

Sermon for November 25, 2018 – “A Question of Giving”

Texts: Malachi 3:6-12; 1 Peter 4:1-11

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We've all heard the old adage “Money isn't everything.” But have you ever heard that “Money isn't everything but it's way ahead of whatever's in second place.”

Today is Stewardship Sunday. Today is also Christ the King Sunday and as we consider the matter of stewardship I'd like everyone to understand that this is **not** a sermon only about our need to give our money to God. In fact, my stewardship sermons have never been about that, nor will they ever be, because, as we know God doesn't need our money, never will. Because, quite frankly, God wants more than that. Equally true is the notion that giving money can never make up for a heart that's not right with God. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were noted for their strict obedience to God's laws; laws which required the tithing of their money or goods. Yet, listen to what Jesus said to them in Matthew's Gospel. **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.”** It seems to me that what Jesus is saying is that there are stewardship things we need doing that don't relate to the giving of our money and that are more important than the giving of our money. Now how often do we hear that preached or taught? So, on this matter of stewardship today we must bear in mind that we're talking about **much** more than the giving of money to God, important though that is! We're talking about giving ourselves, all that God has gifted us with. Still, we know that the church needs money to operate. We gotta have it. Yes, we can have many volunteers which saves us from having to pay a staff member but it still takes money for God's church to operate. But if everyone only gave money and didn't volunteer to help out in any way the church still couldn't operate. It takes a combination.

Think about it. What if everyone just sent their money in every week but never showed up for any services or any of the fellowship events or bible studies, what then? We'd cease to be a church in any discernable way. The point is that Jesus didn't just give money, He gave **himself. Completely.** We can give no less **to Him, for Him,** to continue the work He began. It's seems a shame churches have to have things like bingo or rummage sales to raise money to do His work. As much fun as those things are! It's sad that many churches use high pressure campaigns and cleverly designed schemes to get the money we need to do God's work. If everyone in God's churches would freely give of their money and themselves we'd be amazed what could happen.

O. S. Hawkins said: “The principle hindrance to the advancement of the kingdom of God is greed. It's the chief obstacle to heaven-sent revival. It seems that when the back of greed is broken the human spirit soars into regions of unselfishness. I believe that it's safe to say that there can be no revival without ‘hilarious’ giving. And I fear no contradiction wherever there is ‘hilarious’ giving there will soon be revival.” The sad reality is that ‘hilarious giving’ (pun intended) happens less than it should. What's frequently given are the leftovers. We give, as they say, from our poverty rather than our abundance. Some will say they've nothing left over to give. Their bills and family responsibilities take everything they make.

Now, I realize that many people are likely in debt. That's no secret. Some through unfortunate circumstances but also some because of bad decisions. Neither relieve us of our responsibility to give of ourselves to God.

Okay, so why should we give? Well, **first**, is the obvious, oft repeated answer, because all we have has been given to us by God. Now some have trouble with that. They don't see God giving them anything. They believe it's the sweat of their brow or luck of the draw or a family inheritance that's responsible for what they have. Those may very well have been the means through which God worked but ultimately, the truth is that God's given us everything and everything is ultimately God's. It would seem then, that giving back to God, even though God doesn't need it, is a good way to acknowledge this. Probably a good thing to keep in mind on Christ the King Sunday.

Giving to God first was the idea behind tithing in the Old Testament. God's people were instructed to bring the first fruits of their crops to the Lord. It was an acknowledgement that they were responsible, accountable to God for how we use what we've been given. This includes our money, time and talents. We're stewards of what we've been given not owners.

The **second** reason to give is because of the great need. God's work in the form of a church's mission and ministry depends on God's people giving. I struggle with the concept of tithing, giving one-tenth, as do lots of people. But I often wonder what we'd be able to do as a church if everyone tithed or even if they gave one-fifth. Think about that. Think about what we could do if people gave a tenth or even a fifth of their time and talents! Think of the possibilities! Think about what we could do. Think about it as you fill out your pledge card or when you sit down and write a check to the church.

What I'd really like you to think about is our first reading from Malachi, particularly verse 10 again, **"Bring the full tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in My house and thus put Me to the test, says the Lord of hosts. See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."** Do we realize what God's saying here? "I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Let me prove it to you!" Do you see the challenge? God's challenging us to see if we can out give Him! I'm betting we can't. Anyone want in on that action?

The writer of Proverbs says this, **"Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine."**

The third, and perhaps greatest, reason to give is gratitude! Gratitude for all He has done for us. Gratitude for our many blessings. No matter how difficult our lives may have been, the Lord has blessed us. Sometimes we fail to see something as the blessing it is. We can always look around, sometimes not very far, and find someone who has it far worse. As the old native American proverb goes, "I cried because I had no shoes til I met a man with no feet." We can give out of our own hearts for God because He's given to us out His heart a heart filled with love. "For God so loved the world..."

A missionary by the name of C. T. Studd said, "If Jesus Christ be God, and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him." That's what our giving is, a declaration of our love for God.

So, what should we give? How much should we give? Well, that's up to you. My belief is that what people give is between them and God. I don't ask and don't want to be told what anyone gives. But I would refer us back to last week's readings; remember the first reading from 2 Corinthians? Paul says that **"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver."** Likewise, in the second reading, Jesus reminds us that **"...where your treasure is – your hearts will be also."** As I pointed out, lots of folks get it backwards. We think the verse is "...where your heart is, there will your treasure be also." Mainly because it makes more sense that way because much of the time our dollars follow our heart's lead. We tend to give to what matters to us. But again, that's NOT what Jesus said. Jesus is telling us to give not just to those things we care about but what we **want** to care about, perhaps even what we **should** care about.

I'd like to close with a story, a story told of a millionaire whose office was on the second floor of a bank building. He'd ride the elevator up to his office but take the stairs coming down. According to the story, he was an arrogant man. Once upon a time he'd been poor but had risen up in the world. He seemed to have forgotten this and did not treat those who worked for him very well, or anyone else, for that matter. One of the people that worked for him was a cleaning woman. Her job was to mop down the hallways and stair wells. He'd always walk past her, never speaking to her, never giving her a moment's thought. His mind was always thinking about money, particularly on how he could make more. One day, he left his office taking the stairs as he usually did. The cleaning lady was about halfway down the flight of stairs in the process of mopping them. When the man hit the top step it was still wet and **really** slippery causing the man to tumble down the stairs. As he fell, he passed the cleaning woman who had courteously stood aside and let him pass. When he got to the bottom of the stairs the only thing injured was his pride. He thought about whether or not to have her fired but ultimately decided not to. One thing's for sure he never took the stairs again without noticing the cleaning lady. The point of the story is this, and here's the thing, it's sad what sometimes needs to happen to notice how much we've been blessed and to realize how important our giving really is.

Stewardship Sunday, here at Westwood First falls on the last Sunday of the church year, Christ the King Sunday. Of course, next Sunday, a new year begins with the beginning of Advent, a celebration of the greatest gift possible. Every year we have a new opportunity to respond to this and all that God's given us with giving of our own, giving ourselves, our time, talents and treasure. Let us consider our response with thoughtful minds and grateful hearts.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Amen and amen.