



WHOLE-LIFE STEWARDSHIP: THE CALL TO GREATNESS

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THE CULTURAL MANDATE: THE CALL TO WHOLE-LIFE STEWARDSHIP

Most Christians have been trained to view stewardship in a narrow way that does not live up to the biblical standard. Stewardship consists of so much more than tithing and caring for the environment—it has to do with every choice each person makes. By embracing the true call to whole-life stewardship, individuals can achieve greatness and fulfill the biblical call to bring about flourishing.

Stewardship is both a mandate and a privilege. It was born in the garden, before the fall of man. Christians do not have the luxury of misunderstanding the requirements of stewardship, and we benefit from the pure joy and delight it brings not just to us and our neighbors, but to the thousands of anonymous strangers we can serve.

God presents us with the call to stewardship in Genesis 1:28 when he tells us to multiply and fill the earth. In doing so we are being fruitful. This is God’s call to stewardship, often referred to as “the cultural mandate.”

The implications of being fruitful and productive are massive. We are to build culture and develop the world. This includes all things that we spend our time doing, including having and raising families, engaging in communities, raising churches and cities, and engaging in commerce and trade. This is a profound directive, and the effects of doing it well and with purpose allow us to bring hope to the world.

We live out the cultural mandate through our work, which includes for-profit work, nonprofit work, and work inside the home. Work is a pre-fall ordinance, and as such is not a curse but rather a gift. Work is not to be viewed with dread but with joy. Each person has a unique opportunity to contribute to the cultural

mandate that no one else has ever had because every single individual has something unique to offer that only he or she can give. It is because we are created in the image of God that we are distinct and unique. Everyone was born with gifts and skills that allow him or her to serve others, to fulfill the cultural mandate, and to build the kingdom of God.

WORK AND STEWARDSHIP

Our call to be good stewards arises from God's perfect creation of the earth and everything in it. God's work—the Garden of Eden—was perfect but unfinished. We are created to use our God-given creativity to leave more than what we were born into. We do this by recognizing our unique gifts, skills, and talents. Through these things we come to know our purpose. Our lives are intentional and we have a role in kingdom-building work that does not just occur in the halls of the church on Sunday morning, but rather in all aspects of our lives and our work.

In this way we are more than park rangers who are hired to make sure the park does not get damaged. We are called to create something and to leave more than what we were born into. We are given this call in Genesis 2:15 before the Fall, when God puts man in the garden to work it and to take care of it.

Work is what we do and stewardship is how we do it. Stewardship refers to all of our decision-making: how we choose to use our time, our talents, and our energies. It's where we draw the boundaries on our commitments. It is reflected in all of our choices, from the mundane to the monumental. This is whole-life stewardship, and it requires a paradigm shift. Stewardship is not just about whether we tithe, or how we manage our personal finances or how we preserve fossil fuels. These are important aspects of stewardship, but whole-life stewardship is so much more. It concerns every decision that a person makes, and it requires intentionality and effectiveness.

Stewardship includes decisions over:

- What college to choose.
- What job to take.
- What activities to volunteer for.
- What to purchase on Amazon.com.

The fall of man introduced scarcity into the world, and as a result, people are confronted with constant trade-offs. Scarcity implies that every choice we make involves a cost. Nothing is free. The phrase, "there is no such thing as a free lunch," means just that. If someone offers to take another person to lunch and pay for his or her meal, there is still a cost to that party. He or she must give up time to have lunch with that person, and by definition, it means not doing something else. Time is the most precious of our scarce resources. No matter how much material wealth one has, he or she only has twenty-four hours per day, and no one knows how many days he or she has on this earth.

If Christians are to create cultures and build cities, we don't have the luxury of wasting our scarce resources. We must be intentional, prudent, and urgent. We have the pure pleasure of using our uniqueness to serve others in all of this. How else is a city or a culture built but in the coming together of strangers to trade their talents and gifts with one another? No one person can build a city, not even the most powerful king or emperor in history. That is because it is impossible. God created us with different gifts and skills so that we would come together, and in that coming together we become interdependent upon one another. We need each other. In that need, we are able to serve each other. God weaves a rich tapestry of our humanity through our uniqueness. Together we can achieve things impossible to achieve on our own.

This means that if God has called someone to be a chef, open a restaurant, become a software engineer, or design footwear, one can do it for his glory. Whatever God has called someone to, whatever talents he has given one, he will use that person in the building of his kingdom and in the service of others. This also means that all work has eternal and lasting significance. It's not just our work in the church that matters—the work in the world matters, too. This is profound; it means that individuals worship the King and serve others by pursuing the gifts he has given them. The implication is that someone's call to greatness may be fulfilled by operating a food truck or becoming a mechanic.

HOW YOUR STEWARDSHIP IMPACTS THE WORLD

Have you ever seen the movie “Castaway” with Tom Hanks? If not, please do. It is the story of a FedEx executive, Chuck Noland, whose cargo plane crashes on a remote island. He is instantly ripped away from his modern world of comfort and forced into a day-to-day struggle for survival. He does not know if or when he will be rescued. One of the most joyful parts of the movie occurs when he learns to start a fire. He also has other skills he must master to survive, including distilling water, finding shelter, spearing fish, and building a raft. Though Noland is ultimately successful, he has to produce everything he needs for himself, so most of his waking hours are dedicated to mere survival.

God did not create us to live autonomously like Noland is forced to in the movie. God calls us into community with one another to serve each other. In our modern world we do not have to worry about how to build fires. We purchase matches or lighters or better yet, central heat. We get up every day and use products, and we are completely ignorant of their design, production, and origin.

In this way, we are “ignorant beneficiaries” of the thousands of technologies we use and depend on each and every day. When we focus on our unique gifts and skills, we are freed from having to figure everything out on our own. We can serve others with the talents we have rather than trying to perfect skills that are out of our reach.

When we embrace the notion of whole-life stewardship, we are freed from having to merely survive. Instead, we can thrive, we can bring about flourishing, and we can bring glimpses of hope to a dark world.

Here is a small example of how different life is in the developing world versus in the developed world. In any number of developing countries, women wake in the morning with children in tow. They gather baskets and walk to the nearest stream or river which is often far away. They fill their baskets with dirty water, wash their clothes in the river, and bathe themselves and their children before they walk back to their village. One leg of this trip is often several miles in back-breaking heat. This is a daily routine. They will get up again to do it all over tomorrow.

These women, just like you and I, were created in the image of God, and just like you and I, they have inherent dignity. We have such abundance compared to the women in this situation. Most people reading this probably do not even have to think about where and how to collect and purify water. They can just purchase it from people who specialize in doing that.

STEWARDSHIP REQUIRES AN OPPORTUNITY SOCIETY

Christians have a unique opportunity to bring about greater—though not ultimate—flourishing by taking the cultural mandate seriously, by working with integrity, and by serving others. Whole-life stewardship is a biblical principle, but it has the power to transform the world by bringing about greater levels of flourishing for the believer and non-believer alike.

Stewardship requires freedom and an environment that promotes our God-given creativity and purpose. God does not promise us material wealth, but he does tell us in Jeremiah 29:11 that he wants hope and a future for us. We need to live in a society where opportunities for profound acts of whole-life stewardship are plentiful. This could mean anything from opening a bakery, to following God's call to be a software engineer, to raising children.

Whether you are a plumber or a pastor, you work for the King. By definition, your work has intrinsic value because only you can do it. It has eternal significance in that you are contributing toward the building of the new heaven and new earth which will reign forever.

What can you do in the service of others and the King? You can prayerfully seek your calling and do it with excellence. Your work may seem mundane or unimportant, but it is the single-most important way you serve others, some of whom you may never meet. Embracing whole-life stewardship helps us to count the costs and to be better decision-makers. It also allows us to serve others and brings great joy to ourselves in the process. It is our call to greatness.

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