



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

“Stewardship Q & A ”

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Collect of the Day

Merciful Father, Your patience and loving-kindness toward us have no end. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit we may always think and do those things that are pleasing in Your sight; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

So what's this sermon about? It's about cash . . . cold, hard cash, how we use it . . . what it does for us, and how God would like us to use it.

That's all the church ever talks about is money! You really think so? The last time I preached about money was about this time last year. In fact, I probably don't talk about it enough. After all, Jesus talked a lot about money. Most of his parables were about money. He has much more to say about money than he does about prayer, and more about money than heaven and hell combined. Apparently, he thinks it's a pretty important topic. He once said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." That means how we spend our money comes very close to the heart of who we are. Maybe that's why we get defensive about the topic. How we spend our money reveals what's important to us, and what's not all that important. Money isn't everything, of course, but it's way ahead of whatever is in 2nd place.

But isn't stewardship about more than just money? Absolutely! We are also stewards of our time, skills, influence and position. But that's next week's sermon. This week is about cold, hard cash.

You like saying that don't you? I really do!

Why? Because if you can't annoy someone, there's no sense in saying anything from the pulpit.

How long is this going to take? About the length of the other sermons around here.

Oh brother. So go ahead, ask me something about money.

OK. What's the tithe all about? Glad you asked. A tithe is a one-tenth part of something. In the Old Testament era, it was often 10% of the harvest. Today, tithes normally come in the form of cold, hard . . .

That's enough of that! . . . greenbacks. Many Christians believe the tithe was part of the Mosaic Law for the nation of Israel. It's not commanded of Christians

because Jesus has liberated us from the ceremonial laws of Moses. Just as Christians are not required to sacrifice animals or do the ritual washings, neither are we required to give ten percent of our income. The New Testament never commands it but in multiple places the New Testament indicates it's a good principle for Christians to follow. And Martin Luther came down hard on his hearers for using their Christian freedoms as an excuse for being cheap and indolent.

What else does the New Testament say about giving? Well, 1 Corinthians 16 says it's important to give weekly "in keeping with our income."

Why weekly? Because God gives his gifts to us regularly, not sporadically. Therefore our response to his gifts should be regular, not sporadic. If your employer or government decided to pay you when the spirit moved them, how would you meet your financial obligations? If we give on a hit or miss basis, it may feel as if we are being generous, but in the end, we will have been much less generous as those who give weekly. It's sort of like the tortoise and hare.

Yeah, the tortoise and the hare story doesn't really work with that. But what else does the New Testament say about giving? 1 Timothy 5 exhorts Christians to support the financial needs of Christian workers (vv. 17-18). In fact, Martin Luther said, "I really believe that the churches in Galatia, Corinth, etc., were ruined by false prophets for no other reason than they did not provide for their faithful preachers and teachers" (St.L. IX:748). And he complained that if this is the way things are to go in Germany, I am sorry I was born a German or ever wrote or spoke German, and if. . .

You're drifting. What else does the New Testament say? 1 Corinthians 16:2 also says we should give in keeping with our income. Jesus said in Luke, "To whom much is given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

But what about those who don't have much of an income. There must be some who are too poor to tithe. Not according to the Bible. If you have an income, you have the responsibility and privilege to give a portion of it back. John D. Rockefeller said, "I never would have been able to tithe the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed my first salary, which was \$1.50 per week."

Even the children's allowance? Even the children's allowance. We learn everything as children. We should learn Christian stewardship as children too.

Even those on fixed incomes? Yep.

But I have all kinds of debt? How can I afford to give while I'm trying to pay down debt? First answer: Join the club. Most everyone here has debt in one form or another. And if having debt freed us or relieved us of stewardship responsibilities, nobody would give a dime, and this church would soon shutter its doors. Second answer, having debt will have an impact on your giving, for sure. Therefore it's important to get out of debt as quickly as possible and a course called "Financial Peace" can help you manage that. Final answer, if we have income, we also have the responsibility and privilege to give a portion of it back to God, debt notwithstanding.

You talk as if it is not my money. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?

The Bible, especially the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 teaches that everything we have ultimately comes from and belongs to God. We are his servants, and he's given us the responsibility to use it and invest it wisely. So it's a different mindset. If you think yourself the owner, then yes, you have rights. But if you know you're the manager of God's stuff, then it's more about responsibility. . . the responsibility to use and invest his resources according to his desires and purposes.

I think myself the owner. Some nuts are tougher to crack than others.

Suppose I were to tithe. Does it all have to go to Good Shepherd Lutheran Church? I can tell you this. Not all my tithe goes to Good Shepherd. Gail and I have chosen to direct the vast majority of our tithe to this church, but every month we also give to the seminary, LCMS World Relief, and district missions. The point is if you consider this to be your "home church", then it's appropriate to allocate a significant portion of your tithe to the community where you invest yourself (your time and energy) and where others are investing in you. Besides, Jesus gave his life for his bride, the church. It's the only human agency Jesus established. And God's work in the kingdom begins in the local church.

But what if I don't like or approve of the way the church uses my money? First, our budget has about a hundred and fifty line items. I probably would not approve of every line item either, but I feel it's still important to support my church. And besides, I try to remember my tithe is not for a budget. It's in praise and gratitude to God for all his gifts, and I'm confident he receives it that way too. He did in the biblical era. The point is God wants to see joyful and generous giving from you. It's important to give money away so it doesn't become a little god in our lives. When we generously give of our resources, we are knocking down the number one idol in the land, and we are putting our faith in God and trusting him to provide. Tithing is a way to help us fix our eyes on Jesus (Heb. 12:2).

Does tuition at Good Shepherd Lutheran School count towards the tithe? Nope. Tuition pays for education. Tuition is a bill, an obligation. The tithe, however, is not a bill. It's part of the free and joyous response of gratitude toward God. By the way, membership tuition here pays for a little less than half of what it costs to educate a child. And that's okay because this church has chosen to provide Christian education as part of its mission. But what's not okay is to assume that since I pay tuition, then I don't have to worry about tithes and offerings. Quite frankly, we wouldn't be able to operate a school if all our families thought this way.

As long as you're annoying so many people, why not annoy a few more? What about gambling? Is it okay? Show me first that you tithe 10% to your church and give alms to the poor and then I'd be glad to have that conversation with you.

Is the tithe 10% of my gross or net income? That is, before or after tax income? Even the question indicates maybe there's a misunderstanding about the spirit of the tithe. The question is aimed at meeting the minimum obligation. But stewardship isn't about obligation, or doing the minimum. Stewardship is about praise and thanksgiving for what Paul calls the "indefinable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15) . . . the grace of Jesus Christ. So Scripture teaches we are to give back to God our "firstfruits" (Ex. 23:16,19, Prov. 3:9) meaning the primary and choicest of our possessions, not the leftovers. God modeled "firstfruits" giving when he

offered his Son Jesus. In our response, therefore, we want to model firstfruits giving. We want to be thoughtful and deliberate, but not cold and calculating. In 2 Corinthians chapter 9, Paul writes, “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Show me examples from the Bible of that kind of giving. The magi come to mind. They came with precious gifts for the infant Jesus and were overjoyed to do so. There’s the widow who gave her last mite to the Temple treasury. It wasn’t much but it was precious to her, and it did say something about where she put her trust didn’t it? And there’s that woman who broke the alabaster jar and poured the precious contents over Jesus feet. It was not grudging duty for her; it was over the top praise and thanksgiving. When the disciples questioned the practicality of the gift he said, “Leave her alone. She’s done a good thing for me.” And near the end of the story, there’s also Nicodemus buying some 75 pounds of precious myrrh and aloes, giving the crucified Jesus a burial fit for a king, and at the same time, putting his treasure where his heart already was. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says each should give what he or she has decided, not reluctantly or under compulsion, but cheerfully.

Did you ever hear that country song entitled, “If I could have a beer with Jesus. . .” The one where the guy is feeling pretty proud of himself for picking up the tab?

That’s the one! How do you think Jesus would respond to that? I have no idea, but if I were Jesus, I’d probably smote the guy for being so cheap.

Good thing you’re not Jesus. But can I make God happier with me by being more generous? Nope. There’s nothing that you have that he needs. Moreover, he already loves you unconditionally. Your cash cannot make him love you more, nor does being cheap and miserly make him love you less. Even if you were to give him every last penny, that would not make up for the sins of the day. All the silver and gold in the world cannot pay for forgiveness and salvation. Only the blood of Christ can do that.

Does tithing improve my chances of making the cut on the Last Day? How can it? By grace through faith, salvation already belongs to you. John 3:36 says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.” That means eternal life is already a present possession for you. Your money cannot tip the balance one way or the other.

Are there *any* promises associated with giving? In fact there are. When we give, we empty ourselves in order to be filled again by God. In Luke 6, Jesus said, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.” In other parts of Scripture, God even invites us to “Test me in this.” But the motive for giving is never to manipulate God. The motive is always gratitude.

One last question: You said God loves a cheerful giver. How can I become a more cheerful giver? The greatest giver this world has ever known was Jesus who left behind the glories of heaven and came down to this messy, hostile earth, and willingly, even for the joy set before him, went to the cross to give his life so we could keep ours. It is only at the foot of the blood-stained cross where we really learn the art of Christian giving.

Are you done now? Meat get’s done; people get finished.

Are you finished now? Yes, I’m finished. And the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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