

CHAPTER 18

BIBLICAL ESTATE PLANNING

Should a Christian have a will, and if so, how should he write it? That is, how should he distribute the remaining assets he leaves on this earth when he dies? Is there such a thing as “Biblical Estate Planning?” Is it important to God, i.e., does the Bible speak to this issue, or does it even matter? These are the questions we will seek to answer in this chapter.

YOUR LAST ACT OF STEWARDSHIP

It has been said that a person will spend fifty or sixty years accumulating earthly treasure, then spend another 20 years or more trying to keep from losing it, but will not spend two hours planning the distribution of it when he dies.

The stewardship of what you leave on earth when you die is something I suspect that very few people have ever given serious thought to. I will argue that it’s just as important to God how you distribute *what’s left* of His property, as it is how you manage it *while you are alive*. You are just as much a steward of what you *leave* as what you managed *while you were here*. And you can lose reward by failing to distribute what’s left to God’s glory, just as you can lose reward by mismanaging God’s property while you are here. **Remember. Distributing what’s left will be your last act of stewardship in this life.**

A SENSITIVE AND EMOTIONAL ISSUE

We are embarking upon a subject that is usually sensitive and emotional. That is often the case when we are challenged to surrender our desire to decide what is in our best interest, and submit to what God says is in our best interest. Add to that the fact that the Bible criticizes what the world thinks about this issue, and you have the makings of bitter disagreement and hurt feelings. I believe it would be wise for us to hear the following words from God before we proceed.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than

the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts..." [Isaiah 55:8-9].

How much higher are the heavens than the earth? What a great illustration of how far apart God's thoughts, ways, and ideas are from man's, on every major issue in life. Therefore, there will be tension when God's thoughts begin to criticize our thoughts, especially in sensitive, emotional areas. Some may be offended by certain material in this chapter. It is certainly not my intention to offend anyone. My purpose is not to try to convince you of my opinion. My only purpose is to try to faithfully present God's principles of estate planning, then let you decide how to write your will.

GOD'S MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT WITH MAN REVISITED

In Chapter 4 we stated that the central truth in the Bible regarding the handling of money is, "God entrusts His wealth to man to manage for Him." Thus, if we have a biblical philosophy of money, we will never think of ourselves as owners of anything on this earth. That being the case, our primary objective is to increase God's estate, not ours. Our objective is to give Him a good return on His investment in us during the years we manage it, **then give God back what's left when we are finished with it.**

Consider this simple illustration. Suppose someone gave you \$1,000 to manage for a year, and said to you, "Invest this for me in any way you choose for one year. At the end of the year, we will settle accounts." What would you do at the end of that year? You would give him back two things. You would give him the profit earned on the money. Hopefully there would be some. But you would also give him back the original \$1,000, because it is his property, and you were merely managing it for him.

That is an excellent analogy of how the kingdom of God operates, as we discovered when we studied Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

Again, it (reference to the kingdom) will be like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two

talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey [Matthew 25:14-15].

As we learned from studying the parable, when the estate owner returned from his journey, the period of stewardship was over, and he brought the three managers to accountability, and settled accounts with them. Each manager gave back the original amount entrusted to him along with the profit he had earned on it. Even the unfaithful steward, who earned nothing on the money, returned the one talent to the owner ... because it belonged to him. Jesus said, "This is analogous to the way the kingdom of God works."

God will entrust certain material wealth to every believer with the expectation of getting a return on it while under the believer's stewardship, and getting back what is left when his management period is over, because it is God's property. I believe if we can grasp and accept this concept, it will do more to teach us the principles of biblical estate planning than any other single thing ... *and it is so simple*. A good steward will give God a good return on His investment each year while he has it, and then when he's finished, he'll give what's left back to God. That is his last act of stewardship.

That is a clear and simple concept, isn't it? But being simple does not mean it is easy to accomplish ... nor free of emotional stress and tension. Most of us will struggle with the decisions we must make. Our only hope of getting it anywhere near right is to surrender our lust to decide what is in our best interest, and learn and submit to what God tells us is in our best interest. Let's see if we can begin to get a handle on the tension and stress that we will face. Eternal responsibility and reward are at stake.

SOLOMON ON ESTATE PLANNING

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon confesses the mistakes he made, and the conclusions he reached as he attempted to find happiness and meaning in this earthly life. Although Isaiah 55:8-9 had not been written when Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, he came to exactly the same conclusion stated by Isaiah, that man's thoughts and ways are exactly opposite to God's thoughts and ways. Further, he concluded that man's

thoughts and ways do not work ... they do not bring fulfillment in life. Quite the opposite, they lead to heartache and defeat.

I think if Solomon were here today, he would admit to being one of the world's leading experts on man's attempts to find happiness and satisfaction. If anyone ever gave it a full run for the money, it was Solomon. He ran the gamut from sex, to alcohol, to wealth, to pleasure, to knowledge, to folly, to work ... you name it, he tried it, and finally concluded that none of it produced contentment, or real meaning in life.

In one portion of the book, where he discussed his experiment with work, Solomon wrote about his struggle with the distribution of his estate. I believe it will be an excellent text for us.

So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind [Ecclesiastes 2:17].

“All is meaningless,” he said. All what? It is very important to understand what Solomon meant by this phrase, because all, in a universal sense, is not meaningless in this life. There are some meaningful things in the earthly life. This is where the little phrase “under the sun” becomes so important, a key phrase appearing throughout the book. Solomon means by this phrase all that men are doing on the earth (under the sun) apart from God all that men are doing independently of God. Or, using the terminology we have used throughout this book, all that men are doing while refusing to surrender their lust for autonomy. All of that is “meaningless and a chasing after the wind.”

Today we are still falling into the trap Solomon fell into. It's the original lie of Satan, in which he suggested to our first parents, that you can be like God without being in submission to God. You can be godly without God. In essence, “If you eat of this tree, you will have the knowledge to decide for yourself what is in your best interest. You will not need God to tell you what is in your best interest. You can be independent of Him.”

Solomon embarked upon a series of experiments (described in Ecclesiastes) to find meaning and happiness in life *independently* of God. One of them was work. Labor. That's the one he's discussing in this text, and his thesis is that working, or laboring, when engaged in as an attempt to find meaning or happiness in life leads only to despair. He does not condemn the work ethic in this passage. He wrote many verses in the Proverbs which support the work ethic. That's how important this phrase "under the sun" is. He is saying that work as a means of attaining happiness apart from God, is futile, like grasping for a fistful of wind. *Work for God* good stewardship of God's property, is a blessing. *Work as a god* is a curse. Workaholics, please take heed.

I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me [Ecclesiastes 2:18].

Here Solomon refers to his son, Rehoboam, who succeeded him as king in Israel.

And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless [Ecclesiastes 2:19].

Can you sympathize with Solomon's dilemma? He was probably thinking, "I've accumulated this enormous amount of wealth, only to die and leave it to someone else. That's bad enough. But add to that the probability that the one I leave it to will be a fool ... who will mismanage it, and waste it, and probably even damage my reputation in the process, and you are driven to despair." And that's exactly what he says next.

So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun [Ecclesiastes 2:20].

If you want to find out how foolish Solomon's son Rehoboam was, read 1 Kings Chapter 12. Any doubt that he was a fool is removed by that passage. And I suspect Solomon knew his son was a fool, or at least feared that he lacked the wisdom to handle his wealth prudently

after he was gone. That seems implied in this passage. No wonder Solomon despaired. And the despair Solomon experienced has been repeated over and over all down through human history ... the futility of leaving wealth to a person who will mismanage it ... including, sad to say, many Christian families today.

I pause here to interject a word of hope. We can avoid the despair which Solomon describes by doing two things. First, give God a generous first portion of every dollar of income as we receive it, and second, give back to God what is left when we die. That is the thesis of this chapter and the essence of biblical estate planning.

I am drawn to the conclusion that, if I die and leave wealth to a person who mismanages it ... who does not use it to build the kingdom of God, then I can be held accountable to God for mismanagement. This, of course, brings to mind our children. I'm sure you knew that's where I'm headed here. Obviously, that's what was in Solomon's mind, as verse 20 clearly indicates.

Let's discuss our minor children first. We are responsible for providing financially for our children until they reach adulthood. That could include a college education if we believe that to be the will of God. It could include helping them get started in business, or helping them get a home, if that is our conviction. But once we have fulfilled the obligation to get them to adulthood, we are under no further obligation to them financially beyond that which is clearly the will of God, and **the will of God is that the wealth continue to build the kingdom.** Again, you get to decide where to draw the line, and then be responsible for the portion you decided not to place in the kingdom during your lifetime.

What about our adult children? This, of course, is the sensitive area, because we are emotional creatures. As we begin thinking about this, questions and emotions begin flooding our minds. Let me make clear what I am *not* saying up to this point. I'm not saying whether or not you should leave any money to your adult children, nor how much. All I've said up to this point is two things. First, it is a mistake not to direct how your remaining assets be distributed when you die, that is, it is a mistake to not have a will. Second, I am saying, however you

direct the distribution of your wealth, it must be equivalent to returning it to God. It must be kept working in the kingdom of God.

Now we come to the really difficult issue, how to determine distribution of our estates in relation to our adult children. I struggled for two or three years with how to present this critically important issue. I remind us that under the New Testament, we are given the latitude to decide how we will steward God's property. No specific commands are given us regarding distribution of our estates at death. The controlling commands Jesus gave us are, "Do not store treasure for yourselves on earth. Do store treasure for yourselves in heaven." We will be held fully accountable for how well we obeyed those two commands. With that in mind, I came to the conclusion that the best way of helping us write our wills is to suggest five penetrating questions to ask ourselves. If we consider them carefully, search our hearts, spend protracted time in prayer, and search the Scriptures in relation to these questions, we can find the will of God. Here are the questions.

1. Do you want to be an obstacle to your son or daughter learning to walk by faith? By that I mean learning to depend on God for his or her needs. Many children have been hurt, rather than helped, by having money left to them, even in Christian families. There are situations in which it could be the worst thing you could do.

2. Would you want to be an obstacle to your son or daughter learning the biblical concept of work? By this I mean learning to work to eat, and learning the work ethic as it is presented in the Bible. Many verses in the Proverbs teach the work ethic, how important it is, how bad laziness is. In our text, Solomon recognized the danger of leaving money to someone who didn't work for it.

For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune [Ecclesiastes 2:21].

As we are seeing, this misfortune can be avoided by learning and practicing the biblical principles of stewardship. But question 2 is an

important question to consider. There is a risk in leaving money to someone who didn't work for it.

3. Do you think leaving money to an unbeliever is good stewardship of God's property? Let this question sink in. Think long and hard before coming to a decision. Suppose you have an adult son or daughter who is not a Christian. What would be accomplished by leaving wealth to that unbelieving son or daughter? Perhaps your first thought is, I hope one day he or she will trust Christ as Savior. Of course you do. But do you think leaving money will help that to happen? Or do you think making financial decisions based on what you hope will happen is good stewardship? If he or she does become a Christian, you can change your will.

Here is an even more difficult question than question 3.

4. Suppose you have an adult son or daughter who is a Christian, but has an established pattern of carnality, one who in your judgment is a wayward Christian. Do you think leaving money to a wayward Christian would be good stewardship? You may say, "I don't have any right to judge the spirituality of my grown son or daughter." I submit that you do as far as the stewardship of your money is concerned. Ask yourself this, "What is a wayward Christian going to do with money? What is a materialistic Christian going to do with money?" I do not know what they will do with it, but I can tell you one thing they will not do with it. They will not invest it in the kingdom of God. You can be fairly assured of that. What is a Christian with a drinking problem going to do with money? Perhaps you're thinking, I hope and pray they will repent and get back in God's will, and begin growing spiritually. That would be wonderful. If it happens, then change your will.

This is serious business. I hope these questions will help convince you of that. We are under a management contract with God (see Chapter 4). We are bound by the terms of that contract. God is not playing games with the stewardship of His property.

I think we can reduce all these questions to one key question, question five.

5. Would leaving money to a particular son or daughter be the same as investing it in the kingdom? Would it be the same as giving it back to God? In the final analysis, this is the question you must answer. Let me explain what I mean by giving it back to God. Would that particular son or daughter give God a good return on the income as he or she received it, and then would he or she pass what's left on to another faithful steward when finished with it? If you cannot get a yes answer to this question, then you would probably be guilty of mismanagement by leaving money to that son or daughter.

Please understand that I realize this is an emotional issue. I know what goes on in the heart of a parent of grown children, because I am one. I know how the heart can be torn. I understand the stress and tension which can be created as we face these issues. But let's remember that Jesus said, "This is the way the kingdom operates ..." (Matthew 25:14). In that illustration which He gave, the steward who mismanaged the estate owner's property was severely reprimanded, "You wicked, lazy servant! ..." (Matthew 25:26). The servant was denied any further privilege of management, and his reward was taken away. Stewardship is very serious business. It is not fun and games.

Facing these questions is an excellent application of the following instructions Jesus gave His disciples.

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be My disciple [Luke 14:26].

Elsewhere, Jesus taught us to love others. But here he makes it clear that obedience to His commands is a higher priority than our relationship with any family member. One good application of this passage is in the area of biblical estate planning. The issues we are dealing with in this chapter should give us a greater understanding and appreciation of this command of Jesus. And they are issues involving eternal consequences. Which is more important, what our children think, or what Jesus says? In a sense our personal dealings with our heavenly Father are private and exclusive. Even our families cannot enter some discussions.

We continue Solomon's discourse on work.

What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? [Ecclesiastes 2:22].

Let me re-phrase that question in light of our study. This is what I think he is asking, “What does a man pursuing a humanistic philosophy get for all his anxious striving?” He answers his own question in verse 23.

All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless [Ecclesiastes 2:23].

The question is, what does a man get for acting independently of God? The answer is pain, grief, despair, unhappiness, sleepless nights. Are there any exceptions? I doubt it. I know I’m not one.

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him [i.e. without God, apart from God, or independently of God], who can eat or find enjoyment? [Ecclesiastes 2:24-25].

Implied answer: No one. The next verse refers to “the man that pleases Him (God).” Who is the man that pleases God? He’s the man that acts in dependence on God. He’s the man that doesn’t try to order his life independently of God. He surrenders his thirst for self rule. Let’s read what Solomon says about him.

To the man who pleases Him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner He gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind [Ecclesiastes 2:26].

Men who are disobedient to God may accumulate wealth on this earth, sometimes even large amounts of it. But God decides who enjoys wealth in this life. Enjoyment and fulfillment come to those who are obedient stewards of God’s wealth, those who act in dependence on God.

Let me summarize what I think this passage is saying in relation to biblical estate planning. If we die and leave wealth to the wrong person or persons, it is a form of mismanagement of God's property. I believe I can find in this passage at least four results which can occur from such mismanagement. (1) We can lose at least some of the enjoyment of the wealth as we manage it. (2) We can lose reward in eternity. (3) The money we leave will likely not be a blessing to the one who receives it. (4) God will likely move the wealth. God constantly moves wealth from hand to hand on this earth like pawns on a chessboard in order to compensate for the mismanagement of men.

Therefore, leaving money to children should be done only after careful thought, prayer and meditation in Scripture. Ask yourself the five questions as part of your decision making process, and ask God for conviction and confirmation of your decision.

Here is a suggestion you might consider. It is not Scripture, just a suggestion. If you are considering leaving money to one of your children who is a Christian, who from all appearances is seeking to walk with God, and growing spiritually, consider giving some of your property to that son/daughter while you are alive, and see what he/she does with it. Help him/her learn the principles of stewardship, how to become a faithful manager of God's wealth. If you like what you see, tell that son/daughter you plan to include him/her in the will, with the understanding he/she will give God the first portion of every dollar of income as it comes in, then pass anything left to another faithful steward at death.

ONE WAY TO ELIMINATE THE PROBLEM COMPLETELY

In Chapter 15, I mentioned John Wesley's approach to finances. His three simple rules for managing money were: (1) Earn all you can. (2) Save all you can. (3) Give all you can. By "save," John Wesley meant keep your expenses as low as possible. Spend only what you have to in order to survive.

So his three rules were: (1) Earn all you can. (2) Keep your expenditures as low as you can. (3) Give all you can. Keep studying his life, and you soon realize his real goal was to give God everything by the time he died. On one occasion he said, "When I die, if there is

more than 100 pounds (perhaps equivalent to a few thousand dollars today) in my estate, you can call me a failure.” On another occasion he said, “These hands will be the executors of my estate,” which simply meant that he had every intention of distributing his estate before he died, and in fact, there were 28 pounds left in his estate when he died. He made a lot of money during his life, and distributed it all but a few hundred dollars.

Think about that. No doubt he made that commitment to God years before he died, and had complete faith that God would honor it. What a neat solution to estate planning. If you can do this, your will wouldn't need to be more than a page or two. I mention this because it profoundly affected my heart as a young man. God may use it to touch the heart of someone who reads this.

WRITING THE WILL

Usually the husband and wife do not die at the same time. Therefore, it is important to plan the estate following each death. The ideal situation would be a husband and wife who are both born again, who love the Lord and love each other. Both are dedicated to living in obedience to God, and they share common biblical convictions on stewardship. That's an ideal marriage relationship. Such a model couple will jointly plan the distribution of their assets following each death, no matter who dies first, in such a way that the property they managed for God will continue working in the kingdom. That's the ideal.

In a fallen world, the ideal is not always achieved. One spouse may be an unbeliever, or a believer who is not interested in biblical stewardship. The wife may not be submissive to her husband, or the husband may not love his wife sacrificially, as Christ loved the church. The husband may not look upon the marriage as a partnership. It is an equal partnership according to Scripture. They are “heirs together of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7). “The two will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

These are situations which are less than ideal. They can be dealt with only by confession and repentance of sin, prayer, intake of the Word, counseling, etc. What I want you to understand is the ideal situation, which can be a goal or model for your estate planning. The ideal is two

born-again marriage partners, who love each other and love the Lord, and who are in agreement concerning the stewardship of God's property entrusted to them. They will write a will directing how the estate will be handled if the wife dies first, and how it will be handled if the husband dies first. They will do this with the assistance of a lawyer. Don't attempt to do this without a lawyer.

The details of writing the will are beyond the scope of this study. We are looking only at the biblical principles of estate planning. For assistance in the details of writing the will, and handling the many details which must be handled when death occurs, there are good books available. I recommend an excellent book entitled *Leave Your House in Order*, by John Watts. This book is available on Amazon.com. It is written from a non-technical view and is thoroughly biblical in its approach to the subject, and will tell you what you need to be thinking about as you write your will.

If our ideal couple has minor children, they will include provisions for them in the will. These provisions will remain in the will until the children reach adulthood. One of those provisions will be the appointment of a guardian to take custody of their children in the event both parents die before the children reach adulthood. This provision alone is reason enough to have a will. Without it, some judge could decide who the guardian of your children will be.

After all children reach adulthood, this ideal couple should review the will and change it. The guardian appointment provision can be removed. They will plan distribution of their estate in a way that will ensure good stewardship of God's property after they leave this life, as we have discussed in the paragraphs above. And they will review their will at regular intervals with the help of their lawyer.

ESTATE TAX CONSIDERATIONS

If the ideal couple has an estate small enough not to create any estate tax (i.e. less than the combined gift-estate tax exclusion under the law), the will can direct distribution of the entire estate to the surviving spouse after the first death. The surviving spouse can continue managing the estate for the glory of God without any estate tax expense. But if the estate is larger than the gift-estate tax exclusion,

then the couple may wish to leave a portion of the estate directly to the Lord at the first death, if the surviving spouse does not need it after the first death. That is often the case with larger estates. The portion left to God is free of estate tax. This is very efficient stewardship of God's property.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE A VERY SMALL ESTATE?

Some readers may be thinking, "I don't have enough money to even worry about having a will." I can understand that, and sympathize with that feeling. But I don't want you to miss a truth, which if planted as a seed in the heart, could have eternal consequences. That truth is based on the central truth of stewardship with which we began this study (Chapter 4): God owns and controls all wealth on this earth. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He also owns the hills (Psalm 50:10). Furthermore, God is in control of who gets stewardship of His property.

Rich and poor have this in common. The Lord is Maker of them all [Proverbs 22:2].

God decides who gets five talents and who gets one talent. Has it ever occurred to you that if you thoroughly mastered the principles of biblical stewardship (and you don't have to have any money to do that), and then committed yourself to follow those principles, what God might do? He is in control. He might decide to entrust much larger amounts of His property to you because He is looking for faithful stewards.

For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him [2 Chronicles 16:9 (KJV)].

I am afraid there aren't many in the 21st century church who measure up to this standard. The church today is full of materialistic Christians. Many have large amounts of wealth, but it is not committed to God, at least the evidence suggests it is not.

God is looking for faithful stewards whose hearts are set on storing treasure in heaven. When He finds one, He may entrust more wealth to him to manage, which brings me to my final point of this chapter. **The time to become a faithful manager of God's property is now, no matter how little of it you have, so that God can safely trust you with wealth should He decide to do so.**

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful [1 Corinthians 4:2].

God's managers must be proven faithful. Faithfulness cannot be demonstrated in a short time. Meditate on that. Faithfulness is a pattern of life. To be proven faithful, time must pass ... a lot of time. A believer must start where he is and persevere, and over time establish a pattern of faithfulness.

I suggest to you that the only way you can be sure you will do the right thing with the assets you are managing when you die, is to establish a pattern of faithfulness before you die. It's not likely you will be any better steward of what you leave than you were of what you managed while you were alive. If you haven't been a faithful steward of God's money as you earned it over the years, you are not likely to distribute what's left to God's glory.

If you haven't been a faithful steward of God's money, you have done one of two things with His money. You either spent it, or you hoarded it. If you spent it, it's gone, and there's nothing you can do about it. You will lose eternal reward you could have earned with God's money. You will also lose enjoyment of the things you bought with God's money. Ask Solomon about that.

If you hoarded it, the result is the same. You have lost both reward and enjoyment. And it is not likely that you will distribute your hoard to the glory of God. It just isn't likely to happen. Therefore, **the time to become a faithful steward is now, before it's too late.**

For further meditation you might like to read questions 10, 12, 13, 18, 33 and 40 in the Appendix.

