

A prosperous church member was called upon to make his commitment for the year's giving to the church. "I'll give you my mite", said the well-to-do church member. "Do you mean the widow's mite?" asked his pastor. "Of course, he replied smugly. Just like the woman in the Bible." "Well, I'd suggest you give 10% of the widow's mite," said the pastor. "That works out to about \$10,000 a year, or just over \$190 a week." "Come on!" said the wealthy man. "How do you figure that out?" The pastor replied: "The widow's mite was all she had. It was everything she had to live on. Read the text. Your salary is public record and is \$100,000 a year. 10% of that is just \$10,000."

And I have a little parable. Now it came to pass on a day that I was the guest of a certain man for lunch. The lunch was enjoyed at a very nice restaurant, and the waiters were very gracious and the food was very good. Now when the end of the meal was at hand, the waiter brought my host a check. My host examined it, frowned a bit, but made no comment. But as we rose to depart, I observed that he had laid some bills under the edge of the plate; however, I do not know how many, but the waiter, who stood nearby watching, smiled happily, so I interpreted that the tip was satisfactory.

Now we are all familiar with tipping, but this parable is not about the merits or demerits of tipping. I'm thinking of it in terms of tithes AND tips. Tips are supposed to be 15-20% these days. Which means we are giving more than a tithe to a waiter but we often give to God whatever bare minimum we think will get us by. Do we love eating out in restaurants more than we love God? Do our waiters offer us salvation?

So, yes, my homily today is about tithing. One Church decided to have folks stand up during the service when they turned in their pledge card. The pastor was kind of a clever guy, and had the janitor put wires under the pews to give people a little jolt when the various amounts were announced. When the pastor announced How many are willing to pledge \$30 a week, a little jolt made a number of them stand up. Then \$40 a week and so on. Each time, the jolt was a little more severe. Finally, the pastor announced \$100 a week, and by this time, the entire church had stood up and handed in a pledge card. After the service, the ushers and pastor were all congratulating themselves about how successful the pledging had been, until one person came in and said "I'm so sorry to tell you but 3 parishioners died because they still refused to give even on the last jolt. I asked our Parish Administrator, Noelle, if we could wire our pews and try that this Sunday, but she said I'd get into a lot of trouble – and might have to do a LOT of funerals -- so I didn't pursue it any further. My homily is inspired by the widow who gave everything she had. The Church doesn't ask for everything to be given to God – just 10%, as the Bible says. But why should we tithe?

The first reason is the seductive nature of wealth. This is not a sermon against money. In a few moments, I'll talk about some of the wonderful things money can do. But money is a dangerous thing. The truth is that the more we have, the harder it is to share. This is a fact. From my experience, more money seems to go with more ego and arrogance. Somehow people seem to think they are smarter and better than others if they happen to be blessed with more money.

A Gallup poll confirmed what many of us have observed for years. Donations to charity decrease as income increases. The survey found that low- and moderate-income Americans, especially churchgoers, are more generous than upper-income Americans.

Think about it. The same person who had no difficulty tithing when their salary was \$200 a week has real difficulty when their salary reaches \$1000 a week – after all, 10% of \$1000 every week seems like a lot of money to those of us who can remember when \$100 was all we earned for a week's work!

That's not true for everyone. Pastor Brian Kluth tells of his friend Don, a wealthy businessman who gives generously. When Brian questioned Don about his giving, Don responded, "It helps me to slay the dragon." SAY WHAT? He went on to explain that our greatest temptation is to believe that our happiness or identity can be found in buying newer, better, or more stuff. He pictures materialism as a dragon that he has to fight against every day. The only way to fight the dragon is to be a 'faithful and generous giver.' Every time he wrote a check to fund a church or charity, it was like wielding a sword to slay the dragon.

Country music star Ricky Skaggs and his wife believe in tithing, giving 10% of their income to the church and charities. As he said, "If I believe anything about the Bible, I have to know that God wants my money because He knows my money wants me. He doesn't need my money, but He wants whatever I want more than Him." Skaggs understand how easily money becomes our idol, the thing we worship more than anything else.

God doesn't need our money, but He wants whatever we want more than Him. That's a really good reason to challenge ourselves to give generously. Giving generously helps us slay the dragon of materialism, pride, greed, self-centeredness that stands between us and finding our true happiness and identity in God.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, used 4 criteria for measuring any purchase. I've updated his categories and language for clarity purposes. Before spending any money, he would ask himself;

"Am I acting as a steward of what God has given me?"

"Is buying this thing/house/car/vacation in accord with God's will?"

"Can I offer up this expense as a sacrifice to God through Christ?"

"Will buying this thing/ this experience, bring me closer to God?"

Pretty tough questions! Think about our latest credit card bill. Think about just our Cable bill. Are we worshipping God or entertainment? God or Netflix? If our Cable Bill is more than what we are giving to our church each month, then we have our answer about what we are worshipping. I'd like to order bumper stickers for everyone that say If you love Jesus, TITHE. Anyone can honk!

It should be easier to give as our wealth increases, but it is not. There is something about money that hardens us. As attractive and wonderful as money is, that is its nature. No wonder Jesus talked more about money than any other subject. No wonder He warned that we could not serve both God and money.

The reality is that our giving is a spiritual question. For some of us, our very souls are at stake. The second reason generous giving is critical to the life of a Christian has to do with the wonderful things money can do. I'd be a liar if I said I didn't like having money. Regardless of our circumstances, we have to admit that there are some things only money can buy. Like braces for our children's teeth and a good education. Like quality health care and a comfortable retirement. Like dependable transportation and a warm house on a cold night. Money is simply a part of our lives.

Now some of you are probably sitting there saying "I can't believe that all he's talking about is money." One man in Chapel Hill complained to me because he said all he hears when he comes to church is 'give, give, give.' I can't think of a better definition of Christianity than that.

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British pastor C.H. Spurgeon was one of the most famous and influential preachers of the late 1800s. In addition to his church ministry, Spurgeon founded an orphanage in London. He preached a special service once each year to raise money for the orphans. One year at this special service, a man approached Spurgeon and asked accusingly, "Why, Rev. Spurgeon, I thought you preached for souls and not for money!" Spurgeon answered, "Normally I do preach for souls and not for money, but my orphans can't eat souls and if they did, my brother, it would take at least 4 the size of yours to give one of them a square meal!" A generous giver has an expanded soul. How big is our soul?

Our giving is a spiritual matter simply because there are some things in this world only money can do. Money can help house the homeless and feed the hungry. Money can provide counselors for young people who have run away from home. Money can build a beautiful place of worship to call people to God.

Giving is a spiritual matter, first of all, because of the seductive nature of wealth. Secondly, because there are some things only money can do. Finally, it is a spiritual matter because we worship a giving God. St. Paul says "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty you might become rich." Jesus gave up everything He had and took on the form of a human being to show us the unlimited, overwhelming riches of God's love for us. We worship a giving God and He says to us there is only one way that we can become truly rich. That is by giving – all we have and all we are. And if we think we would give more if we have more, we are sadly mistaken. The one who is not generous with what they have, deceives themselves when they think they would be generous if they had more.

Christian author Randy Alcorn writes, 'Jesus said it is more blessed to give', but He never says why. Here is my why behind this statement. When we keep what we have, we will be blessed. The more we keep, the more we have, the more we have, the more we can spend on ourselves. If we give, on the other hand, 2 people will be blessed by 'our' money – us and the recipient. Keeping blesses one – giving blesses 2...People never discover the second blessing until they actually do it, and I have learned the more they do it, the more addictive giving becomes.

God is love, and out of that overflowing love of God, we are continually given good gifts – blessings. God wants us to share in the joy of giving by giving generously to others. Love is the true sword that slays the dragons of materialism, greed, pride, and self-centeredness. Love for God and trust in God's blessings set us free to be a blessing to the world.

I'm asking every one of us to take some time this week to prayerfully consider our giving – to the church and to charity. Be honest about what we are spending on cable, internet, meals out, wine and beer, frivolous purchases, clothes and shoes we don't need. If that's more than what we are giving to church and charity, we need to make some adjustments.

Also, find out what percent of our income we are actually giving currently. I'm dumbfounded that anyone could think \$10 or \$20 a week is acceptable as a gift to the church in this day and age. Who is making \$100 or \$200 a week? My father was giving \$5 a week in the 1950's, and his salary as a school teacher was \$100 a month; my mother was a part time nurse making about half of that – and they were raising 5 of us kids. It was a true sacrifice back then. \$10 or \$20 today is less than what most tips should be in a restaurant. When it comes to God and church and charity – do we even give what we tip in a restaurant? Are we misers? Or are we generous? Do we feel good about our giving? Or are we honest enough to admit that our giving is not an acceptable gift to the God who has given us literally everything. (adapted from King Duncan, DYNAMIC PREACHING, May-Aug 2021, p. 44-46)

Figure out what percent of income we are actually giving to the church and to charity – the church asks that 5% go to the local parish and 5% to our other charities – like the BAA, Catholic Charities, Habitat for Humanity, Western Wake Crisis, take anything you believe in. And then resolve to increase it by 1 or 2% every time you get a raise. You'll never miss it and you'll be at 10% in just a couple of years. A friend of mine always says that God always shovels faster – and with a bigger shovel! Every time we think WE are being generous, we realize that at every second of our lives, God is pouring blessings into us just keeping us alive, healthy, and able to come to church and be ticked off by another 3 point homily!

One day the comic strip THE WIZARD OF ID showed the king talking with the local pastor. They were standing in front of the church and beside a sign that announced, 'Today's Sermon – Give Till It Hurts.' The king asked, 'What did today's collection tell you, Rev?'" The clergyman responded, "The congregation has a very low threshold of pain." I don't believe that about you. I wouldn't still be here if I believed that about you. I trust you will make the right decisions and be generous. I trust that you will try to love God as He has loved you. Amen.

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