**The Seven Signs of Stewardship**

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**April 2014**

It was Christmas Eve 1914. Almost 100 years ago, across the trenches that divided the German army from the rest of Europe, French and British soldiers caught a familiar tune. Over the barren No Man’s Land, above the moans of the dying, they heard the notes of the well-known German Christmas carol, “Stille Nacht,” or “Silent Night.” The melody was unmistakable, even if the words were foreign.

The Great War had begun in the warmer, more optimistic days of summer. Assured of swift and certain victory by their nations’ leaders, mothers had sent off their boys for the glory of God and country. Instead, the European powers had been locked for months in a brutal war of attrition. Day and night they lobbed explosives at one another. Machine guns slaughtered men with speed and precision never before seen on the battlefield. Snipers from both sides picked off men like houseflies, and forced those who would survive to remain in a permanent slouch. At night, patrols were sent across the barbed-wire-laced, mine-infested, body-strewn 200 yards of frozen mud to probe the other side’s defenses. Disillusioned and hardened, the enlisted men on both sides shivered in earthworks dug with their own spades. They lived on high alert, their nerves frayed to the point of utter collapse. Medics did their best to treat visible injuries – other wounds were beyond the reach of any physician.

Before Christmas the pope had pleaded for a ceasefire, but the leaders of the warring nations refused to suspend hostilities – even for a day. They were far too busy defending and advancing their own empires to acknowledge the birth of the King of Kings.

Imagine the surprise of the French and British soldiers when, out of this chaos, they heard the German carols wafting pleasantly across the divide, and saw candles lit on Christmas trees which the Germans had somehow contrived to erect in their trenches. On this Christmas Eve, as the soothing sounds of “Silent Night” grew with the strength of more and more voices, the French and British began to sing back and light fires of their own. The famous Christmas Truce of 1914 had begun.

This unofficial cessation of hostilities, in violation of their commanders, began because the soldiers recognized that the "night divine" was an event given to them by God, a holy memorial of the night 1,900 years before, when His everlasting peace invaded human history in the person of His incarnate Son. In the depths of their manmade hell, that heavenly invitation was irresistible. They could not help but respond to the declaration of peace on earth and goodwill to mankind. The Advent – and all it means for humanity – was not a holiday to be observed when convenient. It was a reality, a God-sent gift to be stewarded.

The caroling went back and forth until midnight, when at last a silence fell across the front. Silence would come to the battlefield every night, a deafening silence pregnant with the dread of the unknown. This silence was different. There would be no patrols this night, no assaults, no snipers taking aim at the bright orange ends of cigarettes. It was Christmas, and they would celebrate it the only way they could: they would be peaceful.

As the sun rose, each side looked at the other, and the night of grace gave way to a day of gift-giving. They would spend the next 18 hours stewarding the peace that their leaders did not want, but that the Heavenly Father had provided. Soccer games were organized in No Man’s Land. They shared souvenirs and conversed through gestures. Medics from both sides worked together and pooled resources to care for the wounded that had been stranded between the trenches. Each side helped the other to gather the bodies of their fallen companions, and carry them with dignity behind the lines. They even shared food, with the French introducing many a German young man to wine and the Germans sharing their heavy bread with the French.

The peace lasted until midnight on Christmas Day 1914. For a time, the men had defied their commanders, and the commanders allowed it. When December 26 came, however, the powers abandoned the peace God had provided. The conflict and madness recommenced, and they trampled His gift in the mud.

I tell this story to illustrate the importance of steward leadership as it relates to making peace, or wholeness, in our communities. There is a common misconception that peace is the absence of conflict, that if two warring parties could just have talks and sign treaties, peace would result. True peace, God’s shalom, cannot be manufactured through any human effort. God’s peace refers to the holistic, perfect re-assembly of the lives that have been dashed to pieces through original sin. Peace is a gift that arrived with Jesus, and is the result of each of us surrendering to God's miraculous power to put us back together. Peace is a gift to be stewarded in order to restore the world to the state God intends for it.

For millennia, we have missed this. Instead of acting like good managers, we fancy ourselves to be owners. Like the wicked tenants in Jesus’ parable, we are not content to till our master’s vineyard and enjoy its rich fruits – we want to be the masters ourselves, and the result is destruction. On Christmas Eve 1914, this trend was temporarily interrupted. For a short while the soldiers accepted the gift of peace. They stewarded it. They managed it. They invested it, and experienced its growth from a quiet Christmas carol to the actual developing of empathetic relationships – however short-lived – across enemy lines. They found the divine spark in each other as they stewarded peace. But the gift was dropped and mismanaged by leaders who thought of themselves as absolute owners. War raged for three more Christmases.

What if we saw all the gifts God provides as clearly as we see the peace of the Christmas Truce of 1914 – as treasures to be stewarded and wisely invested to prepare the way for our Lord’s return? What if we viewed every man, woman, and young person that we lead as a gift? How about the skills and spiritual gifts that you, as a leader, have been granted by God? What if you treated them as gifts designed for the advancement of the Kingdom of Heaven and others, and not to be used selfishly? Our family and friends are gifts. Our ministries are gifts. All we have and enjoy has been given to us, and, when viewed through the eyes of a steward, these gifts are just the tools we need to bring God's Kingdom into being on earth, and all of creation under Jesus's leadership.

The Greek New Testament word for “steward,” or “house manager,” is oikonomos. Our term “economy” comes from the same root word. By claiming that God has appointed us stewards over the creation, we are saying that He has designed an economy, an eternal system of value and worth, and has gifted men and women to be managers – not owners – of the divine household and its assets.

When we steward these gifts as God intends for us to do, all creation benefits. In James 1:17-18, we are told, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” Every beneficial, valuable thing in creation comes to us from the Father’s hand. As the “firstfruits” of His restorative work, we are early recipients of His good gifts. But the good does not rest in us, like water in a dam. It pours through us to the broader world like a river, irresistible and life-giving. As we faithfully manage what God, the designer and sustainer, has entrusted to us, His gifts multiply exponentially in value, just as the first voices singing a simple Christmas carol gave birth to a day of miraculous peace. The gifts we receive from God reveal the grace of God, if we embrace our role as managers.

So where does this process break down? We are not used to thinking of ourselves as managers. As leaders, we habitually think and speak in terms of *our* resources, *our* goals, *our* staff, and *our* ministry. Our language betrays us. We pray “thy kingdom come,” but in the rush of daily life, more often than not, we consider ourselves to be the owners, originators, and sustainers of our own personal kingdoms.

It is challenging for all of us to stop thinking like owners and embrace our role as managers. To provide some guidance for our journey, I want to use an outline developed and used in partnership with the Acton Institute for a study series entitled, “Our Great Exchange.” I would highly recommend this series to you as a tool for your growth as a steward leader, and as a tool to help you teach others. This outline is also used in the Stewardship Study Bible published by Zondervan in partnership with the Acton Institute. This, too, is a wonderful tool for learning and teaching the freedom of being a leader who stewards God’s gifts instead of trying to own what He has already claimed.

You might have asked yourself: If we are generally such poor managers, why does God give to us at all? God has given to us in order that we might give to others, so that they, along with us, can glorify God. God has designed this exchange to reveal His character as a creator and caregiver, and to lead us into a deeper relationship with Himself. God has provided more than generously for His creation. He now calls us to manage it in a manner that gives everyone the ability to experience Him through His good gifts. As a leader, this journey into greater and greater stewardship of all God has given will yield dividends for His Kingdom, and it will bring joy to the Giver and the steward.

In the “Our Great Exchange” series, we set out to define the characteristics of a steward who is growing in relationship with God and in effectiveness for the Kingdom, to the glory of God and the joy of the steward. These are signs of a steward that will tell us if we are beginning to think more like managers and less like owners:

1. A steward is one whose *character is a reflection of God the Father*. We don't create godly character; we reflect God. We don't brainstorm the traits of a steward on a whiteboard; we reflect them. We are not responsible for the energy and strategy of our lives; we just reflect the Spirit’s work. To do so, all we need to do is submit to the design God has for us. God has chosen us to be His mirror. By placing His image in us at creation, and then giving us Jesus to remove the distortions and scratches that came with sin, He has positioned us and empowered us to shine with His character. It is much harder to attempt to reflect our own image, one we manufacture and must energize in our own power, than it is to simply rest, submit, and reflect our Father. The soldiers didn't create the peace of the Christmas Truce; they reflected God’s peace to the world.
2. A steward embraces a *commission from God* and pursues it with God each day. Henry Blackaby said it beautifully in "Experiencing God” when he wrote, "Find out where God is working and join Him." The joy of being a steward and not a manager is the ability to be on God's mission with Him and enjoy being in His power and plan. The alternative is to try to develop a plan, implement it on our own, and beg God to join us – to somehow, in our finite selves, persuade the divine, infinite Creator to follow our lead! We make our plans and ask God to bless them. A manager of God's gifts, that desires to see *His* Kingdom revealed, enjoys, embraces, and is enthused about God's mission. He commits to it completely. God's will and mission will never outpace His grace and provision. So, when we are in the middle of His will, sensing His commission on our souls, we are content and confident. I can't imagine the thoughts of the first soldiers who risked life and limb to journey across No Man’s Land and shake hands with the enemy. Most accounts say that the first were the medics, the ones who wanted to bind up the wounded and fix the broken. That does sound like God's mission.
3. A *calling to a specific part of the Kingdom* gives the steward a clear focus. None of us can do it all, but all of us together, orchestrated by God, can accomplish His plan. Many times, we look at all that needs to be done and we panic. The fear of things not getting done drives us to declare, “I’ll just do it myself.” To avoid that path of anxiety and stress, we must keep our eyes on the Owner of the Kingdom, and obediently accept the call to the part of His Kingdom He has designed us to serve in. None of us are called to do everything, but we are all called to do what we are specifically empowered for. What freedom! God calls us to what He made us for. Our assignment is our gift. We are to manage what we know. When you feel like your service in the Kingdom is a hobby, and if you could, you would do it for free, you know you have found your vocation as a steward. It is a joy to know we will not be called to a place where we are set up to fail or where we will never excel. A steward can rest in the promise that God will bring success according to His definition, and all we need to do is be faithful.
4. A steward's *heart is broken with compassion,* and empathetic actions and attitudes emerge naturally in his or her life. To understand this type of compassion, one needs look no farther than Jesus. He came to this earth to suffer with humanity and to bridge the gap between the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal. He makes God the Father accessible and gives us the opportunity to be stewards. God's heart was broken by the chaos that afflicted humanity. Jesus’ heart was broken by the disrepair of all of creation, beginning with our relationships. The Spirit was grieved by our inability to hear God's voice and join Him in His restorative activity. In compassion, Jesus came to bring peace, grace, and redemption. We steward that divine outpouring of agape by communicating the message of the Gospel in word and deed. If, however, we still feel like owners, we are apathetic toward the broken; we don't feel for anyone except ourselves. We can, possibly, rise to a sense of pity for those experiencing hardships. However, if we are owners, we don't want to share what we own or allow others into our space. Only stewards can have their hearts broken like Jesus, feeling what He feels, because their very hearts belong to God. Only stewards can sense compassion, because they know they once were broken and struggling until the Father came to them and restored them. Stewards respond to the pain of their neighbors without fear. They give what has been given to them. They are sure that “the cattle on a thousand hills” belong to their God! In other words, they truly believe “there is a lot more where this came from.” Those medics 100 years ago shared supplies, trusting that they would be re-supplied. The wounded need it more than the healthy, so they gave.
5. A steward makes a daily *conscious commitment* to obey. Stewardship is not natural – ownership is. Stewardship is propelled by love. Ownership is driven by fear. Out of fear we hoard and protect. In fear, we cling to a perception of scarcity, and continually sense we will never have "enough," even though we have no idea what enough is. In loving stewardship, however, we channel the blessings of God to others, knowing that He is generous and has no limit. Since being a steward if not natural, it needs to be an act of obedience. Every day we must make the decision to reject ownership and embrace the management of God’s growing Kingdom. Every day we obey adds to the habit of enjoying the freedom of stewardship, and it will become a discipline. However, it begins with simply recognizing the attitudes and actions of an owner within our own hearts, correcting and rejecting those behaviors and thoughts, and committing another day to receiving from God, giving to others, and watching God's glory be reflected. This is where the commanders and national leaders failed on December 26, 1914. They failed to recognize that the men had already reflected the lasting peace the leaders blindly hoped to achieve through war. The foot soldiers who obeyed, consciously committed to reflecting the shalom of God, achieved what leaders would spend years and countless lives trying to manufacture.
6. A steward embraces *conformity to the image of Jesus* in the context of the giftedness he or she has received. The Father gives us a very clear picture of a steward and provides a clear path to achieve freedom from ownership. Jesus, though He had all creation as His footstool, chose to be a steward, a servant who gave what God gave him: His life. A steward sets Christlikeness in all that is thought, said, done, and achieved as the goal. Not only have we been provided with an example to follow, each has been given a unique way in which to do so. Jesus appoints each of His followers to do a specific task and equips him or her accordingly. When we don't recognize or appreciate our gift, we miss the joy of reaching our potential and stewarding our giftedness for His glory. Joy comes when we embrace who we are in Jesus, set our sights on His image, and freely serve. Whoever started singing "Silent Night," I imagine, did so out of a desire to embrace Jesus and the peace He brought on the first Christmas. Once lifting up Jesus became the goal, once the desire was for His peace, everyone just did what came naturally, what they were gifted to do. Medics cared for the sick. Cooks prepared food. Athletes started soccer games. Chaplains prayed and told the story of Christmas while they cared for the sick and gave dignity to the dead and dying.
7. A steward seeks a *lifestyle of celebration*, praising God for who He is and giving thanks for His activity in the world. Stewards have the freedom to be joyful in any and every circumstance, knowing that Jesus has already overcome the Enemy. The outcome is His, and there can be no defeat. Those who would be owners are fearful and anxious, because outcomes depend on their personal performance in a threatening world. Stewards make a lifestyle out of enjoying everything God has given, rejoicing always as they freely receive from God and give to all who have need. In 1914, the celebration was painfully brief.

As leaders, we have been entrusted with great gifts. Daily we must choose to embrace one perspective or the other: ownership or stewardship, fear or love, scarcity or generosity, our petty principalities or His endless Kingdom. We can rush around in anxiety, trying to be God, or we can rest content, trusting in the only true God. We can elect futility, brokenness, and chaos – or we can receive hope, healing, and wholeness. In His kindness, God invites us into His plan for the restoration of all people and things. He calls us to enjoy our giftedness and the richness of His Kingdom. He wants to invite us into the perpetual silent night of His grace, as stewards celebrating the end of our bitter strife and the peace we have received in Jesus, without merit and without effort.

I can't help but wonder how many times in the last century the men who lived through the Christmas Eve Truce reminisced about the miracle that happened when they got out of God's way, and allowed His Kingdom to burst forth. Did they think about how much suffering would have been avoided if the truce had been allowed to continue? If the gift of God had not been squandered? In our day, let's not be left wondering what might have been. Be what you were created to be: a steward in God's house. Reflect God, join Him in His mission, embrace your giftedness and your calling, let your heart be broken, commit to obedience, serve like Jesus, and never stop celebrating the certain victory that is coming.

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