



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

GALATIANS 2:20

DECEMBER 2014

Gospel-Giving

In Paul's farewell address to the elders of the church at Ephesus, he quotes Jesus saying, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35).

More than once I have heard this quote being used to exhort people to give—but adding that the reason it is more blessed is that you will receive more. Isn't that saying the blessing is in the receiving? Actually, in most contemporary Christian teaching, the focus is heavily on the receiving. The "seed principle" is touted as the motivation of giving. We are told that if we sow with a specific harvest in mind, we can plant by giving and in return get what we desired. Though there is obvious truth in the planting and harvesting dynamic, that is not at all what Paul is talking about in his sermon to the Ephesian elders. He is referencing a higher dynamic. He is speaking about the kind of giving that is a fruit of the gospel.

Financial freedom is a hot topic for this generation. Churches that offer instruction and teaching about getting out of debt and properly handling credit cards are seen as relevant and even radical. It seems our generation finds common sense and rational money management as almost foreign ideas. The truth is that such teaching is not uniquely Christian. Any pagan knows that

you can plant and get back more than you plant. They also know that you can't spend more than you have without going into a debt that grows rapidly if not repaid. The best news some have heard is that they can get out of debt financially. I am all for it, but there is more to handling money than getting out of debt, just like there is more to giving than getting. In fact, I would suggest that we are not really financially free until **money no longer makes decisions in our lives**. I mean that the absence of it, the abundance of it, or the desire for it is not the motivating factor in our decision-making process.

Jesus referred to money as unrighteous mammon. He evidently recognized that money acts like a god. It makes the promises of a sovereign— things like security, significance, meaning, control, and pleasure. If we allow it, money will rule over us by determining what we do and what we have. Money is often treated with such dignity that some don't speak of its power in polite conversation, much like personal politics, sex life, or religion. I remember how as a young

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boy, when one of my sister's boyfriends was telling my family about his new job, I asked, "How much do you make?" My dad took my hand and led me to another room and rebuked me for asking such a question. I didn't know until then that the subject of money was so taboo. But my point here is to determine what affect the gospel has on handling money. Do Christians have a unique perspective on it? Does the cross-event make any difference in the way we give, spend, save, invest, and earn money?

The greatest benefit of our salvation is our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Sure we get to go to heaven one day, but that is because we know him. But we don't just know him at a distance. We actually share his life. The gift we have received is his very life. (See John 17:3.) The way the apostle Paul explained it:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20 (ESV)

We have the privilege of living his life through our faculties. He operates from unhindered fellowship with the Father, who owns everything and creates out of nothing. Jesus can confidently live without anxiety about what he will wear or what he will eat. He notices the birds that are busy about their work, without fear or worry. He delights in the creative beauty of the lilies of the field that are dressed beyond measure. He lives totally for the glory of the Father. He has no goal that competes with that. All of his possessions are bent toward revealing the nature of his Father who created everything and delights in showering his goodness on his creation. He

lives to carry out the redemptive purpose in God's fallen creation. He proclaims the gospel of the invading kingdom everywhere, watching the poor find good news, the broken find strength, the blind find sight, and the prisoner find release. His mission is to proclaim this good news, and everything is subordinate to accomplishing that. He dethrones the false god of mammon by using money in a common way. It must serve his purposes and never rule. If he needs it, he can find it in a fish's mouth.

None of us would dispute that Jesus lived that way, but we struggle with the thought that we should or or even could. Paul got it! Look what he said,

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

2 Corinthians 5:14–15 (ESV)

The nature of the Father is expressed in **giving**. The glory of the Father is the revelation that he is a **giver**. Jesus the **giver** lives in us and is working even now to transform us into **givers**. There is restlessness in our bosom until we yield to his gentle, but consistent pressure to **give**. We will not find relief with more knowledge. There is not a new spiritual experience that will bring peace. As we give, we begin to align with his life and the joy of the gospel begins to appear.

Christians often ask questions regarding the tithe. Simply put, the New Testament fulfills the intention of the Old Testament shadows—including the tithe. The person who is committed to being a lifetime giver will not be limited or confined by the

tithe. Sadly, texts have been taken out of context to manipulate people with fear of being cursed financially. During the Old Testament era, Israel was both an *ecclesia* (literally: assembly; a foreshadowing of the church) and a nation. The tithe was used for the good purpose of teaching the people the value of responsibility and ownership of the community. Every member of the community was expected to participate in the purposes of their community-nation. There was no such thing as attendees without responsibility. The needs of the poor and the upkeep of the Levites, along with the maintenance of the temple, were addressed by each member doing his or her part by contributing a base of 10% each year with other tithes for specific purposes.

The body of Christ today would do well to emulate this transcendent value of everyone participating. People need to recognize that there is nothing free. Somebody pays even if you don't. But there are inherent dangers in trying to institute the tithe as a binding obligation for Christians. First, it can easily be viewed as a tax. This focuses on duty rather than liberality, and presses us to give only what is required to keep the penalty from being exacted. Second, it gives the impression that only the tithe belongs to the Lord and we are free to use the remainder at our discretion without regard to his true ownership. Third, it hinders the intimacy that we can have with the indwelling Christ as he directs us in every opportunity of earning, spending, saving, investing, and giving. "Percentage giving" can be a good guideline for financial planning, but trying to use the Old Testament tithe as a law causes problems in biblical interpretation.

For instance, Malachi 3:6–12 is a text that

is commonly used to promote the tithe. In context, Malachi is addressing people living under the Old Covenant. There are stated blessings and curses related to obeying the stipulations of that covenant. The people are violating several of those, including the instructions regarding tithing in that economy. Malachi warns them that they are robbing God by refusing to pay their tithes. He reminds them that breaking the

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covenant brings curses and that obeying it brings blessings. Four hundred years of silence after Malachi's prophecy, God inaugurated a new covenant. Jesus took the place of the people and fulfilled every stipulation required by previous covenants. All the blessings that God has ever offered to obedient people are in Christ. He took the curse of all broken stipulations and then came to live in his people to empower them to live as he lives. In short, we are not living in the old era. We have a new covenant with new privileges. The New Testament writers do not use the tithe as a motivation for Christian giving. Jesus' life is the motivation and the power to transform orphan-minded rebels into children of God who give rather than keep. (See 2 Corinthians 8 & 9.)

Handling money can be tricky. It is easy to deceive ourselves. For many the tithe-dynamic is easier. They don't have to deal with daily dependence regarding stewardship. They just pay the bill along

with the utility bill. But for those who press onward toward the goal of living to express the true nature of Christ, stewardship is serious. Often we need to stop and evaluate how our expenditures reveal our values. Someone suggested we measure our giving by the amount spent on hair care, or doctors bills, or car payments. All those are valuable, but how valuable is our own spiritual growth? Paul instructs Christians to share all good things with those who have taught them. (See Galatians 6:6.) How valuable is the proclamation of the gospel? It is the single most important commission given by Jesus. When we invest in the proclamation of the gospel, we are investing in the divine purpose and the benefits last forever. What about the needs of others who, at the time, are lacking in necessary provisions? What about the equipping of the members of the body of Christ? This is God's project, and we can invest where he does. That is guaranteed success. If we honestly look at our budget and giving patterns, will they reveal that we are pressing toward the goal of being a lifetime giver?

Being generous doesn't necessarily mean we are only spontaneous. The joy of "flare" giving is enormous. We are eagerly looking for someone or some cause where we can give. We get more joy from giving than from buying. When money to give is burning a hole in our pocket, there is a fresh energy in our step. But stewardship is serious enough that it warrants thoughtfulness. So we want to engage "focused" giving.

First, we want to participate in our faith community and make sure the needs of that body are being considered.

Second, we value the extra-local gifts to the body that are not funded by the

local churches. The apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, and pastor-teaching gifts are essential for the equipping of the believers.

Third, we look for good investments in the gospel project. We want to invest in a clear proclamation of the gospel and to steer away from the gimmicks that try to get money. Generally, we feel more comfortable giving where there is a trusting relationship. The message is very important. The messenger's integrity is important. The methods being used are important.

Fourth, we look for those both inside and outside the community of faith who have a need that we can meet in Jesus' name.

Fifth, there are issues in our society that various groups have addressed that have not been considered by the local churches. The leadership and strategy of these organizations are worthy to be supported in an effort to address everything that concerns the heart of our Father.

And there will be more opportunities that open to the heart that decides to be a giver rather than a payer.

It is more blessed to give than receive . . . and not just because we receive when we give. It is the very life of Christ in us.



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