

## **“Giving To God”**

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**November 15, 2009      Sermon 2 of Stewardship Drive**  
**Based on Luke 19:1-10**

I hope I didn't give you the wrong impression last week. In my stewardship sermon I stated that this faith community we call “Trinity Lutheran” exists only because of the faithful offerings we give to support its ministries. I proclaimed a truth that we often forget: If we do not generously support the ministries of this church with regular offerings, there would be no Trinity Lutheran Church. There would be no pastor or staff. There would be no ELCA. It is only through our regular offerings that the ministries of this congregation are possible.

That reality is hard to deny, but I hope that I didn't give the impression that stewardship is only about money. That's what we naturally tend to think. Stewardship is the church's way of asking for money.

Lutherans tend to have a limited understanding of stewardship. And it's not all your fault. The only time the word “stewardship” seems to come up is at budget time in November, when money is the focus.

To help our congregation gain a truer picture of what Christian stewardship is all about, our Council recently voted to implement a year-around stewardship program. You're welcome. Our hope is that by this time next year we will all have a fuller understanding of Christian stewardship, and our faith will be all the more richer because of it.

Money is such a private matter in our society. How much we make and what we do with our money falls into the “None of Your Business” category. It's my money, I worked hard for it, and nobody has the right to tell me how to spend it.

But the Word of God has a different take on the matter. The Bible not only clearly specifies that we should return 10% of our income back to God, but it also spells out how we should use the rest of our money as well. I'll just state the obvious: When it comes to our money, God does a lot of meddling.

Jesus made it clear time and time again that if we choose to follow him, he is going to meddle in our daily lives, including how we spend our money.

From the opening chapters of Scripture, the Bible declares that God created everything. That means that everything belongs to God. We own nothing. God is the rightful owner of all that exists, because he brought everything into being.

So then why is it that our lives are filled with so many wonderful blessings? It is because God loves us so dearly that God has chosen to bless us with an abundance of blessings.

Martin Luther was right on when he reminded us that our family and friends, our health, our homes, our jobs, our time, our food and clothing – you name it – everything is a gift to us from God's gracious hand. Because God loves us so dearly, God just can't help himself but to bless us with good and marvelous gifts. It gives God no greater pleasure than to bless us, his beloved children.

If everything indeed belongs to God, then how we choose to use what God has given to us is an expression of our faith. How we choose to use our time, our talents, and our treasures reflect the relationship we have with God.

If it is all too easy for us to talk ourselves out of attending worship on Sunday, then that is a direct reflection of how committed we are to God.

When we force ourselves to do the dreaded task of cleaning out our closets, and then donate all that stuff to people in need, we aren't just cleaning house. Rather, we are choosing to live by biblical principles. For Jesus himself commanded us to clothe the naked.

When we purchase some extra food items at the grocery store and then donate them to a family struggling to make ends meet, we aren't just being nice. We are being good stewards of what God has given to us.

Such simple, everyday acts reflect our commitment to God and to his ways. Such choices reveal that we understand the biblical truth that God has blessed us not solely for our own benefit, but so that we might bless others.

Every decision we make, every word we speak, every action we perform – everything is a direct reflection of our relationship with God. If we don't allow the teachings of the Bible and our Lutheran faith to guide us in all our decisions and actions, then we dishonor God our Father. But if we choose to use our time, talents, and treasures on things which share God's love and grace and bless other people, then we glorify God. Then we are being faithful stewards of all God has entrusted to us.

In the gospel today we hear again the story of the wee little man named Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a conniving tax collector. He has become rich by demanding that his clients pay more taxes than are due, then pocketing the extra. Nice guy, huh? You can sense how the people have grown to despise Zacchaeus. But if the people would refuse to pay their taxes, they would be arrested by the Roman government.

It is important to note what Jesus says about Zacchaeus. Jesus doesn't refer to Zacchaeus as conniving or greedy. No, Jesus simply says that Zacchaeus is lost. He has lost his way.

So right away Jesus turns our attention from how greedy Zacchaeus is to how his heart is not right with God. It's no longer a financial issue; it's a spiritual issue. The way Zacchaeus is choosing to handle his money is jeopardizing his relationship with God and with other people.

After Zacchaeus spends an afternoon with Jesus and experiences the love and grace of God, Zacchaeus feels compelled to return all the money he has overcharged to his clients, and he willingly gives half of what God has entrusted to him to the poor. That's the power of God's grace at work.

Something else that's noteworthy is that after Zacchaeus chooses to give away such a sizeable contribution, the Scriptures do not refer to Zacchaeus as a generous giver, but rather as someone who has been found, someone whose relationship with God has been made right, someone whose faith and trust has finally been focused where it should be.

The story about Zacchaeus reminds all of us that how we handle our money is not just a financial issue, but also a spiritual issue. When we are not willing to generously offer our tithes to the Lord, that doesn't make us stingy, it makes us spiritually immature.

When we cannot place our full trust in God's holy Word, which assures us that God will provide for our every need, then we have not fully surrendered our whole heart to God. All too often we compartmentalize our lives. We say, "Sure, God, you can have some of this part of my life, but this part is off limits." We all too quickly forget that everything belongs to God.

Being a *committed* Christian is like being pregnant. You either are or you aren't. In order for Christ to use us to build and spread his kingdom, we have to be willing to surrender everything to his authority and care.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is "Love the Lord your God with **all** of your heart, soul, mind, and strength." Love the Lord with not just part, but ALL of our lives. In order to faithfully follow Christ, we have to be fully committed. We can't just be a Christian when it's convenient or when it's not too demanding. No, God demands all of us, all of the time. It's all or nothing.

God knows all too well the all-or-nothing principle. In order to save us, God had to sacrifice it all. God had to hand over his very only Son in order that our broken relationship with God would be reconciled. Talk about total commitment.

What is our response to God's priceless gift of offering his own Son? Do we take it for granted? Or, do we give thanks for that gift each and every day of our lives by fully offering our lives to God? As the offertory prayer beautifully states it: "Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us: our selves, our time, and our possessions – signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Sometimes we might find ourselves thinking that God simply demands too much from us. When that thought enters our mind, let us never forget what God was willing to sacrifice for us – his one and only Son on the cross of Calvary. Think about everything that God has given us: his own son, complete forgiveness of all our sins, a second chance, a reserved space in heaven. God stopped at nothing. God gave us everything.

There is no way we will ever out-give God. His mercies will always be more abundant, more joyfully given. God simply calls us to adopt his spirit of generosity. We are to offer our whole lives in love without considering the cost. We are to believe and trust that God will continue to provide us with everything we need to live out his plan for our lives.

Is it our desire to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ? Are we willing to give God complete and utter control of our lives? Are we willing to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, to direct and guide how we will use our financial resources?

To ask, "Exactly how much money should I give to God?" sounds a lot like when Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive someone. Peter thought seven times would surely be more than enough. Jesus stops Peter cold when he says, "Not just seven times, but seventy times seven." In other words, Jesus teaches us that we are to forgive always and not keep track of how many times someone has wronged us.

So exactly how much are we to give to God? Believe it or not, the Bible teaches that we are to give 100% to God. 100%! Remember Jesus words: "Love the Lord with **all** you've got!"

God expects us to use every single penny we have in God pleasing ways. The point has never been to give 10% to the church and then use the rest however we please. Remember, God owns everything. Everything we have is on loan from God. The Bible teaches that God holds us accountable as to how we use all of the riches God has entrusted to us.

We are to give 100% of our lives for the glory of God. Don't think of it as a requirement, because it's not. Rather, it's an invitation from God to experience a way of life that brings much joy and contentment.

God intended money to be used, rather than something that becomes the prime focus and meaning of our lives. By living as though everything belongs to God, we bring some integrity to an area in our life that is often filled with trouble: our finances.

The good news is that God wants us to be happy and fulfilled. God wants us to have abundant, joyful lives. This is why God invites us to surrender our finances over into his hands. Otherwise, experience teaches us, we end up hoarding things. The distinction between needs and wants, necessities and luxuries gets all confused. Our lives start becoming inwardly focused. We become so wrapped up in ourselves that we push God out of the picture, sometimes without even realizing it.

We often tell our children, “We can’t afford that” to stop them from always asking for expensive gifts. This implies, however, that if we *had* the money, we would gladly purchase the costly item.

What a difference it would make if we would tell our children the truth: “That’s not a good use of our money,” or better yet, “I don’t believe that God would want us to use our money in that way.”

Such statements would help families get beyond the superficial financial question, “Can we afford it?” to the real spiritual question, “Would spending our money in this way please God?”

Choosing to give as God has commanded us to give keeps our attitudes and motivations about money in check. Someone once rightly said that most Christians suffer from “spiritual amnesia.” After we are blessed with great and wonderful things, we forget from where all of our blessings came. Since our money sits in a bank account with *our* name on it, we wrongly assume that we can use it as we please. It totally slips our mind that the job which provided our salary was provided by God. We forget that God not only blesses us with money to care for ourselves and our family, but also so that we can make a difference in the world.

Let us not deceive ourselves. God holds us accountable as to how we use the riches God has entrusted to us. Besides, when we realize that everything we have has been given to us by God solely because he loves us, our hearts should be overflowing with gratitude. Any anxiety or lack of trust should be put to rest. God loves us and promises to take care of us. God’s track record speaks for itself.

When we are willing to trust God to provide us with whatever we need, the Bible promises us that our lives will be more satisfying. We will be more content with what we have rather than upset by what we don’t have. The mantra of a faithful steward is, “God will provide.” Faithful stewards make it a habit of giving to others as generously and freely as God gave to them, for no other reason than out of their love

for God and their concern of others. Faithful stewards don't just give money to the church because there are bills to pay. They give because their heart is full of gratitude and joy in the Lord.

Jesus calls us to boldly and completely entrust our lives into God's hands. We are to be willing to pray the same prayer Jesus prayed in the garden before his crucifixion: "Not my will, O God, but your will be done."

Until we can surrender our whole lives to God in that way, then the 10% financial tithe that the Bible teaches will seem unreachable, impossible. But if we take God at his Word, if we are willing to take a bold step of faith and to live as God has commanded us to live, our lives will take on a joy like never before. Like Zacchaeus, our whole perspective on life will drastically change.

We will experience an incredible urge to go out and love and serve our neighbor. When we fully realize what a difference Christ's mercy and love has made in our lives, there will be no stopping us from finding ways to share it with others.

As we prepare our hearts for Commitment Sunday next week, I highly encourage you to spend some intentional time in prayer to discern what God will require of you during 2010. Typically we look at our paycheck stub or our Social Security check or our retirement statements to determine how much we can afford to give to the church. God encourages us to go about it another way.

God calls us to spend time with him in prayer, to have a heart-to-heart talk about such things as how richly we have been blessed, how willing we are to trust God to take care of us, and how reluctant we are to completely surrender our lives over to God's will. Such a conversation can be difficult at first, but ultimately it will bring us closer to God.

Much like what happened to Zacchaeus, we will end up *wanting* to give generously rather than giving out of obligation. We become acutely aware that every time we place our offering in the plate, it is not simply paying the bills, but rather it is an expression of our faith, an act of worship. We end up giving *from* our hearts rather than to a budget.

So hear the truth of God's Word: everything belongs to God; all that we have is a gift to us from God's gracious hand; God holds us accountable as to how we use what God has entrusted to us; and generously giving back to God is an expression of our faith and a measure of our spiritual maturity.

May each of us wrestle with these truths this week as we discern what our financial commitment to Christ will be during 2010. Amen.