

Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 9, 2018

FORWARD IN GIVING

Matthew 25:14-30

The most famous sermon ever preached was Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Someone might call today's message "the sermon on the *amount*." I want to talk with you about *money* today. About *giving*. About *stewardship* – which is a fancy word involving our management or trusteeship of the resources God has entrusted to each of us. Stewardship is about more than money, but it is not about less than money. It is about what we do with the financial resources God has given us. But it is also about the ways we invest our time and talents and gifts. It is about what we do in response to the opportunities and needs God places before us.

TITHING

One of the first things we think about – or *should* think about – when giving is the topic, the biblical principle of *tithing*. The word *tithe* means a tenth. It refers to 10% of your income. It is 10% of all you earn, 10% of the economic fruits of your labor. In the Old Testament, God instructed the people of Israel to return to Him a tithe or a tenth of all their income as an expression of worship and gratitude to God, and to provide for the ongoing worship life of the nation. The tithe was intended by God to be the first 10% of their income, taken off the top, not the leftovers after they had taken care of all their other expenses.

In the New Testament, Jesus rarely speaks about tithing. One place where He talks about it is Matthew 23, where He has some harsh things to say about the religious leaders of the Jewish people in His day. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus says: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth [a *tithe*] of your spices – mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former."

They gave the most careful scrutiny to the law of tithing, even down to the herbs in their backyard gardens. Jesus does not criticize them for this. He doesn't tell them their devotion to the law of tithing is a waste of time. He doesn't tell them they are taking it too far. He doesn't tell them it is unnecessary. No. The point is not that tithing is *pas*. The point is that there is more to following God than the mere observance of the letter of the law, whether it involves tithing or the Sabbath or any other commandment God has given His people. Ah, but *that there is more* to following God than giving Him a tenth of our income does not mean tithing is unnecessary or unimportant.

The New Testament does not explicitly say that tithing is a Christian duty. It does not say that Christians are required to give at least a tenth of their income to God and His work in the world. Instead of a rule stipulating a certain percentage or a fixed amount, the New Testament emphasizes the attitudes and characteristics of giving that pleases God.

Our giving, the Bible says, should be voluntary, not coerced (see 2 Corinthians 9:7).

Our giving should be generous, even sacrificial (like the poor widow Jesus commended in Mark 12:41-44, who gave all she had at the temple; and like the Macedonian Christians, of whom Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:2: “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.”) It should be generous, not stingy.

Our giving should be cheerful, not begrudging (again, see 2 Corinthians 9:7).

Our giving should be regular and consistent, not sporadic (see 1 Corinthians 16:2).

Giving is an act of worship (Psalm 96:8). That’s why we take up an offering in Worship every Sunday. The offering is a tangible way for us to express the “worthship” of God, to show God with our money that we love and value Him. Whether you physically place an offering in the offering plate or mail it to the church office, give online or through your bank, giving is an act of worship. It is an act of love.

Giving to God is also an act of gratitude. It is a way to say “Thank You” to the Lord for all He has done for you and all He has given you.

Giving is an act of faith. It is a way of showing our trust in and dependence on God.

It is an act of obedience, too. It is an act of discipleship. It is a way of saying to God that we want to be part of what He is doing in and through His church in the world. It is also an act of surrender and dedication to God – because what you do with your money is a window into your heart.

Giving encompasses all of these things. All of which goes to show that money matters matter to Jesus. There is no way to escape it.

What I think God wants me to say to you about tithing is that you should do it. Because you should. Tithing doesn’t qualify you for heaven. That is not how it works. You don’t tithe in order to earn God’s approval. You tithe as a way of expressing your gratitude to God. You tithe as a way to express God’s “worthship” to you. You tithe as a way of showing your love for God, your trust in Him, and the commitment of your heart to Him. If you are not tithing, make it your goal to tithe and be intentional about increasing your giving. If you are already tithing, don’t stop there. Look for ways to increase your giving beyond the 10% bar, as the Lord leads and enables you.

You *should* give at least a tithe – at least 10% - of your income to the work of God’s kingdom in the world. We could debate a number of questions about tithing, such as:

- Should you tithe on your gross income or your net income? Before or after taxes? I have my own opinion on that, but I leave that between you and the Lord.
- Should you give your entire tithe – a minimum of 10% - to the church? Or is it okay to divide your tithe between the church and other valued Christian ministries, as long as the total is at least 10% of your income? Different people have different opinions of this. All I will say is that your giving to the church, to the ministry of the local

body of Christ of which you are a part, should come first, and should be the primary beneficiary of your giving.

For some of you, tithing is a no-brainer. It is what you do. You've been doing it for years, maybe your whole life. For others of us, the concept of tithing may be new. It may be unsettling or even threatening. It may even seem impossible. I just want to say it is not impossible. With God, nothing is impossible.

Tithing, as Ray Ortlund, Jr., says, is not "heroic, high-level commitment. Tithing is entry-level obedience, and then we go from there" (Ortlund, *Proverbs: Wisdom That Works*, 174). Tithing is not the end point. It is the starting point of our giving to God, who so loved the world that He gave (John 3:16) ... and gave ... and continues to give. The Bible says: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent" – *gave* – "His only Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

Should you tithe? Yes. It is not too late, and it is never too soon to start. Should you stop with giving 10% of your income to God and His kingdom work? Of course not. The offerings you give to the church and to other missions or ministries beyond your tithe will be a source of immense blessings to others and bring joy to your heart.

TOO WEALTHY TO TITHE?

The principle of tithing, I know, can be a source of indigestion. A man went to his pastor with a concern about tithing. He said: "I have a problem. I have been tithing for a long time. It wasn't too bad when I was making \$20,000. I could afford to give the \$2,000. But now I'm making half a million, and there is just no way I can afford to give away \$50,000 a year."

The pastor pondered the man's dilemma and said: "I can see that you do have a problem. How would it be if we prayed about it?" The man agreed, so the pastor bowed his head and began to pray: "Dear Lord, this man has a problem, and I pray that You will help him. Lord, reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe."

How do you like that prayer? You can never be too wealthy to tithe. And with God's help, you can never be too poor to tithe. The Bible says that the amount of your offering is acceptable to the Lord on the basis of what you have, not what you don't have (2 Corinthians 8:12). Don't worry about what you don't have or can't give. Take joy in giving what you have.

IT DOESN'T BELONG TO YOU

Here is a story that helps put the basic premise of Christian stewardship into perspective. An older woman had just finished shopping and was returning to her car. She was shocked to find four men inside the car. She dropped her bags, pulled out a handgun, and screamed: "I have a gun, and I know how to use it! Get out of the car." The four guys jumped out of the car and ran for their lives.

Somewhat shaken, the woman loaded her shopping bags and then got into the car. But she couldn't seem to get her key into the ignition. Then she realized: It wasn't her car. *Her* car was parked four or five spaces away. She loaded her grocery bags into her own car and then drove to the police station to turn herself in. The desk sergeant to whom she told the story nearly fell off his chair laughing. He pointed to the other end of the counter, where four men were reporting a carjacking by an elderly woman with thick glasses and curly white hair, less than five feet tall, and carrying a handgun. No charges were filed against her. (Greg Laurie, "A Time to Worship," *Decision*, November 2001.)

You may wonder: What does this have to do with stewardship? Just this: She thought it was her car, but it really belonged to someone else. You may think your life is your own, but it is not. "You were bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20). You may think your money belongs to you, but it does not. It really belongs to God, who has given you everything you have. And you are accountable to Him for what you do with it.

THE TALENTS

You can see this clearly in the story Jesus tells in Matthew 25:14-30. My NIV Life Application Bible calls it the "Parable of the Loaned Money." Traditionally, it is known as the "Parable of the Talents." But the word *talent* in the story doesn't mean what we usually mean when we use the word. In ordinary use, *talent* means a natural ability, skill, or aptitude. You may have a musical talent, an athletic talent, a talent for math, or a talent for managing money. In the world of the Bible, a talent was a form of money. It was a unit of currency or exchange, based on weight. Estimates vary as to the value of a talent, say, of silver. One estimate is that a talent was worth the amount of wages an ordinary person would earn in 20 years. In today's terms, if a person earns \$50,000 a year for 20 years, that is \$1 million. So, in the parable, five talents, the amount of money the master gave to one of his servants, would be in the ballpark of \$5 million. It is a pretty sizable chunk of change that Jesus is talking about.

The word *talent* has a broader meaning, a wider spiritual significance. J. C. Ryle, a prominent 19th-century British pastor and author, said that "anything whereby we may glorify God is 'a talent.' Our gifts, our influence, our money, our knowledge, our health, our strength, our time, our senses, our reason, our intellect, our memory, our affections, our privileges as members of Christ's Church, our advantages as possessors of the Bible – all are talents" (Quoted in James M. Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2, 532).

In other words, everything God has given you that you can leverage for His kingdom, from your natural abilities to your spiritual gifts, from your job or vocation to your material resources, is a talent. And the point of Jesus' parable is that, whether you are a five-talent person, a two-talent person, or a one-talent person, you are responsible to God for the ways you use (or fail to use) what God in His providence has entrusted to you.

So, yes, talents symbolize more than money. They symbolize your time, your skills and abilities, your insights and experience and expertise. They symbolize everything God has given you and everything God has taught you. Which makes them a really big deal.

It would be a mistake to limit the meaning of this story to just money. It would also be a mistake to think we can expand it to mean everything except our money and how we use it (Douglas S. O'Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, 740).

“The master” in the story clearly represents Jesus. The journey represents the extended period of time – the interim – between His first coming and His promised coming again. The servants in the story, all three of them, are professing Christians who call Jesus “Lord.” To each of them – to each of us – is given a *stewardship* to serve God and His purposes with the resources He has entrusted to us.

We see the story unfold in three scenes. In scene one (verses 14 and 15), the master calls his servants together, entrusts his wealth to them in differing amounts, and then goes off on his trip. He does not give the same amount of money to each. Instead, he gives appropriate consideration to the ability of each one.

Scene two (verses 16-18) tells what each of the servants does with the money they are given. Two of them go to work right away, investing the money in such a way that it doubles in value. The third one, however, fails to invest the master’s money. He is unwilling to take a risk. To safeguard the money, he digs a hole in the ground and buries it.

Scene three, starting in verse 19, is the rest of the story. After a long absence, the master returns and settles accounts with the three servants. Two of them receive unbridled praise and approval from the master. Their commendation includes a promotion to positions of higher authority and responsibility. They hear the words that I imagine every person here today wants to hear when we stand before the Lord Jesus and see Him face to face: “Well done, good and faithful servant!” I can’t tell you how much I long to hear those words from Jesus. “Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your Master’s happiness!”

But the accounting does not go well for the third servant. He makes excuses for his failure to put the master’s money to work. He even tries to put the blame on the master. But the master – Jesus – does not let him get away with it. He calls him out for his laziness. For his unfaithfulness and irresponsibility. He even calls him “wicked.” The end result is that the relationship between the master and this unfaithful servant is severed. Permanently. It is not a pretty picture. It is a picture of being cut off from God and His favor. Which is what hell is. And it should serve as a warning to us of the consequences of failing to take our responsibilities as stewards of God’s gifts and resources seriously.

I don’t want to end this message on a negative note. I don’t want this message to be a downer. But it is important to recognize what is at stake here. I don’t want any of us ever to receive the punishment the unfaithful servant got.

Did you know that when you become a member of Faith Church, you pledge to be a good and faithful steward of God’s gifts? One of the five membership vows taken by every member of the church is this:

Do you promise to serve Christ in His church by supporting and participating with this congregation in its service of God and its ministry to others to the best of your ability?

In other words, will you be an active, faithful, responsible member of Faith Church as an expression of your personal devotion and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ?

Will you use what God has given you for His kingdom purposes?

Will you support the ministry of the church with your money, your time and energy, your skills and abilities, your talents and gifts and expertise?

Many of you already do. I want you to know how grateful I am and how grateful the elders are for the faithful giving and service of many of you. Your giving and serving are blessings to me, to the Session, and to our church as a whole. Because of your generosity in giving, we expect to end our fiscal year at the end of September with a sizable budget surplus. It is the best end-of-year position we have been in for a long time. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

But perhaps some of you have been holding back, maybe in your giving, maybe in your willingness to serve in some ministry, or both. I want to encourage you to do what the Christians in Macedonia did, as described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:5: “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.” I want to urge you to follow the Macedonians’ example by giving yourselves first to the Lord – because He is the Lord and the church belongs to him – and then giving yourselves to the ministry of the church family of which He has made us all a part here at Faith.

I love this church! I know you do, too. I want this church family to be all that God wants us to be, for the glory of His name, for the building up of His church, and for the blessing of this world, beginning right here in Kingstowne and surrounding communities.

If you’ve been holding back from supporting the church financially to the best of your ability, or from investing your “talents” in the church’s ministry, please step forward and step out in faith and love and generosity, so that together we may more fully, more faithfully, more fruitfully, and more effectively serve God’s purposes for our church in our community in this time.

A PRAYER

There is a remarkable prayer that David prays near the end of his life when he and his son Solomon are receiving offerings from the people of Israel for the temple that Solomon will build in Jerusalem. Seeing the enthusiasm and generosity of the people, David prays, in 1 Chronicles 29: “Who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from You, and we have given You only what comes from Your Hand.... O LORD our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building a temple for Your Holy Name, it comes from Your hand, and all of it belongs to You.... I have seen with joy how willingly Your people who are here have given to You....

Keep this desire in the hearts of Your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to You” (29:14, 16-18).

May David’s prayer be true of us here at Faith as well. This kind of generous giving, this kind of stewardship of all the “talents” God has given us, is the way to go forward as followers of Jesus. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.