

A Sermon for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Trinity, November 16, 2008

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I'm supposed to talk about stewardship around this time of year, as I have for each of the last twenty-two years I've been at St. Matthew's. This is a difficult topic given the current state of our economy. It seems as though we've been giving away lots of home and asset value for a while now—though I'm not quite sure to whom we've been giving it.

Nonetheless, stewardship is an appropriate topic for this season of time. As the world proves itself to be a shaky investment, with a foundation of sand, it is all the more important that our heart and our treasure be invested in what is eternal and built upon the rock (Matthew 7:24-27).

The Bible instructs us to give money in two ways. The first kind of giving is called “tithing.” This means giving back to God the first part of what he has given us. The second kind of giving is called “free will offerings.” This is when we give to various needs from the abundance we might have saved. Our topic today is tithing.

Tithing is based on the principle that the first part represents the whole. Giving the first part back to God is the token way that we dedicate all we have to him. In the original sin, and in the covetousness of fallen humanity that results from it, we seize the creation and say, “This is mine to do with as I please.” By giving the first part back to God, we say, “This is yours and I am a steward of what you have given me.”

Tithing is the consistent practice of God's people, from Abel (Genesis 4:3-5) to Abraham (Genesis 14:14-20) to Jacob (Genesis 28:20-22). This principle was incorporated into the Law of Moses. The first tenth of all measurable income was returned to God through the temple ministry, along with the first born of all the animals (Leviticus 27:30-32).

Tithing is a sign of faith. When we give to God first, this shows that we acknowledge him as Lord and trust him to provide for us. Giving to God from what we have left over after all our needs are met does not show faith in the same way.

This is illustrated by the story of Cain and Abel. Both made an offering to God. Genesis 4 tells us that Abel, “brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat.” Genesis tells us that Cain made “an offering of the fruit of the ground.” God accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's offering. Hebrews says, “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain” (11:4).

Tithing brings our finances within the realm of God's blessing. One overarching biblical principle that applies to all areas of life is that giving is not a zero-sum game. Every gift of time, ability and money offered to God in faith, makes us richer in some way. As someone wrote, “There was a man, some called him mad; the more he gave, the more he had.”

One way the devil robs us of God's favor and blessing is to make us stingy and afraid to give. Jesus taught us that the buried talent is ultimately lost (Matthew 25:24-29).

The Bible promises God's blessing for faithful giving in several places. For example, Proverbs says, "Honor the LORD with your possessions and with the first fruits of all your increase; So your barns will be filled with plenty, And your vats will overflow with new wine" (3:9). 2 Corinthians says, "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (9:6).

God does not promise to make us rich. He promises to be faithful. In God's economy, all giving comes back to us in multiplied form. The faithful giver always, in some real sense, has more.

The word *tithe* means literally "tenth." We tithe in the literal sense when we get our income and the first check written is for a tenth given back to God. This sounds like a lot to give, but the proof is in the people who practice tithing. I've never met anyone who began to tithe, with sincere faith, who looked back and said, "I wish I hadn't done that." God is faithful.

The more people who practice faithful stewardship the greater is the blessing for individual and community. As God challenged Israel through the prophet Malachi,

Bring all the tithes into the storehouse...And try me now in this, says the Lord of hosts, If I will not open for you the windows of heaven, And pour out for you such blessing, That there will not be room enough to receive it. (3:10).

Tithing also gives God a stake in our success. The church, which is the local manifestation of the kingdom, does well when we do well. And, conversely, in difficult times our giving drops in relationship to our income. If we lose our job, a tithe of 0 is 0!

In any event, two principles govern a faithful approach to stewardship. We should give God the first part, not the last part. And we should give a set proportional amount that reflects a commitment to give as God prospers us. If we are not yet tithing, we should move towards the tithe by giving a percentage that is beyond our comfort zone and, so, is a sign of faith. As Hebrews says,

Without faith, it is impossible to please [God], for he who comes to God must believe that God is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him. (11:6).

Our church is a testimony to faithful stewardship. God has provided for our needs, over the years, through tithing members whom God has blessed in significant ways. This is why we have been able to do more than would be expected from a church of our size. We have a community of extraordinarily committed and faithful people, for whom I am very thankful.

The spiritual benefit of the current economic decline is to remind us all that nothing here lasts. As 1 Timothy says, "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out." What we keep is our record of faithfulness. This is why Jesus exhorted us to use temporary things to lay up eternal rewards. As he said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21).