

“Give All You Can”

October 25, 2015

Money Matters: Earn. Save. Give. Stewardship series

For these last few weeks, we’ve focused on Wesley’s simple rules for money. We’re at the last rule. “Earn all you can” sounds great. “Save all you can” sounds difficult, but smart. But “give all you can” sounds a lot more challenging than the first two. And Wesley knew the challenge of his day and ours - that we still struggle with the idea that more will mean happier.

He even said, “In seeking happiness from riches, you are only striving to drink out of empty cups.” Wesley knew that this really is about our spiritual lives - how we seek wisdom around finances and how we respond to God’s grace with our whole hearts and lives.

Last week, I mentioned the difference between a steward and a debtor. A steward manages the gifts of the one who has given them in line with the giver’s values. A debtor simply borrows money with the agreement to pay it back - not with any hold on how it’ll be used. God calls us to be stewards who use the gifts he’s given to us in line with the Kingdom of God.

We’ve heard from friends in our congregation about growing in faith and giving. I’m grateful for their words and witness. There’s another quote from Mother Teresa that is particularly powerful: “If you give what you do not need, it isn’t giving.” Let that sit for a moment. And hear it again: “If you give what you do not need, it isn’t giving.”

I’m tempted to downplay her words, and yet, when I think of her and her sacrifice, it’s hard to argue. She seems to hit on something similar that we read in the Gospel of Mark. It’s easy to read about how much the widow gives – all that she has. That part is clear. Jesus witnesses her offering and makes note of it to those around him. But before we get settled into the idea that it’s all about money, think again.

We focus on big offerings and how generous people can be – it’s a part of our humanness. We marvel at people of means who give to charity and make a difference, and that’s important. But Jesus reminds us that big offerings don’t mean anything without the right attitude. A family name can grace a building, but there’s more to righteous giving than what we accomplish. Our heart has everything to do with giving, and focusing on why we give is vital to our faith. We can’t escape the connection between giving and faith. I think John Wesley knew that, too.

So, yes, Jesus has something to say about money and how we use it. It’s not just about *what* we offer to God; it’s also about *how* we make an offering to God. That goes

for money, time, gifts of service and help – everything we have to give. It has more to do with you and me as the giver than what we give.

Is our giving a sacrifice or do we give whatever's left after we've fulfilled our own desires? Do we give out of obligation? Do we give because we feel guilty? Or is there something more to our giving – a lifestyle, a commitment, a way we worship God? I ask these questions not as an indictment, but because Jesus compels us to ask ourselves why we give and what we give. Are we giving what we don't need? We're in this together, and God calls us to pay attention.

We sit right alongside the people listening to Jesus' words about the scribes. Remember that scribes are responsible for knowing and interpreting the Law. Their writing skills were highly valued in Jesus' time. They hung out with the religious leaders. But Jesus chastises some of them for their attitude in giving. It wasn't so much an act of worship for them as it was a way to get noticed.

In Jesus' time, there were large containers all around the Temple courtyard where people put their offering. There wasn't paper money, so their offering always made a sound. And as you might imagine, if you put a lot in, it made a bigger sound! And there were some who wanted others to notice!

But, let's be clear. Jesus isn't condemning those who have money to give, and he isn't feeling sorry for those who don't have much to give. "The rich" aren't the bad guys here. Neither are "the poor" overlooked. Rather, Jesus warns us about how and why offerings are made. Jesus calls for an attitude adjustment. As people of faith, we need to fight against a mentality that simply tells us to do what we please with what we have. We fight against the temptation to worship our abundance rather than to share it.

Those who give so others will see miss the point. How much someone gives isn't the point. Yet, Jesus warns about giving what's leftover rather than giving with a true understanding of God's graciousness. In striving to make others think they're holy, these scribes do a disservice to God and others. They practice what we call a false piety – acting like they've got it all together when they really don't, and misleading others about faithfulness. They give holding something back.

And though the widow's offering might have been fairly silent and small in comparison, she gave it all. No one else makes the decision for us about what we give. It's very personal. We have the freedom, and Jesus' makes it clear that both the scribes and the widow have the freedom to give, too. What makes the difference is their attitude about giving. Are we giving what we don't need?

This passage is probably one of the more memorable about giving. The widow shows great generosity. She shows us what real giving means – sacrifice and a sense of recklessness that doesn't allow us to hold back. The widow gives it all, and even with

the small gift she offers, God will use it. And God will use us, whatever resources and gifts we bring, if our intent is to give from the heart.

When we give of ourselves, it becomes a reflection of God working in us. And as Jesus demonstrates, people can tell the difference – and we know that’s true. We can tell the difference in people – if they give and serve out of devotion or out of obligation. And we can tell the difference in ourselves. You know what it feels like to give when you feel committed to something. It’s very different than giving when you feel forced. The scribes Jesus spoke of gave out of obedience to the Law. But this widow’s mighty offering demonstrates that giving is a way of life and a form of worship.

We don’t give or do to earn God’s favor. We commit our gifts to God because we serve God who is faithful and can be trusted. And our God is a giving God. God has entered into our lives and hearts in a mighty way – in Jesus. Jesus is God incarnate – God in the flesh.

And the sacrifice made for us in Jesus is a model for our giving. God has offered us love through Jesus that can only be fully shown when it is given away. One song says “Love isn’t love ‘til you give it away.” The point of faithful living isn’t to impress anyone, or to impress God. The point of faithful living is to be faithful to God because God is faithful.

When the widow gives two small coins, her offering is gracious. She doesn’t do it to get noticed. In fact, she probably doesn’t expect anyone to see. It’s Passover week in Jerusalem, and traffic around the Temple is busy. Nobody would’ve thought anything of her offerings. But Jesus is quick to say that what she gives is meaningful and has more to do with her commitment to God than her financial statement.

On their journey with Jesus, the disciples have asked about how to achieve greatness before God. This widow serves as an unexpected example. Her offering of everything leaves her with only one thing left – trust in God. But trust is exactly what Jesus has been talking about all along. Greatness isn’t measured in our offerings; it’s measured in our devotion. What’s important here is how much giving impacts the giver’s life and faith - not on how much the gift is or how much it pads the treasury.

Money is a gift, and it must be treated that way. Whatever we do to earn it, God is still the ultimate giver of what we have. And our attitude must be one of thanksgiving first of all. Giving is an act of worship. Giving of God’s gifts, in whatever form, isn’t optional for us. It’s our faith commitment, and it’s how we point to God’s grace in our lives.

So we hear those words again: “If you give what you do not need, it isn’t giving.” We don’t give to exalt ourselves or our gifts. God gave us gifts that we might give God glory. When we give, we should exalt God - the ultimate Giver. The widow’s gift was

bold, and her witness reminds us that stewardship isn't just a one-time thing, but a full-time commitment that changes us. The hope is that we reflect God's grace more fully every day.

We make commitments joyfully and boldly today. Some of us have done this before. For some of us this may be a new experience. May we celebrate God's faithfulness, seek God's wisdom, and give with gratitude and joy.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.