

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). The discipline of apologetics is the use of reason to defend the faith. *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 man walked on the moon? In 1969 I was at school and the television news reporter, with all his investigative reporting skills 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. Many years ago Pope John Paul went to prison on Christmas Day to share God’s love. He preached, “You could not come to me so I came to you!” This is revelation. 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 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.”

A lawyer in Louisiana was asked to do a title search for a piece of land being acquired by a U.S. Army base. He ran the search back to 1803 and sent the title in. The base commander was not satisfied and asked the lawyer to run the title search back still further. In complying, the lawyer wrote, “Said parcel of land was purchased in 1803 by the Thomas Jefferson administration from France, the land commonly known as the Louisiana Purchase. The French acquired it by military victory from Spain; Spain acquired it from the Indians by conquest; and the Indians came to own it from God the Creator. I hope this complies with your request.” Read the Bible and you’ll see. 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). Many church offertory plates say around the rim “Of thine Own do we give Thee”. 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 in the Church call *stewardship*. In the Greek it is the word *economia*. 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 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 St Paul a great wealth that he was in turn to pass along to others. 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 sheltered. He won’t ask your net worth; he’ll ask about your generosity in helping others. He will ask about your stewardship not your possession. 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.

God, you see, has 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, grace and mercy in Christ-centred ministry. So, if all ownership is God’s and faithful management is ours, then one final truth yet remains in the Gospel and not so popular to talk about these days. And that is 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 ownership, lack of vision, doing nothing, and selfishness 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 of our stewardship. The text 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, not stewardship. In short, he rejected his boss. He rejected the entire concept of stewardship. Jesus called him “wicked,” “slothful,” and “cast him into outer darkness.” Ownership belongs to God. Faithful use of resources for ministry belongs to us, and judgment day is coming.

By some reckoning, Jesus told around forty eight 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 nine deal with stewardship. Why did Jesus talk so much about possessions, about management of material blessings? I think he did so because he knew money 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 is coming!

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