

Entrusted With God's Property

(MATTHEW 25:14-30 NIV) *The Kingdom of Heaven will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. ¹⁵To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.*

The application is obvious; We are entrusted with God's property.

It's easier to talk about *us trusting God*. We're conditioned to think that way. The hymns of our faith: "*Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus*", "*Trust and Obey*", "*Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*." And we enter the fellowship of the church through a profession of trust in Jesus.

It's the basis of all we hold Holy: "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not unto your own understanding.*" (PROVERBS 3:5). But the parable is clear: God has "entrusted us." It's a whole new ball game. "Trusting God," is about salvation, peace of mind, security... Happy thoughts; warm, like a crackling fireplace on a frosty night.

But, when "*God trusts us*," the focus shifts: responsibility, obligation, stewardship... Heavy, dark, like a song played in a minor key. Duty, spiced with "shoulds" and "oughts", and generous portions of guilt. I've wrestled with this parable for years, now, and I think there's a more effective way of looking at Christian stewardship.

A few generations ago sociologist Abraham Maslow said human behavior is motivated by needs. He identified five levels of human need, which he visualized as a pyramid. Each level of need must be met before moving to the next; but once a need is met, it no longer motivates behavior, and we're free to move to the next level.

Let me illustrate with a story: Org, the caveman, is starving; hasn't eaten in days, and knows he won't survive much longer without food. Tossing caution to the wind, he grabs a stick and goes after a saber-tooth tiger. It's risky business, attacking a saber-tooth tiger with a stick; but *survival* is at stake, and survival takes priority over all other needs. It motivates us to act in ways we don't normally act.

Well, Org succeeds in killing the tiger, and eats his fill. Now survival is assured. It no longer motivates. Now he thinks: "I'll be hungry again tomorrow." Maslow calls this the need for "security". You can't worry about security until survival is assured; and security-seeking behavior is different than survival behavior.

Org knows a cave, deep and cold, and he drags the tiger carcass deep into the cave, where it will be preserved by the cold and protected from scavengers.

Now he's secure; and realizes he's lonely. He has social needs. So, Org plans a party; invites several other cave-dwellers; and, guess what he serves: tiger.

Well, Org's party's a success, and he feels accepted and affirmed. His social needs met, he can now move to the fourth level. Several friends say, "Org, you really

know how to give a party." And as they leave, Org thinks, "Hmm, if you think this is a good party, just come back next Saturday night. I'll show you a *real* party." Org is now motivated by the need for achievement and recognition.

At the next Saturday's party, this time Org *cooks* the tiger! Boy! The people are impressed, and they tell him, "Org, you're the best cook on the mountain!"

He has achieved. He enjoys the recognition of his peers. He settles into his tiger-skin sleeping bag, thinking: "You know, I guess I am about the best cook around. Maybe I should share my gift with others." He publishes a cook-book, filled with saber-tooth tiger recipes, and thus is able to share his gift with his world. Maslow called this final level, "self-actualization". Org has discovered and accepted his true identity, and in that identity finds a sense of calling: not to achieve or succeed, but simply to "be all he can be."

Over the years I've been heavily influenced by Maslow's thinking. It has provided me with practical, functional application for a lot of biblical principles.

Maslow said the most fundamental human need is to survive. For most of us that's not a real issue—physically, psychologically, socially, or spiritually. When I was in Vietnam, it was an issue; and for some of us it's an occasional issue: in traffic, in a dark alley, or a hospital emergency room. And our behavior is very specific in those situations. But, generally, most of us, most of the time, *assume* survival.

Even at the spiritual level; most of us grew up going to Sunday school and church. I don't remember ever not knowing: "Jesus loves, this I know..."

But some people, lost in confusion and emptiness and guilt; hopeless and alone, don't know whether they'll survive today, much less eternity. They don't even know if they want to survive today, because tomorrow looks just like today.

To them, survival *is* an issue. And their behavior reflects that need. They cannot be "entrusted with God's property". Other needs take priority. They need a Word of Grace: "God loves you; you are not worthless. You have value to God."

Even those who've heard and accepted the word of Grace sometimes struggle in the depths of their souls; times of doubt, loss, disillusionment. Christian mystics talk about the "dark night of the soul", when even the faithful cry out in despair.

In those times, *security* is the issue. Again, here it's not possible to be a faithful steward, "entrusted with God's property". The need is for a reminder: "Our Lord, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, '*This is my body given for you...!*'" (LUKE 22:19 NIV)

Most of us live most of the time at the third and fourth levels, which Maslow calls "Social Needs" and "Achievement Needs". We *assume* survival and security; but we need to "belong"—to be a part of something significant and important, whether

it's a winning little league team or a prominent musical group; a respected civic club, or just a small circle of friends who gather occasionally to play cards. We're incomplete, by ourselves; isolated and yearning for a sense of belonging.

That need is met when two or more gather in the name of the Lord. And it's through the strength and support and encouragement of other Christians that we're able to sustain our faith and witness in the world. We need *fellowship*.

And at this level we *begin* to see people being "*entrusted with God's property*". Stewardship may be shallow: going through motions because it's expected. "What will people think of me? I want to do my part." It's a good start; but stewardship at that level usually is inconsistent and isn't sustained over a long period of time.

At the fourth level, our need for recognition and appreciation is valid. In our secular culture, that's where many people exist, and that's why it's so important for the church to express appreciation for service faithfully rendered. We need to hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant." That's why the church needs to maintain a viable, effective ministry, recognized and appreciated in the community. It *confirms* us.

But when that need has been met; when we are confirmed, we can move to the highest level of motivation. Through our success and failure we learn who we are; and in that discovery lie the seeds of what Maslow called "Self-Actualization". The biblical word is "Shalom", which means, "wholeness"—"Peace of Mind". The self-actualized Christian is motivated from within: he knows who he is: a "*gifted*" child of God; she knows her gifts and her limitations and there's no burden of obligation in serving, for her greatest joy is in exercising her gifts.

And at that point one can hear, without burden or guilt, "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and *entrusted his property to them*."

Each Christian will be at a different level—both in comparison to other Christians, and within his/her own Christian experience, advancing and regressing. And, at each point there is "Good News". To one struggling for spiritual survival, lost in confusion and guilt, the "Good News" is "God Loves You and Accepts You." To one who has acknowledged God's love, but is struggling to realize the peace of God's presence, the "Good News" is "This is my Body, given for you."

To one who is isolated and ungrounded, the "Good News" is a loving, caring church. To one needing achievement and recognition the "Good News" is a program of ministry that draws out the gifts and talents of each member.

And the greatest "Good News" of all is available to those whose accomplishments are proven through the tests of time. They can hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" And isn't that the goal toward which all Christian faith is moving?