

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 12

A Giving Church

The Sunday School Teacher asked her eight eager 10-year-olds if they would give \$1,000,000 to the missionaries.

"YES!" they all screamed!!

"Would you give \$1,000?" Again, they shouted "YES!"

"How about \$100?"

"Oh, YES we would!" they all agreed!!

"Would you give just a dollar to the missionaries?" she asked.

The boys exclaimed "YES!" just as before except for Johnnie.

"Johnnie," the teacher said as she noticed the boy clutching his pocket, "why didn't you say 'YES' this time?"

"Well," he stammered, "Because I have a dollar."

It has been said that money talks. Indeed, it does, the only problem is that for most of us it says, "Goodbye." But when you think about it, money does talk in many ways. It says a lot about the people who have it and those who seek to have it. Your attitude concerning money and the way you use your money says a great deal about you.

It might surprise you to find out that the Bible has quite a lot to say about money and possessions. In fact, there are over a thousand references to money in the Bible, second only to the topic of love. More than half the parables Jesus told, of which we have a record, referred to money.

It should be obvious that our use of money says volumes concerning us. It can say that we are greedy or generous, stingy or giving, corrupt or holy. It should be no surprise therefore, that the power of the Holy Spirit made a difference in how these early Christians dealt with material possessions. When they came to Christ, they were utterly transformed in heart, mind, and lifestyle. That is what we see in the opening pages of the Book of Acts. We see people who had been possessed by God.

Here we see another mark of a great Church - a Church that is awake and alive and acting like it should. When the sleeping giant wakes up - we see a Church that gives ... and gives generously.

Acts 2:45 *"They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."*

These early Christians were so committed that they sold their possessions to help others in need. They were so overpowered by a spirit of generosity and giving that even their possessions were no longer as important to them. They were more concerned that in their Church no one would suffer need. But what they provided was not merely spare change. It wasn't even a few thousand dollars sitting in the bank drawing interest. It was their houses, their land, and for some of them, all their possessions. What an unselfish spirit existed among these early Christians! They were a generous, giving Church.

A truly great Church will be a truly generous Church. I don't believe God can do a lot with tight-fisted, materialistic, selfish, grasping, worldly Christians. That, at best, is carnal Christianity, and at worst, it's not Christianity at all. True Christianity is generous. True Christianity is giving.

"For God so loved the world that He gave..." God, in His very nature, is a giver. And we, if we contain the nature of God within our mortal flesh, will also be givers. A great Church is a selfless Church.

Jesus told us that it is impossible to serve two masters - that we simply could not serve God and money at the same time. It is really a question of priorities. And He also told us that we should not be worried about even those basic needs that we all have - needs like food and clothing. The reason is clear. He has committed Himself to provide for our needs, and He wants us to trust in Him for those needs.

It is because we serve a God Who provides for us that we can give with the confidence that He will take care of us. This provides the motivation for giving. Let's look at some characteristics which should mark generous Christian giving.

The first reason we ought to give is because we love the Lord and we are thankful for all God has done for us. Remember, Jesus gave His very life for us. Considering what He gave, how small is the gift of a tithe? Small indeed. God has blessed us beyond what we deserve. Because of all He has done for us, we give out of a heart full of love for Him. We give because we want to - because we are thankful. So, our giving, first of all, should be thankful giving.

It is so easy to take things for granted. We live in a wonderful, free country. We are well fed. We have a roof over our heads, and money in our pockets. It's true, we might not be as well off as some, but compared to most of the world we are rich. We are not only blessed materially, but we are also blessed with friends, family, and a future.

But, in spite of all this, we are sometimes slow to acknowledge our blessings. Because we have grown so accustomed to them, we can take them for granted. It's easy to do. Occasionally we need to be reminded of just what we have been taking for granted, and what we have to be thankful for. It is at special times, like birthdays and anniversaries that we are able to focus our attention on the things which really count.

What is the basis for true thanksgiving? Well, to be thankful, one must be grateful for something, and to someone. It has been said that *"The atheist's most embarrassing moment is when he feels profoundly thankful for something but can't think of anybody to thank for it."* The real basis for giving thanks is found in a Person.

The greatest gift ever given, by the greatest Person, was God's Son, Jesus. He's the real basis for all thanksgiving. 2 Corinthians 9:15 says, *"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"* The greatest gift that anyone has ever given to humankind is the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

This is what is called the Gospel. Gospel means good news. And it is good news indeed! Those of us who have experienced the effects of this good news in our lives also know the gratitude we feel toward God. How can we ever thank Him enough? Surely human words fail to adequately express the overwhelming gratitude which wells up in our hearts.

The basis for true thanksgiving is an encounter with the living God. As we get to know Jesus better, we will find that our gratitude grows. We ought to give because of an attitude of gratitude.

Our giving also ought to be cheerful giving. The Bible tells us that *"God loves a cheerful giver"* (2 Corinthians 9:7). It has been said that while God loves a cheerful giver, He will take money from a scrooge. But that is not His desire.

The word for *"cheerful"* in 2 Corinthians 9:7 is the word from which we get our word *"hilarious."* God loves a giver who gives joyously, hilariously; not simply because he has to, but because he delights in giving. And that kind of giving brings God's blessings.

Giving should be characterised by a certain euphoria. It should be a joy to give to God. Perhaps we should collect the offering in our Church in a new way. Instead of passing around the plates, maybe we should ask the people to march down the aisles in hilarious laughter and give. Giving should be a celebration of the grace of God.

This kind of giving does something important in our lives. Richard J. Foster, in his book *Money, Sex & Power* says, *"Giving with glad and generous hearts has a way of routing out the tough old miser within us. Even the poor need to know that they can give. Just the very act of letting go of money, or some other treasure, does something within us. It destroys the demon of greed."*

Our giving should also be liberal. No, I am not talking about politics, I am talking about the true meaning of 'liberal' which is *generous, abundant, unrestrained* etc.

Luke 6:38 *"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."*

2 Corinthians 9:6 *"Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."*

If we are stingy with our sowing, we shall be sadly disappointed with our reaping. The measure we pour out shall be the same measure we get back. If we give stingily, we shall reap stingily. If we give bountifully, we shall receive in abundance. While you can't out-give God, many certainly under-give Him. It has been said that *"Some give their money as they give their teeth to a dentist."*

In fact, there is even a disease associated with a lack of giving which is particularly virulent in the 21st century. It is called *cirrhosis of the giver*. It was actually discovered about 34 AD and ran a terminal course in a couple named Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). It is an acute condition which renders the patient's hand immobile when it attempts to move from the wallet to the offering plate or to a person in need. However, it is clinically observable that this condition disappears in alternate environments such as golf courses, or clubs, or restaurants. This is not Christian giving. The Lord loves a liberal giver.

Our giving, as was the giving of the early Church, should also be sacrificial in nature.

2 Corinthians 8:1-4 *"And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people."*

They not only gave out of their excess; they gave out of their need. Most people give only out of their surplus. Jesus is not too impressed with that kind of giving. But He rejoices in the person who gives over and above the tithe, over and above what is expected. The person who lives more simply so that the Lord's work can prosper is the one who is storing up treasure in Heaven. We do not lose what we give. We send it on before us that there may be treasure in Heaven.

There is a direct relationship between giving now and the future. I heard of a very wealthy woman who lived in a palatial home, surrounded by fine tapestries, linens, imported china, expensive bric-a-brac, and who indulged in every luxury imaginable. She died and went to the gates of Heaven. An angel was chosen to accompany her to the home. They passed many homes of grandeur and magnificence. Finally, they came to a street of much less glamour, and down at the end of it was a very humble little cottage. They turned to enter, and the woman stopped and looked about with tragic disappointment on her face.

The angel said to her, *"This is to be your eternal home."*

"Oh but," she said, *"I have been accustomed only to the finest and most expensive. There are many, many beautiful homes which we passed similar to mine on earth. There must be some mistake."*

"Ah," said the angel, *"we built your eternal home here out of the material which you sent ahead during your live on earth, and this is the best we could do."*

Now I don't accept the theology of that story – but it is meant to make us stop and think what it really means to 'store up treasures in heaven.'

Many will be surprised at the linkage between giving and God's blessing. Many have been blessed even in this life by giving. J.L.Kraft, head of the Kraft Cheese Corporation, who had given approximately 25 percent of his enormous income to Christian causes for many years, once said this:

"The only investment I ever made which has paid constantly increasing dividends, is the money I have given to the Lord. Pastors will do their greatest service in leading their people to understand the truth of God concerning the stewardship of time and money."

John D. Rockefeller explained a great principle when he said:

"I never would have been able to tithe the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed my first salary, which was \$1.50 a week."

Other examples include John Wanamaker of Philadelphia, who from the beginning of his business career is said to have dedicated one tenth of his increase to the Lord. Likewise, William Colgate, the great soap and perfume manufacturer, rose to fame and wealth while consistently paying a tithe of his earnings into the gospel treasury.

For him, this was the minimum requirement designated by divine wisdom; and year by year as God prospered his efforts and multiplied his wealth, Colgate gladly gave far more than a tenth.

Now we need to understand that this is not prosperity theology. This is not giving so that we get something back. This is simply the principle of sowing and reaping. This is cause and effect. This is a law of the kingdom. This is the truth about giving.

The real question we must ask ourselves is, *"What does our giving say about us?"* And then we must ask, *"What do we want our giving to say about us?"* How you respond to those questions will in a large measure determine the blessing of God on both yourself and the Church.

A great Church is a generous Church. A great Church is a giving Church. These early Christians gave because their lives had been changed and, as a result of their spirit of generosity, God blessed the whole Church, and through the Church, He bless the whole world.

Think about the selfish bent of our society today and what this kind of unselfish, future-looking giving says to our greedy, materialistic generation. Giving shows the world that we really believe in eternity. Only one who knows that this life is not all there is will truly give. When you think about it, generous giving tells the world that you really believe.

Tony Campolo once asked the question, *"Can a Christian drive a BMW?"* He asked it, of course, to get the attention of Christians who had swallowed the materialistic philosophy of the age. But perhaps we can ask another similar and equally blunt question. *"Can you be a true Christian and refuse to give?"* I think the answer would be the same as Campolo gave: NO!

Chuck Swindoll, in his book *Improving Your Serve* tells this story:

Shortly after World War II came to an end, Europe began picking up the pieces. Much of the Old Country had been ravaged by war and was in ruins. Perhaps the saddest sight of all was that of little orphaned children starving in the streets of those war-torn cities. Early one chilly morning an American soldier was making his way back to the barracks in London. As he turned the corner in his jeep, he spotted a little lad with his nose pressed to the window of a pastry shop. Inside the cook was kneading dough for a fresh batch of doughnuts. The hungry boy stared in silence, watching every move.

The soldier pulled his jeep to the curb, stopped, got out and walked quietly over to where the little fellow was standing. Through the steamed-up window he could see the mouth-watering morsels as they were being pulled from the oven, piping hot.

The boy salivated and let out a slight groan as he watched the cook place them onto the glass-enclosed counter ever so carefully. The soldier's heart went out to the nameless orphan as he stood beside him. *"Son ... would you like some of those?"* The boy was startled. *"Oh, yeah ... I surely would!"* The American stepped inside and bought a dozen, put them in a bag, and walked back to where the lad was standing in the foggy cold of the London morning. He smiled, held out the bag, and said simply:

"Here you are."

As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. He looked back and heard the child ask quietly: *"Mister ... are you God?"*

We are never more like God than when we give. *"God so loved the world, that he gave..."*

If we are spirit-filled Christians serving that same God, then we will also be those who give ... not just our spare change ... not just our surplus ... we will give far more than that and we will do it with thankful hearts ... we will do it with joy ... we will do it sacrificially ... and we will do it generously.

What's the biggest misconception Christians have about giving? That when we give money away to a Church or ministry, or to help the needy, it's gone. While we hope others will benefit from it, we're quite sure we won't. We think we're divesting ourselves of money, disassociating from it. Once it leaves our hands, we imagine, it has no connection to us, no future implications relevant to our lives. We couldn't be more wrong.

What we think we own will be rudely taken from us - some of it before we die, and anything that's left the moment we die. But now is our window of opportunity not to divest ourselves of money but to invest it in the kingdom of heaven. We don't have to have everything taken from us. We can give it before disaster or death strike.

Now is our chance to give what we can't keep - to gain what we can't lose. We are God's money managers. He wants us to invest in his kingdom. He tells us He's keeping track of every cup of cold water we give the needy in his name. He promises us He will reward us in heaven because we help the poor and needy who cannot pay us back for what we do for them. We can pay forward into God's kingdom. We can invest in eternity.

This is the secret the early Church learned very quickly and their generosity stands as an indictment, but also a great encouragement and example to us today.