

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Christian Family Today: The Family and Stewardship

I suppose that you've heard about the little boy who asked his Dad to buy him something he wanted, only to be told that his parents didn't have enough money to buy it? Well, the boy's response was that they could just go to the "hole in the wall" to get some! When he was told that this wouldn't work, he suggested that they go to the bank and buy some money! If only life were that simple!!

We may be tempted to think that the family and stewardship is all about this rare commodity, money, and how we have to manage our affairs by using it. But to me money is only one aspect of the things that God has committed to us to use responsibly in family life. This is not to understate, however, the importance of money in the realities of life for the modern family. For some listeners just making ends meet is the current problem! Nor is it to ignore the many demands upon all of the resources available to us, especially our time and our money, which make stewardship so difficult in our present age.

First of all, let's establish what the New Testament teaches about stewardship. There are at least two important principles stated: one is faithfulness – to use resources as God intends them to be used; and the other is accountability – God will assess our performance in these matters. The Lord Jesus brings out these principles in Luke 16:1-13, when He tells the parable of the dishonest servant to His disciples. The Apostle Paul reinforces the message to Christians in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5: "Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful" (verse 2). God expects us to use those resources that He has gifted to us. We are privileged to have them, but they are really His! He expects some return on what He has given out.

Father is the head of the Christian family, and the husband of his wife. God has given her to him: "Houses and riches are an inheritance from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD" (Proverbs 19:14). I've always had the impression that my father-in-law, even though he never expressed it in words, felt he was doing me a great favour in allowing me to have one of his daughters as my wife. But, says the previous chapter of Proverbs: "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the LORD" (Proverbs 18:22). We husbands then are to realise this wonderful fact: "...each one has his own gift from God..." (1 Corinthians 7:7). The Amplified Bible describes this as a "special gift from God". For me, stewardship in the family starts here – the gift of a wife to her husband and the gift of a husband to his wife, both from God – a special relationship to be built upon to His glory. I must then take special care of my wife as a gift uniquely from Him: "For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord *does* the church" (Ephesians 5:23-29).

Now there are usually children in families– we have four in our family, a boy and a girl, and a boy and a girl. The Bible states that they too are a gift from God: "Behold, children *are* a heritage from the LORD ... Happy *is* the man who has his quiver full of them..." (Psalm 127:3, 5). Christian parents are charged with taking care of their children with these words from Paul: "...do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). Whilst a family home should always be a place where children are loved and cared for, Christian family life must centre on the Lord. Christian parents are to discharge their responsibilities by instructing their children to trust the Saviour and to serve Him. This means that they must plan for such activities in the stewardship of family time.

Father's main responsibility is to provide for his family by working for a living. Mother has to bring up her children and look after the house. These instructions to fathers and mothers are found in the following scriptures:

To parents: "...For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children" (2 Corinthians 12:14).

To fathers: "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8).

To mothers: “the wife...[should be] well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has washed the saints’ feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work...the younger [women should] bear children, manage the house.” (1 Timothy 5:10, 14).

Thus, a number of practical questions arise about family stewardship in the twenty-first century in the western world, such as:

- How should I spend my time as a parent?
- Should I allocate all my income/money to the needs of my family?
- Need I consider other issues such as the Lord’s work and His servants?
- Do responsibilities extend to grandparents?

These questions, like all aspects of stewardship are intensely personal, between each married couple and the Lord. However, the main issue must always be a preparedness to utilise what God has provided. This means having the right attitude towards all of His gifts, “a willing mind” as 2 Corinthians 8:12 puts it.

With respect to time, each family has the same amount of time available to them to live for the Lord. The Christian father should manage his time between his secular work and his family, with church life and other things of life being taken into consideration. A friend of mine once put it this way: time management involved him acknowledging the Lordship of Christ whilst recognising the need to be an integral part of family life and coping with the demands of a fulltime occupation! The Christian mother should use her time as directed by the Lord for the welfare of both her children and her husband in practical ways in the home. She may also have opportunity to follow a career, trying always to be readily available for her children, especially during their school years. As we were informed in last week’s talk, Proverbs 31 provides a comprehensive list of the excellencies of such a virtuous wife.

Family time is all-important in this busy twenty first century. It is good for Christian families to aim to have mealtimes together, spend some leisure time together and to have a regular devotional time, which should be additional to, rather than replacing church life. Time is always at a premium in family life and priorities will change as circumstances of life change, but “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). He will provide the grace to get through the busiest periods of life, especially those involving interrupted sleep patterns!

I said at the beginning of this talk that stewardship for the family often focuses upon money issues: how much or how little we have of it. Unlike time, each family will have a different amount of financial resource available to them. However, each family is required to manage with what God has provided. In our affluent, materialistic age, it is worth reminding ourselves of Paul’s words: “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into *this* world, *and it is* certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (1 Timothy 6:6-8). It is good also to remember that whilst the earthly father of a family has only limited resources, their heavenly Father has “...the riches of His glory...” (Ephesians 3:16) at His disposal! And He knows all our needs, as the Lord Jesus said to His disciples: “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on ... nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you” (Luke 12:22, 29-31).

Being the father of a relatively large family (by UK standards), I have always had to manage money as a precious, scarce, commodity. Often this has been difficult, especially when our children encountered peer-pressure – to have the latest gadget or gismo or to be fashionable. By trying to follow the Master’s instructions to give priority in our family life to the kingdom of God, we can honestly say that we’ve always had sufficient money to live in a comfortable house, with enough food to eat, and adequate clothing. God is indeed good! The Lord Jesus encouraged His disciples to exercise proper money management in this way: “...I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. He who *is* faithful in *what is* least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in *what is* least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true *riches*?” (Luke 16:9-11). In using money we have difficult choices to make and so demonstrate the importance we assign to things. Obviously providing for one’s own family must have priority over any selfish requirements and over other things of this world!

Part of the Christian family’s responsibilities is to be charitable with their money and possessions. We have already seen that the Lord Jesus requires the righteous and honest use of money, but in the major New Testament passage on stewardship, 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, Christian generosity is actively encouraged. I think that the teaching of that passage hinges around two outstanding points, the first made in 8:9 and the second in 9:8. They are: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (8:9); and “God *is* able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all *things*, may have an abundance for every good work” (9:8) Motivated by the supreme, the ultimate sacrifice of the Saviour, the Christian family should consider others in greater need than

themselves – such as those in the world who need humanitarian help, and the Lord's servants who take the Gospel to those in spiritual need in the world. In this same passage, Paul also gives guidance on the amount to give – it is to be in proportion: "...it is accepted according to what one has, *and* not according to what he does not have. For *I do not mean* that others should be eased and you burdened; but by an equality..." (8:12-14). However, as in every aspect of stewardship, the right attitude is all-important: "*So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver*" (9:7).

The Christian family will also find other ways of giving in addition to the collection in church or donations to charity. They may include such items as furniture and clothes, which can be passed on to others. There will also be opportunities to open their homes to others: "distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality" (Romans 12:13). Children especially seem to benefit from these activities – my own children testify to the help they received when we have accommodated servants of the Lord, or have hosted the church youth groups, and the like. However, it is most important to seek out those who are in need, as Hebrews 13:2 exhorts us: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so *doing* some have unwittingly entertained angels."

Most stewardship responsibilities for the family fall to the parents. However there are issues for the children to consider, especially as they begin to grow up. First of all, it is expected that they will appreciate their upbringing and follow their parents in the pathway of faith. Timothy is a Bible example of this: "the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5). They should be encouraged by their parents to take on the work of the Lord, thus providing continuity to the testimony.

Grown-up children are also responsible to "first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God," see 1 Timothy 5:4. In other words, "...the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe" (2 Timothy 4:10), has designed family life such that the care of elderly relatives is provided in responsible family stewardship. In return, grandparents should be a great source of encouragement, especially in spiritual matters. At a recent church meeting, I was delighted to see four generations of one family in happy fellowship!

Finally, it is worth making the point that the purpose of stewardship for the Christian family is to prove them capable of other responsibilities. The father can become one of the pastors in the local church: "one who rules his own house well...he [can] take care of the church of God..." states 1 Timothy 3:4 and 5. By practical stewardship of money, all members of a family may prove themselves worthy to be entrusted with the true riches of the Gospel and of the Faith, according to Luke 16:11.

Let's conclude today's talk on the practice of stewardship in the family by looking at some New Testament examples.

Martha, her sister Mary, and Lazarus her brother opened their home at Bethany to the Lord Jesus. According to Luke 10:38-42, it was Martha who specifically welcomed Him. But she got too involved with getting the meal ready and was distracted by much serving. The Lord had to inform her that her sister Mary had chosen a good part in setting aside time to listen to His word. Jesus was at this house again in the week before He died. In John 12:1-3 it is recorded that the family "made Him a supper." Martha again served and Lazarus was at the table with Him, but it was Mary who anointed His feet with very costly oil of spikenard. The house was filled with the fragrance by this act of appreciation. These incidents demonstrate the need for Christian families to find a "quiet time" for reading the Word of God, so that they may be able to serve the Lord spiritually in worship, as well as by showing hospitality.

When the Lord Jesus was crucified, His mother was in great distress and there was an urgent need for her to be comforted. The Lord asked John to do this and he "took her to his own home" (John 19:27).

After His resurrection, the Lord accepted the hospitality of the two disciples who lived at Emmaus. In return, they, as a family, experienced His presence in their home in a remarkable way! (Luke 24:28-31).

In the early church, some disciples used their homes for church meetings. The mother of John Mark, Mary, held a prayer meeting in her house (Acts 12:12); and Paul writes about the churches in the houses of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Corinthians 16:19), Nymphas (Colossians 4:15) and Philemon (verse 2). Paul himself also had a rented house in Rome and for two years he "...received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ..." (Acts 28:30-31) We, too, can use our homes in these ways to serve God and His people.

In Acts 16:15 Lydia said to Paul and Silas: "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." When Paul and his companions were going to Jerusalem, Acts 21 records that they stayed with Philip the evangelist at Caesarea and lodged with Mnason when they got to Jerusalem. Paul had a guest room in the home of Philemon (verse 22). It's good when we, too, realise the potential of our possessions by using them for the Lord.

Other families are commended for devoting time and effort to the Lord. In Romans 16, Paul testifies that Priscilla and Aquila had "...risked their own neck..." for his life. Of Onesiphorus and family he says that they "often refreshed" him (2 Timothy 1:16). The household of Stephanas are commended as those who had "...devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints..." (1 Corinthians 16:15). These families gave of their resources in recognition of all that God had done for them through Christ.

More than ever, the Christian family in this 21st century is under pressure from a busy, materialistic, pleasure-loving society to conform to its values.

Let's now pray that, rather than being put off from being good stewards of the Lord, God will help us to work out what is proper Christian stewardship despite these difficulties:

Our heavenly Father, please help all families to be good stewards of the many things You have given to them. May they care for each other as You care for Your children! Help them to be cheerful, willing servants who sacrificially provide for others in need, as well as their own family. We ask for Your grace may be upon them in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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