

StewardCAST

A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry

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Stewardship Counts

What is the first step in godly stewardship? Counting. Now, before anyone fires off an angry email, understand *what* the steward must count. This counting is not about inventories, ledgers or balance sheets. Instead, the faithful steward counts blessings.

Any honest creature of the Lord, our radically generous Creator, can come up with a long list of blessings which have been bestowed upon him. Luther's rhythmic laundry list of blessings in his explanation to both the First Article and the Fourth Petition capture this beautifully. "Clothing and shoes ... house and home, wife and children, land, animals and all I have..."¹ are just the tip of the blessing iceberg. It is the Lord who provides all we need to support this body and life.

Count your blessings

What is most radical is that these blessings have been poured out upon both the righteous and the wicked — both the faithful steward and the greedy, miserly, slothful

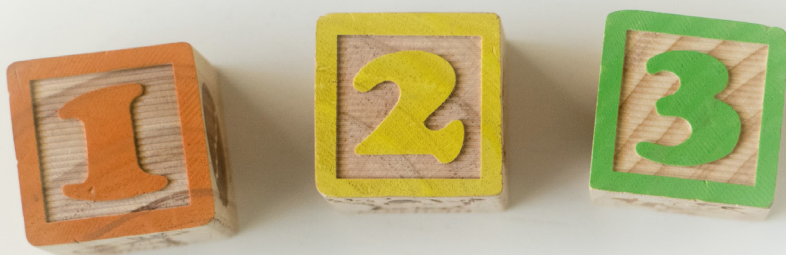
steward. What makes the faithful steward different is that his view of the daily provision for his needs by the Lord flows from faith. The miserly steward will see his material blessings as gained through hard work, shrewd investing and perhaps even blind luck. What blasphemy! The faithful steward, counting the blessings bestowed by a loving Lord who has made heaven and earth to declare His glory, sees these blessings as gifts of grace. There is no faithful stewardship without the daily acknowledgement of the gracious intervention of God in the life and salvation of the individual steward.

To see and count blessings as gifts of grace naturally puts the faithful steward into a vastly different mindset. A steward counting the blessings daily received from the Lord raises his thoughts and eyes beyond himself and the material world and seeks contentment in the Lord as the giver of all things in Christ. It is the contentment of faith resulting from the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian steward

which then sees the blessings as not only for themselves, but also for the benefit of neighbor and the glory of God. When all that the steward has and is comes from outside of himself, from the Lord, contentment is found in the faithful use of those blessings for the sake of others.

Unique journeys

Every steward will have a different "count" of blessings. Each has been blessed with many gifts in life. Each communicates in unique ways and shares in unique relationships. Each steward has a distinct blessing of talents, abilities, characteristics, interests and aptitudes. Each blessing-counting steward understands that he has been formed in ways that make him unique from the billions of other people on the planet. The blessing-counting steward confesses that he has been entrusted with a stewardship that no other steward has, in order to uniquely serve his neighbor and the world. Each steward's journey, formed in



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¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 15.

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his creation and re-made in his adoption by grace in Holy Baptism, is truly one-of-a-kind.

This is where a one-size fits all programmatic approach to stewardship is doomed to fail. These efforts, while providing a framework for activity, start in the wrong place. They are all focused on the activity of the steward. This is not because these programs are malicious or poorly-planned. The real issue is that they are poorly executed. Stewardship programs are offered most often when the financial situation is dire in a congregation. Rather than see stewardship as a call to faithfully count God’s blessings and then use those blessings for the benefit of the neighbor and the glory of God, many see it as the quick-fix solution to keep the institution of the congregation afloat. This is a reverse-engineering project gone wrong. It starts with desperate corporate stewardship and tries to work backward to inspire faithful individual stewards. This has been done over and over in recent decades and has left a bitter aftertaste in the mouths of those who long to be faithful stewards of God’s blessings, but don’t know how.

Receiving the gifts

Our Lord, in creation and redemption, starts, continues and finishes the process of stewardship in and through the individual Christian. The Holy Spirit, working through the faithful administration of Word and Sacraments, sanctifies the hearts and lives of God’s sons and daughters gathered around the font, pulpit and altar. Faithful stewardship is the display of the sanctifying work of the Lord in the life of the Christian. It is God’s work. We sinful human beings can hinder that

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work. Our miserly old-Adam hearts can stop that work dead in its tracks, but not without consequences. When the frustration of God’s work in the steward happens, blessings are not counted, faith is weakened and souls are jeopardized. This is because the steward is then serving another god ... himself.

Blessing-counting, the posture of faithfully and thankfully receiving the gifts God bestows upon us on a daily basis, puts things in the right order. When this faithful attitude of reception of God’s many gifts is neglected, stewardship formation and execution is imperiled. This is dangerous because we have an amazingly gracious God, and no one can take His place. Yet, when God’s Word re-orders the life of a steward in repentance and faith, stewardship grows. Blessing-counting confesses first and foremost that God is real — and that the steward is not God.

Just as the branch receives blessing and nourishment only from the vine, so the faithful steward receives all he has and is from the Lord. Faithful stewards are tasked with abiding and remaining in the connection to the vine in order to bear the fruit of faithful stewardship. This can’t happen when the steward does not see the blessings of life and salvation from the Lord as the starting point for faithful stewardship. Steward leaders, teach those entrusted to you to start counting blessings!

