

# Sermon Study of Proverbs 3:9-10 with Special Reference to Christian Stewardship

By John C. Jeske

[Metropolitan North Pastoral Conference, Faith Lutheran Church, Sussex, WI, September 19, 1988]

The assignment for this conference paper was to prepare an exegesis and sermon study of an Old Testament text that speaks about Christian stewardship. The assignment was furthermore to make pertinent application to the pastor's role in stewardship training. The hope was expressed that this might offer the brothers some help for a sermon they might be planning for the months immediately ahead.

The passage chosen is Proverbs 3:9f, a word originally written by Solomon, the wisest of men, to his son. The opening verses of the book state Solomon's purpose in writing these proverbs: "... for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young" (1:4). Martin Luther called Proverbs "a book on good works, in which Solomon instructs young people in particular to lead a good life before God in the world." The two verses selected for this study show that the subject of our accountability to God is one about which Solomon felt inexperienced young people need instruction. This study has been prepared on the assumption that veteran Christians also need help in exercising their accountability to God for the way they use the possessions he has placed into their hands. Solomon wrote:

honor the LORD with your wealth

Honor the LORD with your wealth

...and with the firstfruits of all your crops;

...and with the firstfruits of all your crops;

...then your barns will be filled to overflowing,

...then your barns will be filled to overflowing,

...and with new wine your vats will brim over.

...and with new wine your vats will brim over.

Let's take a closer look at some key words. The object of our worship is *hwhy*, Yahweh, the covenant God, the God of free and faithful grace. The name Yahweh is actually a form of the verb "to be" (imperfect, 3<sup>rd</sup> singular). God used a slightly different form of this verb when Moses asked him about his name. God answered: "This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Ex 3:14).

God's Old Testament covenant name, first of all, emphasizes his *absolute independence*. You and I exist because God has given us life. By contrast, God exists in his own right. He exists because he's God. Apply that to his grace. Why does he extend his love to a particular person? Because he/she has tried hard to please God? No; God's grace, too, is absolutely independent of anyone or anything else. We call God's grace "free," not just because you get it for nothing but because it is its own reason for existence.

The Hebrew verb form (an imperfect) which God chose as his covenant name says something else about God: it speaks of his *absolute constancy*. In his dealings with his creation he doesn't blow hot one day and cold the next. He's unchanging, and hence thoroughly reliable and dependable. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever" (He 13:8). Yahweh, then, is the God of free and faithful grace.

It is this God whom we are called upon to honor. The Hebrew verb is from the root *kb'* *kaf* "to be heavy." According to Hebrew usage, a "weighty" person is someone who is "honorable, impressive, worthy of respect (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 943)." We have this imperative verb form in the Pi'el conjugation, which intensifies the idea of the verb stem. "The fundamental idea of Pi'el ... is to busy oneself eagerly with the action indicated by the stem" (*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 141). Honoring the God who has entered into a solemn contract with us is not an optional matter for the child of God.

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me?" God once asked his people through the prophet Malachi. "If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" (Mal 1:6) To help us understand what the honor is which he expects from his children, God puts the concept of honor in parallel with that of respect (the NIV's translation of the Hebrew word for "fear"). In attempting to define "the fear of God" for pupils in our confirmation classes we sometimes—and I think ill-advisedly—divide the concept. We say something like "There are two kinds of fear—that of the slave and that of the child." I find Prof. John Meyer's explanation much more helpful. He used to emphasize that there is really only *one* fear of God, and that is solemn awe before God's majesty. The slave will feel this awe as fear; the child will feel it as respect. The difference obviously lies not in the concept of fear, but in the one doing the fearing. God expects that all people—unbelievers as well as believers—will feel a solemn awe in the presence of his majesty.

One way in which God asks his children to demonstrate the respect they feel toward him is by the way they use the material possessions he has placed in their hands. "Honor the LORD with your wealth," Solomon told his son. The son of a rich king may very well have possessed more of this world's goods than you or I, but before claiming an exemption from this word we need to remember that this command is part of the sacred Scripture and is addressed to us. The basic meaning of the word *נכס*, "wealth," is "'goods' or 'substance' in sufficient quantity to be considered 'riches' or 'wealth'" (*TWOT* 491). The Giver of all good gifts has certainly not dealt with us in terms of minimums. King Solomon in all his glory never tasted frozen orange juice, and he never had a chariot that could compare with those parked outside of this church this afternoon. God knows what abundance he has placed into our hands, and he asks us, as we regularly disburse this abundance, to do so in solemn awe of him.

God suggests one criterion we can use to measure the gifts we bring him. "Honor the LORD with your wealth, and with the firstfruits of all your crops." *ty#§r* represented the first and best which the LORD had placed into the Israelite farmer's hand—the first grain or grapes he harvested, the first and best of the calves and lambs born on his farm in any given year. Since it isn't likely Solomon's son was a farmer, we sense a much wider application.

The covenant God addresses our new man as well as our old Adam in asking us in solemn awe to assign him the first share of whatever income he grants us by blessing our labor. By bringing him *our first* we show that we place him ahead of everything else—ahead of self, ahead of family. He asks for the firstfruits of our harvest and is bitterly disappointed when instead he receives the sweepings from our granary. Without apology he asks for our first and *our best*. Remember how God later told his people through the prophet Malachi: "When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor. Would he be pleased with you?" (Mal 1:8).

Bringing the LORD the first and best portion of our income is an act of respect for his majesty, but it is more. It is a declaration of our trust. We declare: "The God to whom I have brought my firstfruits is not going to let me and my family starve as a result."

To nourish that trust in his children the LORD attaches a significant promise to his demand that we honor him with our wealth and with our firstfruits: "...then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and with new wine your vats will brim over." (You might want to flip back to page 1 and note the poetic figure known as chiasm in the two lines of verse 10).

This verse reminds us again that the Savior-God deals with his children not primarily in terms of demand, but in terms of promise. The primary message of Christianity is not "This do" but "This happened!" When we

seek to motivate people to more liberal giving, our basic message is not so much “Do better! Try harder! Give more!” as it is “Trust God to do great things with your life! Believe the promises he has made about your sanctification!”

Martin Luther once made the statement: “The entire life and being of the church lie in the word of God.” In other words, if anything really worthwhile is going to happen in improving the spirituality of Joe and Jane Christian, we can be sure it will be achieved only by the means of law and gospel. The basic business of the church, therefore, is to provide a rich diet of the word through which God’s people will grow in knowledge, in faith, in godly living.

As we seek to help people to become liberal givers, the preaching of the law has a role to play. This is so not because the message of God’s law is capable of producing spiritual life, but because the Christian has a dual nature. When we entered the Christian church, we brought a heathen with us—our evil nature, a nature which will never be converted but which can only be beaten into submission.

Here is the so-called first use of God’s law, its role as a mirror—and I submit that teaching this has a place in our congregation’s stewardship education program. The God who designed us means business with his plan for us. There are many things God will put up with in the human heart, but second place is not one of them. “My son, give me your heart,” he has told us. Each of us knows that we live among people who are daily tempted to give their heart to things. God’s law has something to say here.

If you’ve got a thousand yellow flowers shooting up through your front lawn, you can take care of them in a hurry with a power mower. But you won’t have solved your dandelion problem. You see, those flowers are only a yellow flag announcing: “There’s a dandelion down there!” The enemy of God and man has sowed weed seed in the soil of our hearts, and it has sprouted. There’s covetousness there. There’s the temptation to look upon life as a glorified grab bag. There’s the temptation on payday to think first of what I need and what I want. Too many are treating the financial problems the synod and its congregations are facing as a financial matter, which it is not. It’s basically a spiritual thing; it is supernatural, not natural. “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world” (Eph 6:12).

Satan, in league with that heathen inside of us, tempts us constantly to play at being Christians. In the church service we’re willing to sing: “Take my silver and my gold / Not a mite would I withhold,” but we don’t sing that when God places silver into our hands. When we’re in a car buying mood, we can easily convince ourselves to choose a model with power assists, with fuel injection, with solid-state electronics and air conditioning, even though that decision means hefty monthly payments for the next 4-5 years. Many of God’s people are squirreling away thousands of dollars in IRA’s each year. Now depending on circumstances, these decisions may be perfectly appropriate. But where is the same sense of lavishness when we determine our gifts to the Lord? Why should it be that when the Lord’s work is under discussion we think and talk in terms of survival programs and pygmy budgets and “average” gifts needed? Does that kind of terminology really honor the Lord? Does it show that we stand in awe of his majesty?

Who will challenge the evasive techniques Christians use to escape from spiritual commitment and their overstress on leisure and entertainment, while God-given talents-are withdrawn from creative use in God’s church? Several times the Bible pulls back the veil and lets us hear the specific reason why God told someone: “Depart from me.” Think of Judas, or the rich farmer in Jesus’ parable, or of Ananias and Sapphira. In each case it was their attitude toward earthly possessions which sped them on their way to eternal torment. Who will call people to reexamine their attitude toward earthly possessions and to repent of unworthy attitudes? Somebody has to do that publicly, and you know who that somebody is. Deep down inside we all know that many of our church members are poor stewards because their lives are based on convictions that are more secular and pagan than Christian. Brothers, the solution to this deep-seated problem is not emphasizing the institution’s needs and to plead for greater loyalty. The solution is, first, to call people to repent of sin.

This is not to say that presenting the needs of the organization has no place in the stewardship process. It does have a place. In some theses on stewardship prepared for faculty study several weeks ago, Prof. Armin Schuetze stated: “In the area of stewardship, the presentation of needs, of a budget, of a particular synodical

program ... serves the function of law. They may reveal where the Christian is failing, and expose his sin.” Presenting the need is basically a law function, and the law is incapable of producing spiritual growth, fruit that pleases God. In a *Quarterly* article (Spring, 1987) entitled “Old Testament Principles Governing the Stewardship of Material Goods,” Prof. James Westendorf made the statement: “No amount of law preaching ... or laying out of needs is going to create confidence in the hearts of God’s people,” confidence, that is, in the Lord’s goodness, which alone can move hearts.

Article VI of the Formula of Concord (“Of the Third Use of God’s Law”) has this to say: “The Law says indeed that it is God’s will and command that we should walk in a new life, but it does not give the power and ability to begin and do it, but the Holy Ghost, who is given and received, not through the Law, but through the preaching of the Gospel, renews the heart” (965). What do you think of this appeal to a Christian? “Remember that Jesus died for you. You ought to be grateful that he did, and out of gratitude you should produce works of faith and love.” That type of so-called motivation has hoary precedent, but the Scriptures are quite silent about it, and for good reason. That’s making the gospel into law.

Some months back the committee for the new hymnal conducted a poll among pastors regarding frequency of use of hymns in our present hymnal. One of the surprising, some would say shocking, results was that hymn 405 was the 47<sup>th</sup> most frequently used hymn. That’s the hymn each stanza of which closes with sentiment like “I gave my life for thee; what hast thou given for me?” “Great gifts I brought to thee; what hast thou brought to me?” One has to wonder at the popularity of a hymn which turns the gospel into law. I hope you’ll be happy to learn that the hymnal committee unanimously voted that one out.

Luther hit the nail on the head when he wrote, “The law can show you the way to go, but it can’t give your legs any strength to get there.” In my view the role of presenting institutional needs has been overdone in our stewardship educational and motivational programs. Stressing institutional needs deflects the hearer’s attention from God’s plan for our growth in sanctification. It leads a person to look upon his gift as a business transaction between him and his congregation, instead of solely as an act of worship. In carrying on the work of our congregation, we tend to do what comes naturally. We find it difficult to take seriously the fact that our work is essentially supernatural. God chooses and empowers us to do abundantly more than we ask or think. A well-conceived stewardship education program addresses people not as loyal, dutiful supporters of an organization, but as God’s men and women, who are in fellowship with him through Jesus Christ, as people in whom the Spirit of God has done wonderful things and in whom he promises to do even more.

In the most recent issue of the *Northwestern Lutheran* did you read the disturbing results of a Gallup opinion poll? 59% of the respondents thought that “most churches are too concerned with organizational, as opposed to spiritual issues.” How important that our members hear us tell them what Paul told the Corinthians: “What I want is not your possessions but you!” (2 Co 12:14). Rather than being approached as one who is to supply the financial needs of the congregation, the Christian is approached as a person who is in communion with God through Jesus Christ, a person whom God has given faith to be expressed in the use of everything he has been given.

After calling people to repentance, we don’t stress their ability to give, to do better, to improve their poor financial performance. Instead of directing Joe or Jane Christian to his/her own puny resources of faith and love, we can point to Christ, in whom God took action to change the course of our lives. The law reveals our sin, our self-centeredness, our lack of trust in God’s promises, but the gospel is God’s way of breaking them down. In Bethlehem’s manger and on Calvary’s cross and at the empty tomb God was not only providing story material for Bible story books, he was planting power in people. Through Christ God’s plan for us is restored; we are enabled to be what God has called us to be. “Sin shall not have dominion over you,” Paul assured the Romans. “I can do all things through Christ, who gives me strength,” he exulted.

A well-conceived stewardship education program will help Christians to understand their dual nature—those factors and forces at work in him to make him covetous and those that make him generous. He is shown what he has going *against* him and what he has going *for* him. The kind of stewardship for which God calls, the kind of stewardship which is the answer for the problems that have always plagued God’s church cannot arise

from our own ingenuity or strength. The kind of gifts that please the Lord are not only gifts that show we stand in awe of his majesty, but gifts that show we trust his promise.

Which promise? His promise, first of all, *that in Christ Jesus we have been forgiven*. Without Jesus Christ what is our past but a trail of unforgiven sin? Without Christ what is our present but a meaningless jumble of incidents and accidents, a merry-go-round without point or purpose, a wasted moment of time? Without Christ what is our future but a ghastly nightmare which we must face alone with our fears, a confrontation with God at which we know that we deserve to be and will be rejected by God? But through Christ God not only gave us a demonstration; he effected a redemption. Christ did not pay that infinite price to show us his love, but to give it to us; not to teach us, but to save us. We have his promise on that. Christian, believe it!

We have God's promise, too, *that through his death and resurrection Christ has broken the power of evil* that had held us captive. Because of the old Adam, it's not always easy for us to feel this as we strive to turn our lives more completely over to God, for his good purposes. But again it's important to assure God's people: "You're not doomed to live a selfish, self-centered life!" "God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness" (Col 1:13). You can believe that! "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above ... not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality... evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry. ... You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things ... since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Col 3:1-10). Christian, believe that the Spirit of God is bringing about those changes in your heart!

The old Adam doesn't give up easily. Each of us knows, as Luther pointed out, that when we try to drown the old Adam, we find out that that rascal can swim. To assist our new man to daily come forth and arise and be the driving force behind our life as stewards of God, we need to let people hear God's promises -his promises that he has forgiven us, that he has broken the power of evil that was choking our spiritual life, and the promise *that he will provide for us*. Listen again to his promise: "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new-wine."

God's children who take him at his word and bring him gifts that represent an honorable proportion of their income soon learn they can trust his provision. But such trust is nourished by his promises, and we need to hear them.

"Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (What shall we eat? drink? wear?) *will be given to you as well.*" (Mt 6:33).

"God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, *having all that you need, you will abound* in every good work" (2 Co 9:8).

"*My God will meet all your needs* according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Php 4: 19).

We have learned to trust Jesus as our Savior. Through his word of promise the Spirit leads us to trust Jesus also as our Provider. The sermon outline which is appended summarizes the stewardship thoughts that have been presented.

## Stewardship Sermon Outline on Prov. 3:9ff.

*Introduction:* If a stranger in our service this morning were to ask you why we include the gathering of an offering as part of our service, what would you answer? Is that just sort of a 5-minute intermission, a short interruption in the flow of the service, during which we contribute whatever bills we happen to have in purse or wallet so that the congregation can pay its bills and salaries for another month? The Christian looks upon this business of bringing a gift to the Lord as part of his worship, and so does God.

### God Describes the Kind of Gifts that Please Him

- I. Gifts that show we stand in awe of his majesty.
  - A. God calls us to acknowledge him as the God of absolute independence, our Creator and Master (text, v.9). Offering him the first and best of our income shows we put him ahead of self and family.
  - B. God condemns every refusal to give him the honor he deserves.
    1. By loving things  
Have we become so attached to our earthly goods that we're unwilling to give them away, even to God? Do we tend to look upon our possessions as, though they belong to us, conveniently forgetting that the day is coming when we'll be called upon to give an account of how we have used God's possessions?
    2. By giving God the leavings of our income instead of the firstfruits  
Withholding an honorable portion of our income from God dishonors him; God calls that "robbing" him (Mal 3:8).
    3. God threatens to punish such rebellion (cf. Conclusion to Commandments).

Appl: Christianity is not a tame little tea party; God is in dead earnest about his plan for our lives. He has called us to unrelenting battle against the enemies of our soul. The first gift he wants from us is a contrite heart (Ps 51:17).
- II. Gifts that show we trust his promises
  - A. That he has forgiven us, taken the guilt of our sin on himself.  
It's clear that we need cleansing, and Christ has provided that. His grace is free, independent of our behavior. Our place in his family is assured by Christ's perfect life, innocent death, victorious resurrection.
  - B. That he has broken the power of evil in us.  
It's not always easy to feel this because of our old Adam, but we have God's word for this (cf Col. 1:13; 3:1ff, 5-10).
  - C. That he will provide for us (text, v.10) cf 2 Co. 9:8,10f; Mt 6:33