

Tom Coop
1 Corinthians 8:1-15
February 19, 2017

In God We Trust

Let me start with the story of Matilda and Bert who lived sometime around the great depression in a quaint, small, Midwestern town.

They'd been married forever and loved each other, but they'd become a little settled in their ways.

Well, one day, while at the county fair, they come across a young man sitting next to one of those open cockpit airplane with a sign that said: Ride for 2 - \$5 dollars.

And Matilda said to Bert, "You know I sure would like to take one of those fancy aeroplane rides."

To which Bert grumbled, "I don't think so. Five dollars is Five dollars."

"But Bert," Matilda said, "I'm 72 years old. I might never get another chance to fly in one of those fancy aeroplanes."

To which Bert again grumbled, "I don't think so. Five dollars is Five dollars."

It was at that point that the young man—who was the pilot—having overheard their conversation, interrupted.

"Tell you what folks. I'll take the two of you up for an airplane ride for nothing—free—but here's the catch: ya can't say nothin'.

“If I hear even one peep from either of you while you’re in the air, you owe me the five dollars. That means you can’t scream, or yell or even gasp.

“If you do, you gotta pay the pay full price.”

Well that sounded like a bargain that even Bert couldn’t pass up. And so Matilda and Bert climbed into the plane.

Well, the pilot was pretty good at getting people to scream and he tried every trick he knew to make that happen.

He did steep ascents and dives. He let the plane stall and wove around telephone poles. He did barrel rolls, loop de loops, and spins.

But Bert and Matilda didn’t say a single word.

After twenty minutes, the pilot finally gave up and brought the plane in for a landing.

While they were taxiing down the runway, he turned around to Matilda and said:

“Well, I guess you got that plane ride for free. You know, I did everything I could think of to get you to scream, but you were quiet as a church mouse.”

To which Matilda replied, “Well, I was going to say something when Bert fell out of the plane. But then again, five dollars is five dollars.”

Today is **STEWARDSHIP OF TREASURES SUNDAY**.
It means I am going to be talking about **MONEY!**

Many of us, if we were honest, find financial conversations to be somewhat awkward. \$5 is \$5, right?

And so, if we can manage it, we usually plan to skip church on the morning when the money sermon is preached.

I guess you guys blew it. Can't say I didn't warn you!

But there is a good reason why we need to talk about money. Especially at church. It is because there is a crossroads where our spiritual decisions and our financial decisions intersect.

How we operate our business, what we do within the four walls of our home, how we conduct ourselves on the freeway, what we do with the money we earn—all these stand directly tied in with our religious faith.

The Bible teaches us that we are to serve God and others with all that we have and all that we are, and thus it gives guidelines on a variety of issues.

It has something to say about prayer, about worship, about the words we say to others and the attitudes we display, about sexuality, about work and about many other areas that are part of our daily living.

So, it makes sense that it would talk about money and its use.

When we listen to the words of Jesus, we discover that many of his parables focus on money and material goods.

Some of his teachings warn against making money the primary focus in our lives: "You cannot serve both God and money."

On the other hand, some of his teachings encourage the multiplication of wealth through faithful and diligent work, thus encouraging generosity, so that the needs of others are met.

Nowhere in Scripture, though, is money seen as evil. Our ability to make money and the money we make are acknowledged as gifts from God.

You see, it is not money, but the love of money, that is the root of all evil.

Still, giving, especially giving generously, is difficult. Being detached of our belongings, including our money is no easy task, yet this is exactly what Jesus calls us to do.

When he meets the rich young man, Mark records in his gospel:

Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him.

“There is still one thing you haven’t done,” Jesus told him. “Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

It is that simple! Just sell... sell it all! Okay, I am not actually suggesting you sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor! At least not today!!!!

I am simply trying to emphasize, as was Jesus, the idea of “detachment” and its importance in the concept of generous giving:

How detached are we of earthly goods? How much space does money occupy in our hearts? Is our use of money helping us achieve holiness or is it doing the exact opposite?

Someone once said, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Any idea who? Yep, Karl Marx, the father of socialism, wrote these words in his famous book *Das Kapital*.

The point is this: Thinking about doing a good deed and actually doing the good deed are two different things.

God calls us to give generously – of ourselves, our time, and our resources.

Yet, it is often hard for us to go beyond intentions when it comes to giving, especially financial giving, especially in a society such as our own which places such a high premium on the acquisition of material things.

Even though we know we are called to support the cause of Christ financially, and even make commitments to do so through our membership in the church and our support of the annual church budget, it is much easier in our world to spend money on ourselves and our families, than it is to give it to God.

And that is the cold hard truth!

We may have the best of *intentions*, but it is often hard to follow through. The will to give does not arise from a strong bank account and significant liquid assets.

If you are waiting until you are financially stable to start giving, or give what you think you ought to give, you never will be a Generous Giver.

There is the story of the man who once made a covenant with his pastor that each would tithe ten percent of their income every year.

They were both young and neither of them had much money. But over the years, things changed.

The layman tithed \$500 the year he earned \$5,000, and \$5,000 the year he earned \$50,000.

But the year he earned \$500,000 dollars, he just could not bring himself to write out that check for \$50,000 to the Church.

So, in desperation, he telephoned the minister, who long since had moved to another church, and asked to see him.

Walking into the pastor's office, the man begged to be let out of their covenant, saying:

"This tithing business has to stop. It was fine when my tithe was \$500, but I just cannot afford \$50,000. You've got to do something, Reverend!"

The pastor knelt on the floor and prayed silently for a long time.

Eventually the man said, "What are you doing? Are you praying that God will let me out of the covenant to tithe?"

"No," said the minister. "I am praying for God to reduce your income back to the level where \$500 will be your tithe!"

Generous giving begins with the willingness to trust that God will supply my needs, so I am free to be MORE generous than some might think prudent!

And when we are generous, we will always receive more than we give.

God promises us as much in the third chapter of Malachi. There God is speaking to the Israelites, challenging them to give generously to the work of God in the temple.

He says this in verse 10: "Test me in this... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

Paul echoes this sentiment in verses 6-8 of our New Testament text (*read those verses*).

That does not mean, however, that we will become rich, at least not financially. This is not "Health and Wealth" theology here, which teaches us to give generously so that we might become rich.

When we give generously, God will, in turn, make us rich – but that richness will more often be spiritual in nature, where God will help us grow and become more like Christ.

But, that's much better than money, isn't it?

I mean, which would you rather have - financial riches which you must manage, guard, and watch over, but eventually lose?

Or wealth that lasts forever?

There is a story from the Hindu faith that illustrates this really well.

One evening a priest was just getting ready to sleep under a tree when he was approached by a villager who came running up to him asking that he give him a precious stone.

“What stone” the priest asked?

“Lord Shiva appeared to me in a dream last night and told me that if I came to this place at dusk tonight a priest would give me a precious stone that would make me unbelievably rich.”

The priest rummaged in his bag for a moment and, smiling, said, “Lord Shiva probably meant this one. I found it in the forest today and you certainly can have it.”

The villager gazed at the stone in wonder. It was as large as his fist and, even in the fading light, filled with luminosity. It was the largest diamond he had ever seen. He took it and walked away.

But, that night he couldn't sleep. He was deeply troubled. The next morning he rushed back to the priest, and thrust the diamond back into the priest's hands.

“I don't want it,” he said. “What I want, is whatever you have that makes it possible for you to give it away so easily.”

This story brings us to the heart of stewardship. Christian stewardship is not primarily about money. It's about gratitude and trust.

Gratitude is the link between receiving and giving. Unfortunately, our culture teaches entitlement, not gratitude.

Recall the words of Bart Simpson when asked to say grace at the dinner table:

“Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.”

In one sense, of course, this is true. But the deeper truth is everything we have comes to us as a gift from God – every breath, every ability, every opportunity, every moment of life.

Becoming conscious of that reality changes us from the inside out.

Research demonstrates that gratitude contributes powerfully to human health, happiness, and social connection.

People who keep regular “gratitude journals” report a decrease in physical symptoms and more alertness, energy, enthusiasm, improved attention, better sleep, higher levels of happiness and sense of well-being.

Initiating even a single contact with someone towards whom you feel grateful has an effect on your mood that can last for up to a month.

And what better way to show our gratitude to God, than to part with something we value so highly.

Want to know if you are a generous giver?

Picture two children to each of whom you have given a box of chocolate candy.

The first child opens his box, scans all the many kinds of chocolates, and then runs off for a few minutes.

He returns with his face covered in chocolate, but offers you the last piece of candy, the one he did not want to eat.

The second child opens her box, scans all the chocolates, and then offers you the first piece, any piece you want.

Both children offered you a piece of chocolate. Which child was the generous giver?

In giving to God, many people act more like the first child instead of the second.

Do you give from what you have left over ... or ... from what you begin with? It makes a BIG difference

Now, I need to point out, there is no one absolute biblical model for giving your money. There is no divine 1040 form with thousands of pages of instructions and a heavenly IRS.

There is no group of angels with green eyeshades in heaven auditing our giving. Our giving is a private agreement between each of us and God.

What is required is intentionality. So the real question is: What do we, what do you choose to give?

If every member would pledge and give in proportion to how God has blessed us... we could do so many incredible things.

Listen to this.

If every member of Santa Teresa Hills increased his or her giving by just \$10.00 per week (about the cost of a small pepperoni pizza), it would increase our budget by over \$60,000!!

Think of the good we could do with that.

For DeLynn and I, we made the decision to tithe a long time ago. Last year we gave over \$13,000 to the church. Do I miss it? No! Could I have used it to pay off other debts? Sure! But tithing is one of the best things we could do. I trust God.

I tell you that, not to boast, but to let you know that I not only believe what I preach. I do it!

And this year I promise to raise our pledge at least by the \$10 a week. How about you?

We are called to be the light of the world. The Lord has given us the means to live this calling here in Silicon Valley.

Remember that each one of you is important to the ministries here at Santa Teresa Hills, and that together, even with the smallest amounts, we are capable to witness to God's generosity, practice our works of compassion, and impact our congregation, our community... and even our world.

Santa Teresa Hills is what it is because of you, because of us.

As Mother Teresa once said, "We may feel that what we do is nothing more than a drop in the ocean. But if the drop were not there, the

ocean would be missing *THAT* one drop.”

Somewhere in my house there is a combination padlock, but I’ve forgotten the combination to the lock. I used to know it. Not anymore. And so, the lock is no good to me. I need the combination.

In the same manner, within each of us there is a safe. Let’s call it the safe of generosity. The door of that safe seems to get locked early on in our lives.

One of the first words little ones learn is “Mine!” It isn’t long before we become protective or selfish about what is ours.

Whether it’s from worry or a warped sense of need, or just plain possessiveness or from greed, the safe gets locked and doesn’t open by itself.

And many of us have forgotten the combination.

God, though, has the combination. And he is only too willing to remind us of it.

There are only two numbers we need to unlock our safes. A number called Gratitude and one called Trust.

May we embrace that very Gratitude to God and Trust in God so that our safes may remain open to allow us to be the generous givers God desires us to be.

Amen!