

What does Stewardship Have to do with Suffering?

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Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.

Colossians 1:24-25

Write what first comes to mind when you hear the word *stewardship*?

If you are like me (with a dry sense of humor), then you either immediately think of a pastor emphasizing tithing because the church is behind budget or “redeeming the time” because the church is in need of nursery workers. Money and time are entities for which the concept of stewarding is comfortable and natural.

What if I suggested that God calls us to steward entities such as suffering and conflict? Would you have a frame of reference for how that would be possible? It seems awkward at first. Money and time are neutral objects that can be *managed* (a synonym for stewardship, that is more palatable with modern English) for God’s glory. Suffering is bad. It is a product of the Fall, not a part of God’s original design. In fact, the absence of suffering is one of the defining attributes of Heaven (Revelation 21:1-4). With all these things being true, the Bible still calls us to steward our suffering and conflict.

Jesus explains that managing the Christian life will often require sacrifice and suffering. In John 12:24-26, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me;

and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”

In the central passage of this article, Colossians 1:24-29, Paul says many astounding things. He claims to “fill up what is lacking in Christ’s affliction” (v. 24). He alleges to reveal “the mystery hidden for ages and generations” (v. 26). He takes on the momentous task of making every believer “mature in Christ” (v. 28). In the midst of these eye-catching statements, one of Paul’s most challenging and life transforming truths is often overlooked.

Translation plays a part in this confusion. In verse 25 the New King James, New American Standard Bible, English Standard Version, and Amplified Bible clearly translate the word as “stewardship.” The King James Version and American Standard Version render the word “dispensation.” The New International Version and New Revised Standard Version translate the word as “commission.” In order to determine the English word that best conveys Paul’s original thought, it is necessary to look at the original language.

The Greek word is *oikonomian*. It refers to, “the manager of a household or household affairs” (Vines, *Expository Dictionary*). The central concept behind the term is that of managing an entrusted asset. Hence, *stewardship* is the best translation. Now that it has been determined that *stewardship* is the appropriate interpretation of the term, the next question is, what was Paul

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stewarding? What was Paul managing “for the sake of the church” at Colosse in order “to make the word of God fully known?”

The answer is found in the beginning of verse 24. Paul was stewarding his suffering. Paul was in prison at Rome during the time when he wrote not only Colossians, but also Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. These four books are often referred to as the “Prison Letters.” Roman prisons were not known for their lavish amenities. Prisoners were often exposed to the elements, treated harshly, and dependant upon friends or family for the basic necessities of life.

In the midst of this setting, Paul stewarded his hardship by penning letters of instruction and encouragement to the churches he had planted. He literally redeemed the time (Ephesians 4:15-16) by focusing his mindset upon what God could accomplish in the midst of his harsh and unfair treatment.

An Avoidance Mindset to Avoid

In order to understand how to generate the mindset that enabled Paul to endure suffering and conflict with grace and unwavering confidence in Christ, it is beneficial to examine how he did not approach suffering and conflict. We will examine two mindsets Paul avoided: one passive, “The Avoidance Mindset,” the other aggressive, “The Win at All Costs Mindset.” The diagram in the middle of the page delineates the logical progression of the passive mentality. We will unpack this four point outline illustrating what Paul’s thoughts would have sounded like with this mindset.

The Avoidance Mindset “Conflict is to be Avoided at All Costs”	
1A. Initial Thought	“Here we go again.”
2A. Opportunity to “Win”	Non-existent. The very thing you long for (absence of conflict) is gone.
3A. Effort at Change	Minimal. If you can’t have what you desperately want, then why engage the battle.
4A. Worship	Absent. God has not delivered what you pleaded for. You are disappointed if not angry with God.

1A. *“Here I go again. How much am I going to have to endure? I have already received forty lashes minus one five times and been beaten with rods three times. I’ve been stoned and set adrift at sea for a day. My journeys to spread the gospel are constantly in danger by robbers, disgruntled Jews, wild animals, and inclement weather. And the churches I have planted aren’t exactly beautiful representatives of Christ on earth (II Cor 11:23-29). Now I am in prison. I’m not sure how much more of this I can take.*

2A. *Then again, is it really worth it? Do I really believe that I am going to be able to reach every tribe, tongue, nation, and people with the Gospel (Revelation 7:9)? After all, John Mark—my first missionary protégé abandoned me on his first excursion (Acts 15:36-40). If I can’t create more missionaries, there is no way I can reach the world. And now I am in prison where I can not train, teach, or evangelize anyone.*

3A. *Why am I still doing this? Am I just sadistic and enjoy the pain and disappointment of ministry? How many times have I had to defend the legitimacy of my own ministry from people who don’t even believe I am a real apostle (2 Cor 10-11; Gal 1:11-2:10)? If I can’t convince believers that I am a Christian, why am I delusional enough to believe I can convince non-Christians they need to become a Christian? And there are so many heretical groups popping up. Every time I turn around I have to confront another set of false teachings. All that papyrus isn’t cheap and right now I need to focus my spending solely on the basic necessities. Evidently, I can’t teach as clearly as I thought.*

4A. *God, why have you called me to this? Is this my punishment for having persecuted the*

church before I knew the truth (Acts 8:1-3)? If so, I think I have done my time and then some. What about Peter? What punishment is Peter receiving for his hypocrisy in how he acts differently with the Jews than with the Gentiles (Gal 2:11-14)? It's just not worth it any more. I don't think I can keep going."

Paragraph by paragraph did you hear pseudo-Paul spiraling down each rung of the chart? If we accept the notion that conflict is to be avoided at all costs, then it is hard to argue with him. His ministry was one of intense suffering and frequent conflict. If suffering and conflict are failure, then Paul failed mightily.

As you read the fictional rendition of Paul's approach to suffering, what elements of your own desire to avoid suffering at all costs did you hear? Was it the constant replaying of every other episode of suffering you have endured? Was it the interpretation that all misfortune is

Anger is Also to be Avoided

Avoidance is not all that is to be avoided. An angry explosive approach to suffering and conflict is equally as sinful and destructive. To view each occurrence of suffering as a time to "show no weakness" or every episode of conflict as a window for gaining an advantage does not reveal the mind or attitude of Christ.

Whereas the passive mindset reveals an idolatry to peace, the aggressive mindset reveals an idolatry of influence or self-sufficiency. The demand of the moment becomes respect, persuasion, autonomy, independence, or conquest. Compromise is out of the question. Vulnerability is too extreme a threat. Taking the log out of one's own eye seems irrationally out of place. Biblical principles are irrelevant because the moment is about survival and conquest, not love and faith.

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God's punishment? Was it the silent assumption that as things are, ever will they be?

Take a moment to write out a description of how the "Avoidance Mindset" shapes the way that you look at and retell the story of your current suffering or episode of conflict.

With a "Win at All Costs" mindset, Paul's response to his imprisonment and the church at Colosse would have been much different than with the "Avoidance" mindset (see chart on page 4).

1B. *"If they think I am just going to sit back and take this again, they can forget it. How many times have I been in prison or need? The church at Philippi is the only one that supports me during these times (Philippians 4:15). How many churches have I planted? This is ridiculous. I can tell you what my next missionary journey is going to be about. I am going back to all the churches I have planted and reprimanding them for their neglect and lack of concern.*

2B. *I'll tell you what I am going to do. I am going to forget this church planting thing. I am going to head back to Ephesus and pastor there. Let the Apostle John relinquish the cush job I set for him. Let him get out here and plant a few*

churches of his own. He has had it easy from the beginning: “the beloved disciple” (John 19:26) and the one who was promised not to face a martyr’s death (John 21:22-23). Who would argue that I deserve to get to settle into a cozy pastorate? At my age, just about every should respect their elder anyway. If they don’t they are just living in sin with a callous heart towards God.

3B. At this point, I have so much to offer that I should be around mature believers imparting the wisdom I have gained over my years of ministry. Let some of the inexperienced kids, like Timothy (1 Timothy 4:12), do this basic work of planting churches. It’s labor intensive and theology-light. Preach the gospel and appoint elders to lead the converts. How hard is it? If Timothy can’t do that, he has no business being a pastor. Have they not read that letter to the Romans I wrote? What an exquisite masterpiece of doctrinal sophistication. I am out here continually repeating the four spiritual laws. This is wrong, and they are going to hear about it when I get out of prison.

4B. Where is God in all of this? There was a time when I knew he was leading me. Barnabas and I set out on that first missionary journey by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3). God had a plan and it was working, but now where is He? It’s obvious my skill set is too elaborate for the ministry I am in. Is God out to lunch? Since God is not speaking to me and the other leaders in the church obviously have no discernment, I’m just going to have to provide the leadership.”

It becomes easy to hear how Paul could have been tempted to take matters into his own hands; to bring order to a disorderly situation. While we might not blame Paul for being susceptible to this

temptation, it would not excuse his sinful behavior and attitudes.

Take a moment to write out a description of how the “Win at All Costs Mindset” shapes the way that you look at and retell the story of your current suffering or episode of conflict.

A Mindset to Learn

The “Avoidance” and “Win at All Costs” mindsets do not have to be taught. The desire to evade all suffering and profit from conflict is innate. As a result of the fall and our sinful flesh

The Win at All Cost Mindset “Conflict can be Profitable with Intensity”	
1B. Initial Thought	“Come and get it.”
2B. Opportunity to “Win”	Absolute. Goal is to dominate and acquire.
3B. Effort at Change	Relentless. The goal is not Christ-likeness, but to achieve one’s desired end.
4B. Worship	Absent. God is irrelevant because the situation is about pleasing me not pleasing God.

we do not naturally approach these difficult situations with a redemptive mindset.

God would have us avoid unnecessary suffering and conflict (I Timothy 5:23; Proverbs 19:19). God would also have us desire to grow in light of these experiences when they are necessary. However, the

measure by which we determine “necessary” is not personal preference, but God’s purpose for

our life and the life of those with whom we have relationships.

Paul again provides an ample number of illustrations for what would deem suffering or conflict as necessary. He knew his calling to preach the gospel was at odds with many in the government of his day, so he endured prison joyfully (Philippians 1:12-14). When God did not heal his physical suffering, Paul accepted it as an instrument of God to shape his character (1 Corinthians 12:1-10). Paul advised Timothy to avoid conflict when necessary (2 Timothy 2:24-25), but was not hesitant to confront fellow believers when it was in the best interest of the church (Galatians 2:11-14).

Paul did not enjoy suffering and conflict. Neither did he pursue them. But Paul did not run from them. On the contrary, there were times when he boldly and willfully engaged both suffering and conflict for God’s glory (Acts 21:7-14).

The mindset to steward suffering is based upon what we value most. If we value a Christ-like character more than comfort, the progression of our thoughts will change to something like this:

The Stewardship Mindset “Conflict is a Commodity to be Stewarded”	
1C. Initial Thought	“Here’s my chance.”
2C. Opportunity to “Win”	Present. What I want most (Christ-likeness) is available through this experience.
3C. Effort at Change	Maximum. The new goal is achievable; therefore, there is reason to try.
4C. Worship	Pervasive. Now is the moment I need God most to persevere and display the character of Christ.

1C. [Episode of suffering or conflict] *“This is an opportunity to demonstrate my love, trust, and faithfulness to God. Let me assess the situation to determine how to best honor God in the midst of these circumstances.* [Note how stewarding suffering and conflict promotes a solution-orientation.]

2C. *I don’t like this particular circumstance, but if I have to endure it, I want my character to be shaped by the process. What things do I value more than I should that make managing these*

events more difficult? How would I practically decrease the affection of my heart for these items? [Inordinate desires for things like comfort, respect, appreciation, or affection often amplify the intensity with which suffering or conflict impacts our emotions. If we do not have a stewardship mindset, we will overlook the need to examine ourselves and repent in the midst of difficult circumstances.]

3C. *I refuse to allow this episode to pass without reaping the sanctifying benefits for which God intends to use it. It would be foolish and wrong for me to endure this without being changed for the better. God has promised that trials produce character and purify our faith (Romans 5:3-5). I want that more than I want to avoid this situation.* [The prospect of a solution

and the being cognizant of the promises of God generate a tenacious hope. Giving up, quitting, or running away become increasingly less appealing options.]

4C. *Lord, I need you now. This moment could not come to pass apart from your awareness and permission. I cannot respond as I ought without your enabling. My desire is to honor*

you, and I know that there is no higher worship I can offer than saying ‘yes’ to you and ‘no’ to my fleshly desires in a moment like this. [God becomes powerfully relevant when we approach suffering and conflict this way. We recognize our dependence upon Him and more instinctually cry out to Him.]

Application Steps

The challenge of stewarding conflict is to bring these truths to mind at the moments when our instincts tell us to run or fight, instead of steward. The process of training ourselves to

respond this way is what Paul calls us to in Romans 12:1-2, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to *present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by *the renewal of your mind*, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect [emphasis added].”

as an encouragement to yourself and a tangible measure of your Christian growth.

6. Teach the difference between these two mindsets to your spouse, children, or a friend. Teaching material yourself makes the content “stick” better than merely reading it.
7. Record how you respond to an episode of

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The following items are not steps to be followed sequentially, but a list of strategies designed to assist you in applying these principles.

1. In advance, ask those who will be near you in your moment of suffering or conflict to simply say “Here’s your chance,” when the moment arises.
2. Write the words “Steward Conflict” on an index card and place on your car dash or work space to remind you of this concept periodically throughout the day.
3. Memorize Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:5-8; Philippians 1:29-30, 3:8-11; and 2 Timothy 1:12 to have as a biblical rationale for why it is appropriate to steward conflict. Memorize one passage a week for the next six weeks.
4. Define the word “necessary” as used in the first two paragraphs of page five. Use the Scripture passages to define criteria to determine whether it is “necessary” to endure a particular episode of suffering.
5. Record in a journal the benefits that emerge (spiritually, emotionally, and relationally) from each time when you successfully steward an episode of suffering or conflict. Use these records

suffering or conflict using the outline developed in this article. Use an additional piece of paper if the space below is too restrictive.

Initial Thought: _____

Opportunity to “Win”: _____

Effort at Change: _____

Worship: _____

