

20/10: Better Than Average Vision

2/2 Stewardship

Joel 2:28-29

10 25 2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Each fall I visit the ophthalmologist for my annual eye exam. The assistant begins by checking my vision with a standard **eye chart**. You know the type—it has a humongous “E” at the top with descending letters that get smaller and smaller. Just for fun, when the chart flashes on the screen, I always like to yell “E!” Over thirty-five years, no one else has ever laughed at this weak attempt at humor, but I crack myself up!

We are using the imagery of **vision** to look at the subject of Christian stewardship. Last week’s sermon was **20/20: Clear Vision**. We focused upon the congregation’s ministry and mission. We saw that a church budget is actually a theological document. We are called to see the faces beyond the figures and the ministry behind the money.

This week’s sermon is **20/10: Better Than Average Vision**. Today we are viewing Christian stewardship as a spiritual discipline. Those who grow in giving, grow in grace. Those who grow in grace, grow in giving.

I. The Giver’s Need to Give

Historically, **church financial campaigns** have followed a predictable pattern. Various committees made budget requests. A finance committee compiled the numbers and created a general budget. Then the congregation was asked to “pledge” the total. If commitments fell short, then the committee amended the budget.

Ten years ago we turned this model upside down so that it was right side up. We adopted a new approach to stewardship called **Consecration Sunday**. The program shifted the attention from “*the church’s need to receive to the giver’s need to give.*” By all measures, it has succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. The church’s annual budget has more than doubled from \$681,000 to over \$1.4 million. The *Grow One Step Chart* printed in our stewardship materials clearly shows how people have grown in giving.

Now I KNOW what you’re thinking: “Yeah, RIGHT. This is just stealth stewardship!” I understand that you might feel that way—I experienced the same feeling last week. I received an e-mail from Candler Seminary with the heading: **OCTOBER IS PASTOR APPRECIATION MONTH!** (There’s still six days left in case you forgot!) I was touched that my old alma mater had thought of me. Then I read the body of the email. It turned out that Candler wanted me to GIVE money to show my appreciation!

We have served together ten years as pastor and parish—a decade of stewardship campaigns PLUS three capital stewardship drives. You KNOW that I am not shy about discussing **money**. But the focus IS important. There is a tremendous difference between focusing upon the giver’s need to give and the church’s need to receive.

I did not go into the ministry to raise money—I answered Christ’s call to make disciples. And I have become convinced that stewardship is a critical key to spiritual maturity. Faithfulness in finances frees folk up to grow in grace.

Jesus said, “*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” I always thought the opposite was true—get people’s hearts right and their giving naturally

followed. Three decades of ministry have taught me otherwise. Many good Christians have not been taught how to give graciously, generously, and joyfully to God. When we learn to invest our treasure in God's work, our hearts naturally follow.

II. Money and Stewardship

In 1963, *The Beatles* released the song *Money (That's What I Want)*. It began with a familiar proverb: "*The best things in life are free*" but then it continued: "*But you can keep 'em for the birds and bees, give me money, that's what I want!*"

Anybody here like money? I sure do, and I could always use a bit more! Money is an important part of life. If you don't believe me, read a newspaper, watch the news, or scan the Internet. The economy has been THE lead story for months now.

So why shouldn't we talk about **money at church**? You've heard me say before that it is a popular topic in the Bible. One out of seven verses in the New Testament address the subject. Over half of Jesus' parables dealt with finances. In fact, other than the kingdom of God itself, Jesus spoke more about money than any other single topic. Certainly finances are on every person's mind here today.

Americans have become obsessed about the financial downturn. It has affected every person here in a variety of ways. A spirit of **fear** has infected our society. So we clench our fists tightly to hold on to what little is ours. However, a spirit of fear and worry can rob us of faith and joy. It can also cause us to misplace priorities and to focus upon the trivial rather than the critical. The results can be tragic as we invest in earthly things that do not last.

Some parents once made the mistake of taking their young son into a fine china shop. Despite repeated warnings of "look but don't touch," the boy looked and then touched! He thrust his arm into a narrow-necked vase where it became stuck tight. The parents and then the shop owner pushed and pulled. They tried soap and oil to lubricate the child's arm. Despite repeated attempts, the vase remained stuck tight; and the boy screams grew louder and shriller. Finally, they had no choice—they took a hammer and broke the expensive vase. THEN the reason for the dilemma became clear. The child had spotted a quarter at the bottom of the vase. He had kept his fist clenched tight around the coin, preventing his arm from sliding out of the vase.

Stewardship recognizes that everything we possess is a gift from God's hand. We are not "owners" but "loaners." As stewards, we treat what we possess as if it were our own—but always with the recognition that it is not. We are called to be accountable for all the blessings of life, including our financial resources.

My teenage son cuts the **grass** at home to earn spending money. We agreed upon a price last summer that we both thought was fair. This spring, however, he said, "Dad, I need to increase what I charge for cutting the yard." When I inquired as to why, he answered, "Well, gas prices have really gone up." I thought that was a good response. I was about to agree when it hit me. I said, "Son, I'm the one who buys the gas!" Apparently this didn't figure into his argument!

There is a basic given-ness to life in general and life eternal in particular. Oftentimes, however, we begin to think in terms of “me” and “mine.” We buy into the myth that we are self-made men and women who earn and deserve all that we possess. All that we have, however, is a gift from God’s own hand. He is the author of every good and perfect gift. We own nothing—God gives us everything.

This understanding of stewardship dispels our fear and anxiety. It also enables us to relax our clinched fists into open hands. THEN we are enabled to give.

III. Where We Are

So today I would extend to you a three-fold invitation. First of all, I invite individuals and families to focus upon where you are in terms of Christian stewardship. Hold up a mirror and ask yourself some very specific questions: "How much did I give to the Lord's work in the past year? What figure was entered for *Charitable Donations* on *Schedule A* of the 1040 form? What percentage of my income did I give to God’s work? Then ask: Did we spend more on pet food, entertainment, magazines, or eating out than we did for God's kingdom?"

Last week, we reviewed the *Grow One Step Chart* that gave a snapshot of our church’s giving patterns last year. We also included the chart in the brochure mailed this week. It’s an excellent tool that helps us locate where we are in giving.

But it’s not just dollars and sense—it’s also attitude and spirit. Do we give out of a sense of obligation and duty or out of a sense of joy and gratitude? Our tithe is an offering of thanksgiving. Our giving celebrates all that we are, all that we have, is a gift from God's good hand.

In 2 Cor. 9:7, Paul wrote: "*Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*" I have added on occasion, "*But we'll also accept donations from a grumpy grouch!*" However, the humor misses the point. We are called to give offerings of thanksgiving and praise. At our best, we give not because we have to but because we get to.

IV. God’s Call

The second part of the invitation is to ask, “Where does God want us to be?” The Scriptures teach the foundational element in Christian stewardship of finances is the **tithe**. Title literally means "one-tenth." This discipline is first found in the Old Testament when God commands Israel to give a tithe of their first fruits in an offering to the Lord. In the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and in church tradition, the tithe has been considered the foundational element of financial stewardship.

Leviticus 27 says the tithe is "*holy to the Lord.*" "Holy" means to set something apart for God's use. The tithe is holy because it is set apart for the work of God.

A national poll revealed that church people give an average of 2.9% of their income. In the United Methodist Church, the average is closer to 2%. A 2007 Barna Group survey concluded that only 5% of Christians tithe their income. Why the tithe?

1) First, we tithe because God commands it. It's as clear as the Ten Commandments. It's nonnegotiable. We choose between obedience and disobedience. In Malachi 3, God actually accused Israel of stealing from God by not bringing their "*whole tithe*" to the temple. We are in effect embezzling from the kingdom of Heaven.

2) A second reason we tithe is to remember that all of life is a loan from God. The tenth we give reminds us that the other 9/10ths also belongs to the Lord. The tithe is only a start. What we do with the rest of our material possessions is also important to God.

3) A third practical reason for tithing is the support of God's ministry through the church. The church budget is a theological document that reveals the church in ministry to the world. Last week we explored the different ways our gifts touch the lives of others.

4) Finally, when we give to God, God gives back abundantly. Luke 6:38 says, "*Give and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.*"

I believe God does bless us **materially**. He meets our needs. Not our wants, mind you, but our needs. The discipline of tithing also teaches us how to use the other 9/10ths of our income more effectively. The 9/10ths stretches further than the 10/10ths ever did.

God also blesses us **spiritually**. We grow in faith by trusting God with our finances. "*For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* One author said that "*fundraising is humanity's way of raising money, but stewardship is God's way of raising his children.*"

V. Our Response

The third part of the invitation is to ask how we can go from where we are to where God wants us to be. For many, the goal of tithing may seem overwhelming. So begin an incremental, systematic plan for growth. Determine to give 2% more of your income this year and grow into tithing.

The *Grow One Step Chart* is helpful here. Prayerfully consider growing one step in the coming year in the support of Christ's church. The critical question is what we are going to do NOW with what we have—not later with what we don't.

In his Bible Study entitled *Quiet Strength*, Coach Tony Dungy wrote:

"There is a trap before every person. It begins with the words 'When I' and ends with 'Then.' When I get this promotion, then I'll start giving tithes and offerings to God. It's an effective trap because the hope behind it is sincere and the results are powerfully motivating. But if you hope to be effective at all, you had better make the most of what God has put before you right now. The wonderfully liberating truth is that you can live significantly today—no matter where you are or what you are doing." (Abridged)

Forget about "when I" and "then I." What is God calling you to do in THIS time and place? And how will we respond to the divine invitation?

Conclusion

Mike Morgan is the senior minister at Trinity UMC in Cartersville. He recently shared a story about a mission trip to Ghana, Africa. During the worship service, the time

came for the offering. The rural congregation didn't have polished brass plates and trained ushers. Instead, they placed a basket at the front of the church. Then the people were invited to bring their offerings forward one at a time.

The music began to play, and the first member danced her way down the aisle with an offering. After placing the gift in the basket, she danced some more. Then a second person came forward and a third. Some had nothing to give, but they danced nonetheless. At the conclusion of the offering, everyone danced around the offerings in a celebration of gratitude and praise. Mike said it took thirty minutes to receive the offering—and it was the highlight of the worship service!

Today we have a chance to respond to God's blessings in our life as we anticipate the coming year of ministry and mission at Sam Jones. Each one of us will have the chance to complete an *Estimate of Giving Card* for 2010.

When you complete the cards, I invite you to bring them forward and lay them upon the altar rail. I also encourage you to spend some time kneeling in prayer before you return to your seats. Allow your hands that have been clenched in fear to be opened by faith. And if you feel like dancing a step or two as you bring the cards, then I think that would make God smile! Let us give back to the God who has given us everything. *Amen!*