

# From Neglect to Nurture

## *by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*

### Prayer for Illumination

Loving God, you provide for our every need.  
You feed our bodies and our souls,  
yet we hunger to know and love you more and more.  
Nourish us with your Word today, that we may nourish others.  
Through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

### Background

For the last several weeks we've been looking at different faith movements in our spiritual development and maturity. Stewardships from:

- consumption to contentment
- grasping to generosity
- grumbling to gratitude

And this morning, we're looking at the stewardship from neglect to nurture. When we see all of life as a gift from God—we're more attuned to the sanctity of life. When I remember this—I slow down and pay attention. I'm more engaged. More compassionate. Christ dares us to care, to notice, to treasure and enjoy: our planet, our loved ones, neighbors, strangers, God, and our very souls—leaving things a little better than when we first got them.

*So let's hear now from our morning Scripture readings:*

### Scripture Readings:

#### Proverbs 27:18, 23-27 (NRSV)

Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit,  
and anyone who takes care of a master will be honored.  
Know well the condition of your flocks,  
and give attention to your herds;  
for riches do not last forever,  
nor a crown for all generations.  
When the grass is gone, and new growth appears,  
and the herbage of the mountains is gathered,  
the lambs will provide your clothing,  
and the goats the price of a field;  
there will be enough goats' milk for your food,  
for the food of your household  
and nourishment for your servant-girls.

**James 1:21 (MSG)**

In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

**SERMON – From Neglect to Nurture**

There was a fascinating psychological study done on forty unknowing Princeton Seminary students back in the 1970s. Most of the “guinea pigs” were Presbyterians, by the way. Two psychologists at the school created a modern-day parable of the Good Samaritan. They explained to the seminary students that they were studying the vocational placement of seminarians and asked the volunteers to give a brief talk where half were to speak on job opportunities and the other half on the parable of the Good Samaritan.

One by one each of the volunteers were instructed to proceed from their present location to another place on campus to give the talk. The volunteers were sent out at 15-minute intervals. A third of the group was told that they were leaving early, so they could take their time. Another third was told it was time to go right now. The last third were told that they were late and they needed to rush to give their talk. None of them knew that strategically placed in their path to the speaking location was a person lying in a doorway in the alley—a young man coughing and groaning in pain.

Can you make a guess as to how many of these aspiring Presbyterian ministers were also modern-day Good Samaritans? Did the ones speaking on the Good Samaritan act more “Good Samaritanly” than the ones speaking about career opportunities? It turns out their speech topic didn’t impact if they stopped or not. What *did* matter was how hurried they felt. Of the third in the “low hurry” condition, 63% stopped to help. In the “moderately hurried” condition, 45% stopped. In “high hurry” group, only 10% stopped to offer help.

The message? Sloooooow down. Breathe deep, listen, pray, pay attention, and then act. Don’t walk by or ignore what needs to be attended to.

God has a real sense of humor—this Presbyterian minister almost missed this message of the Good Samaritan experiment this morning. About fifteen minutes before the worship service, a person approached me outside the sanctuary.

“Is there a minister here I could talk to?” I thought about saying that the minister wasn’t here today, as I worried about getting ready for the service. Thank God I remembered my own sermon! Ministers need sermons too. I have an advantage because I’ve been working on it all week—I know the sermon before I give it!

“How can I help you?” I asked.

*My mother’s funeral service is in Phoenix and I need some help with gas to get there.*

*“Follow me in your car, and we’ll get some gas for you.”*

I was able to help the gentleman get to his mother's funeral—AND I even made back in time for this service! 😊

In Christ, we've been given the freedom to be responsible. We've been empowered to make a choice, a good choice—and do what God has called us to do, God's good, pleasing, and perfect will.

The prophet Isaiah describes what the coming Messiah would be like:

*a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.* Isaiah 42:3 (NRSV)

With Christ in us, we care for God's creation. One of God's masterpieces is the world he created. The artist is honored when we take good care of their artwork, so we and future generations can enjoy it. In the same way, we have a responsibility to care for creation because this honors the One who created it. But there's also something spiritual about being connected to God's creation. When we're in harmony with the Creator as Christ's new creation, we find ourselves in an elegant interplay of tending God's garden and receiving of God's provision. We're in tune with how God designed us and the world. We're fashioned more in God's likeness, as James says:

*Let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.* James 1:19 (MSG)

Take the time and make the time to tend the garden of your relationships and your world. We're to be stewards of not only God's creation, but also our bodies. The Scriptures teach our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Rather than neglecting or abusing our bodies, we're entrusted with our bodies. We care for them. We enjoy our bodies. Honor others with our bodies. Glorify God with our bodies. We're thankful for what we've been entrusted with.

Stewardship is about giving to God 110% of your body, mind, soul, and strength. Caring for the earth, tending your faith, nurturing your family, working diligently, investing in others, in yourself—all in Christ's strength and love. It's all an act of worship, of stewardship. Upkeep of these areas is a spiritual discipline.

In our perfectly imperfect attempts, we seek to be:

- Wise, generous, frugal, and thoughtful with our resources.
- We maintain what we have to avoid waste.
- We don't run ourselves ragged to get rich, but we take care of our business.
- We study to show ourselves approved in school.
- We take pride in a job well done.
- Work well with others.

Trust in God and plan for the future—setting aside the resources entrusted to us for saving, giving, and living.

We read earlier in Proverbs:

*Know well the condition of your flocks,  
and give attention to your herds.* Proverbs 27:23 (NRSV)

Scholars point out that this doesn't apply just to farming—this speaks to how we lead, how we run our households, how we exercise authority, and how we live out our faith.

The final area of the stewardship from neglect to nurture is living a just and merciful life. Showing mercy to those in need. Being a good neighbor, a Good Samaritan, in a tragic and broken world. Rather than neglecting or stepping on others, we're advocates for the least of these. We're willing to intervene in unjust systems, praying and living out the Lord's Prayer, that "Thy kingdom come" might arrive through us.

But we remember too, that we're not God. We're to be activists, but careful not to fall into activism-*ism*, where we bypass God altogether and do it all ourselves. Our brand of politics becomes the gospel. This day and age, it's easy for politics to become an idol in our lives, even an addiction with the 24-hour news cycle. Politics is one means, one instrument, but politics is not God.

However, we do labor as ambassadors and stewards of Christ, in God's strength. With realism and hope, we nurture the vulnerable—we're open to be used by God to bend the way things *are* towards the way things *ought to be*—towards the arc of God's justice and mercy, God's shalom. We're a people who respond to evil with justice, but we know that only the resurrection overcomes evil.

Being wise and not naïve, we extend Christ's compassion, forgiveness, and hospitality—to all creation, to those in need, and even to ourselves. We make the stewardship from neglect to nurture.

**Amen.**

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