

Isaiah 25:6-9; Rev 21:1-6a  
Nov 1, 2009

South Plains

of family when we choose to become responsible, contributing, participating members.

#### Stewardship: Benefits and Blessings

Every time either Debby or I go to the doctor, a few weeks later we receive from our insurance company a statement of benefits. The bottom line tells us how much money we owe the doctor. But, the insurance company wants us to remember the benefits we pay for in our policy. Our three scripture readings this morning are a statement of the benefits we receive from the hand of God. The difference between the document we receive from the insurance company and scripture is that you and I do not pay premiums for God's benefits. Most of what we receive from God we do not deserve, we have not earned and we certainly did not pay for. It's all part of the blessings of grace.

Having said that, however, we need to recognize that the practice of good stewardship reaps both blessings and benefits, undeserved blessings and benefits we ourselves shape. Being a good steward, a good manager of the good things we enjoy, does result in blessings and benefits. Debby and I have children on both the east and west coasts. Despite the distance, we keep in touch by telephone and email. It's gratifying to see our children caring about us and about each other. I think the practice of stewardship is like being a responsible member of a family. We enjoy the blessings

In the same way, the family of God reaps the blessings and benefits of good stewardship when we are responsible family members. I want to list four of those blessings highlighted in the readings this morning.

The first benefit of stewardship means we join a great line of saints. I don't mean just the saints who have schools and churches named after them. I mean garden variety saints in ordinary churches like the saints in Corinth and Philippi, and Rome who are addressed in the letters of the Apostle Paul. When Katherine Konrad was buried here last year, her children recalled that their father managed buildings and grounds for our session when the new roof was put on this sanctuary. William Konrad was part of that long line of South Plains' saints. I'm thinking of Ken Scolen who taught me in Sunday School; and Fanny Crosby who wrote over 8,000 gospel songs for the church; and Idellette de Bure, who married and cared for the irascible genius John Calvin.

Our spiritual family is a noble collection of saints. Living up to the honor and obligations of this family is no small responsibility. These saints people the scenes of Revelation, singing around the throne of God. They are the beneficiaries of God's compassion when "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more (Rev 21:4)." Stewardship participates in this family of saints.

of kingdom Jesus is preaching. This sacrament of communion is a preview of that coming feast when all peoples sit down in the kingdom.

Like any holiday meal with people we love, we need to get ready. We need to make our reservations and do our shopping and insure that all the guests know when and where the celebration will happen. Stewardship is part of the preparation for our present enjoyment and our future life in God's kingdom.

The little charts that your stewardship committee handed out last week talk about percentage giving. It's an idea based on the tithe, the Old Testament practice of giving one tenth of the harvest to God. That kind of giving has a very practical effect on any household. Not only does it put God's work solidly in the family budget; it also encourages us to look at what percentage of our budget goes for other things. And, percentage giving raises the question for every expense: How important is this purchase to me? Is this something I need? What contribution does it make to the long term future we envision for our family? Stewardship looks into a great future.

Finally, we are joining a generous God when we become good stewards of what we have received. The old adage is true: we can never out give God. The tidal wave of gifts and graces that heaven bestows on us overwhelm the little buckets of gifts we make to God. Psalm 24 proclaims that

The second benefit of good stewardship means we have joined a family that brings out the best in each of us. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)?" Not all of us are saints in the holiest sense of that word. But all of us are held to the highest standards of scripture. And thus, the Psalm invites us to have "clean hands and pure hearts (24:4)." This is possible only because God looks at us and sees the righteousness of Jesus, our Savior. That's a blessing.

As a pastor, I've had to make more than one visit to juvenile detention and to the jail in order to see a child in trouble with the law. Some of those kids were hard cases. But, I've never seen a mother or father who did not look beyond the crime and see the child they birthed and raised and love. That's how God sees us. God looks at you and me and sees the righteousness of Jesus. Stewardship is the way we learn to respond to that love over a lifetime of service. Stewards are people privileged to drink deeply of that grace.

Third, stewardship means we join a future. We have a great future to enjoy. What's more, Jesus is clear that the kingdom of God begins now. It breaks into this world with his arrival, his ministry, and our sharing of the gospel. Isaiah 25 paints the kingdom as a feast of rich foods and well-aged wines, a feast for all peoples. I think the reason the gospels portray Jesus as eating and drinking with sinners is precisely because that's the kind

cards on the table. By golly, Stephen put his card on the table too. The pastor leaned over the pulpit railings and whispered, "Way to go, Stephen," and the poor little guy almost jumped out of his skin.

John Calvin reminds us that these words hearken back to the first chapters of Genesis where the Lord places humankind in creation as the supreme beneficiary of all the good things God has made. It's all for our pleasure and benefit. The only requirement is that we tend the garden as good stewards: "be fruitful and multiply." I like to think of those estimate of giving cards that we will place on the communion table next week as an affirmation of faith. We are affirming our faith in our Creator and God is affirming our charge as keepers of all he has created.

When our son Stephen was about eight years old and just beginning to receive an allowance of his own money, we tried to teach him about tithing. We explained that Mom and Dad give a percentage of our money to the church, and we want him to do the same. Stephen did not like to give away any of that newly acquired allowance. We talked about being generous and kind. We explained the good causes supported by our church. We asked the pastor of our church what would help our son understand stewardship. His only advice was that it had to be Stephen's decision. And, that's as true for us as it was for Stephen.

On Consecration Sunday, our family came down the aisle to the communion table together and we put our

the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world and those who live in it.

I cannot promise that you'll hear a voice from above next week. I certainly won't promise that you'll get richer for giving to God's work. But, I can assure you that the benefits and blessings of good stewardship will be yours:

Membership in a great line of saints.

A family that brings out our best.

A glorious future that begins right now

With a generous God.

Blessings and benefits galore.