



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

October 25, 2015

Good Stewards

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received (1 Peter 4:8-10).

If you follow the Steelers you know that we won last week, thanks to the gifts and leadership not of our first-string quarterback, or of our second-string, but of our third-string quarterback. Lots of people barely heard of Landry Jones before last Sunday. If you sit on the bench behind Ben Roethlisberger and Michael Vick, you don't expect to see much game time. But Roethlisberger's been out for a few weeks, and Vick got hurt during the game, so Jones made his game-time debut with the Steelers and suddenly looked like a starter. He threw two touchdown passes and sparked the team to victory.

I didn't know anything about Landry Jones before Sunday, and after a lackluster first half with Vick I made an assumption that lots of people make: if we're all the way down to the third string this doesn't look good for the Steelers. As it turned out, I was glad to be wrong—which, by the way, is an experience that's good to have once in a while, if only to remind us how little we know sometimes, even when we think we know a lot. Later I learned from Jason and Ed, our youth leaders, about a website called lamsecond.com, where Landry Jones appears in one of many short videos of people telling how they found joy and peace and freedom by becoming second when they made Jesus first in their lives.

I watched the video and learned that Landry Jones's story is like one I've seen and heard so many times before. He was the good-looking (though he modestly left that part

out) sports star in high school—that guy all the girls love and all the boys wish they were. He had everything he wanted, and everyone said he'd be in the NFL someday. His family went to church, but he thought religion was more like a fairy tale that didn't have much to do with real life. Everything he cared about, and most of his identity and self-esteem, came from being a star. He felt a high every time he won a game in high school, and he won lots of games, so that high became addictive. He didn't see any need for God or faith when he had so many other things to feel good about. Why would he need God, after all, if he was doing so well on his own?

Landry was recruited by Oklahoma to play college football, and he thought he'd be a superstar there the way he was in high school. But then he had the same experience I saw so often when I was a freshman counselor at Yale. Young people who were used to being the biggest fish in some small pond suddenly found themselves just average fish, or even small fries, in a very large lake. If they weren't well grounded in something else, it was a huge blow to their confidence and self-esteem.

Like so many other people I've known, including my own brother, Landry Jones became depressed when he was no longer a star. He felt like his identity had been stripped away. He began to believe all sorts of lies that told him if he wasn't a star in sports his whole life was worthless. He chased after things he thought would make him happy, but nothing filled the empty space where his ego used to be. Then one day, somehow God got in, and his whole life changed. He felt unconditional love, a love that didn't hang on how popular he was or whether he was a star, but only on the fact that he knew he was a son of God. And that changed everything. Now the star who had been addicted to

his own success could end his testimony by saying, “I’m Landry Jones, and I am second.”

Jesus’ Parable of the Sower reminds us of many things, not least that the seed, the word of God, gets cast far and wide, and the seed is the same everywhere, but the quality of the soil makes all the difference. Some seed falls on a hardened path, Jesus says, a heart that’s simply unreceptive to the word, and so the birds come along and eat up the seed. Later Jesus explains that the birds are like Satan, whom Landry Jones came to see as the one that fed him all those lies about himself so that the good news of God’s love could not sink in.

Some seed falls on rocky soil, Jesus tells us, where people hear the word and they’re happy for a while, but then trouble comes along and their faith dies off because its roots were shallow. People who imagine that faith should protect them from ever having to confront bad things haven’t paid much attention to the lives of the saints, because the truth is that faithful people suffer at least as many hardships as everyone else. The difference is that when faith takes root the soul itself is transformed, not the circumstances around it, so that people can face whatever happens with greater courage and comfort and strength and peace.

Some seed falls among the thorns, Jesus says, where faith looks healthy for a while, but then other interests grow up and choke it out. If the rocky ground is full of bad things, the thorns are more like good things that compete for people’s attention. Little by little, they claim more and more of us until at last there’s not much left for God. That’s a common story, especially among those who are gifted and successful at whatever it is they do.

I was reading the First Letter of Peter last week and came across the line about what some church folks' lives used to be like. Peter says they were "living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry." That sounds like the beginning of a testimony from the Salvation Army, where someone might say, "I lived a life of drunken debauchery, homeless and out on the street, but then Jesus came and lifted me out of the gutter, and now I'm free." That's an important testimony, and God bless those who are saved in that way, but as I read Peter's description I thought how very different it is from most of the people I know. Many of the people I know have just the opposite problem.

It occurred to me that if one side of the street has a gutter of debauchery, the other side has something like a gutter of success. It's good to succeed, of course, but success can also be highly seductive. If the Salvation Army watches one side of the street, we Presbyterians tend to keep an eye on the other. We know lots of people who are talented and successful, but their very success can become like the thorns in Jesus' parable.

It starts in school, doesn't it? If we're really good at sports, or music, or dance, or anything else, that takes up more and more of our time, and we begin to define ourselves in terms of our abilities and accomplishments. Then we go off to college and make our way into some kind of career, and if we're good at that, too, it demands more and more of our time and attention. And if we have a family on top of it all, and everyone has their own interests and activities needing to be fed, pretty soon our lives are all about our worldly priorities, and a vital relationship with God gets choked out before we even realize what's happening.

Our financial priorities are like that too. In fact, they're a pretty good indicator of what we really care about. In the business world managers are always looking for metrics, more or less objective measures of how the company and its people are doing. I wonder, if God measured our faithfulness according to what we do with the time and talent and treasure God has entrusted to us, how do you suppose we would measure up? If 95 or 98 percent of our resources go to ourselves and our own families, that would be a pretty objective measure of where our priorities truly lie.

Some among us are quite faithful in their giving and sharing, while others have a lot of room to grow, but in either case Christian stewardship is the recognition that what we call our own is not really ours after all. If you think that your stuff really is your stuff, that your gifts belong only to you, and no one else, not even God, has any claim on them, then it may feel like an imposition and a sacrifice to share any more of what you have. But if you recognize that every good thing belongs to God already, and we're just stewards, entrusted with the management of God's gifts for God's own purposes, then life looks very different. It's the difference between imagining that we are first and God is second, or turning all that around and realizing that God alone is great enough to be first—which, of course, if you think about it clearly at all, is just the simple truth.

As Peter says in his letter, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received ... so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ." The church is a community of people who recognize that God is first and we are second. The church looks out for one another within the congregation and cares for those in the world around us. It picks people up when they fail and offers good news of salvation even

when they succeed. Our purpose is to till the ground and fertilize the heart so that when the word of God falls upon any of us, it has room to grow, and bear good fruit, and make God glad.

The other day I heard some news about a 94-year-old dear Christian friend who is nearing the end of her days on earth. Her memory comes and goes now, but she's in a good place and her family stays close by her day and night. She asked her daughter recently, "How did I get to be in such a beautiful place?" and her daughter said, "It's the result of a life well lived."

To live well is to know that God is first and we are second, and as St. Peter says, to maintain constant love for one another—the kind of love that covers a multitude of sins. To be part of a community of faith like this is one of God's greatest gifts. And to support it with all that we are, to be good stewards of the manifold grace of God, is itself another gift—a precious part of a life well lived.



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