

## The Practices of the Christian Life – The Church - Stewardship

A.W. Tozer once wrote: The throbbing heart of the church is life—in the happy phrase of Henry Scougal, "The life of God in the soul of man." This life, together with the actual presence of Christ within her, constitutes the church, a divine thing, a mystery, a miracle. Yet without substance, form and order, this divine life would have no dwelling place, and no way to express itself to the community.

We have been considering this life, experiencing the life of God together in the church, as one of the practices of the Christian life and for the last week, we've looked at some of the substance, form and order that a church must have – worship, fellowship, and discipleship. We come to the last of the 'ships', so to speak, that make up healthy life in a healthy church, and that is stewardship.

Stewardship is an idea repeated often in the Scriptures, particularly in some of the parables of Christ. What is a steward? Put simply, a steward is a kind of manager. He is a caretaker of another man's goods, and it is his responsibility to look after, use and improve what belongs to his master.

In Christ's parables, there are often comparisons made between faithful and unfaithful stewards. A certain amount of money is entrusted to the stewards, the master goes off, and when he returns, he wants an accounting from the stewards. He wants them to report on what they did with the master's goods. A wise use of the master's goods brings a reward for the steward himself to keep. A foolish stewardship brings loss of privilege, loss of reward.

Since these parables are given by Christ as instruction to us, the implication seems to be that every Christian is a steward. Indeed, Peter says that each one of us is a steward of God's grace.

*NKJ 1 Peter 4:10 As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*

Every Christian receives grace, not as something we earned or own in our own right, but as a gift which God entrusts to us to be used for His glory. When you think about it, God entrusts us with many things. He entrusts us with salvation itself. He entrusts us with His reputation. He commits to us His Word, wanting us to use it properly and well for His glory. He entrusts us with the gospel message, expecting us to properly teach and preach it. He entrusts us with the church that His Son died for, expecting us to love it and nourish it and build it. Within the church, he entrusts us with certain gifts, that are not to be used selfishly, but as good stewards of His grace.

What else comes from God, it is a gift from God, and is to be used for God? Well, Paul put it this way:

*1 Corinthians 4:7 And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*

Our very lives are a stewardship. All our abilities are a stewardship. The time God gives us, with its opportunities, is a stewardship. The resources we have are a stewardship. Paul says:

*"1 Corinthians 6:20 <sup>20</sup> For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.*

To be a steward is to understand that all you have and all you are is actually a gift, something entrusted to you, which is not meant to be used for selfish gain. A steward is motivated to love

something more than personal advancement.

**1 Corinthians 4:2** <sup>2</sup> *Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.*

A steward wants to please His master. He wants to advance his master's fame or fortune or reputation or effectiveness. And as he does so, he lives in genuine camaraderie with his fellow stewards. He does this, keeping in mind that he will one day stand before the master.

Christians are to remember that all we have is from God and to be used for God and to God. We are to remember that one day Christ will return, or if we die before then, we will stand before Him and we will have to give an account of what we did with what God entrusted us.

When it comes to the local church, our stewardship is really focused around what God equips us with to work together for His glory. We have already considered the matters of serving one another, of using our spiritual gifts for God. It remains for us to speak about the matter of giving.

Because of the rampant false teaching on this issue, preaching on giving is sometimes a difficult task. There are so many money hungry preachers out there preaching on money to enrich themselves, so that almost any preacher who preaches on giving starts to raise suspicions. While the biblical teaching about giving has been horribly distorted by false teachers, it nevertheless remains a critical part of the Christian life.

What are some common misconceptions about giving?

**Giving is not to pay Him back.** Payback is an insult to grace.

**Psalms 50:8-14** <sup>8</sup> *I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices Or your burnt offerings, Which are continually before Me.* <sup>9</sup> *I will not take a bull from your house, Nor goats out of your folds.* <sup>10</sup> *For every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills.* <sup>11</sup> *I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine.* <sup>12</sup> *"If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all its fullness.* <sup>13</sup> *Will I eat the flesh of bulls, Or drink the blood of goats?* <sup>14</sup> *Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High.*

Along the same lines, we do not give to maintain His favour over us. God is not a debtor to whom we must continually give instalments of cash, without which He frowns on us.

Giving is not a kind of investment plan, or a guaranteed lottery ticket. The false gospel of the Word-faith movement and of the health, wealth and prosperity movement says that if you sow seeds of money in faith, God will give you hundredfold back. This makes God nothing more than a unit trust, or a horse to bet on. Money is the god, and Jehovah is the hot tip.

Those who refuse this principle are often in financial woes because God is displeased, not with not receiving money from them (Ps 50) but because covetousness has a hold of them.

**Haggai 1:2-9** <sup>2</sup> *"Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, saying: 'This people says, "The time has not come, the time that the LORD's house should be built." ' "* <sup>3</sup> *Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying,* <sup>4</sup> *"Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?"* <sup>5</sup> *Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways! "* <sup>6</sup> *"You have sown much, and bring in little; You eat, but do not have enough; You drink, but you are not filled with drink; You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; And he who earns wages, Earns wages to put into a bag with holes."* <sup>7</sup> *Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways! "* <sup>8</sup> *"Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified," says the LORD.* <sup>9</sup> *"You looked for much, but indeed it came to*

*little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?" says the LORD of hosts.*

"Because of My house that *is in ruins*, while every one of you runs to his own house.

So God does sometimes send lean times when His people are being materialistic and selfish. But don't use giving to God as a means to an end less than God Himself. That doesn't honour God.

*Paul writes in 2 Cor 12:14* **2 Corinthians 12:14:** <sup>14</sup> *Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.*

In commanding you to give, God is not seeking what is yours, but you - 2 Cor 12:14 . God does not need our money - Psalm 50:14. Ironically, He wants us to give because it enables us to receive more of Him -

**Luke 6:38** <sup>38</sup> *"Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you."*

How does 'giving' accomplish these purposes?

**It unites us with His heart.** God is a giver. God is fundamentally not a hoarder. God does not hoard His glory. He is predisposed by His beautiful nature to overflow – to share. He is completely self-sufficient, but His heart is to fill His creatures with Himself. To that end, He gave and gave and gave, and gives and gives and gives. God takes what is His, and hands it over to creatures much less than He is.

Being like God is the clearest way to know God. God made us in His image, and when we are saved we begin the transformation back into perfectly reflecting His image. So the more you are like Christ, the more of Christ you know and see.

If God was not a giver, there would be little merit in seeking to give. But God is fundamentally a giver. And not giving is to place ourselves at odds with the heart of God.

John 3:16 For God so loved that He- what? Felt? Thought? Smiled? Gave! There is cause and effect here. He loved – there's the cause, He gave, there's the effect.

**It frees us from covetousness which blocks out the light of God.**

Col 3:5 calls covetousness 'idolatry'. You cannot be worshipping God and another god.

**Matthew 6:19-21** <sup>19</sup> *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> "but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

Hebrews 13:5. Contentment grows out of satisfaction in God. Covetousness destroys contentment in God. It says – God is not enough. I must have more.

Giving says – I'd rather have God, which money cannot buy, than the things or the apparent security or promised comfort that it is supposed to bring.

Giving zeroes in on our desires – what do I want. Do I want God more than His gifts? Or do I want His gifts more than God Himself? When we give cheerfully we say, "More than money God, do I want you." When we give, we are forced to break out of the materialism and rat-race living of the

unsaved. Our entire lives are re-structured around eternal matters.

**It breaks the idolatry of money and underlines our dependence on Him.**

An old monkey trap consisted of a sweet inside a kind of container with a hole just big enough for the monkey to get his hand in. But once he grabs the sweet, and closes his fist around it, his fist is too big to get it back out. He struggles and thrashes, but cannot get free, because he won't open his hand and release the sweet. His own greed keeps him trapped. If they would let go, they would be free.

Giving is a way of doing just that. It says – money doesn't own me. I don't need money in this world. I need God, I simply use money.

Giving zeroes in on our dependence. It answers the question, "What do I truly lean on in this life? When the pressure is on, when life heats up – what am I actually looking to, leaning on, depending on, to get me through life? Giving says – not my salary, not my bank account, not my assets or investments. God. Remove God, and I cannot stand, even with my money. It helps us to walk by faith not by sight. We gain an eternal focus, while God meets our needs presently.

**It expresses our joy in Him and trust in him.**

Think of the ancient Israelites and the giving to the Temple. There was enthusiasm and gladness. Giving says – my God you are worth much to me. I delight in you. I do not want it to be said of me that I regarded my God as not worth much.

When David bought the threshing-floor, he told Araunah that he would not offer to the Lord that which cost him nothing. He did not want to give God leftovers, but things costly. When Mary broke the spikenard and poured it on Jesus, she was giving up something very costly, but she did so willingly. Giving is an opportunity to express love for God.

**2 Corinthians 8:8** <sup>8</sup> *I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others.*

So in giving we get more of God because it breaks the hold of covetousness which robs us of desire for God. It breaks the hold of idolising money which robs us of dependence on God. And it provides a sacrificial outlet for displaying how much we love God.

**It meets genuine needs amongst us.**

**1 Corinthians 9:13-14** *Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? <sup>14</sup> Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.*

How are you to give?

**1) Give of yourself** – God does not want our money if He does not have our hearts.

**2 Corinthians 8:5** <sup>5</sup> *And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.*

**Romans 12:1** *Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*

Give your time. Give your abilities. Give your body, your reputation, your children, your health, and your spouses. Before we give of our substance, we should place our entire lives before God to do with as He pleases.

**2) Give of your firstfruits** – **Proverbs 3:9** *Honor the LORD with your possessions, And with the firstfruits of all your increase;*

Firstfruits were the very first and often best parts of the harvest, which were given to God as an act of thanksgiving and faith. The farmer recognised God had given him the harvest and trusted Him for more. Modern principle – don't give God the leftovers. Give Him the firstfruits, trusting Him for more. You cannot break the hold of money's idolatry over you, if your approach to giving is – whatever I can spare after I have paid my expenses. Part of Biblical giving is to give to God, not the leftovers, but amounts which reproduce this same idea of thanksgiving and sacrificial faith. The sacrifice is felt because you are giving, not from an abundance, but often from need. The Macedonians gave "out of their deep poverty and affliction"

**2 Corinthians 9:6** <sup>6</sup> *But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*

### 3) Give According to What You Have

In the parable of the talents, some received less than others. They were responsible to give back in keeping with what they had received.

**2 Corinthians 8:12** <sup>12</sup> *For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.*

God does not require you to go into debt in giving, or to give what is impossible. He desires we consider how He has prospered us and give sacrificially in keeping with that. In this way, giving is considered and intelligent- not rash, last-minute or impulsive. We must add, that is may sometimes be more than we think we can manage:

**2 Corinthians 8:3** <sup>3</sup> *For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing,*

This means that you give proportionately:

**1 Corinthians 16:2** <sup>2</sup> *On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.*

We know that 10% was the Old Testament method. I think 10% is a good guideline to start with. It may be sacrificial for some; it may not be sacrificial for others. It may be impossible for some. But decide on a proportion that will guide you. You give to other people consistently, why should God be on a roller coaster of ill-discipline. That's why Paul says, lay something aside. Deliberate giving means you plan, you keep it aside (lay it in store) and you bring it.

**4) Give Consistently** – When Paul calls for this giving to take place on 'the first day of the week', it implies some kind of regular, consistent kind of giving. No one would be satisfied if his employer changed his salary every month, you couldn't live like that. Neither can God's church.

**5) Give Intelligently:** **2 Corinthians 9:7** <sup>7</sup> *So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. . There is thought put into it. It is not haphazard, whatever I have on me at the time. To purpose is to consider one's income, one's expenses. This is a decision in advance.*

**6) Give Willingly.** So let each one *give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.* Reluctance in the heart dishonours God by demeaning the whole act to merely giving God money. Joy in the heart reflects someone who has grasped the concept – mirroring God's heart, living by faith, trusting Him, storing up for eternity.

Now be careful of a common attitude. This is what our deceitful hearts will do: "I still don't feel cheerful about giving, so I won't do it yet." In that case, the cheerfulness will elude you all your

life. The cheerfulness comes when you fight the sin of covetousness, repent of loving money more than God and say, “God forgive me for hanging on to what you gave me in the first place. Enable me to rejoice as I give” And then time comes, worship as you do it. 9:8

### 7) Give Sacrificially:

**2 Corinthians 9:6** <sup>6</sup> *But he this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Mark 12:42-44.*

Sacrificial giving means an amount that requires faith to sustain. It means an amount which doesn't make all the best sense when the finances are tight. God should not get the leftovers. A R30 000 salary gives R300 makes heaven laugh. But someone, giving R50 out of a R700 pension, that's sacrifice.

**8) Give Specifically** There will never be a shortage of needs around us. However, after we have met our immediate family's needs, the Bible tells us where we should focus our giving:

the **Galatians 6:10** <sup>10</sup> *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of household of faith.*

Our primary place of giving is in our local church. Once we have given to God, and have met other needs privately, surplus income may still be available for other causes.

Give because of joy in God. Give for the joy of getting more of God. Give to be free of the faith-destroying effects of the love of money. Give to be free of the darkness of soul produced by idolising money. Give to be rid of the soul-shrinking effects of selfishness, and to enlarge your heart into the size of God's heart – a generous, giving heart. Give so that the deafening, blinding, numbing forces of the love of money are reversed and you see and know and enjoy God.

**2 Corinthians 8:7** <sup>7</sup> *But as you abound in everything -- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us -- see that you abound in this grace also.*

This is a vital practice, if we are to enjoy the life of God in the local church. Next week, we will consider the final practice in our series of the practices of the Christian life.