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Stewardship: A Matter of Mission
Matthew 5:13-16; 6:19-34

It was one of those congregations where the people liked to talk back to the pastor as he preached. Challenging his congregation, the pastor shouted, "Brethren, this church has been walking too long; it's got to run!"

An old deacon shouted, "Let her run, Parson, let her run."

The preacher said, "It's not enough to let her run; she's got to fly!"

And the deacon shouted, "Let her fly, Parson, let her fly!"

To which the preacher replied, "Brethren, it takes money to make her fly!"

And the deacon said, "Let her walk, Parson, let her walk!"¹

What is it that makes church members, sometimes even leaders, so uncomfortable when it comes to *stewardship*—especially the stewardship of our money? Why are believers sometimes so reluctant to give generously of their means to support the work of the Lord through his church?

It may be the paltry record of giving that so many Christians have. Now understand that I'm not talking about all believers here. There are many people who because of limited or fixed incomes, they're not able to give large amounts. But their small gifts may actually amount to a much larger portion of their income than the much larger gifts of someone with a much higher income. Do you remember how in Mark 12:41-44, as Jesus was sitting watching people put their gifts into the temple treasury, he called his disciples' attention to the poor widow who put in two of the smallest coins of that day? He told them, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."² Paul said it this way in 2 Corinthians 8:12: "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have."

What if your income was a matter of public record, placed on the Communion Table here for everyone to see, and beside it was also placed your giving record? What would it say to the people who took a look?

Boy, I went to meddling in a hurry this morning, didn't I?

¹ Adapted from Leon Hill, *O' for the Life of a Preacher* (Amarillo, TX: Baxter Lane Co., 1975), 35.

² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotes are from the *New International Version*.

Well, I never look at individual giving records—that’s none of my business, it’s between you and the Lord. But I did ask David this week for some general information about our giving. Do you want to hear it? I’ll tell you anyway . . .

Out of 299 “giving units” (people assigned envelopes):

- 29 gave \$5,200 or more over the past year.
- 151 gave somewhere between \$1,000 and \$5,000 over the past year.
- 52 gave less than \$1,000 over the past year.
- 33 gave less than \$250 over the past year.
- 34 gave less than \$100 over the past year.

To put it another way, 39.8% of the giving units gave less than \$20 per week to our church last year, while 50.5% gave between \$20 and \$100 per week, and only 9.7% gave more than \$100 per week. You each know your own record.

Now friends, if this were in 1979, it would reflect very good stewardship on the part of our congregation’s members. But this is 2009, where today’s median household income of those living within a five-mile radius of our church is estimated to be almost \$47,000.

Finding the right motivation

Now it’s very tempting to take this kind of information and set it alongside Old Testament passages like Leviticus 27:30 where the LORD claimed the tithe (10%) as his own and Malachi 3:6-8, where he equated not paying tithes to robbing him, and use all this to lay a guilt-trip on Christians who aren’t giving as they should. That’s been done a lot through the years. In fact, I’ve probably done it a few times myself, especially early on in my ministry.

Now don’t get me wrong. *Tithing is an important principle for God’s people.* It’s how God designed things to support the work of his kingdom—in the Old Testament through the priesthood and the tabernacle and temple, and in the New Testament through the priesthood of all believers and the church. Tithes supported the ongoing work of the Lord, and other offerings for special needs were above and beyond the tithe. That works!

“Will a man rob God?” is pretty strong language! I’ve even heard some preachers refer to those who don’t tithe as “freeloaders” as well as robbers. I’ve also heard statements like “Jacob had no church to support, he gave a tithe; a Christian who gives any less should be ashamed!” There *is* a lot of truth to these statements. But is *guilt* the right motive for being good stewards of the resources God has entrusted to us, whether we’re talking about time, talent, or treasures?

When you look at what Jesus said in our text from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, he put things in a different perspective, didn’t he? While he didn’t nullify the principle of the tithe, he did point to *a different attitude* about material resources. As he addressed the attitude his followers should have toward “things,” Jesus made his point four ways.

First, He said that *a person’s heart will be where his or her treasure is* (6:19-21). So his followers must be careful to store up treasure in heaven rather than on earth, to maintain the proper focus and priority in life. Earthly treasures will waste away; heavenly treasures won’t. Our heart must be set on heavenly things, so our treasure must be in heaven, since one’s heart will be where one’s treasure is.

Then he said that *one’s focus must be clear* (6:22-23). People of that day understood the eye to be a lamp for the body. If the eyes were good or healthy, then they let plenty of light into the

body. If they were bad or unhealthy, then the body was dark. It was sort of a variation of our idea of the eye as the window of the soul. Jesus was saying that our focus in life must be right; if it's distorted, then the person will be full of deep darkness—a darkness that's often characterized by greed and stinginess. In fact, some Bible translators indicate that the Greek word in this passage for *good* or *healthy* implies *generous*, while the word for *bad* or *unhealthy* implies *stingy*.³

Then he put it another way—*one's loyalty must be undivided* (6:24). “No one can serve two masters . . .,” he said. The word here for serve literally means *to be a slave*. Joint ownership of slaves always failed. If the demands of the two masters differed, which one was the slave to be loyal to and obey? There had to be absolute loyalty and devotion. Jesus identified the competing masters as God and Money (literally Mammon, the god of wealth or material security).

Then he expressed it still another way. *God's kingdom must take priority over everything* (6:25-34)! Rather than worrying about daily needs, we must seek God's kingdom and righteousness *first*. When we do, we can be sure that God will supply everything we need to be his disciples!

To worry about these things is to live like pagans! Our Father who feeds the birds and clothes the grass and flowers of the field knows what we need. So we don't need to worry. We need simply to trust him, seeking his kingdom and righteousness as our first priority in life!

In other words, Jesus was saying that his followers must not let anything, not even worry over our *basic daily needs*, distract us from seeking his kingdom, his rule in our lives.

Reframing the issue

When we begin to look at our stewardship of our resources from this kind of perspective, everything changes, doesn't it? We begin to realize some important truths about our possessions in connection with our relationship with God.

First, we realize that Scripture clearly teaches us that *everything comes from and ultimately belongs to God*. We don't really *own* any of our spiritual or material resources—God has entrusted them to us for a little while.

When we realize that truth, then we begin to understand that *God has entrusted us with these resources to use them as he would use them*. That doesn't mean that everything we have always has to be used for a specifically *religious* purpose, or never for our own enjoyment. But it does mean that we should use everything we have in ways that glorify God and are consistent with his purpose in the world. We come to grips with the reality that it's not *how many possessions we have* that's important, but *how we view them and use them*!

Dallas Willard has expressed this well when he wrote:

[John Wesley's] famous formula, “Get all you can; save all you can; give all you can,” must be supplemented. It should read: get all you can; save all you can; freely use all you can within a properly disciplined spiritual life; and control all you can for the good of humankind and God's glory. Giving all you can would then naturally be a part of an overall wise stewardship.⁴

³ See translators' notes in *Today's New International Version*.

⁴ Dallas Willard, quoted in “Reflections,” *Christianity Today* (6-12-2000).

As Michael Riley has put it, “Affluent believers are not free to do with their wealth as they please; they are free to do with their wealth as God pleases.”⁵

But there’s a third truth that we need to get a hold on—or rather we need for it to get a hold on us! It’s one that we don’t always make the connection with when we think about our stewardship. It’s simply this: *The way God would have us use our resources is to be on mission with Christ in the world.*

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus made the transition from the Beatitudes to talk about what it means to live as kingdom people, he told his followers that they are salt and light in the world. He said, “Let your light shine before people in such a way that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”⁶ That set the stage for everything Jesus talked about in this sermon. Everything, including how his followers relate to their possessions, is ultimately about his mission in the world!

In other words, *stewardship is ultimately a matter of mission!* Maybe that’s why Paul pointed to Christ’s example when he was calling the Corinthians to great generosity (2 Corinthians 8:9):

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor,
so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

John and Sylvia Ronsvalle (husband and wife), run *empty tomb, inc.* It’s an organization that conducts research to promote generous financial support of Christian mission endeavors, especially those that address extreme poverty and suffering as a part of their gospel outreach. They estimate that in 2005, 700 Protestant mission agencies received \$5.2 billion to use in their work. The Ronsvalles further estimate that if church members had tithed in 2005, there would have been an additional \$168 billion available for mission causes. But instead, we church members tend to spend our money in ways very similar to the world around us. In recent years, American spending has included:

- \$16.8 billion on bottled water in 2007.
- \$19 billion on video/computer game sales in a recent year.
- \$29 billion on candy in 2007.
- \$18.1 billion in credit card penalty fees in 2007.
- \$25 billion a year on lawn care (EPA estimate).
- \$72 billion a year on carbonated soft drinks.
- \$13.7 billion just on greeting cards for Valentine’s Day in 2006.
- \$705 billion on entertainment and recreation in 2004.
- And the list goes on and on . . .

And what did the average Protestant church member give to the Lord’s work through his or her church in 2007, the last year *empty tomb* has analyzed the information for? *A measly 2.55% of income.*

⁵ Michael Riley, notes on Nehemiah in *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 689.

⁶ My translation.

What could we do as a church as we join Christ on his mission in the world if we all became faithful stewards—not according to what we don't have, but according to what we have, as Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 8? What kind of sacrifices are we willing to make to be on mission with Christ?

Several weeks ago I participated in a missional strategy meeting at the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City where my friend Dr. Tom Ogburn is pastor. Tom told us a story about visiting a home in the slums outside Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In that small house lived about 35 or 40 Chin refugees from Burma (Myanmar). The Chin people group in Burma has been predominantly Christian for about a century, thanks to the ministry of American Baptist missionaries Arthur and Ann Carson. Now they're being persecuted heavily by the government, and many are fleeing to Malaysia in hopes of gaining refugee status with the U.N. and moving to the United States or Britain or Australia or the Netherlands.

These refugees can't hold regular jobs because they're "undocumented" in Malaysia. But they get occasional work. Tom said that in the middle of the main room of that house, there was a large, white wooden box with a slot in the lid. When those folks are able to work a little, they come home with their pay, and before they buy anything else—even food—they put an offering in that box, often up to *half* of what they made. What's it used for? To support *a missionary* that the Chin churches have sent to a Muslim people group.

Tom said that their reasoning goes like this. If Jesus died and rose for them so that they might have life, and the Carsons gave their lives among them so that they might hear about Jesus, then they must give themselves and their resources so that others can hear about him.

You see, for the Chin people, stewardship really is *a matter of mission*.

Will it be for us?

†MEG