

Stewardship: Offering Our Possessions

When I was young, I loved talking about money. Whether it was asking what something cost or how much someone made, I loved talking about it. I couldn't understand *why* people would be embarrassed to talk about money. Why should it matter? It was just money.

I did whatever I could to make money as a young person. I would do the chores my parents were willing to pay for. I would create lemonade stands and yard sales. I would change diapers for my sister on babysitting gigs for 50 cents apiece. And then I would hoard my money away in a piggy bank.

After graduating from college, I deferred my student loans and taught English in the Czech Republic. My loan company was happy to defer my loans, because of "economic hardship," they said. I tried to mentally set aside this obligation that I would one day have to pay in full, with interest. It was the first time I felt oppressed by money and didn't like talking about it.

For Christmas, I went to visit friends who were missionaries in Lithuania. They had invited international students who didn't have anywhere to go for a Christmas celebration. Many of them had nothing or very little to open, and I embarrassingly opened an entire *box* of gifts my mom had sent me. At that moment, I thought, *I should have left these in the Czech Republic. I could have saved myself a bunch of hassle too, and only brought one suitcase with me, instead of two.*

On a car ride with one of my missionary friends, I shared a fear of mine. "I'm afraid to pray sometimes," I said, "because I'm afraid that God might ask me to give everything I have."

I thought he might console me or encourage me that God would not ask such a thing. Instead, he looked at me with stern sincerity and said, "Imagine God telling you to give everything you have when you have a career, a wife, and four children."

This was Garrett and Sophi's story. And theirs was a story I could not emulate. Like the rich young man in Matthew 19, I went away sad, because I could not part from money.

I knew that money had its grip on me and its hold *needed* to be loosened. I didn't want to give; I didn't want to tithe; I struggled to *share*. I made a commitment that once I returned to the States and made a full-time income, I would tithe 10% to the church. I still had undergraduate loans to pay off and my net worth was negative, but I knew that I *needed* to give to break the hold money had on me.

When Alek and I got married, the topic of tithing became a *heated* discussion. Alek was (and is) our budgeter, and he couldn't see *how* we could tithe when we both were in seminary and, at the time, making minimum wage. I argued that it *wasn't* logical to tithe at that time, but that we needed to. I had struggled my whole life to make the commitment to tithe, and I wasn't going to go back now. We came to an agreement, knowing that it was illogical and *hurt* to write those checks, but that we needed to.

Please understand that by no means do I think I have arrived and that I no longer struggle with money's grip on me. It seems that one moment I am encouraged by my growth, and the next I am selfishly buying something for myself that I don't need or adding to the long list of Christmas gifts I want.

I share my story with money because we *all* struggle with money. We can't help it; it is a spiritual power over us. And we intuitively know that money is a spiritual power because of the "way we attribute sacred characteristics to our money." As philosopher Jacques Ellul wrote, "For [us it] is one of [our] 'holy things'...We avoid speaking of money. We speak of business, but when, in someone's living room, a person brings up the topic of money, [they] are committing a social error, and the resulting embarrassment is really expressing the sense of the sacred. This is true for the middle class.

"Among the working class we find the same sentiment, but in a different form: it is the widespread conviction that if the money question is solved, all problems of the working class and of humankind in general will thereby be solved as well. It is also the conviction that everything that does not tend to solve the money problem is only hot air."¹

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church: Let's not avoid speaking of money and keep it sacred; let's begin to *desacralize* money by speaking about it.

¹ Jacques Ellul, *Power and Money*, 77.

Let's turn to our Old Testament text, Deuteronomy 26. The LORD God has brought His people out of slavery in Egypt, through 40 years in the wilderness, to enter the Promised Land. As He promised to their forefathers, He *will* give them the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. He has *not* forgotten them but has rescued them and *will* fulfill His promise to give them the land.

Before they possess the land, they are instructed as to what they are to do. They are to remember that the land is a gift from God, and they are to present the firstfruits of the land to the LORD. (The firstfruits are the first, or best, production of the land.) They are to bring the firstfruits to the dwelling place of God and present them to the LORD, recalling how God has saved them and given them the land. They are to bow to the LORD and rejoice.

Every year, a tithe, or a tenth, of their produce is to be given to the Levites. Their tithe is to be given to the Levites because the Levites have no possessions; their possession is the LORD. The Levites will then tithe a tenth of what *they* receive and offer that to the LORD and give it to the priest (Num 18:26 – 29).

Every third year, Israel's tithe will be set aside and stored in their towns. This tithe will be distributed to "the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in [their] towns and be satisfied" (Deut 26:12b). They are to tithe to care for those who will not otherwise be cared for. Israel will then be invited to pray for blessing for the people and the land God has given them (Deut 26:15).

Israel is to remember their past and how the LORD provided for them. Their remembrance is to result in thankfulness, which is to result in joyful giving of tithes and offerings. In their giving, they acknowledge "that the land and all its rich benefits come from the Lord as a gift, undeserved and unearned."² *Everything* Israel has is a gift from the LORD, and their response is to steward His gifts.

² Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 179.

When we hear the word “steward,” we often think that we ought to steward our possessions well. In fact, the very word “steward” means to *manage*. Stewards are not owners; they are *managers* of another’s possessions.

Israel was to steward God’s gifts so that God would be glorified and that all people, even those once neglected, would be cared for. They were not to forget that they were stewards, not owners. The land was not theirs, but a gift from God for them to steward.

We are called to steward God’s gifts to *us* so that God will be glorified and that all people will be cared for.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book, *Life Together*, wrote about Christian tithing while in a Nazi concentration camp. They were not given much to sustain themselves, only bread and water. In the concentration camp, they were *all* poor and had nothing to give. There were those among them who were sickly. The Christians in the concentration camp decided that they ought to tithe to the sickly, and that they *did* have something to offer them, their bread. They would each break of a tenth of their slice of bread and offer the collection of these tenths to the sick.

Even the most meager among us are called to steward well God’s gifts. Whether you are a little kid, an adult straddled with debt, a senior with a limited income, or a person with no financial worries, *remember* how God has provided for you. *Remember* how God has given you life, has been with you, and continues to be with you. *Remember* where you came from. *Remember* the promises God has fulfilled in your life and in the life of His church.

And act in faithful obedience to steward what God has placed under your care. Perhaps this means to begin with a tithe. Perhaps this means using money intentionally in ways which will honor God. Perhaps this means to practice the spiritual discipline of simplicity, an “*inward* reality that results in an *outward* life-style.”³ Perhaps this means to live on a reverse tithe. Perhaps this means to share. Perhaps

³ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 79.

this means to plan your legacy to benefit those in need of care. Whatever God is calling you to do to steward well the resources He has given you, please act in obedience.

May God alone be our treasure, and may we be a people who are known by our giving, offering grace to a world in desperate need of it. Amen.