

“THE MASTER’S GARDNERS (#1): MINE! MINE! MINE!”
(Matthew 25:14-30)

[PROPS NEEDED: (1) “Find Nemo” Video Clip; (2) “R.G. LeTourneau Story” Video]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 4-6-08]

--I--

1. Read Text Matthew 25:14-30 and Pray.
2. Every single day, Americans bounce over one million checks. In any given month, 40% of us spend more than we take in, while every year another 40% pay over \$2000 on credit interest.

A—Add that to the fact that 56% of all divorces list conflict over money as at least one cause, and it shows that we as Americans we are spending more than ever, but enjoying less.¹

B—You see, we live in a culture where money and possessions are at the very heart of our lives, and even for the most disciplined among us, it’s not easy to keep under control.²

C—That’s why over the next four weeks, in a series called “The Master’s Gardeners,” we’re going to be exploring the relationship between faith and possessions (especially money) by comparing our life to a garden, and how God (the Master) wants us (his Gardeners) to tend the “garden” of our life well by how we relate to our possessions.³
3. Now, some of you may want to ask if this is an appropriate subject for a church sermon – after all, shouldn’t we preachers stick to “spiritual” subjects like sin and love and salvation?

A—Yet, if we read the Bible carefully, we’ll discover that there is no more deeply *spiritual* subject than that of money and possessions.

1—Sixteen of Jesus’ 38 parables deal with this, and 1 out of 10 verses of the four gospels (288 in all) deal directly with this subject.

2—The Bible itself talks more about money and possessions than it does about prayer, faith, salvation and love combined!⁴

B—As a result, author Randy Alcorn says that “*Our approach to money and possessions isn’t just important – it’s central to our spiritual lives*”⁵ because it reveals the true nature, depth, and character of our values, priorities, and commitments⁶ (*You want to know what a person’s real priorities are? ...look at their checkbook register or where they spend their money, and you’ll find out quick!*)

C—So my purpose in this series is *not* to get us to hate money or possessions, but merely to help us understand God’s perspective, so He can help us keep money and possessions in their place as a source of joy/good in our lives, instead of being a source of anxiety/evil.

-II-

4. So as begin this series on money and possessions, I think we first need to ask exactly *WHO* it is that owns all our “stuff”?

A–Now, there’s several answers to this, but the one we *tend* to think of as correct can be summed up in following short video clip from Disney’s movie Finding Nemo:

[WATCH VIDEO CLIP: Pelicans saying “Mine!”, Scene 17 (0:56:55-0:57:25 –Time:0:30)]

1–You see, when it comes to our “stuff,” in today’s world most of us tend to think and act just like those Pelicans:...“*I earned it; I made it; it’s ‘Mine! Mine! Mine!’*”
So what right does God or anyone else (including a preacher) have to tell me what to do with my money and my possessions?!”

2–And a farmer/gardener might say the same thing: “*I planted the seed; I watered it; I weeded it. It’s MY garden!...*And yet, I want to ask: ...is it *really* yours?”

B–Think about it: ...*where* does the real growth in a garden come from? From sunlight and rain and other things that the gardener neither “owns” nor has any control over!

1–And what about us? Where do we get *our* ability to work hard, or be successful in the first place? From where does our smart brain or strong, healthy body, or our good-business sense come?

2–Put another way, when we die, can we take all our “stuff” with us? Of course not! That’s why you’ll never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer!

3–When John D. Rockefeller (one of the wealthiest men in American history) died, someone asked his accountant how much he left behind. And his reply was classic: “*All of it!*”⁷

5. You see, in the end, all the “things” we *think* we own – our cars, homes, money, real estate, and even our spouse and children – ultimately come from God.⁸

A–Sure, like a gardener who tends the plants and flowers of a garden, WE might be the *tools* that God uses to take care of the “things” in our charge, or to bring fruition and success to them (like a gardener who helps his/her plants bloom). But we don’t really “own” them.

1–And that’s the point of Verse 14 in today’s story from Matthew 25. The Master (representing God) “*entrusted to [the servants, (representing us)] HIS property...*”

2–Do you see? The property and possessions didn’t belong to the servants at all – they were merely stewards (or “managers”) of that which belonged to God (the Master, who was the *true* owner).⁹

B–Psalm 24:1 says: “*The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it*” – including “our stuff!”¹⁰

C—And the moment we begin to think and act as if what we have belongs to *us* instead of to God (ie., that it’s “*Mine!*”), then like those Pelicans, sooner or later we’ll find ourselves arguing and fighting over it – which, by the way, is precisely why money and possessions have been at the root of so much war, violence and interpersonal conflict throughout history.

D—And the only antidote is to remember: ...*I own nothing; God owns everything!*”

–III–

6. “*So what, then?*” you say. “*What difference does it make whether we view ourselves as ‘owners’ or ‘stewards’? Isn’t this just some petty theological distinction that has no real significance for everyday life today?*”

A—Well, I think it has a great deal of significance for everyday life today! Listen to what author Herb Miller says about this:

*“Stewardship means management. If [we] call ourselves a Christian, then [we] are in charge of managing God’s financial [and other] resources. If [we] view our resources as ‘mine,’ [we] will find it difficult to give money [and other resources] to God’s ministries. [But], if [we] see our money as God’s resources, [then we] can decide much more easily how to give to God’s ministries through [His church].”*¹¹

1—And he’s right! If *we’re* the “owner,” then we’re not accountable to *anyone* for how we use our money and possessions (which is how most of us act anyway!)

2—But if we’re a “*steward*” (like the Bible teaches), then we’re responsible to manage what we have for the benefit of the *owner* (God) – in the words of Randy Alcorn, “[*As stewards*], it’s [*our*] job to find out what the owner wants done with [*their*] assets, then carry out [*the owner’s*] will.”¹²

3—In other words, since our life is *God’s* “garden” (and not *ours*), then we need to ask & discover how *God* wants us money/possessions He gives as *tools* to tend it.

4—That means we may need to think twice before going out and buying that second new car in the last 2 years, ...or before buying that new smartphone, ...or dress ...or set of shoes that won’t even fit in the closet,... because God may want us to use that money to help someone in need through a special offering of our church, ...or through a ministry that makes a difference in the lives of others.

B—You see, “*The world asks, ‘What does a [person] OWN?’ [Jesus] asks, ‘How do [they] USE it?’*”¹³

1—In the end, the purpose of stewardship is so that we can extend the good news of Jesus to others in our world –I.E., through our church’s ministries, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, teach the children, heal the broken & addicted, & give hope to those without it – *that* is God (our owner’s) plan for the “garden” we call “life” in our world .¹⁴

2–But it *can't* happen unless we (His stewards and “gardeners”) manage money and possessions in such a way that that plan can be carried out through His church.¹⁵

C–Listen to a true example of someone who managed his business in just such a way...
[WATCH VIDEO: “R.G. LeTourneau”Story from “Generous Church Toolkit”(Time – 3:10)]

–IV–

7. You see, LeTourneau understood that when God says He’s the “owner” of all there is, He’s not trying to *rob* us of life, but to teach us what *true life* really is – as He designed it to be!¹⁶

A–In the same way, today’s message is not intended to get you to give “your money” – we’re not going to [pass the offering plate / ask you to come forward for the offering] again!

1–No. This message is intended to help all of us understand that when we learn to genuinely give *ourselves* to God, then our money and possessions are not really “ours” to hold on to or distribute as *we* please anyway.

2–They’re GOD’S – we *manage* them, but we don’t *own* them! They’re not “*Mine! Mine! Mine!*” They’re “*God’s! God’s! God’s!*”

B–And as such, our role as responsible managers/stewards (as the “*Master’s Gardeners*”) is simply to decide how to invest wisely *God’s* money and possessions in things around us that accomplish His eternal purposes in His world, His people, and even in ourselves.

C–“*Use everything as if it belongs to God; ...because it DOES!*” Friends, today let’s all resolve to manage well what’s been entrusted to our care!

8. [CLOSING PRAYER]

9. [HOLY COMMUNION]

10. [CLOSING MUSIC: UMH#354, “I Surrender All”]

ENDNOTES:

1. All of these statistics were taken from H. Date Burke’s sermon “*Ownership*” (Sermon #2) in his The Heart of the Matter audio CD Series, (Tape 1666A, October 10, 2004. As affirmation of these trends, sociologist Robert Bellah writes that “*For over 100 years, a large part of the American people has imagined that the virtual meaning of life lies in the acquisition of ever increasing status, income and authority*” (Bella, quoted in Burke’s sermon “*Ownership*” in his series The Heart of the Matter).

2. That’s why 1 Timothy 6:10 says that “*the love of money is the root of all evil.*” It *doesn’t* say that money itself is evil, but that our *love* for it tends to compete with our love for God, and that competition makes us open and vulnerable to all kinds of evil things.

3. We'll be looking at what it takes to keep our possessions from possessing us, how to find true contentment with our "stuff," how to get out and stay out of financial debt, and how to find God's will in our finances.

4. The Bible contains about 500 verses about prayer, slightly less about faith, but over 2000 verses relating to the proper understanding and use of money and possessions! In fact, the only subject that Jesus addresses more in the gospels is the "kingdom of God" [See generally Michael Reeves and Jennifer Tyler, Faith and Money: Understanding Annual Giving In Church (Discipleship Resources, 2003), pp. 12 and 16].

5. Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), p. 10.

6. Author Michael Slaughter says that "*There is no greater indicator of your values and priorities than what you do with your money*" [Michael Slaughter, heard in video clip "The Randy and Kathi Klauss Story" on DVD in Slaughter's book Money Matters (2006)].

7. Cited in Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle, pp. 17-18. In a related story, the late Bishop Edwin Hughes once delivered a rousing sermon on "God's Ownership" that put a rich parishioner's nose out-of-joint. The wealthy man took the Bishop off for lunch, and then walked him through his elaborate gardens, woodlands, and farm. "*Now are you going to tell me,*" he demanded when the tour was completed, "*that all this land does not belong to me?*" Bishop Hughes smiled and replied, "*Ask me that same question a hundred years from now*" (Bennett Cerf, Leadership magazine, Vol. 1, no. 2).

8. "*Everything that God has given you is an endowment. Everything. Every last thing. Your background, your experiences, your family, your church, your wealth, everything is God's gracious endowment in you, and it has one purpose. All of it is to get him glory*" [Rev. J. Ligon Duncan in his sermon "The Joy of Stewardship" in The Generous Church Toolkit (Generous Giving, Inc., 2004), Sample Sermon #5, p. 3]. Even our *children* are not our own. Instead, God "owns" them. He merely *loans* them to us for us to care for them, cultivate them, help them learn to be productive, and help them learn how to find and worship God

9. This story is set in the midst of a series of messages Jesus is giving to his disciples about the preparation needed to be ready for his return at the end of time. So this story is telling us what we as Christians need to be doing to be faithful in preparation for his coming again. It would have been a story recognizable to the people of that day, for it was quite common in the Roman Empire of that era for wealthy families who lived in one place say in the winter to spend the summer someplace else (like contemporary "snowbirds"). And while they were away, slaves or stewards of the house would be entrusted with the care of the master investments, the conduct of his business, and the oversight of his household.

The word *steward* or *stewards* (Greek *oikonomos*) appears 20 times throughout the NRSV translation of the Bible, and it carries the implication of a trustee or servant-manager who is responsible for something of value (such as money, property, or goods) that belong to someone else. So here, Jesus' main point is that while in heaven, God has endowed all his children with an investment, and he expects us to make a return to Him on His investment in us, and He wants us to look at the whole of our lives in that light.

10. Even for those who tithe, its not even that 10% belongs to God and 90% to us. No. The Bible says that 100% of what we possess actually belongs to God! He is the owner; we're merely His stewards/managers. Other stories and scriptures that affirm God's ownership of all things include: Genesis 2:15-17, 4:2-4 (where Adam and Eve were placed in a garden called earth at the beginning of creation, not to *own* it, but to be stewards and caretakers of it on God's behalf); Haggai 2:8; Deuteronomy 8:18; and 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

Along this line, the founder of Methodism John Wesley once wrote to his Methodists that "*When the Possessor of heaven and earth brought you into being and placed you in this world, He placed you here not as an owner but as a steward— ...He entrusted you for a season with goods of various kinds... but the sole property of these still rests in Him, nor can ever be alienated from Him. As you are not your own but His, such is likewise all you enjoy*" [John Wesley in his sermon "The Use of Money," cited in The Works of John

Wesley (Jackson Edition), Sermon 50, Section III, Paragraph 2, p. 133].

11. Herb Miller, Full Disclosure: Everything the Bible Says About Financial Giving (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2003), p. 29.

12. Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle, p. 25.

13. South African evangelist and writer Andrew Murray (1828-1917), cited in www.GenerousGiving.org/quotations. Matthew 6:19-21 explains it this way: *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

14. *“All too often we regard stewardship simply as a matter of our giving to God, but this aspect is secondary. Before we can give, we must possess, and before we possess we must receive. Therefore, stewardship is, in the first place, receiving God's good and bounteous gifts. And once received, those gifts are not to be used solely for our own good. They must also be used for the benefit of others, and ultimately for the glory of God the giver. The steward needs an open hand to receive from God and then an active hand to give to God and to others”* [Murray J. Harris in “Voices” (Vol XIII, No. 3, 1987), cited in magazine Christianity Today (Vol. 32, no. 4)].

15. *“We should be thinking like stewards, investment managers, always looking for the best place to invest the Owner's money. At the end of our term of service, we'll undergo a job performance evaluation”* (Randy Alcorn, The Treasure Principle, p. 27). Read Romans 14:10-12 as a description of this.

Elsewhere, Herb Miller describes it this way: *“Christian stewardship uses the life [and possessions] God gave you for God's purposes. Your money is a tangible extension of that life. God does not so much call you to give your money as to give yourself. Yet genuinely giving yourself always involves giving that financial extension of who you are”* [Herb Miller, Full Disclosure: Everything the Bible Says About Financial Giving (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2003), p. 29].

16. Herb Miller explains it this way: *“Stewardship is not just an opportunity to enter into God's service but an opportunity for God to enter into you”* [Herb Miller, Full Disclosure: Everything the Bible Says About Financial Giving (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2003), p. 29].