

## Treasures of the Transformed Life # 4

### Pennies in the Fountain (Gifts)

2 Corinthians 9:6-13

Media: *God's Pie*

11 06 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

*All Saints Sunday*

### Scripture:

### Introduction

Some years ago the church's Finance Office experienced a strange mystery. Each week's offering contained one mutilated dollar bill. Every Sunday someone tore a corner off a one dollar bill before putting it in the offering plate. This continued for months, and the church amassed quite a collection of **torn money**.

The culprit's identity was finally revealed through a casual conversation between a staff and church member. A family in the congregation had two children. Each week the children received a dollar bill to put into the offering plate. The younger son felt quite attached to his new found wealth and didn't buy into the whole "*cheerful giver*" thing. So he tore off a corner for himself before placing the remainder in the offering plate!

Perhaps the young boy planned to eventually build his own dollar bill out of the pieces. The first time someone told me the story, I thought to myself: "Now THERE'S a future church member in training!"

### Financial Bondage

Money has ALWAYS been a touchy subject in the church. Clergy hesitate to preach on it and laity dread to hear about it. During the first half of my ministry, I avoided the topic as much as possible. However, I am now convinced that financial faithfulness is a critical area in Christian discipleship. Money matters in both our fiscal and spiritual lives.

The current financial crisis has emphasized the importance of money in our individual and corporate lives. Call it a recession, depression, downturn, or bear market, the economic slump has affected us all.

The financial crisis has also revealed that many people are **enslaved by money**. They live in economic bondage. A series of creative commercials by *Capital One* credit cards end with the question: "*What's in your wallet?*" The answer for most Americans may surprise you.

In the United States, the average American spends more than 100% of his or her income. A typical consumer carries a \$9,200 monthly balance on seven **credit cards**.

When I was growing up, my parents kept their bills in a small lockbox with a built-in combination lock that I loved to play with. Taped on top of the box was an old, yellowed copy of a bill. One day I finally asked my mother what it was. She told me that

early in their marriage they had charged too much on a credit card. It cost them a lot of money and time. So they kept the bill there as a reminder to never charge more than they could pay off at the end of the month. When I was six years old, I learned an important lesson about credit.

In the United Methodist Church, candidates for ordained ministry are asked a series of questions. One of them is: “*Are you in debt so as to embarrass yourself?*” They have just finished four years of college and three years of seminary while working part-time and oftentimes supporting a family. YES, they are embarrassed by their debt OR they’ve lost the ability to blush! Yet they’re supposed to answer, “NO.”

**Savings’ rates** are at an all time low of less than 1%. Many people are living on the edge with no financial cushion to soften a fall. Most families are only one or two missed paychecks away from being out on the street.

Since 1968, there has also been a steady, national decline in **charitable giving**. The giving pattern for all Christian denominations in the United States is now 2.6% of annual income. The United Methodist Church is below the national average at 2%.

Bishop Lindsey Davis tells a revealing story about a stewardship campaign in a church he served. One member who was less than regular in his attendance made a surprising \$5,200 annual pledge. When the first quarter’s financial statements were mailed, however, the member stormed into the church office in a rage. He flung the statement on the pastor’s desk and demanded to know why it said he was behind.

So Bishop Davis reached into the file box and pulled out the pledge card. He pointed to the appropriate line and said, “Right here you put down \$100 per week. With 52 weeks in a year, that’s \$5,200. You’ve only given \$300 in the first three months, so this is why your statement shows you are behind.”

The man looked at him incredulously and said, “I didn’t pledge \$5,200 for the year—I pledged \$100 weekly—for every week I attend!”

In our congregations, we have become **consumers rather than stewards**, paying “*user fees*” for the services that we want. This is why almost every church suffers a “summer slump” in giving. People tend not to give if they don’t come. And ministers dread the prospect of missing a Sunday due to bad weather because it takes the rest of the year to catch up.

Money is a good gift from God. Yet Paul warned about the dangers of worldly wealth when he said: “*The love of money is the root of all evil.*” John Ed Mathison begins *Treasures of the Transformed Life* with a quote from John D. Rockefeller: “*How much money would it take to be REALLY satisfied? Just a little bit more.*”

We must constantly ask whether we own what we own or whether what we own owns us. Or to put it more simply, it is not a question if we have a little money, but if a little money has us. Wealth makes a good servant but a terrible master.

### **Financial Freedom**

Christian stewardship is ultimately not a question of money but a question of **faith**. Are we willing to trust God with our material resources? Are we ready to take a leap of faith in financial faithfulness? And who do we believe is the better money manager in life—ME or the Creator of the heavens and the earth?

Jesus said: *“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* We normally think the opposite is true. However, where we place our money is where our interest and attention naturally follow.

For example, some here probably own **stock**. When you open the business section of the newspaper, do you read every symbol and price of the thousands of companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange? No, your eye naturally goes to the stocks that you own. Our hearts follow our treasure like a rope follows an anchor thrown into the water.

Stewardship is a vital part of discipleship. People who grow in giving also grow in grace. Due to the sensitive nature of money, this hasn't always been addressed in the past. However, people who grow in grace need to LEARN how to give. Over the past years, we have emphasized *the giver's need to give and not the church's need to receive.*

The Bible teaches the principle of **proportional giving**. God calls us to return a portion of our income back to God's work in the church. A foundational element of proportional giving is the **tithe**. “Tithe” literally means “one-tenth.” Both the Old and New Testament teach that the first tenth of our income is to be returned to God as an offering of thanksgiving and service.

In the book, Dr. Mathison recalls the message of the prophet **Malachi**. He served in Jerusalem, and God called him to confront the Jewish people about their disobedience. God says to the people, *“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.”* The people responded, *“How do we rob you?”* God answered:

*“In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. 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!”* (Malachi 3:8-10)

I LOVE the video we saw today entitled *God's Pie*. It serves as a vivid reminder of how we often use our financial resources. If you didn't catch the line towards the end, the German car representative leans forward and says, “Dude, He brought the pie!”

Malachi's words contain both warning and promise. The people are warned against the consequences of stealing from God; but they are also promised God's blessings if they are faithful. The Lord says, *“Test me in this!”*

Recall Paul's words from today's Scripture lesson: *“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”* The apostle went on to say: *“And God is able to make all grace abound in you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”* (2 Corinthians 9: 6 - 8)

Jesus said that the measure we use will be the measure we receive. What Christians discover is that stewardship is not only about the money we GIVE but also the

money we KEEP. Financial faithfulness breaks the bondage of money and grants us the personal discipline to manage what we have better than ever before.

Dr. Mathison recalls the example of Texas businessman, R. G. LeTourneau. The industrialist earned a great deal of money. He began tithing 10%. Under God's blessings, he raised it to 20%, then 40%, and then 60%. By the end of his life, he was giving up to 90% of his income to ministry and missions.

When asked about his generosity, the businessman replied: "*The question is not how much of my money I give to God, but rather how much of God's money I keep for myself.*" (*Treasures of the Transformed Life*, p. 192)

### **Financial Challenge**

I've got good news for you this morning. Although the sermon is dealing with our vow to support the church with our gifts, we are not asking for money . . . this morning! However, each year I do invite you to consider a multifold challenge and invitation:

- 1) First, where are you in your financial faithfulness to God? In dollars, in percentage, in trust, in spirit, in joy, in love, where do you find yourself this morning?
- 2) Second, prayerfully consider where God wants you to be. I believe that the Scriptural command to tithe is for all people. For some, this presently seems like an impossibility. And for others among you, the tithe may be an inadequate response to how God has blessed, and you feel called to give more.  
Please note I have not talked about dollar amounts today. The Lord calls us to be faithful with what we have. One of the most faithful stewards I have ever known sacrificially supported her church with \$25 per month. For others, you may have the opportunity to more than tithe on the material blessings you have received.
- 3) Thirdly, ask yourself how you will go from where you are to where God wants you to be. I invite you to step up this year to a place closer to that goal. If a tithe is where you need to be and you are presently giving 2%, make a systematic plan to increase your giving over the next year or years so that you are moving towards where you need to be. And I promise that God will bless you in your faithfulness.

It has been exciting to see people respond to these challenges over the past years. We have seen a significant increase in personal and congregational giving accompanied by spiritual growth. By letting go, we have learned to let God.

### **A Giggling Giver**

Finally, examine the spirit in which you give. In today's Scripture lesson, Paul wrote the Corinthian church: "*Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a **cheerful giver!***"

After twenty-five years in the ministry, I think that Paul may have greatly overestimated his audience! I'm sure that God DOES love a cheerful giver; however, we

often offer grudging, grouchy gifts with reluctant hands. Although God loves cheerful givers, the church will still accept gifts from irritable grumps!

On several occasions, I have noted the difference between adults and children during the **offering time**. When the offering is taken, adults look like they are getting a root canal at the dentist's office without benefit of anesthesia. The plate is quickly passed from one hand to another like a game of hot potato.

Children, on the other hand, LOVE the offering. They like to handle the plates and drop their change in to make the loudest noise possible. And the question I have always asked is: *"When do we lose the joy of giving in the journey from childhood to adulthood?"*

Last year a church member answered my question. He pulled me aside and said, *"Children lose the joy of giving when they begin to give their own money rather than their parents!"*

Today I invite you to recapture the childlike joy of giving. Because I have good news for you—it's not your money! All that we have has been given to us by our heavenly Father.

David Bell is a United Methodist minister in Kentucky. During a stewardship campaign, his five year old daughter, Ashley, heard her daddy speak on money at church. Afterwards, she gave him a hug and announced with a laugh: "Daddy, God LOVES a giggling giver!" I think the apostle Paul would whole-heartedly approve this paraphrase of his words.

Today let all of us give what God has laid upon our hearts, not reluctantly or under compulsion, because God DOES love a cheerful giver. You don't HAVE to giggle this morning; however, an occasional smile is alright! Stewardship is not a dreary subject we talk about in whispers only when the church needs money. It is the essence of what it means to live as children of God.

### **Conclusion**

A year later I got an update on my young friend who gave torn money to the church. The Finance Office eventually quit receiving its weekly supply of mutilated money. Instead, the boy began giving entire one dollar bills with all four corners attached. His mother reported that the offering had become one of his favorite moments of worship. He gave with joy and excitement.

He finally discovered a simple truth: it wasn't his money. He only held it for a moment in time to use for God. My prayer is he will never lose the wonder and joy of giving. And as God's children, I invite you to embrace the same lesson in your life today. In the process, we discover how transformed lives can satisfy our soul's thirst for more.