view that creation is of our making and that its sole purpose is to serve us. The one Creator of this world occasionally reminds us that we humans may not be the only reason for his handiwork and, further, that we cannot understand how it all works.

In the book of Job we find a stunning reminder of this and of the fact that our God is the Lord of all creation. Job experiences what feels like an unending series of tragic misfortunes. His servants are attacked and killed; his livestock are stolen; his children are killed when a mighty wind brings down their house. Job complains to God that there is something unfair about all his suffering; he is, after all, a righteous man. He questions whether a God of justice would inflict an upright man with so much loss and grief. God answers Job with a series of questions about who is the Creator and who is the creature:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (38:4-7)

In responding to Job's doubts about God's justice, God does not enter into a debate about divine justice. He does not even answer the questions Job puts forward. God simply reminds

this human that he, God, is the Creator of all. Little more needs to be said.

Questioning God—or God’s justice—in the midst of tragedy continues to this day. We wonder aloud how a loving God can allow innocent people to die in tornadoes or car accidents or street gang shoot-outs. Yet even in such moments we also hear people express a recognition that their lives and possessions belong to the Creator. Survivors of a fire or natural disaster often express a deep-felt gratitude that they are able to live on even when their homes and possessions have been destroyed. This may be a moment of great loss in their lives but it can also become a transforming realization of how dependent they are on God for everything they possess, including their lives.

Such moments may reveal another human characteristic. Deep within us is an awareness rarely articulated that everything in our world owes its existence to God and belongs to God. Even as we gather possessions or build financial empires we have to know that none of it goes with us into the next life. We might plan for our wealth or possessions or businesses to pass to our children. We may will some of what we own to be taken over by one charity or another when we die. Those very actions, however, are a de facto recognition that our material goods, including those we have worked so hard to acquire, belong to another. The intense and busy nature of our lives allows us to ignore for the moment this and many other truths about our lives and about the rest of creation. Sometimes we need to be reminded through the fear of a natural disaster or through a Job-like experience that it is all God’s and it is all about God.

Finding Our Place within God’s Creation

If creation belongs to God, what is our place within it? Do we have a role different from other living beings? Is there anything that sets us apart from the squirrels, the skunks, and the chipmunks? What did God have in mind for us?

The Scriptures have much to say about this but two creation stories are particularly helpful in addressing these ques-

tions. Both stories are from the opening pages of the Bible. Each was written at a different time in the history of Israel and each carries its own message about Israel's understanding of God and of the peoples' relationship to this God. Although these creation stories were not concerned about twenty-first-century environmental problems, the two accounts provide striking insights on humankind's relationship to the rest of creation—on humankind's place within this garden that God has planted.

The first of these stories represents the most familiar account of our role among the other creatures. Through much of human history we have used this story—especially the following verses—to establish humankind's superiority over everything else that God has made:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Gen 1:27-28)

Throughout this entire story, which encompasses all of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, no other creature or part of creation enjoys this unique status. Humans alone are made in the image of God. Male and female God created them, and God blessed them.

Our understanding of what it means to be made in God's image has developed in Christian theology over the centuries. Through much of this history our likeness to the Creator was seen in humans' ability to reason, to understand, and to make choices—in our intellect and will. More contemporary reflections on this special status of humans tend to focus on our ability to enter into loving and caring relationships with others. In this we reflect our likeness to the divine Creator. However we understand being made in God's image, in the

first creation story it is clear that humans alone enjoy this special status of reflecting in some way the likeness of God.

This creation story from Genesis 1 also makes the point that humans are to exercise dominion over all other living beings: “over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Too often in human history this text has been understood as granting people the authority to do whatever they wish to the natural world. According to that line of thought God not only created the world for humans to use but also put humans in charge, giving us the right to treat the rest of creation any way we see fit. Obviously this way of interpreting the “have dominion over” text is problematic.

Our concern today about climate change and other environmental problems begs us to reexamine this ancient text in light of contemporary human experience. We can name too many examples of human behavior toward nature that can only be characterized as abusive. Excessive applications of nitrate fertilizer on Midwestern farm fields results in a massive dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico depriving all species of fish the oxygen necessary for life. Is this what it means to “have dominion over”? Scientific experimentation in human reproduction holds the possibility of cloning humans. Is this how we are to exercise our special place within creation? Is the rest of creation here simply for our experimentation and enjoyment?

Indeed, biblical scholarship cautions against a strictly human-centered reading of the creation story in Genesis 1. To have dominion over is more accurately read as a call to stewardship. That is, humans are given the responsibility of taking care of what belongs to God. To have dominion over means to watch over the rest of creation as God would, in the place of God. What would it look like if we were to care for creation as God would?

To answer that question we need to appreciate that the Hebrew people understood their God as a God with a special love and concern for the poor, the defenseless, and the vulnerable. This was, after all, the God who led them from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land once promised to Abraham. So

to watch over any part of creation in the place of God necessarily meant treating the natural world with the same love and compassion that Yahweh showed toward them. This does not mean that humans cannot use and enjoy other living things in the natural world. It does suggest, however, that we do so with an awareness of the responsibility God has given us, and with a reverence for all life—human and others—that reflects the beauty and love of the Creator.

In reflecting on humans' special status some early Christian theologians offered an insight both humbling and enriching. Humankind's unique position among all of God's creatures is for the sake of the rest of creation, so that all we regard as earthly might be elevated to the divine. For some this might grant too much to humans—a mediating role between creation and God—but it certainly finds support among early Christian writers.

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, observed how suited humans are to carry out this role. Man is

king of the things on earth yet ruled from above, earthly and heavenly, subject to time yet deathless, visible and knowable, standing halfway between greatness and lowliness. He is at the same time spirit and flesh: spirit because of grace, flesh because of pride—the one, that he might always remain in being and glorify his benefactor; the other that he might suffer, and in his suffering come to his senses, and be corrected from his ambitions of grandeur. He is a living being: cared for in this world, transferred to another, and, as the final stage of the mystery, made divine by his inclination towards God.³

Humans' unique role within the created order allows us to perceive God's wisdom and purposes in creation, to reflect some likeness to God, and to honor this Creator of all through our careful and compassionate guardianship of the natural world. Thus, we not only exercise some form of dominion or stewardship over the other creatures but we also recognize the mystery of this creation in which we participate as fellow members of the created order.

The second creation story provides a balance or check on any tendency to grant humans too lofty a place within God's creation. It allows humans the role of naming "every living creature," which in ancient times signified a measure of authority on the part of the one doing the naming. At the same time, in what else it says, and does not say, this story reminds us that we humans are primarily a part of this creation that God told us to watch over. There is no mention of us being made in the likeness of God. Nor are humans told to have dominion over all other living beings. Rather the text points out how much we are like the other creatures:

[T]hen the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground . . . Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree . . . So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air. (Gen 2:7, 9, 19)

In this account of creation humans are made of the same stuff as the trees, animals, and birds. There is no suggestion of us being fashioned in the likeness of God. We are just made—like everything else—from the ground. From the moment of our coming into being we are connected to all other living things. We are part of creation.

Indeed, humans carry a special role, a unique responsibility within creation. We are not the same as the squirrels, skunks, and chipmunks. The Creator of all has chosen to place upon humans the responsibility of looking out for the rest of creation. He has endowed us with the gifts and capacities to do so. It is our goal to till and to keep the garden in the place of the one who made it all come into being.

But we also are part of that creation, part of that created order. Though made in God's image and enjoying a sacred dignity not granted to any other of God's creatures, we remain more creature than creator. In that way our similarity with those squirrels is assured.

There are many other places in the Bible where we can find direction on how we should regard nature and all the

world around us. There are other biblical texts reminding us that creation belongs to God and that our role here is one of grateful stewards. One such text is Deuteronomy 14:22, one of the most popular biblical references to tithing within Christian churches:

Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field.

The tithe referenced here—and in Numbers 18:21-32 and Leviticus 27:30-33—is an offering consistent with the biblical practice of presenting to God the firstfruits, whether produce from the field or livestock from the herd. Offering the tithe was an important way of acknowledging that we have this sheep or this grain because of God. It is God who sent the rains and made the soil fertile. Without God’s abundantly rich land, water, and favorable climates, none of us could make anything grow.

In the biblical context, our tithe is a simple but direct acknowledgment that this produce, upon which our lives depend, is available to us because of our loving, caring God. So, our offering to God is not because God needs it, but because we need to remind ourselves how dependent we are on God for the most fundamental elements of our continued existence. And, all these gifts and resources in nature that nourish us and allow us to flourish—all of this—belongs to God. This is the beginning of stewardship.

Getting Practical

Growing Our Relationship with God in the Midst of God’s Creation

The beginning of stewardship is recognizing that everything within creation belongs to God. How we bring this truth into our lives will shape how we choose to use the many gifts God has granted us. We need to be clear on what this means for

our own lives, for our developing relationship with God, and for how we use the material possessions we refer to as “ours.” There are a number of practical approaches we might take to appreciating more clearly the biblical insights on creation and our place within it.

It Is God’s

If all of creation belongs to God, what does this mean for how we live our lives on a daily basis, freely using the gifts of nature like clean air and water? These simple but essential elements of nature are gifts from our Creator that we cannot live without. How easily we take these for granted with little thought about who provides them. A good practice would be to reflect on this from time to time as a way of remembering how dependent we are on the Creator who so generously provides these and all the other resources upon which we as individuals and as a human community rely. This kind of grateful reflection can enrich our ever-developing relationship with God and do so in relation to this beautiful world we are blessed to enjoy and called to protect.

When we acknowledge that “the earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it,” how does this affect or shape our thinking about our own possessions? In our society private ownership stands as a near sacred institution. We take it for granted that all people have the right to own privately whatever their resources allow them to purchase. This may be one of those areas where the biblical teaching on creation is not an easy fit for modern Western thinking on private ownership. The two may not contradict each other, but they certainly require careful adjusting. All of us would benefit from some clarifying reading and reflection on how we should regard our possessions. A helpful resource on this is Catholic social teaching that recognizes the right to private ownership (*On the Condition of Labor*, Pope Leo XIII, 1891) but also sets limits and expectations for how we use whatever we own (*On the Development of Peoples*, Pope Paul VI, 1967).

Our Place within Creation

The Scriptures tell us that humans are given dominion over the rest of creation. We know this is not a license to abuse, destroy, or even do whatever we wish to God's beautiful planet. It is, rather, a summons to look after and care for God's world. Our responsibility is to care for all of creation as God would—with love and compassion and with a special sensitivity to that which is vulnerable and easily hurt.

But what does it mean to be stewards of the earth at this time? Today we are facing a number of serious threats to our environment. We worry about climate change and how rising temperatures and sea levels may impact all life forms. Also on the global level we know that nearly a billion people suffer from malnutrition. In the upper Midwest we hear about the dangerous levels of nitrates in freshwater sources caused in part by modern methods of agriculture. These are illustrations that as a human community we are not doing the best possible job of caring for what God has created. With the knowledge we possess today, especially in the various branches of science, there is little justification for not rectifying these serious problems.

We might benefit from connecting with one or more organizations addressing these and many other issues. Lending our support to such organized efforts can be an effective way to exercise our "dominion over" or stewardship of the world that God has placed in our care. Such practical and direct involvement may help us as well to understand more clearly what the problem is and how we may be contributing to it. Finally, this activity may help us see God's presence and purpose in creation—a sure step toward developing and strengthening our relationship with this loving God who trusts us to look after his beautiful world.

And How about Those Squirrels and Chipmunks?

The second creation story tells us that we are created much like the other beings that inhabit the earth. We are made from the same dust of the earth as are the other animals, the birds

and the fish. Our life on earth is shared with all of them as we are part of this same created order. And yet, Genesis 1—the first creation story—calls us to look after and to care for all other creatures. What does this mean today?

Surely this responsibility suggests that we act with kindness toward other living things, and, at the very least, that we not cause undue harm or hurt to any other creatures that God has placed upon this earth. This does not forbid the use of animals in ways that serve human needs, including raising animals for food. But it does mean that we do so in humane ways and with a grateful awareness that God has provided us what we need to live a reasonably comfortable life.

Squirrels and chipmunks, cows and chickens, walleye and pheasants—all of them add to the beauty of God's creation. None of them should be treated in ways that cause stress and suffering. To do so is to dishonor their Creator. A useful action flowing from this stance would be to look at one or more organizations dedicated to the humane treatment of all creatures, whether in pet stores, poultry facilities, or large-scale livestock confinements. Perhaps involvement in such activities might lead us to appreciate even more God's call to us to be stewards of his creation.

Notes

1. *Didache* 4.8, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M.-F. Marique, and Gerald G. Walsh, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation 1* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 174.

2. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* 2.1.1, in *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, vol. 2, trans. Dominic J. Unger, *Ancient Christian Writers 65* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2012), 17.

3. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 38: On the Theophany* 11, qtd. in Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, *The Early Church Fathers* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 122.