

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. How does one know anything? How can I know what is true? One means of knowledge is *reason*. Two plus two equals four is an equation of reasonability. Scripture says, “The wisdom from above is ... open to reason” (James 3:17). *Experience* is a second means of knowledge. I know fire burns because I touched it! The blind man Jesus healed was being harassed by the Pharisees over Christ restoring his sight. He defended the incident by appealing to experience. “This one thing I know. I was blind, but now I see” (John 9:25). Then there is human *authority*. How do I know a man walked on the moon? In 1969 I was at school and the television news reporter, with all his investigative reporting skills and backed up by moving images, said so. Christianity appeals to several thousand years of authority in the pages of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17). A fourth means of gaining knowledge is *revelation*. It is sometimes called conscience or intuition. Revelation is God’s self-disclosure. What we could not learn about God through human speculation, he has himself disclosed. Our feeble reasoning, our limited experience, our lacking, human authority, has been surpassed by Jesus coming to us and preaching, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father” (John 14:9). This, then, is the Bible — a record of human experience with God; a reasonable appeal to the human mind; an authoritative statement of knowledge gained; but most of all, a record of God’s self-disclosure. Read the Scriptures with the question “What is God like?” uppermost in your mind. There the Lord gives revelation of himself. The Lord’s Prayer tells us he is like a father (Matthew 6:9). The parable of the prodigal son tells us God is a dad waiting for a runaway boy to come home (Luke 15:11ff). And Psalm 23 explains God as a good shepherd.

Our Gospel for today explains yet another facet of God’s character that is surprising to many. He is a businessman investing his resources for profit. He is what we today would call a venture capitalist. In the parable, Jesus explained how life is like a rich man going on a long journey who called together his servants. He gave them each a sum of money with instructions to trade with it until he returned. After the passing of years he did indeed return to settle accounts with his employees. Some were rewarded. Others punished. What’s here for our edification?

First, we must understand that all ownership is God’s. The Gospel reminds us that all true ownership belongs to God. Psalm 24:1 puts it bluntly, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”

Read the Bible and you’ll see that all that I have — it came from God, it is God’s now, and it will return to God (Hebrews 1:1ff). This is true for my car. It is true of my house. It goes for my clothing, my bank account, even my very flesh and blood. The Apostle Paul reminds us, “For we brought nothing into this world, and we cannot take anything out” (1 Timothy 6:7). You don’t see any boat trailers or caravans on hearses, do you? If all ownership is God’s, then the second point the parable teaches is that faithful management is ours.

The Gospel says the rich man divided his property among his servants. He commissioned them to work with his resources entrusted to them until he returned. This is what we call *stewardship*. In the Greek it is the word *oikonomia*. The English word “economics” comes from this. Stewardship means I am out of ownership and into management. It means that life is like a great ship loaded with a rich cargo to be delivered to people in many places. And Christ is the owner, but I am the captain. In Romans chapter 1,

the Apostle Paul is clear about his charge from God. He uses three “I am” statements: “I am under obligation.” “I am eager to preach.” “I am not ashamed” (Romans 1:14-16). It is as if God had given Paul a great wealth that he was in turn to pass along to others and so he did in spades!

When we get to heaven, Jesus won't ask how nice a car you drove, but did you use it to help others? He won't ask the square footage of your home; he'll ask the number of people you led to him. He won't ask your net worth; he'll ask about your generosity, mercy and grace in helping others. Stop and think for two minutes. Quick! Name the past ten AFL Premiers. Give the names of ten Australian senators and the last five best actor Oscar winners. You cannot, can you? Ah, but you well recall the names of those who helped you when you were hospitalised for a week, those teachers who went the extra mile to get you through school that tough year, and the six persons in your small group who've helped you grow this past year. That was God's doing. That was God's doing.

God, you see, has heavily and richly invested in you! Time, talent, money — it's all his! But to you he has entrusted a sum. And now he has strategically placed your life where you can express his love by your kindness, your generosity and grace, in a Christ - centred life and ministry. So, if all ownership is God's and faithful management is ours, then one final truth yet remains in the Gospel. And that is that accountability is coming. The Gospel tells us the businessman returned and called in each of his employees to see what they'd done with his venture capital, and the reward for work well done was more work. But the punishment for a lack of vision, doing nothing, selfishness, ownership and control was that even what they had was taken away.

In every game there is a siren, a whistle, a finish line, a bell that rings signalling the end. So will come a day in each of our lives. A trumpet will sound from on high. We will cease all commerce. We each shall stand before the Lord, and we shall give account- not of our success, not of our achievements, not of our wealth, power and control but of our stewardship. Our stewardship. Are you ready for that?

The Gospel says some of us are given five talents, others two, some of us one. We're not all equally endowed. But a man or woman shows who they are by what they do with what they have. In the parable, the five talent man told the businessman, “Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.” He was commended. The same with the two talent employee, and so on. “Well done, thou good and faithful servant!” Ah, but one employee took his stewardship to the master and sourly complained, “I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” Translation: “I resent your lordship over me. I'm into possession, ownership, power and control not stewardship. My involvement with you is conditional and manipulative.” In short, he rejected his boss. He rejected the entire concept of stewardship. Jesus didn't hold back, he called him “wicked,” “slothful,” and “cast him into outer darkness.” This parable tells us in blazing technicolour: Ownership, power and control belongs to God not us. Its the faithful use of resources for ministry that belongs to us, and a judgment day without doubt is coming.

By some reckoning, Jesus told around 48 parables. Five deal with God's character. Eight deal with history. Four encourage us to “Watch” faithfully for Christ's coming. Three bid us pray and not lose heart. Eight deal with obedience. And a whopping nine, deal with stewardship! Why did Jesus talk so much about ownership, possessions, about management of material blessings? He did so because he

knew money and power was his chief rival for the soul of man. After all, what was it that caused the rich young ruler to walk away from Christ? Money. What was it the prodigal son wanted from his father, and getting it, ran away to live the fool? Money. What was it Judas received for betraying Christ? Money. No, there must be no divorce between business and God, between faith in Jesus and how we manage money, between the Lord's Day and the workweek. Never forget! Ownership is God's. Faithful management is ours, and the time of accountability without doubt is coming!

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