

Stewardship

Thanksgiving is over and here comes Christmas! Isn't this an exciting time of the year!!?!? A great time to go out and buy gifts for those closest to us – to drive down the road with Christmas Carols on the radio as we sing along – going to the stores to find just that perfect gift – bring it home, wrap it up – and put it under the tree until Christmas Day.

Then on Christmas Day we wake up early to either watch our kids or grandkids open presents, or maybe we wake up early to start cooking our Christmas dinner because the family is coming over .

Just a wonderful, beautiful time, isn't it? And doesn't it just make you feel so good to do all this work, all of the thought and preparation – just getting ready for Christmas – because it is so great to be able to give to others. Maybe there is some truth to that old adage, "It is better to give than receive." Maybe it really is.

But then I really get thinking about everything that goes into preparing for Christmas – First, there is going out to buy gifts - How many people went out shopping on 'Black Friday'?

Just driving down the road – before you even get to the store, it is like the drivers have lost their minds. You are going along nice and steady and all of a sudden the person in the right hand lane makes a left hand turn across 6 lanes of traffic. Kind of like when my wife sees a garage sale sign – hold on for dear life!

I don't know what comes over people around the holidays. They can be very inconsiderate drivers – and then, they all end up going shopping at the same store you are in – and their attitudes match their driving skills. They just elbow you, push you to the side, cut in line, just completely rude.

I don't know if you saw it on the news, but every year people are out there having fist fights over sales items. I am sorry, but gifts like Tickle Me Elmo are not that exciting.

Then if you survive all of that, you may actually end up getting the gift you were searching for. That is unless it was a Doorbuster and they sold out of them 3 hours before you even woke up that morning.

But if you actually did get the gift you were searching for – and you get home safely in one piece – there is no guarantee that it will even be appreciated.

I don't know about you, but I was an ungrateful little kid. For one Christmas my parents got me a bike – I looked at it and said, “a three speed, I wanted a 10 speed.” I couldn't be happy with just having a bike – I wanted a 10 speed bike.

And then there's the dinner itself. How many people have the Christmas Dinners at their homes and everyone feels they must be in the kitchen at the same time – while you are trying to cook? Of course they are all giving advice to the one person cooking the turkey. All trying to “HELP” in their own special way.

Why do we put up with all of this? Better to give than receive? Who's crazy idea was that?

Last week we talked about how the early Jews had to give a portion of their new crops back to God – something called First Fruits.

We talked about how this was new to them and that they needed to look at giving to God a little differently than they had in the past.

So every year when they went out to their fields and began to harvest it, they would have to put aside a portion to give to God.

Then – there was another rule. They weren't allowed to harvest their entire property – they always had to leave some of their crops behind. They had to leave a portion un-harvested so the poor people could come and take the leftovers. It was called gleaning the fields.

So here are the Jews in their promised land. The land that God had promised to their ancestors. They are working the land, they are growing crops, but then they are required to give a decent sized portion away to God and then another portion to the poor.

At first I am sure some people had a problem with this. I mean, it was their crops – who cares about the poor – let them get their own crops – and God, why give something to him? He didn't help me grow these crops.

But then other people understood a little more. They knew that they wouldn't have even been in that land if it wasn't for God, they would have still been slaves in Egypt. Or maybe they realized that the maker of all things – the Creator of the world, asked them to show their love for Him and give a little of their riches as a way to give thanks and remember Him.

Then they might have realized that there were many people who just weren't as blessed as they were. The poor might be poor because the breadwinner of the family died, or maybe because they are elderly, or maybe because of some other financial crisis.

Whatever reason, some people realized that the poor people needed help and it would be a good thing to allow them to have some of the leftovers in the field.

But for us, why should we worry about it? Why should we give to God, why should we give to the needy? Is it because our culture tells us it is the right thing to do?

How many of us gave after hurricane Katrina? How about after the tsunami? Anybody here give blood? How about Angel Trees or food banks?

But then our society rewards people for giving, as well. If you give enough blood, you get a special pin that shows how many gallons you have given. For some charities, if you give over a certain dollar amount, they place your name on a plaque – or they might even name a building after you.

Let's say for example that Bill Gates donated a million dollars to the North West Hospital – they might name the library the Gates Library. But what about the woman who only donated \$100. Think they will name a building after her?

Let's put it more into perspective. Bill Gates has a net worth of \$50 billion dollars. So that 1 million is about .0018 of one percent of his net worth. But the woman who gave the hundred dollars only has a net worth of \$10,000. So that \$100 is 1% of her net worth.

So the woman actually gave a larger portion of her net worth. But you don't see them naming buildings after her. You don't see the hospital administrator calling her up and asking her to come over for a special dinner in her honor. You don't see the newspapers running over to her door to get her picture for the front page.

Now don't get me wrong – Bill Gates has donated a lot to charities, and I am just using his net worth for this example.

In our culture, we tend to reward those who give the highest dollar amount. While large donations are great for many charities, God looks at donations a little differently.

As Debi read for us earlier in Luke 21:1-4.

God looks at it differently. God wants to know that we made an effort to help others. God wants to know that we've made a small sacrifice to help our neighbors.

God doesn't get excited when we make a donation and say, "See what I did!" God gets excited when we humbly give to Him or when we help others.

Many of you may have heard of a word called a tithe. To tithe means to give 10% of your income away to help others. I am not asking anyone here to tithe.

For any of you that have been here for longer than a year, you know I don't preach that people should tithe. I don't even preach that people should give. One Sunday a year I ask for us to make a financial pledge to the church – and I don't come back and say we need more pledged.

Here is my philosophy on giving. No church should tell you what to give. I also don't believe anyone should donate only to a church. There are a lot of other charities out there that are just as deserving, if not more deserving.

I believe that every year we should pray and discern what we feel God wants us to give to the church and other charities. When we make our pledges, it isn't necessarily a pledge to our church, but a pledge to God.

If things happen in our lives and we can't keep our pledge, or if we want to increase our pledge, we just need to place a call or send an email to our bookkeeper to make a change.

I know many people get uncomfortable when finances are discussed at church. I used to be one of them, and that is why I only discuss pledging one Sunday a year.

I want to share with you my giving history. Some of you may have heard this story before, but I would like to share it again:

As many of you know, I was Catholic until about 15 years ago. When I was growing up and confirmed in the Catholic church, they sent me offering envelopes. I was 14 years old and the church expected me to start donating.

Well, needless to say, those envelopes never got used. Actually, when I received them, I stopped going to that church. I didn't have any money as it was and the last thing I wanted was to go there and not use my envelopes.

As I got older and started getting back into church, I would leave a little in the offering plate now and then. I understood that they had to pay for the building and that kind of stuff – but I never fully understood giving. I didn't know what it meant to want to give.

When I was in the Navy I had this boss that told me she happily tithed and what a wonderful blessing it has been for her. I asked her what tithing was and she explained to me that it was giving 10% of your income to the church.

I was shocked – 10% – that was a lot of money. How could anyone give that much to a church. You have to be kidding me.

I figured she was just some religious fanatic.

A few years went on – and I was going to church occasionally. Then I really started reading the Bible, growing in my faith and learning what it meant to sacrifice something in my life for God and others. I mean, after all, Jesus did sacrifice himself for my sins.

So one weekday afternoon as I was getting closer and closer to God, I was praying in the Catholic Church by myself when I got up, walked to the back of the church and inserted a \$20 bill into a collection box.

Now, let me explain a couple of things that were going on at this time. I was pretty much broke. I probably had about \$100 to my name and I was between jobs.

The second thing to note was that there was nobody there. No one. This particular church kept their sanctuary open during the weekdays so people could come in and pray. So I wasn't forced or pressured to give a thing – but I felt moved to give – in my heart.

I wasn't moved by some great preacher's words, or a certain song – but by God. It was something I knew I should do.

It was probably one of the hardest things I ever did. It was strange. Here I am by myself in a pretty big church, I was just praying, and now I am looking at a donation box with a slot in it.

I had my \$20.00 bill folded up, my hand trembling, hesitant and then – I let it go into the box. I was scared to death. What the heck was I doing?

I know I thought about it afterwards. What did I do that for? I was just at church praying to God for help and direction in my life. If I had known that I would end of giving \$20 to the church, I probably wouldn't have gone in!

But you know, God does provide. I still had enough money to get by. Giving that \$20.00 actually turned out to be a blessing for me.

I wasn't tithing at all before then – and I didn't all of a sudden start tithing either.

But the sacrificial giving of that \$20.00 touched my life in ways that I could never have imagined.

It taught me first and foremost to trust in God. Now I am not saying I heard this voice booming down from heaven saying, “Mark, give me a \$20 bill.” But I just knew that it was the right thing to do. We could say that the Holy Spirit moved me to give.

It also taught me that giving a little back to God is a good thing. Not something to look at as an obligation to the church. Because it shouldn't be looked at that way. Giving back to God shouldn't be considered an obligation— but a way for us to walk the path the Bible teaches us to walk – and, more importantly, a way to draw closer to God.

I really felt good about giving that \$20 bill to the church. I am sure it was used do something for God's kingdom, but do you know what? I am pretty sure that giving that \$20.00 away did more for me than it did for the church.

But just giving that \$20 bill didn't change my entire attitude towards giving. Working towards sacrificial giving can take a lifetime. Giving that \$20.00 did open my heart and mind to the idea that I could give a little more than I had been giving, but a tithe – no way!

It took many years of praying and slowly increasing my giving before I got anywhere close to a tithe. But, for me, as I increased my giving to the church and to other charities, I felt more of a blessing in my life.

Once I realized that I am not obligated to give, and realized that giving actually can help other people, and giving can even help me draw closer to God – when I realized these things is when I finally felt released from the norms of society and felt closer to God.

I am not saying that I think everyone should 10% or more to the church.

I'm not saying that I think everyone should give 1% or more to the church.

I'm not even saying I think everyone should pledge.

What I am saying is that we should all pray about giving and truly see where we are being guided. Once we pray about it, we should decide to either make a pledge or not make a pledge. Then we need to be happy with our decision.

Whatever we decide – whatever percent or dollar amount we decided on, we need to be comfortable that we sought out God and made a pledge to our church for what we truly feel God is leading us to give.

A tithe isn't something we should feel pressured to give. As a matter of fact, we shouldn't feel pressured to give at all. We should make it more about wanting to give to God and to other charities. It shouldn't feel like an obligation.

I know for me, when I truly search my heart and give what God is leading me to give, then it becomes a true blessing to me. Maybe it is better to give than to receive.

I want to leave you with some words from the Apostle Paul: Acts 20:35

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