

Good morning. It's good to be here. I always love being with this community. It feels like home. I want to talk with you all a little bit today about stewarding our relationships in ways that honor Christ, especially through the holidays. Because the holidays can bring a lot of joy and celebration. It can also bring added stressors and demands on our time. Really want to get a sense of what can be helpful in these last couple of months before we move into the new year. Okay.

So part of it, too, is just choosing to live wisely. That's a key. Choosing to love deeply and rest. And I can't emphasize that enough, to rest in God's abiding faithfulness. I know many of you are probably experiencing a lot of busyness right now. Final exams, possibly work projects, all these deadlines that come up. So navigating your relationships, our relationships with God, ourselves, and others in this season, can require more of us than at other times of the year. So this morning, we will devote time to just discussing how we can honor Christ in the ways that we steward our relationships through the holidays.

I wanted to just read that key verse again. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." And I just want to draw your attention to all of the action words here. There are things that we can do that are our part that contribute to this. So study, or spoudazo, hopefully I'm pronouncing that correctly, is to make every effort and to be diligent. We are workers faithfully laboring for God. The part about ashamed, that we don't want to have spiritual regret due to misrepresenting God's truth in any way. And lastly, rightly dividing. That comes from a Greek word that means to cut straight or to handle with integrity.

Why this topic and why now? As I said, the holidays can really stretch us thin, physically, emotionally, socially, and financially. We faced demands on time. People are probably experiencing that. There's all the deadlines and planning gatherings. I know for me, as a first-time grandmother this year, and Hosting Thanksgiving is going to look very different because our family has grown so much. So the preparation will be... I'm already thinking about it. So thankfully, people are bringing dishes.

So we faced demands on our time. Sometimes our calendar can look like that. When you look at a calendar like that, you just want to close it and keep going. But our calendars can be extremely full. Our use of our talents may be utilized more because we're involved in ministry, and so we're serving as part of our place of worship. Our temple, it's important to maintain the practices that keep us resourced to do all of the things that are part of our responsibilities. So getting rest, proper nutrition, exercise, all of these things help. Our witness is just the way we're living out the gospel in our relationships with other people, even when we're experiencing relational stress and tension. Like the holidays can sometimes bring us together with family members, that we may have challenging relationships. One of my former pastors used to often say that we would refer to people, some people as EGRs. If you're familiar with that term, it means extra grace required. We probably all have people in our life for whom extra grace is required. And guess what? Sometimes we are the EGR in someone else's life. So just remembering to not view people as problems. But, Okay, God, what are you calling me to do? How are you calling me to engage with this individual?

Another thing that's key for us to remember is that while God is infinite, we are finite. We had a speaker here for one of the church ministry conferences a few years ago, Kelly Kapic, and he talked about the importance of remembering that only God is infinite, that we are a finite. To push past the limits that God has put in place is detrimental to our soul, our spirit, and to our relationships. So the holidays can stir up a lot of emotions, a wide range that span from joy to pain.

So before we talk a little bit about stewardship, I do want to pause and draw your attention to a brief reflection question to think about and consider. How often do you ask yourself, What's in my tank? How prepared and resource am I to engage this topic with this person at this time, and others that are in our life? And As we're thinking and reflecting on that, remember to check your HALT meter. Halt stands for hungry, angry, lonely, tired. If one or more of these are at play, pause, cease and desist, and reconsider what actions you want to take and postpone important conversations.

I think it demonstrates love to people when we say to them, This is such an important conversation, and I really want to give myself some time to think about it. Can we circle back to this? There's ways

to do that graciously and gracefully. The other thing I thought about one of my eighth grade teachers, Mrs. Howard, and she would invite us, the class, to spend even five minutes a day just sitting quietly and thinking. Thinking about what we're doing, thinking about what we're thinking about, thinking about the future. And we don't have a lot of quiet spaces now. It just feels like everything is so intrusive. I read a book earlier this year called *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*. And just how much time and how much our attention spans have been shortened because of all the technology. One of the things that was recommended was when you're driving, when you get in your car, to turn off your phones, not even have the radio on, just have some time for it, not be accessible. It's a time you can pray for others, you can appreciate God's creation. And when I started doing it, I thought, This is like the olden days. I like this. People People don't have to have access to us every minute of every day.

Let's talk a little bit about understanding stewardship. A working definition of stewardship, and there's multiple definitions out there, but just simply, it's managing what belongs to God in ways that reflect his character. In other words, we are owners of nothing but stewards over everything that God's entrusted to us. And what he's entrusted to us is our time, our talent, our treasures, and our witness, as well as our relationships. So stewardship is an outward manifestation of an inward discipleship as we follow Jesus and allow him to disciple our hearts and minds. So as a result of being disciplined by Jesus, we grow in spiritual maturity. And how do we grow in spiritual maturity? Practicing truth, practicing biblical truth over time by the power of the Holy Spirit, is how we grow in spiritual maturity. Words are so pregnant with meaning. So I just wanted to say, when it comes to maturity, and people think, Well, what is that? We have different meanings of it. Maturity is accepting responsibility for our actions, our thoughts, our words. That's a big, important part of maturity.

So again, we want to grow in that ability to manage the gifts, the resources that he's entrusted to us with wisdom, with love, and with faithfulness.

So there are some scriptures that really give us ways to think about stewardship responsibilities One of them comes from the Psalm 90:12, which reads, "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." And what I love about Psalms is that it's just such a wonderful way to pray God's perfect will in our lives. So it is important that we pause and reflect to see if the demands that are... If we have the supply to meet the demands in front of us. In the counseling realm, we often say when people are struggling mentally, often it's a breakdown in resources and supports. So basically, the demands are outpacing what is being placed on them, and it's just too much pressure. Proverbs 3:9 reminds us that we are to honor the Lord with our wealth and with the first fruits of all of our produce. 1 Peter 4:10 reminds us that each of us has received a gift. There's not one of us that has not received gifts from God. And we're to use it to serve one another with love and as good stewards of God's varied grace.

A couple more of scriptures. Matthew 5:15 reads, "In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." And that speaks to our witness. How are we living out the gospel in our relationships? Last but not least, John 15:5, reads, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me, you can do nothing."

One of the things I often say in counseling is that anything that's worth its salt that really works in counseling comes out of Scripture. And there's a lot around attachment theory. And the importance of how our proximity to our primary attachment figures really helps to give security a sense of stability, a sense of steadiness, and constancy. And as we know, the vertical relationship with God is preeminent over our horizontal relationships. And really, our ultimate attachment figure is God the Father. And we can lean and rest in him at all times.

So we know these truths, and yet, even though we know them, sometimes it can be easy to lose focus. And wanted to talk some of the things that can get in the way or hinder God-honoring stewardship.

Number one, self-absorption. We're so focused on us and our needs that it's hard for us to look up and see what God is doing in our lives and in the lives of others. And when I say self-absorption, it's

not just thinking too much of ourselves, it's also thinking too little of ourselves. There's just a small book written by Tim Keller called *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought or more lowly than we ought, but agreeing with God about who he who he says we are. We need to be in agreement with God about who he says we are.

Another area, an emotion that can hinder as well is that of fear, right? False evidence that appears real. The fear of failure, the fear of missing out, fear of rejection, and a host of other things that we can experience fear. Going into the finals, how am I going to do on this exam? There's just so many things that can add up and weigh on us. I wanted to... Shame. Shame is an area that we don't often talk about because you don't want to talk about that. But it is a real thing that we experience and that people experience more often than they're willing to let on. And what happens when we have shame triggered or we're experiencing a shame spiral, if it goes unchecked or if we don't address it, we can lash out at others because of that. So viewing people as problems, as I mentioned earlier, instead of as image bearers of Christ is another hindrance that can affect how we honor God with stewardship in our relationships. And lastly, probably many of you are familiar with this one, division over political views, cultural or personal differences, and just not being able to sit with someone and ask, I really want to understand how you got there. Where did that come from? Where in scripture supports that? And how to do that in a way that is loving. Bringing that a little bit closer to home Really thinking about how might what I choose to say next either strengthen or weaken this relationship.

And something I'd like you to consider, James 4: 1, what causes quarrels and what causes fights among us, it's that our passions are at war within us. We know that God is love, and it's manifested in giving. Well, love seeks to give at the expense of self, while lust seeks to get at the expense of others. And that could be as simple as, I'm going to win this argument, versus, help me understand how you got there. I see it differently, but I want to understand how you got there. I think we need to remember, we don't have to attend every argument that we're invited to. We have a choice. So remember that. The next time, there's an opportunity to enter into an argument.

So what helps us steward our relationships well? Balance. We need to have balance. I know some of you might say, I can't have balance right now. I've got work, I've got sports, I've got extracurricular activities, I have my studies. It's hard to have balance. And yet I find that there's an inverse ratio. When we give to God what is his, render unto God what is God's render unto Caesar, what is Caesar's. He helps us to maximize the time that we have when we are faithful in devoting and tithing our time to him. So make sure you're prioritizing that. Just the spiritual disciplines, practicing Sabbath, having a whole day where you set aside time to just remember and observe God's goodness in your life. Prayer for your needs, intercessory prayer for the needs of others, reading scripture and studying the word, our key verse for today, Meditating. Meditating on God's goodness, meditating on his truth. We need God's word to be inside of us and readily accessible. And the way to do that is to study it and meditate on it and make it a part of our daily practice. Living in community. I would say, I mentioned earlier about shame spirals, and I think because there's so much... Well, there's decreased person-to-person contact. And community has a way of regulating some of the feelings and emotions that can go unchecked when we're solely relying on texting or other forms of electronic communication to connect with others. I often recommend to clients to never have an important conversation via text. So much of communication is lost in that media, in that forum.

The majority of our conversations, words is the least important part of the conversation. It something like seven percent, whereas our tone and our attitude and our body language convey so much more. That whole more is caught than what is taught. So it is important to give that time. And so as we practice these disciplines and we trust... I wanted to just mention about gratitude, too. Gratitude has a way of confirming relationships. And so that practice, that daily practice of acknowledging what you're grateful for, can really shift things that we might be stressing about. So as we practice the disciplines, trusting the Holy Spirit to cultivate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control, we experience more of that balance in our lives.

Some other things that help is just remembering that Jesus despised the shame of the cross for the joy that was set before him. I will say, sometimes it's easier to not have that hard conversation with someone because why bother? Or it's not going to make a difference. And yet God calls us to not

defraud our brothers and sisters in Christ. And if we love someone, we are willing to speak the truth to them in love, and we're willing to have them, we invite them to speak the truth to us in love.

And just joy is very different from happiness, because happiness is based on our circumstances. The weather is nice, I'm happy. But joy is based in the confidence in God's goodness and not our circumstances. So there are some examples of faithful stewardship from Scripture. There's many examples. I just chose a few here. Joseph demonstrated integrity and forgiveness in the face of severe relational trauma. Pardon me. He was faithful to what God entrusted to him, no matter what circumstance he was in, whether he was in jail, whether he was being wrongly persecuted. He remained faithful to God in his stewardship. Abigail is someone who was wise and discerning. She was prudent, and she was a peacemaker. When the household was in danger, she actually was the one who intervened to help bring peace and reconciliation. She also reminded David of who he is, who God is, and who he is because of him. That disrupted a needless loss of life. Then David, we see so many examples of him demonstrating repentance and humility before God. We think about Psalm 51, where he asks God to create in him a clean heart. He acknowledges that his sin is against him alone. It's important to study these individuals and how they've navigated their responsibilities, not perfectly, but with a faithful returning to God from the heart.

So there's some additional questions I would like you to be thinking about. One is, what do my attitude, my actions, and my words reveal about my relationship with Jesus Christ? Because whether we say it in words or not, we're telling a story about who Jesus is in our lives. Next is, how can I invite the Holy Spirit to guide me when relational tension arises during the holidays? It's good to do it now before we have those conversations around the Thanksgiving dinner table or Christmas Eve, just to ask God because he knows what we will face. And so inviting his presence and involvement in that is going to be a support. And then last, what does it look like for us to set boundaries that protect peace and still reflect Christ's love? And we need to be in the word and in prayer to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading in that. So in terms of living this out daily, some things I want you to consider and think about is the importance of reminding yourself that God knows exactly what we will face, and that God is our refuge and strength of very present help and trouble. Psalm 46:1. And I also love in Acts 17, I think 24 through 28, it says that God knew exactly where we would be born, where we would be placed, and the boundaries of our life and existence. And it's not by accident. So trusting in his sovereignty is an important point to help us to rest in him.

Just daily surrender, daily prayer, inviting God to change our hearts. He's in the business of changing hearts, and he's the only one that can change hearts, not us. We cannot be the Holy Spirit in anyone else's life. We can yield our hearts to him, but we can't facilitate change in someone else's heart. In Psalm 139:23, David invites God to not only search his heart, but to know his thoughts, to show him what's there, and then to lead him in the everlasting way. So think about that. Lord, search me, show me, and lead me in the way you would have me go. Remember that we're called to faithfulness, not perfection. How many of us know that David made some pretty big mistakes in his life? We want to be people who give ourselves to prayer, time devoted to prayer for our family, for our friends, for our professors, for our church, and other members of the community.

Pace yourself. You cannot do it all. Regularly give thanks, as I said earlier, gratitude confirms relationships. And meditate on God's truth. Isaiah 26: 3 says, "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you because he trusts you." Something...just some thoughts to consider.

So as we close, please remember that God is inviting all of us to live in his grace as faithful stewards of his goodness, of his truth, his love and grace through every day, but especially through the holiday season. I wanted to turn back to our reference verse as a reminder, and I'd love for us to all read it out loud together. "So do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." Thank you for reading of the word. So I'm going to just close in prayer, and I really appreciate the time with you this morning.

Dear heavenly My Father, we thank you for who you are and who we are because of you. We thank you that we can lean on and trust in you in and throughout every situation, circumstance, and relationship in our lives. Teach us. Help us to remember to number our days, to apply ourselves to your wisdom.

Help us to use the gifts that you have entrusted to us, the resources that you have entrusted to us well in ways that honor and reflect who you are. Help us to love deeply and help us to rest in you during this holiday season. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.