

Father in heaven, as we come this morning to think about stewardship and our role and responsibility, not just in this church, but in our lives, to steward the resources of God that you have entrusted to us. We pray, Father, for that mindset that sees it all, everything we have, everything we are, belonging to you. We pray you'll pour out your Holy Spirit upon me, Father, as we have a lot of ground to cover this morning, that you would strengthen me and equip me, Father, with clarity of mind, brevity of expression, conviction of heart, and that what I say would inspire us all to give our lives away. We offer these prayers in Jesus' name, amen. We come this morning to our stewardship season, which is a brief Sunday in our church calendar, but it's a reminder that for the Christian, all of life is a life of stewardship. Now, the Stewardship Sunday in particular can be difficult for us. It can be difficult for me as a pastor and our elders, because we kind of feel we're asking an already generous congregation, an already engaged congregation, to lean in and give more. And as a father of six, I know what it's like to have my schedule pulled every which way but loose. And for a good part of the last 30 years, I've looked at the end of the month and seen a lot, not enough butter to spread over too much bread. And I know what that feels like. And you can feel sometimes when you come to situations like this, here we go. And it can be difficult not just for the leaders, but also for the congregation, because you maybe have come this morning bracing for impact, kind of readying yourself for a guilt trip to give even more, to do even more, and you're stealing yourself, resisting it. Like Benjamin Franklin resisting the urge to give money at a George Whitefield sermon. He'd always find himself so convicted by Whitefield's preaching that he would give far more than he intended. One time he went to hear Whitefield and left his wallet at home, brought no money. He was so convicted by the sermon, he borrowed money from one of the bystanders. So you can put it in the offering. And maybe you've come kind of stealing yourself for that. And I want to tell you this morning, my goal is not to guilt you into doing anything. That's not how the Christian life works. We are moved when we catch a vision for God and his glory. And our heart will always follow that vision. And in that sense, the church, Never really has a stewardship problem. We never really have a money problem. We either have one or two problems. Either we have a vision problem, or we have a heart problem. Either we have a vision problem, that the vision that's been set before you by the elders hasn't been clearly stated and persuasively announced to capture your heart. Because when people are healthy in their souls, their hearts, their treasure, their time, their talents will always follow the vision, unless their hearts are not healthy. And if our hearts are not healthy, even when the vision is set before us, we'll find ourselves dragging our hearts behind us as we lean into the church. And so this morning in our stewardship sermon, I want to think about that, a healthy vision for the church and a healthy heart to respond to that vision as Christians. So when it comes to our vision, Churches like Healthy Businesses need to have a healthy vision and mission statement. Vision looks to the future. Mission looks today. Vision looks to the future. What do we want to be as a church? What would our church look like if God were to bless us and we were to be as strong as we could be, as energetic and involved as we could be here on this campus, in our city, and to the ends of the earth? That's vision. What are we going to be in the future? And mission is all about today. What do we do today to close the gap between where we want to be and where we are now? That's the mission. It's our priorities of all of the things we could do. What are the most vital pressing things to do to move the ball forward here, to move the gauge forward in our

ministry? who might bring more glory to God, growth to his kingdom, and good to his people, and to proclaim and to fulfill the vision he has set before us. And if the vision and mission of the church are not clearly stated, one of the dangers is that we can suffer from either ministry bloat, where we try and do everything and end up doing nothing well, Or mission drift, where it's like a ship in the sea, the open sea when you're sailing on a cloudy day. You can't see the sun or the moon or the stars. And there's no land by which to set your trajectory. If you haven't got a clearly set path on the compass, you'll almost inevitably end up sailing round in circles, because you haven't got a trajectory set. And one of the dangers of a big, historic, downtown church like First Press is that our vision can very quickly become, well, what's our vision? It's to be First Press. And what's our mission? Well, it's to do all the things we've always done. And at the moment, at least, those are great things. I think we're a healthy, I'm so encouraged by the health and vibrancy of our church. But I think we can do a better job in really distilling and clarifying our vision and our mission into memorable statements to really tease out the magic sauce at first press and in God's word and how that connects so we can be even more effective at ministering with God-ordained priorities here in this place at this time and for God's glory. So that's something for the session and me to kind of hammer out together in the months and years to come to watch this space. But I can tell you what our major priorities are. One of my mentors, Dr. Harry Reader, speaks of the five ships of the Christian armada. And they are worship, leadership, discipleship, fellowship, and stewardship. Those are the five ships of a Christian armada, and they must be in place in any healthy church. So first of all, think of worship. We mentioned it this morning in our call to worship, or before in the announcements. Worship is our verb, right? Before we exist as a church to bring the gospel to Columbia, to spread the gospel as far as the sun shines, before we exist to grow in the grace of God here by discipleship endeavors and all of the wonderful work, of Pastor Henderson and his team and the other ministers as well. Before we do any of that, our first responsibility is to worship God, to praise him, to glorify him, to enjoy him in our public worship. And so before we do anything else, that's why we gather to worship. It brings glory to God and it's also good for us. It's the energy bank. It's the place we go to connect most effectively with the means of grace. And if you could do nothing else every week as a church family, I would say come to morning and evening worship and connect with the grace of God. It's the sine qua non. of a healthy church member, without which not. We cannot be healthy if we're not engaged in worship. That's our first priority. Our second priority is leadership, and God has ordained that we are led by men in our session. Our elders, if you're new to this church, we're led by elders, and the elders' role is to govern the spirituality of the church, to pastor the souls of the members, and to set the spiritual practical priorities for our ministry. That's the goal of the elders' leadership. Then our deacons, they look after the physicality of the church. And we believe that men and women can serve on the diaconate, and they do so very well. And they look after the physicality Yes, the budget, yes, the buildings, but also the physical needs of the congregation are shut-ins. Those who are sick, those who are impoverished, those who are ambushed by sudden financial catastrophe, the deacons exist to serve the congregation. They're like the offensive line in football that exists to protect the quarterback from getting sacked, and the deacons exist to protect the pastors and elders of the church from being overwhelmed with nitty gritty and getting distracted from our ministry of prayer and of proclaiming the word of God. So

worship, leadership. As part of our leadership panoply this year, I'm excited to announce that we're adding a new member to our staff, a new executive director slash executive pastor who'll be helping me oversee the whole ministry. He'll be working alongside Brad and helping make sure the details of our ministry are well ordered, and we're set on track. His name's Bruce Stallings. Bruce was the executive pastor at Briarwood for many years. He was Dr. Harry Reader's right-hand man for the best part of the last 20 years. And God really blessed him. He's got a wonderful way of clarifying complicated situations, complicated organizations, saying what's working, what's not working. how to tweak, how to add new ministries into an existing ministerial platform. He's just a wonderful seasoned leader and it's a great blessing of God that he has led Bruce to believe God's calling him here and I can't wait to introduce him to you and you to him in the months to come.

So worship, leadership, the third is discipleship. And discipleship has two levels. First of all, discipleship seeks to make those who are not currently walking with God, the unconverted, unbelievers, and to bring them into the church, expose them to the gospel, and see them converted and come to a healthy church membership. So it's reaching out to the lost. It's also taking those who are found and building them up in Christ. And in that sense, our discipleship has layers. If you want to grow as a disciple, which after worship is our number one priority for you, if you want to grow as a disciple, it all begins in the inner sanctum of worship, morning and evening worship. That's where growth begins. Before you do anything else, connect with God there. And then the circles, the concentric circles around that are further opportunities to lean in and be discipled, whether it be in our Sunday school class, whether it be in small group Bible studies for our men and our women, which are tremendous, whether it be in the opportunities in the foundry, where older seasoned church members will meet with younger people in the faith and encourage them through reading books together, reading the Bible together, talking together, praying together, encouraging them to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ Jesus. And then, of course, there's individual one-on-one sessions with your pastors, with your elders as well, which are also available. And so when you think of discipleship opportunities, there's feeding and serving. We should lean in and be discipled by those senior to us in the faith. But we should also, as healthy Christians, be looking never to be a dead end to truth. Whenever we receive truth from God, we should always be seeking to give that away, into the lives of other people. And if God has been blessing you and you feel you're at a stage where you can start serving and giving in an official capacity, I know there are many opportunities for men and women in our foundry ministries to lean into the life of a young Christian and to help them grow in the faith. And you can see David Henderson about that, or Mary Louise Bowers, they'll be glad to connect you with that opportunity as God blesses. So discipleship is a huge part of our ministry here. We also want to lean into Columbia and to serve our city with the gospel and then see the mission of God spread as far as the sun shines through our various mission agencies. And you can speak to Sean Henderson about that, but there are always opportunities to be involved locally and also internationally in short-term mission trips to get a taste and feel for what it is to be engaged in the mission of God. In that sense, as I said this morning, we have two church plants in Columbia. Ransom Kent has a church plant in Cary, and God's Grace Presbyterian Church has been doing very well and is growing. And we're just setting up another church plant in Lexington with our own pastor, Jeff Tell, who will be installed this evening. And I want to encourage you as a congregation, Jeff and the

men there, the provisional session, they're hoping to gather a core group of 50 people before they leave the shelter of First Presbyterian Church to actually go and have a location in Lexington. I want to encourage you to pray and to think. Perhaps you would commit, it might not be a lifelong commitment, maybe a year or two years, as the Lord would lead you, to really lean in there and help Jeff get the ministry off the ground. He's looking for energetic Christians to get in, the kind of Christians who are friendly, engaged, warm, the average member of First Presbyterian Church, to really lean in and help this ministry get off the ground. And we're praying for that and praying that the Lord will lead you, perhaps, to connect in that way. Worship, leadership, discipleship, fellowship. Fellowship's about enjoying God with one another and enjoying one another before God. It's about meeting and talking about the things of God, how we're growing together, what lessons God's teaching us in life, and connecting, doing life with one another, whether it be here in fellowship meetings, before or after the service, in our homes, home hospitality. Lots of opportunity to connect and lean into life and do life with one another as a congregation, to really build a vibrant community of Christian faith. Fellowship's important as well in a healthy Christian church. And then stewardship, our talk this morning, how we steward our time and our talents and our treasure before God. So that's, we dealt with our vision and our mission and our priorities as a church. I wanna transition now and think a little with you about the kind of heart that leans in to this church and the kingdom of God here at First Presbyterian Church in Columbia. To do that, I want to think with you about your priorities. I want to read to you a short account. It's from Stephen King. Stephen King, the author, some of you may know, was in a terrible accident some years ago. And he reflected on that, and it caused him to really think through his own priorities. So listen as we hear what he learned. A couple of years ago, I found out what you can't take it with you means. I found out while I was lying in a ditch at the side of a country road covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans like a branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm. I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you're lying in a ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard. We all know that life is ephemeral, but on that particular day and in the months that followed, I got a painful but extremely valuable look at life's simple backstage truths. We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we're just as broke. Warren Buffett, going to go out, broke. Bill Gates, going out, broke. Tom Hanks, going out, broke. Steve King, broke. Not a crying dime. All the money you earn, all the stocks you buy, all the mutual funds you trade, all of that is mostly smoke and mirrors. It's still going to be a quarter past getting late, whether you tell time on a Timex or a Rolex. No matter how large your bank account, no matter how many of your credit cards you have, sooner or later, things will begin to go wrong with the only three things you have that you can really call your own, your body, your spirit, and your mind. So I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan anyway. All that lasts is what you can pass on. Those are the words of a man who does not share a faith. But they echo, do they not, the words of Jesus in Mark 8. If you want to turn there with me quickly in your Bibles. Mark 8:31. And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, get behind me, Satan, for you are not

setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the son of man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his father and with his holy angel. Here's a rule for the whole church. Jesus says, if any come after me, any pastor would come after me, any elder would come after me, any deacon would come after me, any staff member of the church would come after me, any man who professes Christ would come after me, any woman, any member of our church, any boy, any girl would come after me. Let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Now that is an uncomfortable challenge. Peter felt it. When Jesus himself said, I'm going to the cross, Peter said, Lord, you don't want to do that. What a waste. And Jesus said to him, get thee behind me Satan. The voice calling us away from the cross is the voice from the pit. It's the voice of the devil. It's the logic of hell. Now the gospel way is the cross. I think it was Thomas Watson who says, God has one son without sin, but no sons without suffering. And the distinctive suffering that God calls every Christian to is the suffering of carrying the cross. There was one for Jesus, and there's one for you, and there's one for me. Are you carrying it? There's no way of putting this, other way of putting this, but the cross is an instrument of death, of execution. When men die on the cross, when women die on the cross, lives are extinguished. Dreams, hopes are shattered. Jesus bore the cross for us and he calls us to follow him. Let's take a moment to think about that this morning. Death on the cross in the days of Christ was not unusual, but it was truly obscene. It represented a form of punishment that was reserved for the worst of society, at least in Rome's eyes. It was a form of punishment in which the degradation and malice of men was given full vent. Describing the torture, Rome added a new word to its dictionary, excruciatum. which means pain from ex cruciatum, the cross. We get the word excruciating pain. From beginning to end, the process of crucifixion was designed not just to kill a man, but to break him completely, which is why the Jews wanted Christ to die in that particular way. Josephus records during the siege of Jerusalem that Titus allowed his soldiers to have their way with the prisoners. So the soldiers, out of the rage and hatred they bore the prisoners, knelt those they caught in different postures to the cross by way of jest. Seneca bears similar testimony. I see crosses there, not just of one kind, but made in many different ways. Some have their victims with head down to the ground. Some impale their private parts. Others stretch out their arms on the gibbet. Such cruel men crucified your savior. And Jesus takes that very imagery and says to you and me, if any man would come after me, as Bonhoeffer said, he must come and die. And this is not appealing. Our natural flesh recoiled from it. I remember when I was a young lad, I used to sail in the summers. In Britain we have three seasons. There's wet, wetter and wettest. and cold, colder, and coldest. And it's freezing. You'd sail all morning, and the wetsuit would get pleasantly warm. You take it off and go and get some lunch, and then you come back out and put it back on again. And putting on a wet, cold wetsuit is a very unpleasant experience. Your body recoils from its freezing. Well, the cross is an unpleasant prospect. When we face it, we say, I don't want to do that. I don't want to lose my life. I want to save it. And Jesus says that mindset leads

to surprising results. Jesus says if anyone would save his life, he would lose it. Whoever would lose his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. We want to clutch on to our hopes and our dreams and our time and our talents and our treasure. We want to say it's mine. We hold on to it. And to let go of what feels like dying, which is exactly the point, isn't it? It's exactly the point. And I'm calling you, I'm calling myself this morning to an entirely new way of thinking about everything. Principally a new way of thinking about this world. I want you to imagine with me this morning that you're sentenced to be crucified tomorrow. Tomorrow you'll get up, you'll be taken by rough Roman soldiers to a gibbet where you'll be tied up, and they will flail you alive. They will beat you with a cat of nine tails, and in that nine tails there are pieces of lead and pieces of shrapnel. The lead is designed to bruise your back, and the shrapnel is designed to tear your back apart. Many people died during that procedure. The Jews would limit it to 39 lashes. The Rome prescribed no such restraint. The lector, the man with the whip, would beat you until either he was finished or you were. After that, you've got to carry the cross beam of the cross through the streets of Jerusalem, out the gates, down and up toward the place of the skull, where you'll be placed on the ground. Again, rough Roman soldiers will hold your arms and your legs, and they'll sledgehammer rusty nails through your wrist, piercing the median nerve, shattering the bone, and impaling you to the wood. Then they will hoist you up and they will allow the cross to thud into a post hole a few feet deep. Imagine the pain as your nailed limbs catch the weight of your body and the force of gravity. There you will hang naked at eye level while passers-by look you in the eye and mock you. You are not high up as the paintings show. You are actually down much closer to the ground. So people can get a look at you and spit in your face and so forth. This is what Christ endured for you and me, not just the shame of rejection by man, but he was also rejected by God. He became your sin and my sin. But he calls you and me like him to follow him down the Via Dolorosa, out and away from the world. Think about that, you're being crucified tomorrow. That tomorrow is now today, and you're actually carrying the cross. How does your 401k look now? How does your bank balance look now? How does your reputation look now? How does your day timer and your plans for life look now? That moment would radically change you, wouldn't it? It would change your relationship with everything, knowing that you were being led out, and in a few moments, you would breathe your last on the cross. And that's what the cross does. It causes us to change our thoughts about everything. It gives us a new way of looking at this world. This world is a playground for men to enjoy themselves in a worldly way. It's a place, as one writer put, where sin looks normal and holiness looks weird, where the lusts of men rule the day and pride is the central thing, John says. And we often look at the world, you and me, we look at the world and the darkness looks bright to us. We think, oh, that's the life. But the cross changes the way we think about the world because it brings us right up to the verge of eternity and the grave. And it forces us to think of life from a different perspective. So the cross changes the way you think about the world. The cross also changes the way you think about treasure. Jesus says, what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? We think we spend our lives pursuing treasure, and we all do. That's what money is. Money is a tool for buying treasure. The question, of course, is what is the thing you treasure? But Jesus says, you're not really spending your life pursuing treasure. You're actually trading your soul. How much is your soul worth? And Jesus says, if you took all of the treasure of the world,

all of the gold, bullion, all of the silver, all of the platinum, all of the precious metals, all of the diamonds and rubies of the world, all of the pleasures of the world, and put them in a pot. And you traded your soul to gain them. Jesus tells you you've just sold yourself short, which tells you that Christ values your soul way more than you do. Your eternal, never-dying soul. What are you treasuring? Jesus says, do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. It's a wonderful thing. There's a book by Randy Alcorn called The Treasure Principle. It's a wee tiny book, but I commend it to you. It's a fantastic book, but prepare for the scalpel. He has these rules of treasure in the book, and the first two treasure principles are God owns everything, and I am his money manager. That's his first rule. God owns everything. I'm his money manager. Second rule, my heart always goes where I put God's money. That's convicted. God owns everything and I am his money manager. And my heart always goes where I put God's money. And that's really the central thing. Do you look at your life and think mine? Or do you look at your life and everything in it and think stewardship? It all belongs to him. He is the creator. He is the giver of every good and perfect gift and it comes down to me and I'm his servant to steward the talents he has given, the treasure he has given, the time he has given. Would it be living sacrifices? And as I've said before, the problem with a living sacrifice is it keeps on crawling off the altar. You know, I'll put my life on the altar and turn round, and my life's crawling off the altar. I'm trying to get off as fast as I can. I've got to grab myself by the ankles and pull myself back up onto the altar again. And that's not just true for me. It's true for all of you. And these words of Christ, the cross, they challenge the way we look at the world. They challenge the way we evaluate treasure. Jesus says, the eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. And if then the light that is in you is darkness, how great will that darkness be? What is your eye? Your eye, young man, is the organ by which you evaluate treasure. The problem is for some of you, you look at trash and you think, oh, it's my treasure. It's my treasure. And that's the problem of your eye. You're not seeing things clearly. You're not looking through the lens of truth. You're not looking through the lens of eternity. You're not remembering that one day you too must die. and you look at treasure through the wrong eyes, and the darkness will look bright to you. And if the darkness looks bright to you, how great will that darkness be inside of you? And the only way that can be fixed is to let Jesus perform eye surgery on you, that you no longer look at life in terms of what looks good to my eye, what feels good to my body, but you look at life from God's perspective and through the lens of God's truth. a new way of looking at the world, a new way of evaluating treasure, a new way of thinking about time. None of us want to be ashamed. You wear the wrong pair of sneakers, or the wrong t-shirt, going to school, some no-name brand that everybody else is wearing, I don't know, some expensive designer brand. And you walk in, everybody looks at you and thinks, oh, those sneakers. And you feel as if your feet, you just want to hide your feet in the ground. Because we don't want people looking at us and thinking we're stupid. That feeling of shame. And Jesus says, when you think about shame, you can think about what men think, or you can think about what God thinks. Choose wisely. Jesus says, whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, in this adulterous and sinful

generation of him will the son of man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his father with his holy angels. If another human being looking at you with disgust fills you with an awful sense of shame, what would it not feel like to have the creator of all men and the holy angels look at us with disgust? And you gotta be disgusting to one or the other, to an adulterous and sinful generation. And pleasing to God, or disgusting to God, and pleasing to a sinful and perverse generation. And the cross forces us to choose, because nobody in this world wants to be crucified. But it forces us to think about time and eternity differently. I'm not going to live for the dot. I'm going to live for the line. That's actually Randy Alcorn's final principle. Are you living for the dot or the line? The dot, little dot with a pen, represents this life, 70, 80 years. It's amazing how fast it goes. People told me that when I was your age. I didn't believe them, but I tell you, it's amazing how fast it goes. The dot or the line? And the cross takes us to the edge of the dot and forces us to look at the line, eternity. Let that word sink into your minds. Eternity. At St. Peter's Dundee in Scotland, where Robert Merrimac Sheehan pastored for many years, there was on the door stone of that church, beneath the lintel, There was a granite block and then went into it was inscribed the word eternity. A reminder as you walk into church, I am an eternal being doing business with the eternal God and I'm bound for eternity. And the cross reminds us of that. Where we're headed. And so Jesus bids you and me to take the cross as a reminder that we find life in the strange logic of the gospel by giving it away, not by holding it close. One of my elders in my last congregation has a sign at his front door when you walked in, a big chalkboard with oak edges, and on that chalkboard were written those words, give your life away, and that's the cross. And Christ is saying to you and me, I'm not asking you to do any more than I have done for you. If the King of kings, the Lord of lords, will give his life away, becoming your sin and mine, What sacrifice is too great for you or me to give for him? And that's the power of this verse. That's the power of stewardship. It's not about just writing a check, giving money. It's about giving yourselves, giving yourselves up, pouring yourselves out, and laying your lives down in service of Christ. because of who he is and what he did, pouring his life out, laying his life down, and giving his life away for us. And that's the way we think of stewardship healthfully, in terms of our time, our talents, and our treasure, but really not our time, but his time. Not our talents, but his talents, entrusted to us, and certainly not our treasure, but his treasure. God is my, God owns everything and I am his money manager and my heart always goes where I put God's money. Let's pray together this morning. Father in heaven, we thank you for this congregation. We thank you for how engaged they are. We thank you, Father, for how sacrificial they are. And we pray this morning, oh God, that you will help us all examine ourselves and see not just how much are we giving, but how well are we living? Are we living for ourselves? Are we living for God? Do we really believe that it all belongs to God and we must steward it for you? Or do we believe that it all belongs to me and then I can divvy it up as I see fit? And I pray, Father, you'll challenge that mindset in my heart and in every member of our congregation's heart that we would be all in, in life, and all in and ready for eternity because of Jesus our Savior. In his name we pray, amen.