

Simple Rules for Money stewardship sermon series

“Give All You Can”

Proverbs 11:24-25

There was a man who worked all of his life and saved all the money he earned. He loved his money more than anything else. So, just before he died, he said to his wife, *“Honey, when I die, I want you to place all my money in the casket with me, so I will have it in the afterlife.”* He asked his wife to promise him that she would do so. Reluctantly, the wife agreed and the man died.

At his funeral service, the wife sat quietly, holding a shoebox on her lap. Just as the funeral director was about to close the casket, she shouted, *“Wait!”* She went over to the casket and placed the shoebox in it beside the dead body of her husband.

After the casket was rolled away, her best friend said to her, *“I hope you were not crazy enough to put all of his money in there with the stingy old man.”* The wife said, *“Well, I made a promise to him. I am a good Christian, so I can’t lie.”* *“What? You mean, you’ve really put every cent of his money in the casket to be buried with him?”* asked the friend in disbelief. *“I sure did,”* said the wife. *“I got it all together, put it in my bank account, and wrote him a check.”*

Indeed, you can’t take it with you, can you? Everything you own - your nice homes and fancy cars, your latest gadgets and electronics, your beautiful clothes and jewelry, no matter how much you love them, you cannot take any of your possessions or money with you when you leave this world. You will go as you came, with nothing in your hands.

In Chapter 12 of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a story of a rich farmer whose land produced a bountiful crop (Luke 12:13-21). It was way more than his barns could hold. So, he decided to tear down the barns and build bigger ones to store all his grain and his goods. He said to himself, *“You’ve stored up plenty of goods, enough to last several years now. Time to take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.”* But, God appears to him and says, *“Fool! Tonight is the night you die. And your barn full of goods, whose will they be?”* Jesus ends the parable with these words, *“So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but aren’t rich toward God.”*

Truly, it is foolish to earn all we can simply to accumulate more money. It is foolish to save all we can just to meet our own needs. In his sermon, *Use of Money*, John Wesley said saving money just to store it away was not any different from wasting or throwing it away. All our efforts to earn all we can and to save all we can becomes meaningless if we fail to go forward to the final purpose, which is giving all we can.

Wesley made it clear to his hearers: We are here on earth not as an owner but as God’s stewards and managers. Everything we have, our soul, our body, our talents, our possessions, and our money belong to God who created and brought us into this world. We are to use all that we have in a way that becomes *“spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* (1 Peter 2:5)

Here are some specific instructions Wesley gave on how to wisely manage what God gave to us: *first of all*, provide for your own basic needs - food, clothing, housing, transportation, and whatever is necessary to keep yourself in health and strength. *Second*, provide for the basic needs of your family - your spouse and children, and any others related to your household. *Third*, when you have done these things, seek to do good for those in your faith community. *And then*, if you still have a surplus, look for opportunities to do good for all others. In this way, you are giving all you can.

Wesley said, if a doubt arises at any time concerning the use of money, ask yourself these questions:

1. In spending this money, am I acting according to my character? Am I acting not as an owner, but as a steward of my Lord's goods?
2. Am I giving this money in obedience to God's Word? In what scripture does God require me to spend this money?
3. Can I offer up this action or expenditure as a sacrifice to God through Jesus Christ?
4. Do I have reason to believe that for this very work I will receive a reward at the resurrection of the righteous?

In his book, *Earn, Save, Give*, James Harnish says there are three kinds of people when it comes to giving offerings. First, there are *tossers*. These are the people who throw in some of their excess money. "Toss" is the word the Message translation uses in the story of the widow's offering recorded in the Gospel of Mark. People "tossed money in for the collection." (Mark 12:41). Harnish writes,

We toss our gifts, whatever their size, into the offering plate in worship or into the red kettles around Christmas, the way folks did that day in the Temple... Tossing is giving off the edge. We never miss what we give in this way. It never makes a difference in our lives, though by the miracle of God's grace, it can be used to make a difference in the lives of others. (p.118)

Second, there are *tryers*. They are the people who are growing deeper in their generosity and commitment, who are working toward the 10-10-80 plan. Harnishes continues:

For many faithful disciples, a cold turkey leap to tithing is impossible because of their current financial condition or the amount of debt they have incurred across the years. They know that moving toward the biblical discipleship of tithing is a huge step, calling for major readjustment of their budget. Tryers are folks who lay out a plan for a systematic process to move from where they are to where they believe God would like them to be. They grow one step at a time toward the goal of tithing by reducing debt and reorganizing their financial priorities as they grow. (p. 118-119)

In one of the churches I served in the past, I noticed a young couple with two small children had doubled their weekly offerings one day. When I called to thank them for their generosity, the wife answered and said,

"Pastor, as you know, recently, I participated in the church health survey. Answering the questions on the survey, suddenly, I realized I was not taking my membership vows seriously, and I did not feel good

about it, especially, about our offering. So, I shared my feelings with my husband. We discussed our finances and agreed, with some adjustments to our lifestyle, we could give more. We plan to increase our giving every year until we reach our goal.”

Her sharing brought tears to my eyes. My heart was filled with joy as I was listening to her testimony of faith. They started as tossers and became tryers, and it was because of the church health survey the wife took. Truly, God works in mysterious ways. The following week, she even showed up for the evening Bible study, as her husband was watching their kids at home!

Now, there are *tithers*. Harnish says,

“Tithing is the base line or beginning point of a generous life... Giving the first 10 percent of our resources back to the God who gave them to us enables us to live into the command, ‘Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first of all your crops.’ (Proverbs 3:9).” (p.119)

Here is a little bit of background for tithing. The word, “tithes” comes from an old English root meaning one tenth. In the Old Testament, the tithe was an offering of one’s agricultural income to God as an expression of thanks and dedication. There were three kinds of tithes: two every year and one every third year, so an average of over 23 percent of one’s annual produce from the land were given as a tithe. And, of course, there were other kinds of special offerings people were giving.

The stories of Abraham and Jacob in the book of Genesis (Genesis 4:17-20, 28:22) reveal to us that tithing was a common giving practice among God’s people, from very early on in their history. Then, a system of tithes was instituted in Moses’ laws (Deuteronomy 12, 14, and 26). And, later in history, the prophets rebuked the Israelites for failing to give the tithe to God (Malachi 3:8). Tithing is not specifically mentioned in the New Testament, but it was assumed to be one of the spiritual practices Christian believers continued from the Jewish tradition.

In general, tithers do not stop at the set giving of 10 percent but make an effort to grow beyond tithing because they have experienced God’s blessings through their life of generosity, as clearly described in today’s scripture reading: *“Those who give generously receive more, but those who are stingy with that is appropriate will grow needy. Generous persons will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.”* (Proverbs 11:24-25)

What kind of giver are you? If you are tossing your money into the offering plate whenever you are in church, take the first step toward a disciplined approach to giving and begin to experience God’s blessings in your life. If you are trying to move into a deeper level of stewardship, trust in God’s provision and keep moving toward your goal as you count God’s blessings in your life. And if you are already a tither, don’t see it as a ceiling for your giving; grow beyond tithing. Take a leap of faith and experience the joy of living a life of extravagant generosity.

Harnish says in his book, *Earn, Save, Give*, Christian stewardship “is a spiritual discipline,” and it “takes a lifetime.” Christian stewardship “changes the financial priorities by which we live,” and its success “is measured by the difference it makes in the life of the giver.” (p. 116-117)

Martin Luther, the great reformer said that three conversions are necessary in the Christian life: the conversion of our heart, the conversion of our mind, and the conversion of our purse. I pray that every member of our church family will experience all three conversions this Fall through our stewardship campaign. I pray that you will see your wallets and checkbooks not in terms of what's in there for yourselves, but what is available to wisely steward for God.

May we all grow in our faith by committing ourselves to the spiritual discipline that John Wesley taught and practiced concerning money, of earning all you can, saving all you can, and giving all you can!
Amen.