**Faithful Stewards of God’s Grace**

**Sermon – Week #1**

**“Receiving & Using God’s Gifts”**

**1 Peter 4:10 & Matthew 25:14-30**

Introduction:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen. Today we begin a three week look at what it means to be *Faithful Stewards of God’s Grace*. The theme verse for this series is taken from the Epistle lesson for today, 1 Peter 4:10, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” This verse is a good beginning point for us. As Maria sings in the *Sound of Music*, “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.” This verse gets at the very beginning of Stewardship and how it fits into the life of the Christian and the life of the Church. However, just a word of warning, while 1 Peter 4:10 is a good place to start, finding the beginning of Stewardship is still tricky business.

I. Finding the beginning of Stewardship:

When it comes to Stewardship, we usually bypass the beginning. It is just too easy to skip the beginning and move right into the work or the end goal of Stewardship - the giving of our time, the using of our talents, and the tithing of our treasures for the work of the Church. While time, talents, and treasures are where we usually start, they are the ending goal not the beginning. So, what is the beginning of Stewardship and where do we find it? The beginning of Stewardship is found in the definition of what makes a Steward, a Steward, and that is found in our theme verse, 1 Peter 4:10. Let me read it again, and see if you can pick out the two things that define a Steward. “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” Did you catch the two elements that define a Steward? The first thing that defines a Steward is Receiving, and the second is Using.

A. A Steward is a Receiver of God’s Varied Graces:

A Steward is first and foremost one who has received a trust from another, or one who has been entrusted to take care of something that belongs to someone else. Stewards do not use and take care of their own possessions. Let me say that again, Stewards do not use and take care of their own possessions. They receive someone else’s possessions and are entrusted to use them according to the wishes of the giver. To be clear, Stewards are not Owners. They are Receivers of a trust from another. Maybe it feels like I am going a little overboard with this emphasis on Receiving, but it is precisely at this point where Stewardship goes off the rails for most people.

The sad truth is that it’s hard for materialistic people living in a consumer-oriented culture guided by secular material principles to accept the Steward’s mindset. It’s hard for us to admit that what we are and what we have is not ours, but is a trust from God who Created us and all we have. So, let me put it another way. The First Article of the Apostles Creed confesses that The Father is the Creator and we are His creation. He is the Owner and we are the Stewards. Luther clearly explains this in the meaning to the First Article found in Luther’s Small Catechism:

*I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.*

Luther makes it clear that everything we have is given to us by the Father. This is where Stewardship begins. We, by faith, acknowledge that we are not the Owners but Stewards of His creation. All we are and all we have are gracious gifts from our Father in heaven. This is the first part of being a Steward. For the second part, let’s return to our theme verse from 1 Peter 4:10, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

B. A Steward is a User of God’s Varied Graces:

Using the gifts that God entrusts to us, is the second part of being a Steward, and Peter makes it clear how we are to do that. We are to Use God’s gifts to serve one another as faithful Stewards. Here too, we find that it is hard for materialistic people living in a consumer-oriented culture guided by secular material principles to accept the Steward’s mindset. We have come to believe the Devil’s lie that serving ourselves with what we have is what will make us happy. This was the original lie that Satan spun in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had gladly accepted the role of Stewards of creation not Owners of creation. They gladly Received everything from God’s gracious hand and were Stewarding it for Him. But, the Devil’s temptation to Eve to please herself and use the tree her way was too much for her, and she ate. Adam followed suit ignoring the Creator’s will and rejecting the role of a faithful Steward.

Since that day, all of humanity by sinful nature rejects the role of Steward and fights to be self-serving free-agents. So, what hope do we have of being the kind of Stewards that St Peter envisions in our theme verse? We find that hope in the Gospel for today, Matthew 25:14-30, The Parable of the Talents. We find it in the kind of relationships that exists between the Master and the Stewards.

II. Finding the Power to be a Faithful Steward:

In the Parable of the Talents, the Owner entrusts 5 talents, 2 talents, and 1 talent to his Stewards. The first two stewards joyfully receive their 5 and 2 talents and gladly go about putting them to use to serve the interests of their master. Their actions reveal a relationship of love and trust between master and steward. The master entrusts the first two with significant sums of his wealth. The first two stewards obviously love and trust their master and immediately begin stewarding his property for him with wise care. When the master returns, he is pleased with the first two stewards. He expresses his love and appreciation by graciously entrusting even more of his wealth to their care, exclaiming, “Well done, good and faithful servants.” It is the relationship of love and trust between master and steward that produced these good results.

The relationship between the third steward and the master is quite different. It is a relationship of fear and mistrust. While the master also graciously gives a talent of his wealth to this steward, the reaction of the steward is not one of love and trust, but of fear and distrust. The steward receives the talent and is immediately filled with fear and dread. He believes the master to be a hard and unjust man who is just looking for a way to condemn his stewards. So, he hides the talent in a hole in the backyard. This effectively eliminates all opportunities for the stewarding of his master’s wealth. When the master returns, this rejection of the stewarding role by the unfaithful steward draws the wrath of the master. The steward tries to shift the blame to the master by accusing him of being hard and unjust, but that only seals his fate. Punishment follows swiftly. In this case it is the relationship of fear and mistrust between master and steward that led to the unfaithful steward’s failure and punishment.

Our Creator, our Master, our Father knows our weakness and sinfulness. He knows how our guilt and shame makes it hard for us to love and trust Him. That’s why God Himself took the responsibility of making the relationship between Master and Steward one of love and trust. He sent Jesus! Jesus fulfilled the role of Steward perfectly for us. He paid the awful price for our unfaithfulness. He took away the fear of the grave by rising from the dead, and He ascended into heaven where He now pleads our case before the Father. He calls and invites us to enter into a Good News relationship of Master and Steward built on love and trust. 1 John 4:18-19 says, *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.*

Conclusion:

This is the very beginning of Stewardship! By grace through faith in Jesus we Receive with joy and gratitude all that God entrusts into our care as *Stewards of God’s varied gifts*. With love and trust we Use these gifts to glorify God by serving one another. Next week we will dig more deeply into how we *Serve One Another*, but for today defining Stewards as Receivers and Users of God’s Varied Graces is a good place to start. I guess Maria in *The Sound of Music* was right. When you start at the very beginning it is a very good place to start. In the name of Jesus to the glory of the Father. Amen