

Pentecost 25 (Proper 27), November 11, 2018

Sermon: What is Stewardship

Text: 1 Kings 17:8–16

Other Lessons: Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24–28; Mark 12:38–44

1 Kings 17:8–16

8 Then the word of the Lord came to him, **9** “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”

10 So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.” **11** And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” **12** And she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.” **13** And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.” **14** For thus says the Lord the God of Israel, “The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.” **15** And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. **16** The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Hebrews 9:24–28

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. **25** Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, **26** for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. **27** And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, **28** so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Mark 12:38–44

And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces **39** and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, **40** who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

41 And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. **42** And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. **43** And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. **44** For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus rest upon each and every one of you this day.

“And Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all who are contributing, for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Wow...imagine that. The Bible talks about money and giving; Jesus Himself talks about money and giving. Now, I'm sure that some of you hear this language of money and giving and you get a little uneasy, perhaps even a little defensive. I know that you hear this frank and uncensored talk in our Gospel lesson this morning about giving and think to yourself, “Here we go! Here comes the brow-beating and the guilt-tripping about how we need to give more money! All the church cares about is my money! Besides, it's not right to judge others. It's none of your business how much or how little I give. That's between me and God.”

Guys: I've read through this text a thousand times in the past couple of weeks, even dissecting every word of the Greek language that it was originally penned in. I'm sorry, but I don't see it. I don't hear one single command regarding how much I

need to give monetarily in order to offer up a good and God-pleasing offering. There's nothing here about tithing or putting yourself in the poor house so that you can give an "acceptable" offering on Sunday morning, nor is there anything here that says that the smaller the offering the more acceptable it is to God. Believe it or not, this lesson really has nothing to do with money and giving at all. All that uneasiness and defensiveness and rush to justify why you give or don't give as much as you do is all unwarranted and wasted, spilling forth from a guilty conscience. Instead, this Gospel lesson has everything to do with proper trust in God and His providence. In this way, this Gospel lesson does also have everything to do with proper stewardship; that is, proper use of all and proper thankfulness for all that God so richly and graciously provides us.

Just look at that Gospel account of the poor widow. We are told exactly how much she gave for good theological reason. The original Greek keys us in to tell us that her offering was worth about 1/64 of a denarius, a denarius being one day's wage for a laborer. She put in 1/64 of a day's wage, and that's all she had to live on, as Christ Himself declared. I did the math on this, calculating what this fractional amount would equal in today's economy, and according to statistics published just this past week this woman had a whopping \$0.96 to live on. This is all the woman had in the world!

Take careful note, too, of what the text does NOT say. Jesus never says here that the widow put in her last \$0.96 that was left over after the groceries were covered, the bills were paid, and the car got gassed up, and the IRA contribution was made for retirement. She had \$0.96 to live on—period. It is that \$0.96—her only \$0.96—that she faithfully gave back to the Lord. You can be sure that the more affluent people around her put in far more than she did, dollar-wise, yet Jesus says quite clearly that she gave far more than any of them. Did she know if anything better was going to be coming her way? No! In fact, we're never told—never—that this

woman went on to be blessed with an abundance of material wealth in the wake of this blessed act of stewardship. She may very well have died completely broke and utterly destitute a few days later for all we know, but...she would've died in saving faith.

“Pastor, you do realize that making mention of this little fact isn't exactly encouraging me to give more, right?” Guys: I've said it before and I'll say it again: I don't care how much you give. God doesn't care how much you give. God cares about your heart. He cares that your heart is in the right place when you give. That's precisely why our Lord calls this widow's meager offering given out of her immense poverty greater than all those who contributed to the offering box out of their abundance. She didn't give for the purpose of receiving a tax deduction at the end of the year. She didn't give for a pat on the back. She didn't give so as to fund her special pet project. She didn't give what was left over after her bills, her necessities, and her entertainment expenses were covered. She didn't let everyone around her know that she just gave her last \$0.96. Nobody knew that except Jesus, who truly knew her situation, her motivation, and her heart.

Almighty God knows your situation, your motivation, and your heart, too. You can fool everybody else, but you can't fool Him. He knows the truth of your stewardship. He knows when the gifts you give, whether it's your time, your talent, or your treasures, even if they are a mathematical “ten-percent” or more, are given as a leftover or as a way of keeping score or as an attempt to earn favor and praise or as an attempt to fund your personal, self-serving passions and desires. “Hey God...did you see this? That's ten-percent, down to the penny. Go ahead and check my math! Look at how good and faithful and wonderful I am. This should count for something, right?” “Hey God, I'm a little tight this week. Starbucks upped their prices. The price of milk and eggs is going up. I just got a new big-screen TV. I need to get new tires, and I'm trying to stash a little something away for retirement and a nice winter vacation to the Caribbean. You understand, right? Think of

this as another widow's mite.”

I don't mean to burst your bubble, but God is not impressed with such shallow, hedonistic, self-centered giving. His love and His favor is not bought. It's not earned. His love and His grace and His favor are ours as absolutely free and unmerited gifts because of Jesus Christ's all-atoning and completely selfless gift of Himself for all mankind.

Folks: As I said before, today's lessons really have nothing to do with money or giving. Today's lessons are all about trust and faith; trust and faith that naturally bears fruit in our stewardship. That's why I love the story of the little African fisherman. The story goes that a missionary was teaching the African villagers about stewardship and tithing. After the service, the missionary returned to his hut, confident that he was faithful in his teaching, but also cognizant of the universality of Old Adam's disdain for any talk about having to part with hard-earned goods or money, in one ear and out the other, with no real change in anyone's patterns. A short while later there was a knock at the door. The missionary answered the door and found a little boy standing there with a fish in his hand. “Pastor, you taught us what tithing is, so here. I've brought you my tithe.” As the missionary gratefully took the fish, he asked the boy, “If this is your tithe, where are the other nine fish?” The boy smiled and replied matter-of-factly, “Oh, they're still back in the river. I'm going back to catch them now.”

Think about that. That little boy gave the very first fish. That's what made it a true tithe. Technically, he didn't have ten-percent, did he? That would require having nine other fish. But he trusted that God would provide. He gave the first fruits. The other fish still needed to be caught, and if you've ever spent any amount of time fishing, you know that this is, by no means, a guarantee! There's a reason it's called “fishing” and not “catching.” This is faith in action!

The Old Testament often speaks of this same exact thing in terms of produce and crops. The very first harvest is gathered up and returned to the Lord in humble thankfulness. The farmer doesn't know if there's going to be a bad frost or locusts or drought or any other disaster. The other 90% is still theoretical. It hasn't grown yet. For all he knows he may very well have given away the only crop that will grow that year. However, he gives it away in the full trust and confidence that God will provide. He gives it away knowing that whether he lives or dies he belongs to God. Even though the next meal may not be a sure thing, he knows that his salvation is absolutely sure and certain. Fear, love, and trust in God above all things...are you hearing it?

My friends: Trust /Faith is what it comes down to when we speak of proper stewardship. God has entrusted us to be caretakers/stewards with a wide array of His rich gifts to use in praise and worship of Him as well as in faithful Christian service to one another; especially to those who don't yet know of Jesus Christ and the life and salvation that is theirs in His sacrifice. That's the key here—sacrifice. I don't think anybody will disagree that stewardship requires sacrifice, but without Christ's all-atoning, all-redeeming sacrifice at the center, all other sacrifice on our part is nothing more than dirty, soiled rags before God.

This is precisely why I will not tell you that you need to do more or give more. I can't make you do anything. All I can do as a faithful servant of God is point you to the cross and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Saving faith and trust in this reality will bear fruit in all areas of life; of this I am confident. The Bible tells me so. Look to Jesus Christ. He willingly and obediently gave up all of heaven to take on our fallen and sinful flesh, all for the sole purpose of having that flesh beaten and crucified upon a lowly criminal's cross. He took all the sins of the entire world upon Himself, willingly suffering the eternal pains and fires of damnation so that we would never have to taste them for ourselves.

He became nothing so we could have everything.

Understood in this light—the light of the cross of Christ—all these other sacrifices of ours that we make in this life—whether it's with our free and unmerited gifts of time, talent, or treasures—cease to be burdens and chores that somebody else can or should do. They cease to be something we squeeze in if time permits or budget in if we have enough left over. They cease to be dreadful worries or foolish checklists we create to make sure that we're keeping up our end of the bargain with God. When understood in the all-redeeming, loving light of the cross of Jesus Christ, all these gifts in our lives, whether they're great or small, are instead rightly recognized for what they truly are: the joyous gifts and opportunities that God freely grants us to serve and thank and praise and trust in Him for all that He has already so richly entrusted to us here in time and there in eternity—us, His loving, trusting, and faithful stewards. Stewardship: It's a "Trust" Thing

To Him alone be all glory, all praise, and all honor.

AMEN

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

