

The Seven Deadly Sins of Church Stewardship

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“I have come to know my congregation well enough to know that I can preach about sex anytime, and I can preach about politics most of the time, but I still can’t preach about money anytime.” This sentiment sums up the challenge faced by many pastors across North American churches. How did we get to the place where preaching and teaching on money and stewardship was viewed so negatively? Why is it so hard for us to talk openly and honestly about our possessions, our spending habits and our giving decisions in our houses of worship? When Jesus mentioned money so frequently, and so often in relationship to the kingdom of God, why do we talk so little about it in His church?

I believe that part of the answer lies in seven deadly sins that are habitually committed by churches and church leaders. The cumulative affect of these sins over the years drive a wedge between the issues surrounding money and what is deemed to be the acceptable dialogue of the church. This article exposes those sins and call us back to a comprehensive and courageous encounter with biblical, holistic stewardship.

The preaching, teaching and practice of biblical stewardship has a less than stellar history in the American church. Generally speaking, seminaries don’t prepare pastors to teach it, pastors don’t like to preach on it and parishioners don’t like to hear about it. As a result, the discussion of godly stewardship is sequestered from the church’s discourse. The lack of teaching and preaching on the subject yields a misguided understanding of the biblical concept of the godly steward and a near complete ignorance of the definition of holistic stewardship.

Into this vacuum perceptions and practices have emerged to distort the noble calling of generous stewardship. To understand these ‘deadly sins’, we must start with a common definition of biblical, holistic stewardship.

Holistic Stewardship

Holistic stewardship begins with God’s intention for creation and the gracious decision to create humanity in God’s image. It is built further on the central

Christian tenet that the God in whose image we have been created is the God we know in Jesus Christ, and the God that has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ is a Triune God. We were created to bear the image of a God who is, in the divine nature, community, fellowship, and interdependence. Simply put, you and I were created for relationship.

In Genesis we find that we were created for whole relationships that reflect the image of God on four levels; 1) intimate relationship *with God*, 2) balanced relationship *with our self*, 3) loving relationships *with our neighbor*, and 4) custodial relationship *with creation*.

As Adam and Eve lived out those four levels of relationship they reflected the image of God, and so do we. In the fall of humanity into sin we lost our relationships on all four levels. We must understand the profound and devastating effects of sin on all four levels if we are to embrace a holistic definition of stewardship.

Praise be to God that the restoration Christ accomplished through his own blood was even more holistic than the affect of the fall. In short, *all* that was lost in the fall was *fully and completely* restored in Christ! As a result, *we are stewards of our redeemed and restored relationships on all four levels*. The holistic image of the godly steward then is *reflecting our creator God through whole, redeemed relationships on all four levels, glorifying God, and practicing in each the ongoing work of the steward*.

The Two-Kingdom Temptation

The godly steward knows only one kingdom and serves only one Lord. Our enemy's one primary goal, therefore, is to divide this kingdom in two. The enemy accomplishes this whenever we are enticed to act as lord over any part of this kingdom in which we are stewards. Whenever we do, we create a counterfeit second kingdom. Ownership, power and control are the tools we use to rule over our own kingdom.

Whenever we seek to exercise power and exert control over what is properly God's, we yield to the temptation to be kingdom builders. In truth, we are all kingdom builders, and that confession is the starting place to understand the battle into which we enter whenever we seek to be faithful, one-kingdom people and when we take on the task of calling God's people to one-kingdom

stewardship. It is a fierce battle fought against an enemy to which the church has largely capitulated the arena of stewardship.

The Seven Deadly Sins

The seven deadly sins are built on a holistic understanding of stewardship, and our daily temptation to be kingdom builders.

#1 - Denying the Battle

The church commits this first deadly sin when it fails to understand that the stewardship struggle is a spiritual battle against a powerful enemy. In doing so it will fall well short of accomplishing the urgent task of equipping God's people for the battle. Left unprepared and unwarned, we have little chance to win the daily battles against an enemy who has so thoroughly persuaded the world around us that our own personal kingdom building is the path to happiness, the measurement of success and the purpose of life.

We must reclaim the language of battle in our churches and take seriously our call to 'put on the full armor of Christ' if we are to raise up godly stewards.

#2 - Ignoring the Victory

After acknowledging the ferocity of the battle faced by every godly steward, we must immediately follow it with an equally powerful proclamation that the battle has already been won! We do so when we stride boldly into the task of challenging and encouraging godly stewardship in our churches. We commit this second deadly sin when we apologize for our stewardship work, when we capitulate to a consumerist society and assume the enemy has already won, or when we underestimate the power of the armor of God.

We must proclaim the victory won for us over the power of the enemy, and take on our stewardship work with boldness and confidence.

#3 - Accommodating the Divide

We commit this third deadly sin when we allow people to live comfortably in their two-kingdom world. By not making stewardship a core church issue we accommodate the two equally devastating views that stewardship is really only about money and that the subject of money is off limits in the church. Both

views will ensure that our people remain in bondage to their kingdom-building passions, and will never know the blessings and freedom of the steward of God.

We must challenge at every turn the two-kingdom attitudes and actions of our people and call them back to one-kingdom lordship.

#4 - Ignoring the Signs

When pastors refuse to know the giving patterns and trends of their parishioners, they have ceased to serve as a true shepherd of their flock. A person's giving choices (time and resources) is an important indicator of their spiritual health and maturity. To ignore this indicator is to abdicate one's calling as a true minister of God's people. In doing so, the pastor has relinquished the ability to be effective in this most fundamental area of the Christian walk.

We must open up in our churches the discussion and treatment of the use and investment of our personal resources and refuse to pay homage to the enemy who wishes us to keep it private, secret and beyond the reach of accountability and witness.

#5 - Preaching from the Appendix

When pastors deny the battle, accommodate the divide and ignore the signs in the call to godly stewardship, they also relegate their stewardship preaching and teaching to the appendices of church life. Stewardship is too often an add-on at the end of the church year. It is preached only when absolutely necessary and for as short a time as possible. One Sunday per year will usually suffice. The same holds true for child and adult education. We will never raise up godly stewards, equip parents to train up children as godly stewards, or witness to our world the transforming freedom and power of godly stewards if we refuse to give it place and prominence in our preaching and teaching curricula.

We must integrate the preaching and teaching of biblical, holistic stewardship throughout the year and at every level of our Christian education curriculum.

#6 - Failing to Model

We cannot raise up godly stewards in churches if those same churches are not stewards themselves. Is your church a steward in its use of resources, time, land, money, and relationships? Are your deacons, elders, board and trustees the most spiritually mature people in your congregation? And pastors, how are you at modeling holistic, biblical stewardship in your own life? People need

consistent preaching and teaching in biblical stewardship, but they also need models and mentors to win this battle.

We must provide for our members clear and compelling models of holistic stewardship through our church practices and the lives of our leaders.

#7 - Stealing the Glory

We steal the glory due only to God when we fail to help our people understand the tri-fold blessing in the act of giving. When God's people respond to a call and challenge to give generously out of an obedient and grateful heart, they are blessed through their faithfulness, the church is blessed to carry out its ministry, and the asker is blessed to have been used by God as the conduit through whom these blessings were made possible. If credit is given or taken (and this is just another form of kingdom building) by any of the three parties, then the glory that is God's alone is stolen. Great care needs to be taken to help your people celebrate their stewardship calling in ways that always give God the glory.

Avoiding these 'deadly sins' requires courage, conviction and prayer. May God grant these qualities to the women and men called to leadership for the transformation of His church.

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