



Stewardship

A WAY OF LIVING

The Unfaithful Steward

The songs of the birds in the olive grove wafted on the morning breezes, drifting through the hole that served as a window. As Simon slowly swung his feet to the smooth dirt floor, his thoughts were on his troubles.

I am a failure, he thought. My wife and children are barely getting enough to eat. They deserve a better place to live than this shack. The stench of rotting grapes from the winepress behind the house permeated the air.

He had grown up in a very poor home. But he had dreamed big. He was going to rise above poverty and become wealthy someday. But his dreams had crumbled after the birth of his handicapped son. With the medical bills and other calamities that had befallen the fledgling family, he had been reduced to this small shack that the landlord

had given him with no rent.

If it were not for the olive grove beside my house where the birds come to sing their beautiful songs, I could not survive in this filthy place.

Then a bolt of electric excitement shot through him.

The Master was coming! Today was the day!

It was very unusual that He was coming to visit Jericho in person. Usually, He would send His servants to evaluate the affairs of the town, but He was coming in person today. Rumor had it that He would appoint stewards to manage the estates.

After hastily eating a meager breakfast of crusty bread dipped in milk and a few fish his sons had caught in the stream, Simon hurried to the village square. The teeming crowd was increasing by the minute. Never

before had he seen so many people gathered in the square. The excitement reverberated around the buildings.

Simon had heard much about the Master and now, at last, he would get to see Him.

Simon didn't even dare to think that he would be chosen. He was so poor. The Master would want someone who was successful in life and would know how to manage His vast holdings. Not that Simon was not a good manager. He was just unfortunate in that the calamities had reduced him to a position only slightly better than that of a beggar.

Of course, there was always a chance.

And so, the excitement increased as everyone waited for the Master's arrival.

Then the shout!

"He is coming!"

Simon craned his neck. But the mass of bodies prevented him from seeing anything. He searched for a vantage point. Several meters away stood the scraggly fig tree that still struggled for survival in the middle of the market. Simon pushed and shoved his way through the mass to the tree. Grasping the lowest branch, he hoisted up his skinny frame. From his vantage point, he could see

the Master ride into town on a small donkey.

Simon had heard much about the Master over the years. He was a great man with vast estates. He was known for His just rule. Simon had expected Him to ride in on a great stallion. Or a chariot.

But a donkey?

The crowd parted to let the Master pass. He rode to the tree in which Simon was perched, then came to a halt and slowly dismounted. The crowd pushed back until a circle had opened up around Him. It dawned on Simon that the Master came to the tree because it was in the exact center of the market. He also realized he was in a very awkward position to meet the Master, who was peering up at him.

Simon quickly dropped to the ground and was about to blend into the crowd when the Master said, "Simon."

He stopped, turning to face the Master. *How did He know my name?*

"Where do you live and what do you do to support your family?" The Master's voice was kind.

Simon hung his head. "I live behind the grape press." He was acutely aware of the threadbare robe hanging from his sparse

frame. The patches didn't cover all the many holes. "I work in the vineyards and stomp grapes in the press," he finished lamely.

He had long looked forward to this day when he would get a chance to see his Master. But now he was brought to shame in front of the whole town. Hot tears pushed at his eyelids.

The Master pondered for a moment. Simon wished he could run back home and hide, but the Master was staring at him as if He was looking right through him.

Then He spoke.

"Would you be willing to be the steward of one of my many enterprises? Perhaps steward of the vineyards?"

Simon was speechless. Had he heard right? "But Master, I am a poor man. I live on the wrong side of town. I have committed many sins. I am not worthy of such a position."

The Master smiled at Simon. "I make worthy all that I call. You are forgiven of all your sins. Yes, I know you are poor. But the possessions you have are not what qualify you as a steward. The only thing required is that you are faithful with what I place in your care."

He paused and reached out to break a dead

branch from the fig tree. After throwing it onto the garbage heap beside the tree, He turned back to Simon and asked, "Would you like the role of steward of the vineyards?"

Simon glanced dazedly around at the many staring faces. Suddenly, he was weeping. "Master, I will be faithful in everything that you entrust to my care. I will do whatever you tell me to." His eyes dropped to his feet. "But may I ask one favor of you?"

"Sure, Simon. I would be glad to grant your wish."

"Could I become steward of the fields instead? I wish I wouldn't have to see another vine or grape for the rest of my life. The smell of sour grapes always fills my house, and I abhor them."

A twinkle came into the Master's eyes. "Of course. I will be happy to make you Steward of the Fields. You can manage the grain. I knew you didn't like the grapes, but I wanted you to ask so I can have the satisfaction of granting your request."

He glanced at the sun. "Simon, I will stop at your house later to deliver your instructions."

Later, sitting at the Master's feet under the olive trees, Simon drank in each word. The

Master explained the many details of managing the fields, rotating the crops, allowing the soil to rest and recuperate, and the many details involved in helping the soil become more productive. “You should make each decision based on whether it will help the increase of the harvest or not.”

“What will I do with the increase?” asked Simon.

“Remember, you are the steward of my possessions, and I will hold you accountable for your stewardship. You may use a portion of the increase to sustain your family. You are allowed to take what you need to live on, but don’t become greedy. The remainder is mine. Distribute it wisely.”

As the Master rose to His feet and prepared to leave, He handed Simon a small book. “This has all the instructions you will need to be a good steward. My servants will check on you periodically. I will eventually return, and then you will have to give an account of how you handled what I placed into your care.”

Straddling the little donkey, the Master turned and looked back at Simon. “If you need help, remember, I am always quick to respond when called.”

The next several months were nothing short of chaotic for Simon. While he was still basking in the euphoria of his release from his former state, he was also burdened by the great responsibility of his new occupation. There was so much to learn.

Simon spent his days nurturing the fields and brainstorming ways to increase production. He faithfully recorded every expense he incurred during the tilling and planting process. The anticipation of the profit from the harvest brought him excitement.

Each evening when he came home to the small shack he called home, the stench from the spoiled grapes met his nostrils. It was the only blight on his life.

After the harvest and sale of the crop, Simon was overwhelmed with the responsibility of using the money so it would have the most impact on the Master’s kingdom. He spent many hours evaluating the many needs in the town, distributing where the needs were the greatest. He was sure the Master would be pleased.

But one thing was bothering Simon.

The Master said He would periodically send servants to check on the progress, but I have not seen even one so far. What is the delay?

Simon pondered. He wanted the servants to relay to the Master how well he was managing the fields.

The following year, Simon had another abundant crop, and the year following was even better.

Handling large amounts of money became a normal part of his life. The newness of helping those in need had worn off.

The shack that Simon lived in kept bothering him increasingly. With all the money passing through his hands, he began to wonder if the Master would mind if he used some of the money to buy a better place.

The fourth year, Simon found a nice place on the outskirts of town along the creek. The house was much nicer and had an extra room for sleeping. He purchased it with the Master's money and moved into his new home.

His conscience bothered him a little when he went to distribute to the poor, but he appeased it by telling himself that he worked hard and deserved it. Besides, had the Master not said he could use what he needed to sustain himself?

With the increase, Simon purchased land

from other people so he could increase his crop. He could not help as much with the needs around him, but he knew it would increase the amount he would have to give in the future.

He added several more rooms to his house, with porches on the sides and back. He planted many trees to cool the breeze. To water the trees, he had a canal dug from upstream to his land. It was expensive, but because he hired the poor from the town, he was able to keep the costs lower than expected. The poor worked for less because they were just glad to have some work to help feed their families.

Simon also loaned out money to those who were in difficult situations. Soon, many people were in debt to the Master.

The lack of messengers from the Master caused Simon concern. He began to wonder if the Master really cared about the assets in his care. He had increased the Master's holdings significantly; the yields had increased, and he had channeled about the same amount of the increase to the poor each year. He felt that he was doing very well in his stewardship role.

Someday, when he had built the Master's holdings into an empire, he would stop

buying more land and use all the funds for the poor.

Of course, he would not use it all for the poor because he needed his share to sustain his lifestyle.

And yes, his lifestyle was increasingly expensive. With a second home on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and the servants he needed to maintain his homes and grounds, the traveling, and the exotic foods he brought in, it took much more to sustain his needs than it used to.

But I deserve it, what with all the hard work I am putting in for the Master. After all, with the way Simon had increased the Master's holdings, he was sure the Master was very pleased.

Simon was still grateful the Master had drawn him from his previous deplorable state, and he silently thanked Him daily even though he wondered if the Master heard him.

Simon's hair was becoming gray now. He couldn't stay in the fields all day as he used to. When he considered the vast holdings that he had acquired for the Master, he couldn't help feeling good about his accomplishments.

The house that Simon lived in was very nice, but he had a niggling doubt in the back of his mind that the Master would not like his extravagant lifestyle. But he always dismissed the thought because whenever he got together with his fellow stewards, he noticed that they lived just as well as he did, and some even better.

There were a few radical stewards who didn't sustain the same lifestyle.

Occasionally, they would remind Simon of his commission. But Simon never took them very seriously. They didn't have to live so simply. Had the Master not said they could use of the increase for their own livelihood? He had not said that they needed to limit it to the bare essentials.

The cool breeze came dancing through the window, ruffling his gray hair. Outside, the chattering brook filled the evening with music as the crickets strummed their fiddles to add their talent.

Then, crashing into the evening serenity came a sharp knock. Who could be visiting so late?

The stranger at the door had a letter, which he handed to Simon. No words passed over

his lips, but turning quickly, he disappeared into the gathering gloom.

Simon sank heavily into his chair.

Why this dread?

Why this premonition of a calamity? The letter read:

Dear Simon,

I gave you the responsibility of steward of the fields, including the instruction book on how to manage them. I have periodically sent messengers to check up on you, and they have reported that you are wasting my possessions for your own gratification, and have acquired many more fields at the expense of the poor.

Behold, I will be coming to remove you from your position and will put someone else in your place, because you can no longer be steward of the fields.

With eternal love,

The Master

The crickets were still playing their fiddles, but Simon did not hear.

Why would the Master say that he had been unfaithful after the increase he had brought in for Him? True, the letter did mention that

he had wasted His possessions for his own gratification, but he had been told that he was allowed to use what he needed. Maybe he had lived better than he would have had to, but surely the Master would consider the increase.

Then Simon remembered the instruction book mentioned in the letter. He had read a little in the book right at the beginning of his stewardship, but over the years, he had read less and less. Many instructions were very difficult to understand. Many didn't make any sense.

Desperate now to know the answers to the turmoil in his mind, he took down the book, wiped the dust from the cover, and began to read.

At first, he skipped about. A few passages grabbed his attention.

Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.¹

And:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in

¹ Matthew 5:42

*heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:*²

Also:

*He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.*³

And again:

*Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.*⁴

On into the dark, troubled night, Simon read.

As the first rays of the sun brushed the tops of the trees outside Simon's window, he laid the book on the table, staring into the distance. He now knew why the Master was displeased with him. He finally understood the meaning of the instructions in the small book. Why had he not made it a priority to fully understand what the Master wanted of him? But it was too late now! The Master was coming to expel him.

What could he do?

He knew well enough that no amount of begging would change the Master's mind. The Master was not interested in empty words, and Simon had nothing to offer as a bargaining tool. After all, it was clear now that even the house he lived in was not his. He had known this, but somehow, he forgot about it. So begging was out of the question.

And when Simon considered the power and might of the Master, he trembled. There was no way he could force his way through this situation. Even if he called all his friends to come and take up arms with him, they would have no chance against the Master.

Oh, what could he do?

"I know what I will do," Simon's voice bounced hollowly around the large study he had spent the night in. "I will give away the Master's possessions."

He started with his vacation home by the sea. Next, he sold his home and moved into his old house behind the grape press. It had fallen into disrepair over the years, so Simon remodeled it. It was now a nice little home that was sufficient for him, his wife, and their handicapped son. Simon wondered

² Matthew 6:18-20

³ Matthew 13:22

⁴ Matthew 19:23-24

why he had thought he even needed the many roomed mansion he used to live in.

He released those he had bound with debt.

The lands he had purchased were sold.

Finally, all that remained was what he needed to function well in the grain business.

He distributed to the poor. Even the old leper who always lay at the city gates begging received a small shelter with plenty to eat.

The breezes were whispering among the olive trees. Sometimes they darted down to ruffle the few hairs left on the old man's head as if they wanted to share a secret. He was leaning against the trunk of one of the olive trees, gazing into the final rays of light lingering in the west. The pungent odor of souring grapes wafted down over the bank behind the small house he called home, bringing the beginnings of a smile to his lips. Why was the smell so offensive to him in that time long ago when he lived here and wished to be somewhere else?

Anywhere else!

Now the smell brought peace.

The messenger emerged from the olive

grove behind the old man. When he tapped his shoulder, the old man slowly turned as if he had expected him.

This time, the stranger spoke. "I bring you greetings from the Master. He is well pleased with you and soon you will go to meet Him. Remain faithful until the end and He will take you home to a better place."

The old man lowered his eyes to his feet. "I don't deserve a better place. I have grieved the Master with my wasteful living in the past."

The stranger's eyes became bright. "To those who repent and turn from their error, the Master extends forgiveness. He is anticipating the day when He can give you the reward that is prepared. Until then, I leave with you the Master's blessings. God be with you!"

He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all

these things: and they derided him. And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God. (Luke 16:10-15)



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