

## ENTRUSTED WITH MUCH

10-30-05  
Ken Peterson

Mk. 12:41-43

TEXT: *Everyone to whom much is given,  
of him much will be required.* (Lk. 12:48) RSV

### INTRODUCTION

A church was running a serious budget deficit. The pastor planned to make a special appeal to make up this deficit on a Sunday morning. Unfortunately, the regular organist called the day before to say she was sick. Since there was no one else in the church to play, the pastor scrambled to find a substitute organist from outside the church family. He finally located someone and hurriedly went over the order of worship. The organist thought he could handle everything. Then the pastor said, “There’s just one more thing. At the end of my sermon on giving, I’m planning to ask for people to stand who will pledge an extra \$1,000 to help cover our deficit. I’d like you to play something appropriate while I give them time to prayerfully consider their commitment.” The organist did a fantastic job throughout the service. At the end, as the pastor gave his invitation for an extra financial commitment, the organist started playing “The Star Spangled Banner.”

While this is our annual stewardship Sunday, I hope you don’t interpret this as a “hang onto your wallet” Sunday. Don’t worry, there’s not going to be anything manipulative this morning to “get your money.” Most churches have what is called a “Stewardship Sunday” about this time of year. It is an important time of reflecting upon our responsibility toward the resources God has blessed us with. However, the way we’ve been handling this in the last few years is different from many churches in two ways:

1. We have been using what we refer to as a “faith budget.” This means we don’t go out and get pledges from people in order to cover the anticipated budgeted expenses for the next year. Instead, the session prayerfully seeks to discern what God is calling us to as a church, trusting then that “in what He guides He provides.” We are trusting God to move our hearts and enable us to be obedient to His call so that all our needs are provided for.
2. While we still are asking you to make a pledge, it is *really* for your own benefit to set a goal for yourself and a chance to prayerfully consider what it means to obey God with your finances. Thus, we refer to this as a “secret pledge.” The “secret” part means that no one in our church knows what you’ve decided to do— it is strictly between you and the Lord. Thus, the envelope is self-addressed to you. It will never be opened here. The envelope is placed in this box on the altar, dedicated to the Lord, and remains there until next year about this time when it is dropped in the mail back to you as a reminder of your commitment.

For both of these reasons, there is solid Scriptural support, some of which we’ll refer to shortly.

This morning, I'm talking about three important questions regarding stewardship:

1. Why is it called stewardship?
2. How much should I give?
3. How should I give?

## **WHY STEWARDSHIP?**

A steward is someone entrusted to use the resources of another person according to the owner's directions. Foundational to a Christian world view is that we don't *really own* anything. Everything belongs to God. Psalm 24:1 says it well,

*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.*

We all know that, for none of us is capable of really creating anything. We may "own" land, but it is not really our land, is it? The same with houses, cars, and everything else. We didn't create the materials from which anything is made. We are tenants upon God's land, stewards of His resources. Nevertheless, we need to continually be reminded of this basic truth lest we become too possessive of that over which we claim ownership.

I was visiting with my sister, Karen, recently, and she recalled a formative incident in her daughter, Kimberly's view of all this. Kimberly was in the eighth grade and she and her mom were returning from a before-school shopping trip. Kimberly was quite put-out with her mom because, while she'd seen a lot of clothes she really wanted, she had only been allowed to buy one nice outfit. As Karen and Kimberly discussed this, Kimberly lamented the fact that they didn't have more money so she could dress like some of her friends, naming several from affluent families. Karen countered by naming a lot of other friends who were from rather poor families, asking Kim how that would make them feel? Then, Karen went on to explain, "Kimberly, do you think I would have bought you all those things you wanted if we had the money?" Kim responded, "Well, yes, Mother. Don't you love me?" Karen said, "Kimberly, even if we had more money, I hope I would have been strong enough to not buy you those things. Not having much money makes it easier for me to say no. But that is not the really important reason I didn't buy those clothes for you. Spending more there would have meant we couldn't support some of the ministries we think God wants us to support. And, we must answer to God about how we use the money He has blessed us with. In our circumstances, balancing needs and wants, I wouldn't feel right spending more on your school clothes." With that, Kim responded, "O, I had no idea!"

Karen went on to tell Kimberly that she was free to supplement the new clothes they bought with whatever she wanted from the used clothing store in town— most of which was \$.50 to \$1.00. Kimberly is highly creative, and throughout high school made good use of used clothing. And, here's the amazing thing: when Kim graduated from high school, she received a number of what they call "superlatives" or "best of's" voted on by the students, and among those was, "Best Dressed."

It is easy for us to rationalize that if we "can afford it" (or at least afford to make payments on it),

it is okay for us to spend “our” money on it. Karen’s talk with Kimberly is a helpful reminder that we answer to God for all our financial decisions. And, it is good to know that it doesn’t necessarily mean dowdy, as Kim’s “Best Dressed” honor shows. The issue is not so much who has what and how we keep up with them. The question we need to be asking is, “What would honor and please Jesus?”

Kenneth Taylor, who paraphrased the Bible into The Living Bible, understood this. He died several months ago. But some of the information coming out shows that while he had a chance to become very rich from the sale of The Living Bible, he wouldn’t touch the money personally. To him, it was God’s money. Over the years he continued lived sacrificially, donating the millions and millions of dollars coming from The Living Bible toward the spread of the gospel throughout the world.

Few of us in our current culture feel we are wealthy because we keep comparing ourselves with one another. And, of course, there is always more stuff we want or think we need. George Will has written, a need “is defined in contemporary America as a 48-hour-old want.” Gregg Easterbrook, in his fascinating book, The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse, points out that compared to a world scale, our consuming culture has lost all touch with reality. Consider:

- Middle class Americans live better than 99.4% of the human beings who have ever existed;
- American per-capita income, adjusted for inflation, has more than doubled since 1960;
- Americans spent more on recreational watercraft in 2001 than the entire gross domestic product of North Korea.
- The number of square feet in our homes has more than doubled since 1950.
- A typical American dwelling has 5.3 rooms for its 2.6 people, whereas the typical dwelling in European nations still does not quite have a room per person.
- The U.S. is just shy of having one automobile per licensed driver, and is on track to having more cars than drivers.
- Today, the typical American eats four restaurant meals per week (if fast food counts), whereas for our parent’s generation, one restaurant meal per month was the norm.

In addition, *U. S. News & World Report* notes that American kids get an average of 70 new toys a year. The current events in our world with the terrible devastation from Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Pakistan should help us get in touch with reality. Thinking of the hundreds of thousands who are homeless, who lost everything but the clothes they were wearing in Louisiana and Mississippi should put some brakes on our consuming.

All this should give us a clue as to how seductive money is. Jesus recognizes this in devoting 16 of 38 parables to issues of money and one out of ten verses in the Gospels. While there are 500 verses in the Bible on prayer, less than 500 on faith, there are over 2000 on money and possessions!

The Bible clearly tells us that we will one day have to give an accounting of how we've used all the resources God has entrusted us with. As Jesus talks about this in Lk. 12:43-48, He concludes with, *To whom much is given, much is required*. On a scale with the rest of the world, even the poorest of our nation have much. And most of us have enormous wealth, but we don't recognize it because we keep looking at others around us who are similarly wealthy. Are there people starving to death, dying without basic medical treatment, and dying without hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ because of our hoarded wealth?

## HOW MUCH SHOULD I GIVE?

Here we come back to the story of the widow in Mk. 12:41-43, acted out in our skit at the beginning of the service. I often find Christians taking a false comfort from this incident, thinking, "Even a small gift is big in the kingdom of God." While that may be true, the uncomfortable truth to me in this story is the fact that God evaluates our gifts on the basis of what we have left. The widow was commended for giving it all. The wealthy hardly missed their big offerings.

At a presbytery meeting a couple of years ago, Will Browne from our church's missions headquarters was sharing some inspiring stories from the mission field. He told us about a visit to a small church in Myanmar in S. E. Asia, one of the poorest nations on earth. The practice of believers there is to always set aside a handful of rice for the church whenever they prepared rice for their families. This rice is brought on Sundays as an extra gift to raise enough money to send someone to reach a tribe of people across the mountains from them. This was beyond their regular tithe. A little extra that the Lord multiplied for their outreach. And today, a group of believers has been established in that unreached tribe. That is sacrificial giving!

So often we want to give in ways that cost us little. There's something we want to replace in our home and think, "I'll just give the church my old one." Thus, every church accumulates an odd assortment of furniture and things. Now, sometimes these items are useful to the church. But, think about it: if you're giving it to Jesus, do you want to give Him the old, half-worn-out item and you get the new one?

I expect most of you have heard the Butterball Turkey story, since it was on Paul Harvey a few years ago, but it still makes a point. The Butterball Turkey Company set up a hotline to answer questions for consumer questions about preparing their turkeys. One woman called to inquire about if it was safe to cook a turkey that had been in her freezer for 23 years. The operator told her that while it would be safe if the freezer had been kept below zero the entire time, the flavor had probably deteriorated, and she wouldn't recommend eating it. The caller replied, "That's what we thought. We'll just give it to the church."

God helps us with the amount in giving us a baseline to start from— the tithe, 10% of our income. The God-ordained practice of tithing predates the Old Testament law. Jesus affirms it in His teaching. Malachi 3:10 is a wonderful promise,

*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in*

*this," says the LORD Almighty, "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.*

Christians from the beginning have upheld this as our baseline, actually where we start from. A tithe keeps us honest, in touch with God's purposes so our hearts don't get overcome by our consumerism. If we feel we can't afford to tithe, in general I'd say there is something about our finances that is being mismanaged. Prayerfully seek God's guidance in setting a budget that will enable you to obey God in this area. On the "welcome table" there is a short study I've written to give you guidance in deciding about tithing I would suggest you read it if you are not yet tithing. A tithe is a concrete way of seeking God first. As Jesus promises, *...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well* (Matt 6:33).

We need an unshakeable bottom line like the tithe to start from, lest we deceive ourselves into thinking we can't do any more. Do you realize that in the midst of the Great Depression, Christians still gave 3.2% of their incomes to the Lord? Now, we are five times richer in inflation-adjusted dollars, and average only 2.6%. Obviously, a lot of Christians are not obeying the Lord in their giving— but it is more of a heart problem than an income problem. Remember, legalism asks, "How little can I give?" Love asks, "How much can I give?"

### **HOW SHOULD I GIVE?**

Remember, it is to the Lord we give, not to the praise of people or to gain status or power to control. We need to be careful of attaching strings that further our agendas that may not be the Lord's. Our giving should also be in secret, or at least not seeking honor, for as Jesus says, we aren't to let our left hand know what the right hand is doing in this matter (Mtt. 6:3). That is why we make our pledging a secret affair in this church. It is also why no one in the church, including the pastor, knows who gives what except for the financial secretaries and the treasurer. Presbyterians have always carefully guarded such knowledge lest it lead to pride, favoritism or judgmental attitudes.

In 2 Cor. 9:7 it tells us giving is to be with a cheerful heart and not under compulsion. That is one of the reasons we are not approaching you with a pledge. This is between you and God. We believe the Holy Spirit can move your heart to give what is needed for the ministry here. Of course, you need to be faithful and instructed by Scripture in your giving. Again, we come to a heart matter. If we are not free to give to the Lord, and do so cheerfully, it should be a warning that something is wrong in our heart. It may be a sign we are being possessed by our possessions.

### **CONCLUSION**

Love can't really be stored up, can it? If you save it, hold it back, you lose it. But if you give it away, you get it back multiplied. Money is likewise meant to be fluid and flow through our lives to bless others and carry on the Lord's work.

As we close, I call your attention to the quote by Bruce Larson at the end of your "Stewardship Sunday" insert.

*...money is really another pair of feet to walk where Jesus would walk,  
 money is another pair of hands to heal and feed and bless the desperate families of earth.  
 Money can go where I do not have time to go,  
     where I do not have the skill to go,  
     where I do not have the youth to go,  
     where I do not have the passport to go.  
 My money can go in my place and heal and bless and feed and help.  
 A man's money is an extension of himself.*

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**For Further Study and Reflection from Sermon 10-30-05**

Scriptures: Mk. 12:41-43; Lk. 12:48

**Also, in preparation**, it would be good to read  
 Pastor Ken's study, **"God's Plan for Giving"**  
 (a blue sheet) on the welcome table.

1. Is there something in this sermon that seems particularly applicable to your life now?
  
2. Do you often pray about how God would want you to use "your" money? Can you think of a time God gave you direction regarding a purchase or other financial decision?

How much of a role do you think prayer should have in decisions regarding what we spend upon ourselves and what we give to God?

3. 2 Cor. 9:7 says to give cheerfully. If you aren't feeling that way, what can you do to help change your attitude?
  
4. Think Christmas. Have you heard older people talk about receiving just one or two small gifts at Christmas and how they felt? Compare this with today.

How can we make Christmas less of a materialistic thing?

5. Discuss Mal 3:8-10,  
*"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.  
 "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'  
 "In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse-the whole nation of you- because you are robbing me. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "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."*  
 And, Mtt. 6:33- *...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

What is His promise if we obey these?

Have you found this true in your life? Can you give an example?

6. From the sermon:  
 "Remember, it is to the Lord we give, not to the praise of people or to gain status or power to control. We need to be careful of attaching strings that further our agendas that may not be the Lord's. Our giving should also be in secret, or at least not seeking honor, for as Jesus says, we aren't to let our left hand know what the right hand is doing in this matter (Mtt. 6:3)."

Have you ever caught yourself giving for the wrong reason?

7. IF TIME- you may want to discuss Pastor Ken's paper, "God's Plan for Giving."