

Stewardship as Citizenship

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Occasion: **Stewardship Month: Principles of Giving**
(17 minutes)

Theme: *"We are to give to God's work as citizens of God's Kingdom"*

Citizenship

Citizenship is an interesting phenomenon these days, with the shrinking world and the blurring of boundaries between nations. People change citizenship quite easily these days.

Citizenship comprises two main components:

1. Membership. Part of citizenship is membership of a particular nation. Manifested in an ID book or passport. It's a legal thing – you are recognised, legally, as a member. But this is not all there is to citizenship.
2. Adoption of the nation's culture, traditions, history, values, worldview, practices. Citizenship involves embracing that culture and adopting as one's own.

Different nations have different cultures. The individualism prevalent in the USA is different from the communalism of Africa. The assertiveness of the USA citizens is different from the humility and submissiveness of citizens of Eastern nations.

When an individual decides to change citizenship, they sometimes merely change membership – get the passport of the new country. But what is really required is an embracing of the culture of their adopted nation, which requires leaving behind the culture of the nation they have left. Only when they do this have they become full citizens.

Two Kingdoms

As Christians, we live in two Kingdoms, which exist side by side:

1. There is the Kingdom of God. Jesus describes this Kingdom as 'near', 'present' and 'in our midst', and yet as 'hidden' and 'secret', like a pearl of great price buried in a field. The Kingdom of God is any place, time or person in which God is recognised as King. Of course he is always king, but his Kingdom refers to those places where his kingship and authority are acknowledged. So as we embrace his kingship, his Kingdom expands.
2. The Kingdom of this World is ruled by Satan. This does not mean that the world is debauched, depraved and vile. There are many citizens of the kingdom of this world who are good, righteous, moral and generous people, who contribute significantly to the world and who make the lives of other people better. Many of them are better than Christians are. Rather, what makes the Kingdom of this World different is that God is not acknowledged as King – he may be hated, rejected or just ignored and dismissed.

I've been grappling with the question of whether our lives as citizens of God's Kingdom are any different from the lives of the citizens of the Kingdom of this World. For example, how is our giving to God's work any different from a non-Christian giving money to Rotary? Surely there ought to be a difference, but I often feel like there is none.

So let's consider some of the differences between these two Kingdoms in terms of stewardship and giving. How are the cultures of stewardship and giving different between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this World? Let me suggest three main ways.

Needs

The first difference has to do with our human needs – how we think about what we need.

- **Kingdom of this World.** The prevailing culture of the Kingdom of this World is one characterised by 'more'. We always want more, we are never satisfied with what we have. We get some more and then that is no longer satisfying, so we want yet more. We're always chasing the next promotion, the next salary increase, the next upgrade, the latest accessory. It is a culture of greed and materialism, fed by capitalism.
- **Kingdom of God.** By contrast, citizens of the Kingdom of God are characterised by a culture of 'enough'. We have learned to be satisfied with what we have, be it much or little. There is a sense of sufficiency and contentment with what we have. Paul says, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Phil 4:12).
- **Implications.** If we were good citizens of the Kingdom of God we would be less anxious about giving, because we regard God as a good and sufficient provider of our needs. Thus giving would become freer, more confident, less complexed, more generous. It is not that we must give everything away and become poverty-stricken, but rather that we would be content with what we have and even with less.

Ownership

The second difference has to do with ownership – with possessions, with what we have.

- **Kingdom of this World.** The prevailing culture of the Kingdom of this World is one in which ownership centres around the self. What I have belongs to me. I earned it, so it's mine. I studied for this degree so I deserve this job. I've worked here for two years so I'm entitled to this promotion. The world centres around me and my needs – a culture of narcissism. Like a small child (I used Erin as an example) who constantly wants what he sees – citizens of the Kingdom of this World never outgrow childish greed.
- **Kingdom of God.** By contrast, citizens of the Kingdom of God recognise that what we have belongs to Christ. Nothing that we have belongs to us. Everything that we have (material and financial) and everything that we are (personality, gifts, talents, strengths and weaknesses) belong to Christ. We understand this in relation to the earth – after all, God made it. But we often feel like we worked for our money, so it belongs to us. But the author of Deuteronomy says, "You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today." (Deut 8:17). So everything we have and are belong to Christ, even those things that we *feel* we have earned ourselves.
- **Implications.** If we were good citizens of the Kingdom of God we would not feel that when we have given something to God's work that we have given away something that belonged to us so that we are now poorer, feeling like we've been really generous and needing to be acknowledged for it. Rather, we would know that what we have given to God always belonged to God. And what we have left after we have given is a gift from him already.

Investment

The third difference has to do with investment – where we invest what we have and what kinds of dividends we expect in return.

- **Kingdom of this World.** The prevailing culture of the Kingdom of this World is to invest in the temporal, in the here-and-now. Most investments are short term – a year or ten. Long-term investments may extend to our children. But they are always linked to the temporal, to our life. And the returns on our investment typically accrue to ourselves – we gain the interest. Even an investment in education is so that we can secure a better job. Investing in our children's education is so that they can get a better job and earn more. The focus is on making our lives on earth more comfortable.

- **Kingdom of God.** By contrast, citizens of the Kingdom of God invest in the eternal. We invest in things that have eternal value, things that are spiritual, things that matter to God. We invest in relationships, in salvation, in discipleship, in building the Kingdom of God. Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal (temporal). But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal (eternal).” (Mat 6:19).
- **Implications.** If we were good citizens of the Kingdom of God we would think hard about how we invest our time, money and talents. If we have some spare cash or some extra time, we would think twice before ploughing it into a temporal investment that accrues to ourselves. Rather, we would invest it in something of eternal value, something that expands the Kingdom of God.

Implications

So this brings us back to the theme of citizenship. If we are Christians – in a relationship with Christ – we are already legal members of the Kingdom of God. We carry the passport. It is part of the package of salvation.

But citizenship is more than just membership. It is also about embracing the culture of the Kingdom of God, which requires turning away from the culture of the Kingdom of this World.

	Kingdom of the World	Kingdom of God
Needs	More	Enough
Ownership	Self	Christ
Investment	Temporal	Eternal

So the question we need to think about during the next few days is, “Are we more acculturated to the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of this World?” Have we really turned away from the culture of the Kingdom of this World? Or have we still bought into it, with its values and patterns of living?

Let’s make a decision to shed the World’s culture and become full citizens of the Kingdom of God. Let us adopt the culture of the Kingdom of God and then live it out in daily life.

ⁱ This sermon was prepared for the second Sunday in Stewardship Month. I didn't use any of the readings set for the Sunday (Proverbs 3:5-10; Psalm 95:1-7; 2 Cor 8:1-15; Mark 12:41-44), although they were all good and relevant. The theme I was given was 'Principles of Giving'. I had been studying Ladd's *Theology of the New Testament*, which has a great deal to say about the Kingdom of God, so my thoughts for the past couple of months have very much been on this theme. And then I also recently read Peterson's *The Contemplative Pastor*, which talked about how we are different from those around us and also talked about the Kingdom of God hidden in the Kingdom of this World.

So I began reflecting on how our giving would be different as citizens of these two Kingdoms. I hate sermons during Stewardship – they always make me feel guilty and like I'm not really committed, etc. So to preach one was tough. I thought about people donating money to charity, Rotary, etc and wondered how our giving was any different. Allan had preached a sermon the previous Sunday (which I didn't hear) in which he took quite a tough line about giving recklessly and unstintingly to God's work, which seemed to have not be very well received by some parishioners. (In fact he opened this service by saying that God watches what we put in the collection plate, counting our generosity, which I didn't find very helpful!)

So, I wanted to approach the issue of giving from a different perspective – more on what underlies our giving than on the giving itself.

I needed to use a visual aid for this sermon, and because our data projector had come down I had to create a series of flip charts large enough for the entire church. This took hours!