

Give Until It Feels Good

Mark 12:41-44

November 4, 2007

There is a risk in telling you this story. It is a risk of sounding like I am bragging. There is a risk of sounding arrogant. I hope you won't take it that way because I think there are certain things about a pastor that people need to know. I have come to believe over the years that a leader cannot lead where he or she has not been or is not willing to go. That includes our financial support of the church. So Toni and I are tithers.

This is the fourth year in a row that you are going to hear me talk about financial giving to the local church. Like the other years, I am going to hold up the tithe as the minimum level of giving required by God. If you have trouble with that, take it up with God, because it is his plan clearly spelled out in the Bible.

One of the things that many people complain about in the church is that we are always talking about money. We honestly don't do that very often around here, but we are going to do it today because it's important. Jesus was never shy about talking about money, so we need to get over our own reluctance to tackle the subject.

I have also tried to be honest with you when I have told you how Toni and I struggled with our giving for a long time. Especially when our family was young and growing, when Toni was a full-time seminary student, and when I was a young pastor who really didn't make that much. Tithing was something we didn't do very well for awhile. But together, she and I finally came to the conclusion that if we wanted the folks in our congregations to tithe, we had to lead the way.

Consecration Sunday for the Leo congregation was last Sunday. So the night before that, Toni and I sat in our living room to fill out our own Estimate of Giving cards for 2008. Our Pacesetters for this year have already received their Estimate of Giving cards which we will present in a few moments. The rest of you will be receiving yours in a couple of weeks. So Toni and I had a calculator in front of us as we discussed our giving to the church and to a couple of special projects Toni supports. It struck me at that moment that our giving now is greater than the total salary I received during my first year following seminary.

I stopped, looked at Toni, and said, "Do you know what we could do with that money?" I was thinking "Bass Boat" and she was thinking "Down payment on a retirement condo." But we knew that giving to the church was more important than those things. A couple of years ago, we set up a plan so that the bank sends our giving directly to the church. Therefore we never see the money and really don't miss it. Our giving to the church has become the first thing that gets paid. Before the bills, before gas for the cars, before another pair of shoes for Toni, before another book for me, before everything else, the church gets our tithe.

We have been talking about the flowing grace of God that spreads over all of us. We have to acknowledge – even the skeptical among us – that God has been very generous to us. The implication of that acknowledgement is that God expects us to pass on those blessings to others. God doesn't give to us just so we might keep it all for our own use, but rather gives with the understanding that we will pass it on.

Stewardship is the recognition that we don't own anything. We don't earn anything. We don't even deserve anything. But God gives to us anyway so that we can give to others. In Matthew 10:8, Jesus says "Give as freely as you have received." In II Corinthians 9:8, the Apostle Paul says, "God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others."

We may believe that we have earned everything we have. We may believe that we deserve everything we have. We may believe that we are able to accumulate our possessions because we put in the time on our jobs, because we are diligent, because we are thrifty, and because we work hard to provide for our families. We have a tendency to think, "Wow, look at all that I have accomplished." But it was God who gave us the ability in the first place to produce our wealth. It is not our accomplishments, but God's.

Also giving to the church is an indicator of where our priorities lie. Probably the best signal of our priorities is what we are willing to invest in. Investing first in the work of God is a clear sign that we consider God to be most important. Jesus is the one who said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

The biblical standard for giving is the tithe. A tithe is ten percent. Leviticus 27:30 says, "A tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain or fruit, belongs to the Lord and must be set apart for him as holy." Now you might say to me, "Well, that is the Old Testament. Haven't we gotten away from all of the Old Testament rules and regulations?"

But go to the gospels and you discover that Jesus held the tithe as normative for believers. He complained in the 23rd chapter of Matthew that the Pharisees were tithing but neglecting justice, mercy, and faith. Then he said that those things should be practiced without neglecting the tithe (Matthew 23:23-24).

Now, you may be saying, "Wait a minute. I'm just getting by on my paycheck. I can barely pay my bills and keep food on the table." It's easier for those making a good income to give to the church than it is for some others who are not making that much.

A few minutes ago, we read the story in the gospel of Mark about the widow's mite. This is how it happened. At that time, there were 13 trumpet-shaped receptacles that stood against an outside wall of the Temple. Their function was to gather the gifts of faithful worshippers. As Jesus and his disciples watched one day, they saw rich person after rich person come by and drop their large offerings in. They clattered and clanged down those trumpets so that everyone in ear shot could hear and try to imagine the great sums that were being contributed.

Then a poor widow came by. The Message says that she dropped in two small coins – a measly two cents. The New Revised Standard Version says that she dropped in two small copper coins which are worth a penny. This was the smallest coin in existence at that time. I have read this offering described in various ways: one-eighth of a cent, one-four-hundredth of a shekel, or one-one-hundred-twenty-eighth of a denarius. The literal meaning is “a tiny thing.” She had two of them. She didn’t hold one back and give the other, but dropped both of them down into the offering.

Charles McCabe was elected a bishop in the Methodist Church back in 1896. When he got to his assignment in Texas, he began trying to raise a million dollars for some mission projects. That’s a lot of money, but back at the beginning of the 20th century, it was really A LOT of money. He received numerous letters from fellow Methodists who thought that he had gone off the deep end.

One day, after reading several negative letters, he opened an envelope and out fell a nickel. The letter was from a little boy who wrote, “I’m so glad that you’re going to get a million dollars for missions. I’m going to help you get it. Here’s a nickel toward it. It’s all I’ve got now, but when you want more, call on me.”

The issue is not how much you give. The issue is one of sacrificial giving. Are you willing to sacrifice something to give to the work of the Kingdom? God sacrificed his only Son. Jesus sacrificed his very life. How ready are we to sacrifice as a response?

Do you remember ten or fifteen years ago when Ted Turner gave away a gazillion dollars to some charity? It was incredibly generous and I’m saying nothing against his generosity. It was a terrific donation. But I remember his saying at the time that it was no big deal because he would make it all back the next year.

Not too long ago, Warren Buffet gave away a couple of gazillion dollars to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Again, it was an incredible gift. But in addition to it being a really good item to list on his tax return, he has probably made it all back by now.

If I had to guess, I would guess that the disciples who were with Jesus that day could only stare in amazement at the sight of that widow giving her offering. They perhaps told Jesus that he really didn’t understand economics. She didn’t give the most. She gave the least. But then Jesus would have explained to them that they might have gotten an “A” in economics, but they failed psychology. This woman gave all that she had. She gave all that she was. The others, by way of contrast, gave just a token out of their surplus.

The world is without a doubt helped by major financial gifts. Yet I always look for the sacrifice. The widow who dropped in her little coins and the boy who gave a nickel to his bishop really knew the true nature of sacrifice.

Let me ask you to do a little experiment. I would challenge you to go home and dig out your tax returns from last year. Let’s assume that the IRS didn’t make a mistake with

yours like they did with mine. Two weeks ago, I got a letter from the IRS telling me that I owed them \$38,000 in back taxes because I under-reported our income by \$95,000. They said that the Annual Conference gave us two 1099's – one for \$30,000 and the other for \$65,000. In actuality, Toni received two scholarships from the Conference for \$300 and \$650. The IRS left out the decimal point in both figures.

So let's assume that your tax returns are accurate. What if God decided to give you a salary equivalent to ten times what you gave away? Would you receive a salary cut or would you be alright?

There is one final thing to say. I may have told you this story before. I have a pastor friend who was in the midst of a huge building project for the church he was service. He had talked to several people in the church who had written rather large gifts to the project. He went and visited one fellow to explain the project and ask for his support. This man just didn't like the plans, wasn't sold on the project, and really didn't want to write a check. But he said that he guessed that he could since some of his friends were doing it.

He got out his checkbook and prepared to write a check for \$250,000. My pastor friend said, "You know, I want you to put away your checkbook. This is a gift that is not given cheerfully or expectantly. If you can't be excited about giving, then you need to keep your money in your pocket." So the guy put away his checkbook and the church never got the money.

The Apostle Paul says in II Corinthians: "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (9:6-7).

We don't give because we may feel guilty if we don't. We don't give because we feel we are bowing to pressure. We don't give because we want to impress our friends. We give because we love God and love God's church. We willing give because it makes us happy. If you cannot offer your gifts to Calvary church willingly so that you feel good about it, then maybe you'd better keep your money in your pocket.

God has been very generous to us. Giving to God demonstrates that God is placed as the first priority in our lives. Our first love is God and his Son Jesus. I hope that the giving of ourselves is testament that we are willing to return that love.