

# Seven Secrets of Successful Stewards

In our Church today, few concepts are more misunderstood than the concept of Catholic stewardship. I know, I know, many hear the word “stewardship” and immediately it morphs into “fund-raising.” But that is not really what stewardship is about. Not at all.

Quite simply, the good steward is the person who takes care of whatever it is that she or he has been entrusted. Uses it well, to good purpose. Doesn’t squander it. As the U.S. Catholic bishops said in *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*: “A Christian steward is one who receives God’s gifts gratefully, cherishes and tends them in a responsible and accountable manner, shares them in justice and love with others and returns them with increase to the Lord.”

When we think about it, good stewardship affects every part of our lives. If we have wasted a talent, or dawdle our time away with worthless pursuits, or squander our resources, something inside of us just doesn’t feel right. That’s because our inner compass senses the right direction, even when we sometimes wander off course.

On the other hand, when we are using our time, our talents and our material resources well, we feel in balance, in tune with God. We realize we have been generously given those gifts and, in turn, we are using them for good purposes.

As I’ve been traveling around the country and visiting in parishes, I wanted to find out more about stewardship and, if you will, wanted to see if there are some common qualities—let’s call them “secrets”—that good stewards have in common. Here they are and I’ll bet at least half of them will surprise you. Successful stewards...

## 1. Give until it feels good

Genuine, thought-out stewardship is not about pain or depletion. Stewardship is most deeply about pleasure and increase. If you think about it for just a moment, you realize how good you feel when you are generous, when you are doing something that makes a difference in someone’s life. That is what underlies good stewardship, which makes it actually quite natural in our lives.

I have a simple saying that, to me, makes ultimate sense: “Stewardship— it’s already in your heart.” There is something deep within us that is good and generous, some almost biological sensation that is triggered when we see a need. It is that good feeling that wells up within us when another person’s needs and our shared gifts intersect.

“It is better to give than to receive” might seem like so many lofty words, but as we look back on our lives, we find they are absolutely true. How many times have we found ourselves saying, after we have extended ourselves (even when a bit begrudgingly): I like doing this. Giving feels great; I’m not depleted at all. In fact, I’m enriched!

And so, good stewards capitalize on such moments. Why not, they say, feel absolutely wonderful when I have given some of my time, or talent or treasure to something or someone and have realized the sharing of that gift has made a difference?

## 2. See not obligation, but opportunity

Love—or good stewardship—can’t be demanded from a person as an obligation. There is no vitality, no life when actions are little more than a “command performance.”

When Catholics really begin to understand good stewardship (usually because of someone’s example of generosity and then in becoming more generous themselves) a light often goes on. “This is exciting; this is actually fun,” the person discovers.

And then the entrepreneurial side of stewardship kicks in. “Where can I help? What are the needs here? What difference can I—me, specifically me, with what I have to offer—what difference can I make?”

The good steward is awake, alert to opportunities about them, actually *looking* for chances to make that difference. But note: The good steward is a *conscious* steward, not a *guilty* steward. Successful Catholic stewards are not hand-wringing worrywarts: “Am I doing enough? Did I spend enough time there? Did I use my talents to the fullest? Am I as generous as I *should* be?”

Nothing is more corrosive to a good, healthy spirit of stewardship than to be constantly second-guessing yourself. That isn't the way God works with and through us. He is not some sort of unappeasable grouch who is never satisfied with what we do. No, the good steward joins in God's own generous nature by quite simply and directly addressing the needs of the moment.

### 3. Give to specifics

Good stewards dislike—and rightly so—generic appeals. Good stewards also are less generous—and rightly so—if they do not know to what or to whom their generosity is being directed. That is why good stewards give and give generously of themselves and their means to their parish.

And there in the parish, good stewards are eager to hear the stories, the modern-day parables of lives changed, enriched, made better and more human because of their generosity. They understand that good stewardship is not lived by merely dumping their time, talent and treasure into some dark hole, while piously folding their hands, eyes cast heavenward, uttering, “I gave.” That actually would be testimony to poor stewardship. Good stewards, carefully marshaling their gifts, are willing to be generous to their parish, but in turn expect accountability for those gifts they have shared.

But it is more than good bookkeeping. It is about common sense. If the good steward has seen or heard of a parish need and has responded, that steward would logically want to know what role he or she has had in meeting it. Good stewards want to know they helped paint these walls or put on a roof or pay a decent salary to a teacher.

It is not that every hour, expression of talent or dollar must be specifically targeted and then directly attributed to the giver. But there is a real satisfaction, a deserved satisfaction, in knowing that because of their efforts a young mother was provided a safe home for her baby and herself, the youth mission trip went smoothly, the RCIA program is deepening people's faith, or dinners and visits to the widower made an enormous difference after the death of his beloved life's companion.

### 4. Have an ‘attitude of gratitude’

Without sounding like some kind of ditz, good stewards are constantly aware and amazed by what they have been given. “How lucky I am!” easily comes off their lips and is radiated in their faces.

And, quite frankly, isn't it so? That among billions of tiny sperm cells and hundreds or thousands of eggs, two would join up to make that very individual. That a measure of years has been allotted to that person, this unique combination of abilities showered upon them. And that through some miraculous confluence of abilities, good fortune and time they have been able to earn—or often times, been given outright—material wealth or possessions far beyond anything they might have imagined.

Good stewards have good memories, recalling where they came from, the struggles of their parents, the struggles of their own lives, those peaks and those valleys that shaped them and brought them to this very moment. And they find themselves deeply grateful.

It's an “attitude of gratitude.” Good stewards know that they didn't earn their time, talents or treasure. These are truly gifts from a generous God—miraculously and randomly scattered over the human race—who asks only that we also be generous.

### 5. Share various gifts at the right times

Good stewardship is not a calcified formula or a specific recipe. “To four parts time, add two parts talent and sprinkle three parts treasure over the top and serve.” Not at all. At various times in our lives, we will be more able to give of our time, our talents, our treasure.

The busy young executive may not have the time to sit in a retirement home and play bingo every morning, but she may have the organizational skills to put that ministry together. A retired couple with a fixed income may have to be careful about their limited finances, but they may be able to spend time in the day-care center with children of working parents.

The good steward practices, once again, that stewardship truism, “Do what you can. Not what you can’t.” Different situations in the life of our families, our parishes, our communities will call forth different applications of those three trusty pillars of good stewardship: time, talent, treasure.

I know of a North Carolina plastic surgeon who makes a handsome income, contributes generously to his church, but also spends two weeks a year in a remote village in the Caribbean, employing his talent: repairing cleft palates and disfiguring burns that have marginalized these unpaying but no less needy “patients.”

I know of a woman who cleans offices in Alaska who contributes her “widow’s mite” each week, but also beautifully arranges the altar flowers and lovingly irons the altar cloths used in the liturgies.

I know of people with a short attention span who perform ministries that call on them to see many people in a limited amount of time and I know people who have enormous patience and can listen for hours.

Each is a good—and sensible—steward. Each looks inward at what she or he has to offer and offers it. Good stewards are intentional stewards, consciously setting aside for God’s use some portion of their time, talent and treasure, but in proportion that makes sense at that point in their life’s journey.

And good stewards don’t envision themselves as solo singers. Rather, they are happy to take their place as members of a vast chorus of goodness, with a rich combination of gifts making a joyful noise.

## 6. Realize God will point the way

Stewardship is in our hearts, but like any other discipline, good stewardship takes time to infuse our total being. And so the operative word that the good steward uses is: “Relax!” God is with us on this journey. He will point the way.

It is not so much that good stewardship has a learning curve; it is more an experiential curve. In other words as we “do” or live good stewardship, we become better and better at it. And, as we experience that satisfaction (it is really God’s grace streaming into our lives) that comes from sharing some portion of our time, our talents and our treasure, we hunger for more. It becomes easier, more natural.

I was listening to a talk by Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J., who wrote the book *Dead Man Walking* as she retraced her own journey to becoming a powerful advocate against the death penalty. She admitted she didn’t know what to do or where she was going when that first death-row prisoner wrote her. “But God gives you a little flashlight,” she writes. “You won’t see too far ahead, but you’ll usually know where to place your foot for the next step.”

So it is with the process of becoming a good steward. Once a person actively commits herself or himself to the first step—becoming a conscious or intentional steward—the next steps and portions of the stewardship journey will reveal themselves. In people they meet, situations they see, words they hear, they will begin to hear the soft, gentle call of God, asking them to respond.

The good steward then responds, not out of guilt, but out of gratitude. Not responding to every one of the cacophony of voices and needs that cry out, but to certain ones that, at this particular time of life, can be addressed.

## 7. See stewardship as a spiritual act

If you think about it for a minute, the realization sets in: God doesn't actually need us to return anything to him. It's all his anyway.

First, God gives us life—time. Then he provides the various physical and psychological components, DNA, education and temperament that create and shape our various talents. Finally, without the application of those talents and abilities over a period of time, there would be no treasure for us to even consider. (Those who inherit have to hearken back a generation or two, but the same principles apply for our forebears.)

It is we who need to return some portion of time, talent and treasure as an act of love, of appreciation, of acknowledgment.

Good stewards see this love relationship as a spiritual act. It's an offering to God that in some small but real way mirrors Christ's own life—and a way to return the Father's great love.

## **It's catching!**

As good stewardship is a beautifully spiritual act, it is also dangerously contagious. When we see people in our parish leading by example of good stewardship, of not calling attention to their generosity, we are very likely to become "infected." We surely are affected. The practice of good stewardship is enormously attractive and appealing.

I love that adage, attributed to St. Francis, "Preach the gospel, and use words if necessary." That is how good stewards share this bountiful life with God in Christ. Not by mouthing pious words, but by actions that speak to the deepest parts of us. Good stewardship calls out to us all. It's possible, exciting, fulfilling, while bringing us ever closer to the giver of the gifts we have been given.

***Paul Wilkes is a freelance journalist whose work has appeared in top national publications. He has written 18 books, including the best-selling Excellent Catholic Parishes and The Seven Secrets of Successful Catholics (print and audiobook). He is creator of the New Beginnings parish-renewal programs, A New Way of Living as a Catholic and the parish stewardship program My Opportunity for Giving. All of these are distributed by St. Anthony Messenger Press.***