

## Pay It Forward – Laying a Good Foundation

### 1- The Privilege of Sharing

Psalm 49

1 Corinthians 3:1-15, 3:21-4:2

Luke 6:43-49

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October is Stewardship Season at South Highland. We focus our messages this month over various aspects of *The Privilege of Sharing*. Today the foundational principle underlying all our sharing - the principle of seeing ourselves as **stewards**.

A few years ago a book and then a movie came out called “Pay It Forward.” The story presents a simple concept that could have radically positive benefits. A school teacher assigns his most obstinate student an extra credit assignment; come up with an idea that could change the world and then implement it to see the results.

This student decides he will make it a point to help three people in ways that are important to them, and then when they come to pay him back; he will have them “pay it forward” to three other people instead. He reasons that if this scheme is continued it will quickly grow because of its exponential power. 3 will become 9 will become 27 will become 81 will become 243 will become 729 will become 2,187 by the sixth time the recipients pay it forward. At that rate good deeds will reach millions and even billions of people in no time.

It is a utopian idea, and part of the story line is about what happens when people who are helped are not able to pay it forward before they either die, or fall back into a bad habit, or resist the urgings. Yet the principle is clear: if we pay forward instead of pay back, the world may be changed.

The Apostle Paul brings to central focus this power of paying it forward in his Letters to the Church at Corinth. This was a Church Paul had established, a Church Paul dearly loved, and yet a Church that had more than a few problems. His two Corinthian letters address many of these, as he moves between the problems and the powerful gifts God has given in Jesus Christ. In the passage we read today, Paul rebukes them for their factional party spirit that is fragmenting the Church, and calls them to go beyond pitting different preachers against one another, Paul vs. Apollos vs. Cephas (who was Peter.) Instead, Paul says, see your selves “as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.” These images as **servants** and **stewards** emerge quite often throughout the New Testament as Jesus, Paul, Peter, and others encourage believers to embody an identity quite unlike the identity prized by the Roman and Greek Cultures, and also the Jews.

To see oneself as a **servant** of Christ and a **steward** of God’s mysteries leads in quite a different direction from seeing oneself as a self-made man or woman, an all-

important doctor or lawyer, a brilliant intellectual, a keen business executive or government ruler or church official. You may be that. But ultimately you are more a servant of Christ and a steward of God's mysteries. To see oneself as a **servant** means we tend to other's needs first. To see oneself as a steward means we manage what belongs to someone else. "Moreover," Paul continues, "it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy."<sup>i</sup>

These Corinthians have become like callers on a reality TV show, rating the performances of Paul against other preachers like Apollos and Peter. "Our preacher is more – biblical, entertaining, intellectual down-to-earth, inspiring, brief, spiritual – than yours." Instead of using the gifts God has given them to pay forward to others the good news of Jesus and to show forth the care and compassion following Jesus makes possible, these Corinthians are wasting their energy putting down their leaders.

## I

And Paul will have none of it. There is no time for such silly non-productive intramurals. The point is for all to build forward on the One foundation that alone matters and look for approval to the One whose approval alone matters. "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each."<sup>ii</sup>

We are all servants and stewards, each with a specific role to play for a particular limited time. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."<sup>iii</sup> The point is; do not focus on the individual farmer, whether the farmer is putting out seed or fertilizer or water. Focus on God. "Only God gives the growth... We are God's servants, working together; we are God's field, God's building. We are "stewards of God's mysteries." We are not our own. We belong to God.

Jesus once told a story about three stewards who were given money to care for what belonged to a master who went away on a long journey, and then he described how each responded. Though they were given different amounts, two of them doubled the funds they were given and were praised for their astute management, and promoted by the master upon his return. The third man, however, took the money he was given, and he was given the least so he had the least to put at risk, and he simply dug a hole and stuck the money in the ground. When the master returned this steward was rebuked, his money taken and given to the others, and he himself was "thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,"<sup>iv</sup> because he did not creatively care for what was entrusted to him.

As stewards we are caring for property that belongs to someone else. When we say, as in the Creed, "I believe in God," we are making a foundational affirmation that there is someone and something over us to whom we owe our life and to whom our life shall one day return. As Psalm 49 puts it, "mortals cannot abide in their pomp. When they die, they will carry nothing away. (But) God will ransom, he will receive me." For Psalm 24 comprehensively affirms, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world,

and those who live in it.”<sup>v</sup> God is the owner. We are God’s stewards who must be found trustworthy. This is our identity. Think of yourself as God’s steward.

## II

Now in order to be found trustworthy as a steward, we must build upon the foundation the owner has established and no other. Paul describes that foundation as none other than Jesus Christ. “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”<sup>vi</sup>

In my last church a man who was a bank trust officer took funds he was entrusted to oversee and invested them in financial instruments other than those authorized by the Trust, seeking to get a better return. He did not build on the established foundation. He built on another foundation, and he went to prison for it. The Corinthians, by their contentious rivaling, sectarian spirit, pitting Paul against Apollo and Peter, were straying off the foundation that had been laid. They were violating the trust given them.

You and I are stewards of the Grace of God in Jesus Christ, specifically stewards serving God through South Highland Presbyterian Church. We are building upon a noble foundation. We can only build well and build wisely upon the foundation we have received. And we have received so much, in terms of many generations since 1888 who have paid it forward to the next. Generations who envisioned through wars and depressions and schisms and culture shifts, what God was yet calling this Church to, and trusted God to work through others after them. They built upon the established foundation and no other.

Now each generation added their own insights, their own ministries, and their own programs that became relevant for a particular season. At one time there was a weekly ministry to prisoners in the city jail. At another time there was a tutoring program to black children at nearby Ramsey High School. At one time special music was provided by a lovely little quartet, only later did the radical idea of a full choir emerge. At another time, and still continuing to this time, there are programs to bring food and faith and fellowship to mentally challenged individuals, to care long for senior adults afflicted with Alzheimer’s, and to provide a safe nurturing Christian environment for preschool children. In varied times through varied ways, this foundation that is South Highland has been laid by some, built upon by others.

Stewards step forward and do their part, but most often the work is not completed before they have passed off the scene. “I planted. Apollos watered. God gave the growth.”

Some of you have visited St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City within Rome. Until 1989 St. Peters was the largest church in the world. You may not be aware that this great old church, built in 1506, is technically the new St. Peters. The original St. Peters was built in 324 by Emperor Constantine over the tomb where Peter was buried. In 1506 that

old church was torn down and this new and bigger church built on the same spot, on the same foundation. It took 120 years to build and was not completed until 1626, just two years shy of the entire lifespan to date of South Highland. Considering that a worker at that time had an active career of 20 to 30 years, it took between four to six generations to begin and complete that Church. “I planted, Apollos watered. God gave the growth.”

### III

. Paul was building for the long haul. In rebuking the Corinthians for their divisive spirit, and reminding them we all have a role to play, whether planting or watering, it is God who gives the growth. It is God whose work we are doing and who is at work in us. So Paul says, enough of all bragging. Here is your identity. “Let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future- all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

Recognize then, who you are as servants of Christ, and stewards of God’s mysteries. You work for the Lord. Do not stoop to any lesser god. Whatever you do, do it for the Lord. You are building for the ages, not for the moment. Pay it forward. You are establishing a legacy that can continue long after you have breathed your last breath.

Happy and Christine Elsom were two dear saints of South Highland who knew and lived that. They built wisely and built well, and built for future generations. Happy died in 1998 at the young age of 98. Christine died one and a half years ago in 2009. Every Sunday until nearly the end of her earthly journey Christine sat in the short pew in the back of the sanctuary, next to the sound system and always had a warm word of encouragement for me as we came in for worship.

Happy built that pew for her. He loved to work in wood. He also built the lectern and the sound system case in the Davis Family Hall, and the beautiful wooden paneling around the water fountain in the reception halls. He built things for children out at Boys and Girls Ranch. Christine came to Birmingham shortly before World War 2 and worked for many years as an administrative assistant with Liberty National. She met Happy, who was considerably older, they married and enjoyed many wonderful, indeed, Happy years together.

Happy and Christine loved their Church and were generous in support of it. They were not wealthy people, but they were incredibly generous people. They were tithers who followed the Biblical principle and shared 10% and more of their resources for South Highland’s regular ministry and worldwide mission through Witness Season giving. They did this both in their lifetimes and beyond.

You see, they made provision in their wills to continue doing beyond their lifetimes what was important to them in their lifetimes by leaving a large portion of their estate to South Highland. It became available this year after Christine’s death, and enables them to continue their full annual tithing and mission giving. Through a generous bequest, to the South Highland Foundation their giving continues. Ministries

and mission for God's work about things Happy and Christine felt were important will go on in perpetuity, year after year.

During this Stewardship Season we are focusing on the Privilege of Sharing. Pray about what God is calling you to share. Think three dimensionally, with both your eyes seeing up close and far out. Think up close what God is calling you to do as a steward for this coming year – 2011 when the economy is so difficult and the need is so great. And think far out - what God is calling you to do as a steward for the ages, extending on beyond your lifetime through a gift made in your will or other long term planning. What does it mean for you to do the best you can as God's steward?

You may know – it was a segment on last week's "60 Minutes." Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffet and other fabulously wealthy people are urging their peers around the world to give half their wealth away to charitable causes that are important to them. I doubt anyone here can give at their levels. But everyone here can give generously, like Happy and Christine Elsom, by sharing a tithe (10%) or by moving toward a tithe if you are not there yet, for God's work in 2011, and by designating a meaningful portion of your estate, perhaps 10% to perhaps 50% to ministries through South Highland that are important to you and to this Church for its impact on the whole world.

Reinhold Niebuhr said,

"Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime,  
therefore we must be saved by hope.  
Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context  
of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.  
Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;  
therefore, we are saved by love."

Remember who you are. "I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it."

"Think of yourselves in this way, as servants of Christ, and stewards of God's mysteries." Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 Cor. 4:2.

<sup>ii</sup> 1 Cor. 3:5

<sup>iii</sup> 1 Cor. 3:7

<sup>iv</sup> Matt. 25:14-30.

<sup>v</sup> Psalm 24:1.

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<sup>vi</sup> 1 Cor. 3:10-11.