

Valley View Chapel
February 27, 2011
Plain Truth about Stewardship 3
“True Purpose”
Acts 16:6-12

Introduction

The #1 law of stewardship is: God is the owner of everything. This law does not come naturally. We have to learn it and practice it and perfect it for the rest of our lives. Why do I preach a series on biblical stewardship every year? Because the idea that *God is the owner of everything* goes against every natural inclination.

Here's what comes naturally: “The Toddlers’ Ten Laws of Stewardship.” Unless we learn *God’s laws* of stewardship, we will live by the toddlers’ laws of stewardship all our lives. Here they are:

1. If I like it, it’s mine.
2. If it’s in my hands, it’s mine.
3. If I can take it away from you, it’s mine.
4. If I had it a week ago, it’s mine.
5. If it’s mine, it must never appear to be yours in any way.
6. If I’m building something, all the pieces are mine.
7. If it looks just like mine, it’s mine.
8. If I think it’s mine, it’s mine.
9. If it’s near me, it’s mine.
10. If it’s broccoli, it’s yours.

Because the “Toddlers’ Ten Laws of Stewardship” come so easily to us, it’s important to look into the Bible to learn God’s laws of stewardship.

So far in this series, we’ve explored what the Bible says about “True Ownership” and “True Generosity.” This morning we’re going to think about “True Purpose.”

I want to set the stage for this message about “true purpose” with an incident from the movie *Dead Poets Society*. *Dead Poets Society* is the story an English teacher named John Keating, who shakes up a New England prep school for boys in the 1950s.

One day Keating tells his class to huddle up. Like a coach at halftime, he addresses his students: "We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. The human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering... these are all noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But, poetry, beauty, romance, love...these are what we stay alive for."

Mr. Keating then proceeds to quote from a poem by Walt Whitman: "Oh me, oh, life of the questions of these recurring. Of the endless trains of the faithless.

Of cities filled with the foolish. What good amid these oh me, oh life?" The students listen carefully and recognize the poet is asking a rhetorical question.

Mr. Keating continues, "Answer: That you are here. That life exists...That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. And you may contribute a verse..."

He looks around at his students and asks, "And what will your verse be?"

"*And what will your verse be?*" In other words: "What will be your unique contribution to the world?"

Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of the rock group Queen, who died of AIDS at the end of 1991 in one of the last songs he ever wrote asked the haunting question: "Does anybody know what we are living for?" Freddie Mercury was one of the most successful and wealthy entertainers of the last quarter of the twentieth century. Yet he died, not knowing what his "verse" would be.

The Hollywood heart throb, George Clooney, talked about his life's purpose in an interview with author Doug Stanton: "We only have so much time on this earth, and I'm going to spend mine working." Clooney's "verse" is "work and more work."

Ernest Hemingway is considered to be one of the greatest American novelists of the twentieth century. He was the poster boy of the successful man. At age 25 he sipped champagne in Paris, and later had well-publicized game hunts in Africa and hunted grizzly bears in America's northwest. When he was sixty-one, after having it all—wine, women, song, a distinguished literary career—Hemingway chose to end his own life, leaving behind a profanity-laced suicide note.

Freddie Mercury, George Clooney, and Ernest Hemingway achieved greatness, world-wide fame, and considerable wealth in their respective fields. But I suggest to you this morning that they missed the whole point and purpose of life.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *The Weight of Glory*: "We are halfhearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased."

The main thrust of this series called *Plain Truth about Stewardship* is that we won't be "too easily pleased," that we won't settle for less than God's best for our lives.

Some day we are going to give an account to our Maker about how we managed what he entrusted to us. And the most basic resource he has given to us is *life itself*. We will stand before the one who made us and give a defense of the way we lived our lives. If

we have not identified our “true purpose,” we will have little to say in our defense to God. That is why it is so important to find our “verse” and live every day with that our “verse” ever before us.

We can learn a lot about living by our “true purpose” by looking at the life of the apostle Paul. We see him guided by his life purpose in Acts 16:6-12. Let’s look at this passage:

“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.”

When We Say “Yes,” We Must Also Say “No”

Look again at verses 6-7 - “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.” Acts 16:6-7 (NIV)

If we are going to be committed to our “true purpose,” we have to say “no” to a great many other things. And many of these things are good things!

Paul had to say “No” to preaching the gospel in Asia Minor and Bithynia, which are in modern-day Turkey. Paul *wanted* to go there. He tried every possible means to go there. But the Spirit of God shut the door. It wasn’t consistent with the Lord’s purpose for his life.

A.T. Pierson, in his book, *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, wrote about what he called “God’s double guidance.” God’s “double guidance” is when he stops us from doing one thing to lead us to another thing. We sometimes refer to it as “God closing a door” and “God opening a door.”

There were many things to which Jesus could have devoted the majority of his time - healing people of their sicknesses; delivering people from demons; or teaching people the Word of God. While Jesus spent some of his time doing these things, he gave most of his time to training and equipping his disciples to carry on his work after he was gone.

I’ve given a lot of thought over the years to my “true purpose” or “my verse” in life and I think I’ve discovered it: “To preach and apply the Word of God so that God’s people are

equipped to live holy lives and do the work of the ministry to which God has called them.”

When We Say “Yes,” We Must Also Say “Slow”

It takes *time* to discover our true purpose in life. It doesn’t come all at once.

In his book *The Eighth Habit: from Effectiveness to Greatness*, Stephen Covey told the story of Muhammad Yunus, an economics teacher in Bangladesh. 25 years ago, Yunus met a woman who was stuck in poverty over a matter of pennies.

She made bamboo stools, but couldn't afford to pay the equivalent of 20 U. S. cents to buy the bamboo. She had to borrow the money from the bamboo trader. Then she sold her stools back to him at whatever price he dictated. The woman ended up earning 2 cents a day. Yunus took one of his economics students around the village and came up with a list of 42 people in that sort of situation.

"When I added up the total amount they needed," Covey quotes Yunus as saying, "I got the biggest shock of my life: It added up to 27 dollars! I felt ashamed of myself for being part of a society which could not provide even 27 dollars to 42 hard-working, skilled human beings."

He loaned them the money, telling them to pay it back whenever they could afford to. Yunus asked bankers for help, but they thought that the money would never be repaid by people who were too poor to offer collateral. Yunus got every penny back, so he went to other villages and did the same thing, always getting repaid. But the banks still wouldn't do anything to help. So he started a bank of his own. Covey reports that Grameen Bank now works in thousands of villages in Bangladesh, lending about \$500 million a year -- with the average loan being less than \$200.

It took Muhammad Yunus a long time to write his “verse.” Maybe he thought that his “true purpose” was to teach principles of economics to young people. But his “true purpose” was more far reaching and more satisfying than he ever dreamed possible. He waited many years, but he finally began to write his own unique “verse.”

The word “*wait*” appears many times in both testaments. For some of us, “waiting for God to act” is the hardest thing we are asked to do.

One day Phillips Brooks, the esteemed nineteenth-century pastor of Boston’s historic Trinity Church in Copley Square, was pacing around in his study. It was obvious that he was very agitated about something. His secretary noticed this uncharacteristic body language, and asked: “Dr. Brooks, what’s the trouble?” The pastor replied, “The trouble is, that I’m in a hurry and God isn’t!”

It was hard for Joseph to wait in that dark and dismal Egyptian prison for two years while he was pondering what his true purpose in life was.

It was hard for Jesus to build tables and chairs in a Nazareth carpenter's shop while he waited to step onto the stage of public ministry and fulfill his true purpose.

It must have been hard for Paul to go from Phrygia to Galatia to Mysia to Troas, wondering why he was traveling from place-to-place and not fulfilling his "true purpose" of preaching, winning people to faith in Christ, and starting churches.

I graduated from seminary in May 1973 with a Masters of Divinity degree, having spent the previous eight years in the pursuit of higher education. I felt called to be a pastor. But God had other plans. For the next ten months, I drove a taxi cab fifty hours a week. I learned patience. During those ten months, I re-examined my calling, purpose and passion. The Lord graciously gave me opportunities each day be a pastor to the 30 or 40 people who got into my cab. By the time I was called as the pastor of the Abington Alliance Church in suburban Boston in March 1974, I was solidly committed to my "true purpose."

When We Say "Yes," We Must Also Say "Go"

There comes a day when everything is ready for us to step onto the sacred stage and do your part – to do what our Creator intended us to do when he made us. When God says "Go!" we move forward without hesitation into the perfect will of God.

Finally, everything was in place for Paul and his team to impact the strategic city of Philippi for Christ. We read the thrilling words of verse 10 – "After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." Acts 16:10 (NIV)

Notice something very important in verse 10. Paul couldn't fulfill his "true purpose" by himself. And neither can we. Other people have to buy into it, own it, and commit to it.

Paul had seen a vision of a man in Macedonia pleading: "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Timothy didn't see it. Silas didn't see it. Luke didn't see it. Only Paul saw it. But Paul communicated his vision to his friends and partners in ministry. And a wonderful thing happened. Paul's vision became their vision! Paul's purpose became their purpose!

The word "concluding" in verse 10 suggests agreement and consensus. Paul's partners discussed his vision. They prayed with Paul about it. They calculated the cost. We know they affirmed Paul's purpose because we're told in verse 10 – "God had called *us* to preach the gospel to them." Paul didn't fly solo. Timothy would preach. Silas would preach. Luke would preach. It would be a team effort.

You know it's time to "Go" forward with your "true purpose" when others say: "That's my purpose, too. I want to join with you as together we do something significant for God."

Conclusion

Sports Illustrated columnist Rick Reilly called it the "Play of the Year." A local newspaper called it "the touchdown heard around the world." Sports shows everywhere told the story. Jake Porter, 17, a member of the Northwest High football team in McDermott, Ohio, was born with chromosomal fragile X syndrome, a common cause of mental retardation. He couldn't read. He could barely write his name. But he loved football, and he faithfully attended every practice.

Northwest coach Dave Frantz wanted to do something special for Jake. So before a game against Waverly High, Frantz called his friend Derek Dewitt, the head coach at Waverly. Frantz suggested that both teams allow Jake to run one play at the end of the game, assuming the game wasn't on the line. Jake would get the ball and take a knee, and the game would end.

So, with Waverly leading 42-0 and five seconds left in the game, Frantz called a timeout. Jake trotted out to the huddle, and the two coaches met at midfield. Coach Frantz asked his friend Coach DeWitt for a big favor. He didn't want Jake to take a knee. He wanted him to score a touchdown. It would mean that Waverly would have to give up their shutout. Coach Dewitt called his defense over and said, "They're going to give the ball to number 45. Do not touch him! Open up a hole and let him score! Understand?"

God created you to get into the game of life and take a knee. God wants you to score a touchdown. He wants you to discover your "true purpose" and pursue your unique purpose as you have life and breath and strength.

Rick Warren in *The Purpose-Driven Life* said: "When you get to heaven, God won't ask you why you weren't more like Billy Graham. He may ask you why you weren't more like you....Be yourself and let God use you."

When the game of life is over may we walk off the field knowing that we have lived the life that God called us and equipped us to live.

