

STEWARDS AND SERVANTS

Jesse Livermore was-and still is-known as one of the greatest investors who ever lived. Jesse left home at the age of 14 because he did not want to become a farmer like his father. He made his way from the small town of Acton, Mass., to Boston with nothing but the clothes on his back, \$5 in his pocket, the blessing of his mother and an intense determination to succeed. The year was 1891.

Jesse found work as a “board boy” in the offices of Paine Webber, a stock brokerage and asset management firm. His job was to write stock quotes on a large chalk board and keep them updated for the traders who worked at Paine Webber. Jesse was a quick study, learning how to read the stock ticker and to see trends in pricing. Shortly after he got the job at Paine Webber, he began to frequent “bucket shops” in Boston. “Bucket shops” were places where people would literally gamble on the stock market; the trick was to predict the prices of stocks. Within a year, Jesse had turned his \$5 into more than \$1,000-that would equate to about \$20,000 now. Over the next several years, he continued his work both at Paine Webber and in the “bucket shops,” and he won so much money at the expense of the gambling establishments that most of them banned him.

Next, he turned his attention to Wall Street, and relocated to New York so that he could tackle the stock market head-on. He made a big splash in 1907, raking in \$3 million as the market fell. But it wasn't until 1929 that Jesse made his major mark on the world of trading. In the market crash that precipitated the Great Depression, Jesse somehow made a whopping \$100 million.

Jesse's stock market savvy allowed him to have many material things. He owned a series of mansions around the world, all fully staffed with maids, butlers and cooks. He had a fleet of limousines. He had a steel-hulled yacht for trips to Europe. And he had a mahogany-paneled private office in the penthouse of a Fifth Avenue building which had a private elevator. Jesse moved in the most exclusive and wealthy circles of people in New York.

I share the story of Jesse Livermore because, this morning, we are talking about investing. In its most basic form, investing means to give up something now in hopes of a future return on what we're giving up. Inherent in investing are cost, risk and reward. Cost and risk are things we don't like, but they are necessary in order to gain the reward. And typically, the higher the cost and the risk, the higher the potential reward.

I know this whole discussion of investing probably does not seem like it fits with our continuing series on what a fully devoted follower of Christ looks like, but let me assure you it does. Because being a fully devoted follower of Christ has a lot to do with investing, except maybe not in the way Jesse Livermore did it, or in the way many others today would expect investing to look like.

The two descriptors we're covering are stewards and servants. In regard to stewards we wrote, “Fully devoted followers of Jesus submit to him in how they manage their time, abilities and resources. Inherent in stewardship is the biblical practice of tithing.” For servants, which is a new addition to this list, we have, “Jesus' followers act like Jesus, who adopted the role of a servant and went about doing good. They serve Christ and others both in and outside the church by devoting themselves to good works.”

As with financial investing, being a steward and a servant have costs and risks, as well as rewards. As we cover each of these descriptors, I'm going to share this information with you, as we see whether being stewards and servants actually provide us with a return on our investment.

Let's start by talking about what it means to be a servant. In our explanation of this descriptor, we write that Jesus took on the role of a servant, and we are to copy his example. We see this in passages like Philippians 2:5-7, where it says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." But it is exemplified nowhere better than in John's Gospel, chapter 13:1-17: "It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?'

Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.'

'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet.'

Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.'

'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!'

Jesus answered, 'A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.' For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. 'You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'"

Jesus, the one through whom all things were made, wrapped a towel around his waist, got down on his hands and knees, and washed the feet of his disciples. In fact, he took on a role that, in Jewish culture, was thought to be beneath Jewish slaves. You can understand Peter's horror. Jesus, the one he believes is the Messiah, is going to demean himself like this? No way. But Jesus not only forcefully insists, but then goes on to insist that they-and us by extension-should do it too.

So what is the cost and risk involved? Humiliation, to name one. I don't know about you, but I prefer being served to being a servant. I have a tough time serving even those who are closest to me because I don't like to feel like a servant, like I am less important than someone else. Yet, that is exactly the heart and mind attitude Jesus invites his followers to, one that says others are more important than me.

Of course, with this risk also comes the question of who is going to care for me. I'm very good at asking that question. "But if I take care of you, who's going to take care of me?" This isn't really a legitimate question, though, because I've never really taken the focus off me. The

real issue is that I can't put anyone but myself first.

Jesus desires us to give ourselves to servanthood the way he did because he wants us to make an investment in others. Every moment he spent on his hands in knees in front of his disciples washing their feet was an investment in them. Jesus' service to his disciples gave him the opportunity to demonstrate his love and care for them, and give them a picture of what real living looks like. When we choose to be servants, we do likewise. And while there may be some who will take advantage of that service or use us-even our Savior was met by that attitude, such as when 10 lepers were healed but only one returned (Lk. 17:11-19)-many others' lives will be changed.

Service tends to catch other people's attentions, probably for the same reasons we listed under costs and risks. They are often amazed when someone will go out of their way to help someone else. And our reward for serving others is the opportunity to share Jesus with them. Through our service to others, sometimes we get to see their eternities change and other times we get the satisfaction of knowing we made a difference on behalf of someone else regardless of whether they choose to follow Christ. Every opportunity we have to serve is an opportunity for us to articulate that we are following in the footsteps of Jesus, and that our hope is found in him, and to point people to our Savior.

As if that were not reward enough, Jesus tells us that when we are serving someone in need, we are, in fact, serving him. In Matthew 25, Jesus talks about his future return, and how his sheep will be commended for feeding him when he was hungry, giving him something to drink when he was thirsty, inviting him in when he was a stranger, clothing him when he had no clothes, looking after him when he was sick, and visiting him in prison. The people, puzzled, will ask him when they saw him in such a condition. His reply? "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Now, if Billy Graham was to suddenly appear in the foyer and needed something, we would fall all over ourselves trying to help. What a privilege! How much more-both in our effort and in privilege-would it be if Jesus stood among us? Well, we can have that privilege every time we reach out to someone in need or someone who's suffering, because Jesus tells us that we're serving him. Incidentally, I wonder if Jesus might be at the Jackson Interfaith Shelter this afternoon when a team of people from Bethel go over to celebrate some homeless kids' birthdays...

And still, this is not all the reward that comes from serving. In the John 13 passage, Jesus tells his disciples in v. 17, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." Jesus doesn't go into specifics here, but I don't think he has to, because we already know that every good and perfect gift comes from God. Whatever God has for us in response to our faithfulness in following Jesus' example of service, we know it's going to be good.

Being a steward has many things in common with being a servant. In fact, in Jesus' day, stewards and servants were both slaves. But stewards were different because they were in charge of their masters' households. This meant that stewards had a great deal of autonomy and authority, but they also had a great deal of responsibility because they often exerted control over finances, household staff, livestock, crops, and anything else the master owned. We are like stewards in that we, too, often have many things which we exert control over, which are represented in the image with the clock (time), the plant (abilities), and the hand with the dollar sign (resources).

Jesus tells us how important it is for us to manage these things well in Luke 12:42-48: "The Lord answered, 'Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for

that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”

So what are the costs and risks associated with being a steward? Well, first, there is the realization that everything I call mine really belongs to God. The paycheck? God's. The house? God's. The car? God's. The retirement account, or what's left of it? God's. The diploma or the degree? God's. Even the entertainment system? Yes, that's God's too. Of course, that's in addition to today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year and so on. Because none of these things are mine, but have been entrusted to me, it means that I cannot use them only to suit my own whims or for my own gain.

Related to this is the fact that these things, be they time, ability or resource, can no longer be ends in themselves. The goal will never be to have the most money, the biggest house, the most toys, the longest retirement, or to be the most famous at whatever we do. All of these things-time, abilities and resources-are for reaching God's goals.

You see, when we are stewards, we are investing in God's agenda. He invites us to take the things he has placed in and around us and be a part of his ongoing story of redemption. We not only matter to God, but we are an important part of his work as well. By entrusting us with these things-his things-he tells us that what we do with them and how we manage them really do matter.

This is a reward in and of itself, but we find in Scripture that the rewards for stewardship go beyond it. First, we note that those of us who are good stewards will receive more responsibility. God will entrust us with more, if we manage the things he's given us well. We get a promotion, if you will.

Even more, though, we receive the praise and share in the joy of our heavenly Father as he celebrates our good work. In Matthew 25:21 and 23, Jesus says that the master's response to good stewards is, “Well done, good and faithful servant! ... Come and share your master's happiness!” You and I know what it means and how it feels to have someone congratulate us on a job well done, or to celebrate a particular accomplishment with us. It's wonderful. I cannot even begin to imagine how much it would mean and how good it would feel to stand before Jesus and have him say those words to me. But I know that I long to hear them. With every fiber of my being, I long to hear him say, “Well done!”

There is one more thing I need to share with you. I would not be doing my duty as a pastor if I did not talk about one more cost or risk, depending upon how you understand it. You see, there is a cost or risk associated with choosing not to serve or steward, or to serve or steward poorly. For anyone who might see being these as optional, I share a warning from Jesus.

In the Luke 12 passage we've already looked at, Jesus concludes his discussion of stewardship by saying, “That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know

and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” This is not the only time he says something like this. In the other passage on stewardship we referred to in Matthew, he says something similar; it is in some of his parables on service as well.

Friends, Jesus takes stewardship and service seriously. These are incredibly important to him, because we are investing in people, whom he cares about, and in the Father's agenda, which is what his own life on earth was about. We are wise to listen to his warnings and take his call to service and stewardship as seriously as he does.

We would also be wise to remember the rewards as well. When we steward and serve, we have the opportunity to point others to Jesus, to personally serve Jesus, to be blessed, to be a part of God's agenda, to have what we do matter, and to receive the praise and share in the joy of our heavenly Father.

We started this morning talking about the famous investor Jesse Livermore. And while it's true that Jesse did indeed make a killing in the market, there is more to his story that you should know. You see, even though Jesse became a multi-millionaire, he ended up losing his fortunes... twice. He also was divorced twice, had little if any relationship with his children (one of whom died at the hands of his own mother), and he fell into a deep depression when he was unable to make the money back. In 1940, Jesse took his own life. The mansions, the cars, the mahogany paneling never really did mean all that much.

So, as we are reminded that Jesus calls us to be his investors, as stewards and servants, let me ask you this morning: What are you investing in? What are you devoting your life to, pouring your energies into, focusing your resources on? Because if it's anything other than what Jesus has called us to, it will not return anything like the rewards he has to offer, nor can it last.