

Mark 12:38-44

Sacrifices©
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Stewardship Commitment Sunday

This is the Sunday in the church year, that I consider to be a very special time for the people of God. It is a service of dedication and of thanksgiving; a time to recommit ourselves to God out of gratitude and love for what God has done for us.

Every Sunday is an opportunity to rededicate our lives to the Lord, but this is the Sunday where our dedication is the main focus. Yes, it is a time to turn in our pledge cards after praying about what God is leading us to give. We commit to giving a percentage of our income, or to giving an amount, even if isn't a determined percentage.

In the Old Testament, the rule was that God's people gave ten percent of what they had ... of money, or whatever their harvest was, or livestock ... the first fruits of their harvest was considered what belonged to the Lord. They would bring it to the temple and give in an act of dedication and sacrifice.

In the New Testament we don't hear about the tithe as much. Instead, we hear about giving generously and giving out of love and gratitude. Paul tells us in Galatians 5 that generosity is one of the fruits of the spirit. The new Christians were encouraged to give, not just because it was God's law but because their hearts were full of love for Jesus, the one they believed had given the ultimate sacrifice for their salvation.

Jesus came and turned so many things upside down. Now, a tenth of what a person had wasn't a hard, fast rule although it was still encouraged. Now, a person could give MORE than ten percent! You didn't have to just stick to rigidness, but you could be extravagant! If you have an abundance, you could give more! You could give out of that abundance.

But if you did not have much, the command was to give what you decide you can give – but to do it with a generous and loving, cheerful heart. Not begrudgingly, but lovingly and joyfully.

Jesus said, "Where your heart is, there also is your treasure." It seems to mean something to God if we are giving with a heart full of love. It's about an attitude of gratitude. We are created in the image of God and God is the ultimate giver, right? God has given us so much out of His love for us. Our giving helps shape us to be more and more like God

It's about trust too. One woman said, at Bible Study on Wednesday night, that one of the former pastors here used to say, 'If you give ... if you tithe ... you will never lack the money to pay the bills and have what you need.'

I can say that I actually experienced that first hand... many years ago. I was married to the father of my children, Dwayne. He was a hard worker, but he got laid off with Sherwin Williams. We had started going to this little Baptist church, and had just started tithing ten percent when he was laid off.

I remember writing that check for ten percent of what little income we had and wondering how we could possibly feed our two boys and pay bills and make it ...

But we gave our offering and the next day I was wondering what I was going to do for groceries when I had a phone call from a church member. She said she had felt God speaking and leading her to us and would we be offended if they offered us some groceries.

Later, that week, two checks came in the mail. One was an insurance reimbursement that we had forgotten about, and the other was for a settlement with income tax that we did not expect to get.

In Malachi 3, verse 10, God says this about tithing, “Test me in this and see if I don’t open up heaven itself to you and pour out blessings beyond your wildest dreams.”

In tithing, we are trusting that God will take care of us; will provide for us. Trust is a matter of faith. And the more we trust, the more trust grows. And the more our faith grows.

In tithing, I have never been let down. Have things been hard? At times, yes! Have I been scared about the future? Once in a while, I have. But I can say that my trust in God has grown stronger and stronger because of my trust in God. In other words, the more I depend on him the more I see how dependable God is.

So, let’s look at the scripture lesson from Mark. Now, Jesus is in his final week of life as a human on earth. He has already entered Jerusalem on a donkey for the Passover. The city is full of people who have come pouring in to celebrate Passover. Jesus has been on a mission since his arrival. He has cast out the evil, the crookedness in the temple where people were using the temple to make money that was actually oppressive to the poor. Vendors were selling doves and sheep for sacrifice ... but at exorbitant prices.

And then he pointed out the temple leaders to his disciples and told them that this was how it should not be done. These rulers were flaunting their authority. They were saying long prayers in public just to make a good impression. They were strolling around in their fancy, expensive robes showing off their authority and their esteemed position. Jesus said: **DO NOT BE LIKE THEM.**

So, Jesus and his disciples sat down in the temple and just observed. They saw many wealthy people come by and put big bags full of money into the treasury. They sashayed in and, one at a time, they came by and poured their big bags full of coins into the offering. It was noisy ... and noticeable.

Some would be impressed and say: Wow! Look at those rich men with their fancy, expensive robes! They must be very important, but look how generous and giving they are. Jesus seems to think they are more about show than they are about giving from the heart. He indicates that all that money was just a drop in the bucket for them – not something they would miss at all.

But then, they saw this old widow woman come by. Now, if you were widowed in that day and if you had no sons or anyone to take care of you, you could easily become destitute. Apparently, Jesus recognized this woman as someone who was poor. He already had observed and talked to his disciples about how the temple leaders were taking everything from the poor, from the widows. He pointed out how they “devoured the widow’s houses.”

And yet, she came walking in holding the two coins that were worth less than a penny. She put them in the offering (or the treasury) and kept on walking.

And those who saw were more apt to consider it worthless than an act of great merit. Two coins, worth less than a penny? Compared to all this wealth given today, this is nothing.

Yet, Jesus commends her act and calls it something that is worth much more than all that the wealthy had given, because their giving, he said, was out of their abundance. It was not a hardship. They would not suffer because of their giving.

But this woman gave her all. She gave everything she possibly could. Her giving was generous and sacrificial and was given out of love. She gave her all to God.

You see, tithing – or giving extravagantly is one of the things that changes our lives, that helps to mold us into the person God intends us to be. The point in this scripture today is that what the wealthy men gave was good but it didn’t make a difference in their lives. It was easy for them to give that amount because it really did not affect them. It didn’t require sacrifice that in turn leads to trusting God.

The widow, however, out of love for God and out of trust, gave all she had. You know it had to affect her. When she left that place of worship, she knew she had to trust God to take care of her.

It is in the sacrifices we make that we grow and become stronger in our faith if we put our trust in God. Stewardship is, of course, about more than our money. It is about recognizing that everything we have is a gift from God – actually still belongs to God.

We have been given a responsibility. God has trusted us to be His stewards, taking care of all that is His. To be a good steward means that we take care of our bodies, we take care of the earth, the environment, of the creatures on earth.

To commit to the Church, which is the Body of Christ, means we take care of the Church as well. We generously give our time and our talents, our spiritual gifts for the ministry and mission of the church.

Giving financially is only one part of practicing stewardship but it is a very important part. Why? Well, of course there would not be a ministry or mission or pastor or even a sanctuary if there was no money. That’s a fact.

But committing a portion of our income to the church is very important for our spiritual growth. You know it's been said that money is the root of all evil. And it can be. It can so easily take control of us. We earned this money and we don't want to lose it. In fact, we want to keep making more. It's mine. We can so easily become stingy and hoarders.

Giving generously helps us to let go and to put our trust in God instead of our money. Whatever you decide that God is leading you to give, whether it be a small portion, or a tenth, or more, or whether it be the tiniest seed that is the beginning of your life of giving, do it with joy and grateful hearts for the many blessings God has poured out on us.

God has given us life, God has provided us with a church family and a place to worship and learn and grow, God has given us our own families and our jobs and our money and everything we have. And best of all, God has given us his Son, Jesus Christ.

We started today's service honoring our veterans who sacrificed so much for us to have freedom. They gave up the lives they were living for a time and they left their families (who also sacrificed) – all for love of country and for freedom for those who would come after them.

We know that many people who have gone before us in the church have sacrificed a great deal so that the faith would live on and on.

And of course, we remember with deep gratitude the one who is our Savior, our Redeemer. He sacrificed everything out of love for us. Jesus – the Son of God – gave his life so that we might be free from sin and death. If we didn't give for any other reason, we want to give out of gratitude for that sacrifice and love. Our giving helps to continue His church and his message of love and grace.

I want to close with this touching story about a little boy who went into a church one Sunday morning to get out of the cold. He had been trying to sell newspapers, but not a single customer had passed by. He entered the church, hoping to pass an hour unnoticed on the back row. The preacher delivered a powerful sermon about Jesus and his love for us. At the end of the service, they took an offering.

The ushers went from row to row until, finally, one came near to the little newspaper boy. He stopped right in front of the little boy and held out the offering plate. The boy stared at the offering plate, and after a long pause, he asked the usher to place the offering plate on the floor.

Then the little boy did something very unusual. He stepped into the offering plate -- first one foot and then the other. He slowly looked up with tears streaming down his cheeks and said, "Mister, I don't have any money; I haven't sold a single newspaper today, but if Jesus did all that preacher said he did just for me, I will gladly give my life to Him."

I don't know if that story is true, but I do know that God wants us to give him our all -- our hands, our feet, our hearts, our voices, our silver and our gold.

Dear Father, like the widow, we desire to give all that we have to you. For all that we have comes from you. Amen.

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