

STEWARDSHIP FOR Youth

BY REV. ANTHONY CREEDEN



Introduction

Stewardship for young people has been buried in discussions of money matters and the traditional models of time, talents and treasure. Don't get us wrong. These things are not bad. They are just misplaced. How? They are the *result* of stewardship and are not stewardship itself.

In many ways we have developed a bad habit of replacing the identity of a steward with the fruit of stewardship. We have watered the apples and not the trees. We have tried to establish the life of the steward without defining a steward. This is the crux of educating young people regarding stewardship. We must first clearly define stewardship if for no other reason than to allow them to define it themselves. And that is what is at the heart of stewardship for young people.

This discussion of stewardship will identify wrong ideas about stewardship training for young people in an effort to define right stewardship in the context of their lives and the world in which they live. Stewardship should be defined according to the vocations God has given them to fill in their families, in the church and in society. The way this will be done is through a series of questions and answers that will allow you to explore and evaluate our ideas about young people and their lives as stewards of God's gifts. You are encouraged to answer the questions honestly and then return to the alternative answers to gain a fuller understanding of how stewardship fits into the lives of young people. Following the questions we will get into some basic stewardship principles that we hope will assist you in educating your young people about stewardship.

Do young people today care about stewardship?

Yes, they do, even if they do not understand that what they care about is stewardship. They care deeply. Stewardship is a part of everything they are. It is our job to help them flesh out what stewardship means so they can have a firmer grasp on how it affects them and everything they do.

Even though the answer is yes, it is very easy to come to believe that they do not care. The reason is that they have not had the whole picture of stewardship and therefore have not fully embraced what

it means to be a steward. We hope by the end of this discussion of stewardship, we can begin to help you people frame stewardship in the right way and see that stewardship is something they have cared about and sought after for a long time.

What is stewardship?

› We belong to God.

The first of our eight LCMS biblical stewardship principles states that, "God's stewards are God's stewards. This means that they are God's stewards by virtue of creation and their re-creation in holy Baptism; therefore, they belong to the Lord!" While we affirm that the world is not our possession, we can see in Genesis that we were given the specific task to care for God's possessions as His caretaker (Gen. 1:26-31): from the beginning God gave man vocations, holy callings in family, church and society. In this we were given the role of acting as a steward over all He created, a role that helps us recognize our relationship to God as His stewards.

› The use of time, talents and treasures.

This has been the traditional model of stewardship for generations. It is the idea that stewardship is broken down into how we use our time effectively, our God-given talents in the kingdom of Christ and our treasures to financially support the ministry of Christ. And while these are good things indeed, they are not the essence of stewardship. Think of it in reference to an apple tree and its apples. To say that time, talents and treasures are stewardship would be like calling the tree the apples. While the life of the tree is directed toward producing apples, the tree is the first necessary step in getting apples. This is why rightly defining stewardship is the first step in rightly living out stewardship. We must understand who we are, who God created us to be and what roles (vocations) he has given us to fill before we can know which actions are required of us.

› The right use of money and possessions.

There are some who believe stewardship is a matter of possessions only. However, this view of stewardship is far too narrow. In Gen. 1:26-31 God gives to His human creatures the responsibility of caring for His creation. This means living out our created purpose in all aspects of life not just in reference to the material world. We must learn to get past the narrow focus of stewardship as money if we have any hope of rightly teaching stewardship to young people or anyone.

What are the important aspects of stewardship for young people?

› Taking care of themselves and others.

While this is very important for them to do, it is not the most important aspect of stewardship for young people. In fact, the surprising thing for many people is to see how young people care for each other quite a bit. Many young people are willing to go to the mat for those they love and care about. Loyalty is an important ideal for young people. The problematic context for this is that if they develop relationships with people who have a negative influence on them, they may defend wrong behavior and even get to the point where they believe that participating in that behavior is, in some way, a way to take care of people they love. This aspect of stewardship needs further clarification and definition.

› Recognizing identity.

Identity is very important to young people and it is an important aspect of stewardship. The definition of stewardship begins with the question, “Who am I?” Why? Because proper stewardship begins with knowing who we are created to be and what roles God has given us to fill. For young people, self-definition is communicated to them as an ongoing process, something they have to seek out and discover. They are constantly bombarded with television ads and media that attempt to define their identity for them. And all the while, many youth fail to realize that their identity is not something they have to create or something assigned to them by committee, but a reality that is woven into their fabric of life, a gift from their Creator. The life of a steward is grounded in the solid truth that the very first thing God made us to be is a steward of family, church and society. And in a youth culture that is fixed on the question of identity, this truth is of immeasurable value.

› Asset management.

While some youth may be concerned with how they manage their things, many of them have no real understanding of the importance of how we manage our material goods. There are several reasons for this and each student has his or her own context but for many the idea of careful and intentional care for possessions is overpowered by the impulse and drive to identify with others. Consider how some treat their gadgets like cell phones and audio players or larger items like cars. Even if they purchased those items themselves, many times they can be misused or abused via the desire to impress or stay up with the latest and greatest. Things become a method of identity rather than a tool to assist them in living out the steward life.

Who is a steward?

› Christians.

This seems like the logical answer. Since God gives the identity of steward and we seem to be the only ones talking about it, it makes sense that the idea of stewardship must be a Christian matter. But

The life of a steward is grounded in the solid truth that the very first thing God made us to be is a steward of family, church and society. And in a youth culture that is fixed on the question of identity, this truth is of immeasurable value.

it isn't ours alone. Remember the identity of a steward is given over the whole of life: It's our vocation in family, church and society. *Those who rightly take care of what God has given them.* This is the old qualification argument. If someone acts in accordance with the requirements of stewardship, then clearly he or she is a steward. But the problem here is obvious. We are all sinners and none of us can rightly accomplish stewardship this side of heaven. But by the grace of God through Jesus Christ we can grow as God's stewards.

› Everyone.

The truth is that the identity of a steward was given to Adam and Eve from the beginning. This means that the identity is not something we must qualify for in any way. It is a part of our creation. It is what we consider a “first article” reality, that is, something given to us by God in creation as explained in the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. The importance of this cannot be stressed enough. This means that whether you are a good steward or a bad steward, you are still a steward. NO ONE IS EXEMPT! This point is vital in educating young people about stewardship. Stewardship is not optional and it is not a set of tasks we decide to do or a lifestyle we can choose: It's who we've been created to be, the roles we have been gifted to lived out in church, family and society.

What is the biggest obstacle to stewardship for young people?

› Ownership?

In regard to ownership, stewardship can be difficult when we lose sight of the truth that all things belong to God. Read Ps. 24. Notice how David is firmly rooted in the reality that all things and people belong to God because He created them. When we forget that and think that the things in our possession actually belong to us we start to push God out of the picture. We no longer see ourselves as caretakers of someone else's property, but owners who have the right to use our possessions in any way we believe is appropriate. The danger here is that we shift our thinking about creation from stewards and borrowers to owners and thieves. For young people this is a tempting move. If we are owners, then we get to set our own rules and determine the limits of how we use what we have. For a young person, this is thought of as a step toward independence. “It's my life, my body, my fill-in-the-blank.” These responses

to limits on how we use creation are evidence of an ownership problem that can prevent a young person from fully understanding his or her identity as a steward.

› Pride?

Regarding pride, young people find themselves battling the same temptation that Adam and Eve faced in the garden. They want to make and live by their own rules. The result of this rebellion is pride that brings about a loss of stewardship. God gave us this beautiful creation and instructed us about how to take care of it. But when we desire to be our own god and allow our human pride to take over, we begin to live by our own rules. This is the essence of sin and the reason Martin Luther emphasized that the First Commandment is not just about an external idol but a matter of the idolatry of the heart. He says, “Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils” (*Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, Kolb and Wengert, Page 388:21). Pride is the worship of self and the worship of self means that we no longer need someone else to tell us how to live and care for the world around us. Pride is a dangerous enemy to good stewardship.

› Privilege?

In regard to privilege, the move from childhood to adulthood presents many difficult transitions. One of the difficult transitions is the acceptance of responsibility. In other words, the problem is that, as children, we get used to things being done for us and people holding our hands. We are in the process of learning what it means to be an adult and take responsibility for the roles God has given us to play. But that, as we all know, is difficult. When it is difficult there can be a temptation to resist this change. Stewardship carries with it a tremendous amount of responsibility. It means not only embracing our identity as a steward but then letting that identity take hold, influence and guide our actions. It is here that the power of the Holy Spirit is so necessary.

Stewardship principles for education

Now that we have defined what stewardship is and isn't, as well as taken a look at the ideas and lies that get in the way of stewardship, we are better prepared to think about how we are to communicate stewardship to young people. Below are three basic stewardship education principles that guide our stewardship training: information, identification and reformation.

› Information

The first and primary battle we must face in the fight for teaching young people biblical stewardship is the fight against ignorance. Simply put, if we want our young people to be biblical stewards, we have to get them into the Bible. We have to allow God to define stewardship for them and frame the discussion as He designed it. The reason this is so important is because young people are used to being on the receiving end of sales pitches. They are constantly

Give them the Word and let the Word work. We don't need to sell God's truth.

offered quick fixes and promises of products that will change their lives. From the latest in fashion to the newest hit television show, young people are fed a steady diet of redefinition and social strategy, all in an effort to make their lives better. So when something comes along like stewardship that can actually make their lives better, it gets tossed in with all the rest. What we have to do, with a heavy and healthy reliance upon the Holy Spirit, is show young people that stewardship is not just another voice in the clamor for their attention but the ONLY voice that actually gives them the truth. This means that our foundation for all stewardship discussion must be rooted in the Word. Successful stewardship education cannot rely on individual charisma or be couched within what looks like a sales pitch. Young people are conditioned to believe that if you are trying too hard to sell something to them, then it is likely not worth it. Give them the Word and let the Word work. We don't need to sell God's truth.

How do we do this? We do this by carefully reading and studying the Word of God and letting that Word be the guide and inspiration for our Christian stewardship as it confronts us with two critical questions: “*Who is God?*” and “*Who Am I?*” Put those questions together and the answer is vocation: “I am who God has made me to be in my family, my church and my society.”

› Identification

Stewardship education must encounter young people where they are. It must be communicated to them in a way that allows them to see how stewardship involves every facet of their daily lives. And it centers on identity. Our identity is a result of our baptismal faith. In Baptism the Holy Spirit claimed us to be children of God, heirs of salvation and good stewards of all of life and life's resources for God's purposes.

Many stewardship programs begin with several scriptural passages on property, money, and the right and proper use of both. They will touch on Moses' collection and how he turned away Israel from giving because the people had excess (Ex. 35 and 36). They will touch on Malachi and his exhortation on tithing (Mal. 3). They will touch on the very words of Jesus Christ as he explains what it means to have treasures in heaven (Matt. 6). While each of those sections of Scripture is important, they are lacking if we do not first have a foundation of identity from Genesis. Understanding our created purpose as stewards, the nature of our Creator, the relationship we have with Him as His creatures and how the fall was an attempt to overthrow stewardship and try to hurt our ability to make sense of the rest of these wonderful passages on living out stewardship. Why did Moses have excess contributions for the tabernacle? It was because the people of God gave in abundance. They weren't people of any more special faith than the rest of us, but people who

understood their identity as stewards. God needed what belonged to Him and so His caretakers brought to Him what was rightfully His. But if you do not understand your identity as a steward, passages like those seem obscure and difficult to process into everyday life.

Stewardship for young people needs to be approached from the angle of identity: Who has God called you to be in your family, church and society? Understanding the identity of God as Creator and Owner and thereby understanding that we are the created stewards of the Owner, allows young people to gain a clearer definition of where they fit into the wonderful God-designed creation. This, in turn, gives them purpose and communicates to them that their identity is not something fashioned by the world or assembled through their attributes, likes or trends. Identity is given and it is not found. Young people do not need to stress themselves out over where they fit or what their place is in this world. They do not need to allow others to define them or be concerned about whether or not they are valuable. Young people don't need to get caught up in the games of social king-of-the-hill or become wrapped up in categories that place people into unfair stereotypes and classifications. What they need is a firm grasp of stewardship as the proper response of baptized children of God!

For more information on this and some free resources for stewardship Bible study, check out these Bible studies and articles from the LCMS Youth Ministry's Esource:

Bible studies:

www.youthesource.com/Index.asp?PageID=7082&Function=View&ArticleID=1797

WHO AM I:

www.youthesource.com/Index.asp?PageID=7082&Function=View&ArticleID=1792

So, You're a Steward ...

www.youthesource.com/Index.asp?PageID=7082&Function=View&ArticleID=1794

› Reformation

The final principle for successful stewardship education is reformation. Reformation strictly defined is the process of reshaping the way something is done. That is exactly what we are proposing. In every way we engage our young people, we must model stewardship and the steward identity. This means change.

The first change we can make to more effectively teach stewardship to young people is to change our expectations. In 2008, two young men by the name of Alex and Brett Harris wrote a book, *Do Hard Things*. The premise of the book was to challenge young people to rebel against low expectation and use the teenage years as a time to do great things. In the book, the young men ask the important question of how God views the teenage years. And what they found is best summed up when they explain:

Adulthood is not some switch they flip on when it is time, but rather an identity they must learn to embrace. Indeed, it's simply a matter of shifting roles and vocations.

"What we find is clear evidence that God does not hold two standards: one for young adults and one for adults. He has high expectations for both. Where some might look down or excuse young adults, God calls us to be examples. Where our culture might expect little, God expects great things" (Do Hard Things, Page 42).

Their point is that God doesn't make any concessions for teenagers regarding expectations. In fact there is no such thing as teenagers to God. When young people think about being good stewards of possessions and money, they believe that these matters are for the later years. These are adult matters. What they fail to realize is that adulthood is not some switch they flip on when it is time, but rather an identity they must learn to embrace. Indeed, it's simply a matter of shifting roles and vocations — from child to spouse, from catechumen to confirmed member, from student to neighbor and worker. But there is never a time when we do not have vocations in the church, in the family and in the world. Stewardship is a critical part of that identity. God expects them to be good stewards of what they have been given because that is what He created them to be. This means that we should expect the lives of young people to reflect their identity as stewards. We should speak to them as if stewardship defines who they are. We should expect young people to act like stewards. And what does that mean? That is the next thing we need to change.

The next reformation we need in youth stewardship education is providing real opportunities for them to live out their steward lives. How do we do that? The answer is twofold.

The first thing youth leaders can do is to make sure they provide real and meaningful ways for young people to participate in the stewardship of their community (in their vocations in society) and congregation (in their vocations in the church). Seek out opportunities to do local service projects. Find ways that they can support the ministries going on in the congregation that might be considered more "adult" activities. For example, participate in local home building projects and community cleanup events. In the congregation, have them read, usher, even get involved on a board or committee as much as your congregation will allow. These opportunities serve to support and reinforce their steward identity as they take care of their fellow believers. It also allows the congregation to begin to see young people as a part of the steward community.

The second thing youth leaders can do to provide meaningful ways for youth to exercise their steward identity is to connect

the activities they are already involved in with stewardship. For example, let's say you have a baseball player in your youth group. How is it possible to see baseball as stewardship? How about physical fitness? Sports activity involves the exercise of the body, which is the stewardship of what God has created. There are also realities of team sports that encourage support of teammates, teamwork and an effective strategy on how to accomplish goals. It may sound odd, but these are all reflections of the steward identity. God created us in community and gave us the task of caring for ourselves and others. This only verifies that the steward identity is a regular part of everything we do. We are at all times and in all situations stewards.

Finally, effective youth education regarding stewardship must be solidly grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The truth that every person, young and old, knows is that we are imperfect and incredibly flawed. These words from Eph. 2:8-10 are so important for us to remember: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."* And what does this mean for our stewardship? It means that stewardship is distinctively other focused and requires daily repentance and renewal through Jesus Christ.

It is here that we find daily repentance and renewal, necessary parts of our lives as God's stewards. Like every other endeavor of a Christian at any age, we must always remain strong in the hope and restoration of our Savior for the times when we struggle with our

stewardship. So often we fail to care for others and God's creation as we should. But we are never left alone to fend for ourselves. Once stewardship is rightly framed for young people, they may begin to feel overwhelmed with the mistakes they have made or the enormity of the task. And in that moment, they need what any believer and steward needs. This is the comfort and confidence of a loving God and beautiful Savior who assures them that even though they may act contrary to their identity at times, it never changes their identity as stewards and, more importantly, as beloved children of God. Paul said it so well with these words from 2 Cor. 5:17, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*

Conclusion

Blessings on your stewardship education and may God strengthen you in this important task as you work to guide young people through the difficult transition into understanding their identity and living out renewed lives.

For more reading on steward identity or other items in this document you can find more in these sources:

- › Alex and Brett Harris, *Do Hard Things*, Multnomah Books, Colorado Springs, Colo., 2008.
- › R. Scott Rodin, *Stewards In the Kingdom*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill., 2000.

