

Give Generously

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: Seven Habits of a Disciple

1 Corinthians 4:1-2
Proverbs 3:9-10

We do not give God what is left. We give God what is best.

Drama:

(Taking apple) Thanks God. It's very generous of you. Thank you. You have blessed me exceedingly and abundantly above all that I have asked and I'm incredibly grateful for that. <bite> I mean, I thank you for everything! Like... my home. I love my home. It's very cozy with all those stainless steel appliances. <bite> Oh! And my new plasma HDTV. Very nice. <bite> Oh, and my car. Cars, actually. I always wanted a Jag. <bite> Alright...and my job. I guess. No, no, no, no. Thank you. I'm thankful for my job. I appreciate my job. I appreciate my job. I appreciate my job. <bite> And money of course. I have enough money to pay all the bills. Y'know, the mortgage bills <bite> the cable bills <bite> the gym membership bills <bite> the whatever bills...<bite>. Oh, and that trip to Europe. That was cool. Thanks. <bite> And my new treadmill...and consequently my new feather duster...ha, ha, ha.

(looking at what's left of the apple) Oh...um...well, I guess I should give something back. (lifting up the apple core) Here. (placing it in the offering plate) You can have what's left. (starting to leave, then returning and taking one more bite then putting the core

back in the plate) If there's anything left. (exit)

She wondered if she should give God what was left; if, indeed, there was anything left! Hold that thought!

Our Old Testament lesson from Proverbs tells us plainly, "Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce" (Proverbs 3:9). "First fruits" describes the earliest harvest that ripened after the spring planting. God's people believed the first fruits belonged to God. God was served first and we partake second.

One of the annual pilgrim festivals of the Jewish people was the feast of first fruits or Shavuot. It was also known as the festival of Pentecost, which is a word meaning 50th day. The festival of Pentecost was celebrated 50 days after the spring planting, when people offered their first fruit to the Lord.

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Today, I am preaching our annual stewardship sermon. For the initiated, stewardship has been, in the church, a code word for money. A stewardship sermon was intended traditionally to inspire you to make a pledge in support of next year's budget.

Some of you don't relish the opportunity to hear another steward-

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ship sermon. I don't blame you, especially when preachers try to cajole or badger congregants into giving. Or rail against the evils associated with accumulated wealth. Or whine about the church's budget woes.

I promise you today, I will not resort to any bottom-of-the-barrel approaches to stewardship. I will take the high road to recover the Biblical meaning of stewardship and to lay upon your conscience what God leads you to believe and do in the area of giving.

The Bible teaches three essential principles about stewardship. First, God owns everything. Second, everything we have is on loan from God. Third, we are God's stewards. Let's look at these three principles sequentially.

First, God owns everything. The Psalmist declares, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1).

When a fly lands on flypaper, the fly says "my flypaper," but the flypaper says "my fly." We don't own what we think we own!

I am reminded of Mark Twain's memorable line, "Friends, we're dealing with tainted money. It taint yours and it taint mine."

Second, everything we have is on loan from God. I've noticed the word "ownership" has crept into our vocabulary. We talk about committees or groups of people taking ownership over something. Whom are we kidding? We don't own anything! Everything we own is on loan from God.

I may have referenced this story in an earlier sermon, but it bears

repeating here. An older woman had finished shopping at the mall and returned to her car, only to discover four men inside the car. She dropped her shopping bags, drew a handgun out of her purse and screamed, "I have a gun and I know how to use it. Get out of the car." The men did not hesitate; they got out of car and ran.

The woman, now somewhat shaken, loaded her shopping bags into her car and attempted to drive away. But she couldn't insert the key in the ignition. Then it dawned on her, her car was actually parked four or five spaces away. She was in the wrong car. So she loaded her bags into her car and drove straight to the police station to confess her deed. The desk sergeant to whom she told the story nearly fell off his chair laughing. He pointed to the other end of the counter, where four men were reporting a carjacking by an old woman with thick glasses and curly white hair who carried a handgun. When the men realized what had happened, they decided to drop charges.

She thought it was her car, but actually it belonged to someone else. We think our lives are our own when, in reality, our lives belong to God.

Third, we are God's stewards. Our New Testament lesson from 1st Corinthians speaks of Christians in terms of being God's stewards. "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" (1 Corinthians 4:2).

Money may be a good servant, but it's a lousy master.

Trustee serves as an appropriate synonym for steward. Our Board of Trustees in this church holds and manages money on our behalf. Trustees do not own our money; they manage it in trust for the entire church. We, likewise, are trustees who manage God's resources.

Jesus talked more about money than any other single subject. He spoke more about money than heaven or hell, sin or salvation. Why did Jesus talk about money so much? Most assuredly, Jesus was not materialistic. Rather, he knew the seductive power of money. Jesus recognized how money can become a rival to God. It's one thing to have money; it's quite another to let money have us. Money may be a good servant, but it's a lousy master.

We talk a lot about being a disciple-making church. Stewardship is a vital dimension of our discipleship. A disciple is a steward; a steward is a disciple.

Professor Robert Frank serves as an economist at the Johnson School of Management at Cornell University. His book *Luxury Fever* is appropriately subtitled *Why Money Fails to Satisfy Us in an Era of Excess*. Dr. Frank claims the American appetite for luxury isn't paying off in higher consumer satisfaction. He cites numerous surveys taken through the years that demonstrate that the percentage of people who say they are "very happy" doesn't rise with income. The only time money buys happiness is when a person

moves from poverty to middle-income status. Beyond that, the average life satisfaction doesn't correlate with further accumulation of material goods.

I was raised around affluence. I can attest from personal experience that money doesn't buy happiness. Many of the wealthy people associated with my life lived in a chronic state of unhappiness. Why are so many wealthy people profoundly unhappy? Their kids go through life unhappy as well, displaying a distorted sense of entitlement. Why are there so many big houses and broken homes?

The Romans had a proverb: "Money is like seawater. The more a man drinks, the thirstier he becomes." The more we have, the more we want.

Some of us are afflicted with a disease called "affluenza." This malady of over-consumption leaves people feeling bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled.

The prophet Isaiah asks a penetrating question: "Why do you spend your money on what does not satisfy?" (Isaiah 55:2). What's the point of a closet full of seldom-worn clothes and assets beyond what we can possibly use? If money buys happiness, why are so many prosperous people desperately looking for something else? We covet prosperity, yet we yearn for purpose. In an age of plenty, we search for meaning.

I have noticed something about people. When we evaluate our standard of living in relationship to other people, we most often com-

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pare ourselves to people who are better off than we are. We have a tendency to compare ourselves upward.

The TV in our family room is a perfectly good Sony TV. We bought this 18-inch television ten years ago. It's altogether adequate for our needs. But when I go to stores or people's homes to watch their flat-screen HDTV with its theater-like effects and high resolution, I don't feel the same toward my old Sony TV. I'm tempted to kick my old set and buy a new one. It's hard to determine where necessity ends and excess begins.

Jesus often taught using parables. One of the things I have noticed about Jesus' parables is how many of them involve money. In fact, 16 out of Jesus' 38 parables deal somehow with money and possessions. Take the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. Jesus tells a story about a master who entrusts talents (money) to three different stewards. Two of the stewards invest the master's money wisely, while the third steward hoards the money in the ground.

How are we using the resources God has entrusted to us? Think about how you spend your time and what you do with your money. Are you investing in things that outlast your life? Are you giving your first fruits or leftovers?

The budget course offered by Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago is called Good Sense Ministry. This budget course is designed to prepare people for a lifetime of Christian

stewardship. This ministry centers on five key principles. A faithful disciple aspires to be a diligent earner, cautious debtor, wise saver, prudent consumer and generous giver.

The last of these principles, generous giver, is a close cousin to our 6th covenant or practice of a disciple: give generously. We are inviting you, as a disciple, to consider how you will use your time and talents for the Lord's service. We are requesting that you indicate a commitment of time and talent on the blue card to some aspect of ministry next year. We will ask you a few moments from now to offer on the white cards a portion of your financial resources you would be willing to pledge to the Lord's work in the coming year.

This church is worth your investment. We publish how every last penny is spent in this church. Unlike some churches, everything in our budget is a matter of public record: our salaries and ministry allocations, as well as the 25 percent we expend on outreach causes beyond our church.

I'm not asking you today to be a generous giver solely because this church needs your money. I am appealing to you at another level altogether, as God's stewards. We do not own anything. Everything we have is on loan from God. One of the ways we express God's ownership and our stewardship is through our giving. We give first fruits, not leftovers.

