

Focus on STEWARDSHIP - 2

2 Corinthians 9:6-11, Matthew 6:31-33 [MW17-35]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 19 November 2017

Today we are continuing to reflect on “Stewardship”

- we are invited to consider our regular planned giving for the coming year and also to come to some decision about this for ourselves
- it's of crucial importance for our own health and well-being
- it's of equally crucial importance for the health and well being of our church
- so let me continue on from last week by sharing with you a kind of discussion on this topic
- some of you have been introduced to the 'real bloke' who has somehow managed to meet God and engage in some rather wide-ranging and interesting conversations
- this is from the next instalment and deals with today's theme it's titled “Just Giving”

[read story]

In regard to “Stewardship”

- some parishes I've been part of tell you what's needed to achieve the budget target and give you a special card to fill out and return
- they ask you to prayerfully consider then pledge an amount to give weekly or monthly

This morning I'm not suggesting we do anything like that

- I am asking you to remember the promise of God
- I am asking you to consider the special nature of our church and Mission District and what you contribute to this
- I am inviting you to spend a few moments in silent reflection and prayer then I will conclude with a prayer

[prayer and reflection]

Prayer:

Oh Lord, giver of life and source of our freedom, we are reminded that Yours is “the earth in its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it.” We know that it is from your hand that we have received all we have and are and will be. Gracious and loving God, we understand that you call us to be the stewards of Your abundance, the caretakers of all you have entrusted to us. Help us always to use your gifts wisely and teach us to share them generously. May our faithful stewardship bear witness to the love of Christ in our lives. We pray this with grateful hearts in Jesus' name. Amen.

Just Giving

The boys were asleep and Patti was in bed. I was sitting by the fire and watching the flames – as you do. It was then that the Lord turned up, as he did sometimes late at night.

“What’s on your mind,” he asked. I’ve noticed that the Lord of the universe is pretty perceptive about what’s going on with people.

“I’ve been watching early morning TV,” I replied.

“I didn’t know there were sports on then.”

He knew me well but I decided to let it go. “Not sports. More to do with your interests I think. Been watching those – uh – televangelists I think they’re called. Anyway what’s with what those guys wear? Flash jackets. Bright ties. Some kind of uniform?”

The Lord was silent for a moment. “That’s not what you’re concerned about is it?”

As I said, the Lord of all creation is extremely perceptive. Cuts to the heart of the matter – yet always at your pace. “You’re right, as usual,” I said. “it’s what those guys were saying that kind of got to me. Talking about ‘giving’. Give your money. Give more of your money. Give generously. Give sacrificially. Give till it hurts. Give and God will bless you ...”

Again the Lord was silent in that special way he has. Letting you know he’s there and listening and hearing all you say.

“Is that right?” I asked. “Is that what it’s about? The more you give, the more you’re blessed? Give all you can – and more. Make God the first call on your finances.”

“Well there’s some truth in that,” the Lord began ...

“And where’s all that money go?” I interrupted. “They say: ‘give to God’, but you don’t get it do you?”

“It’s not quite like that. As I was trying to say,” the Lord answered gently. “There’s some truth, and sometimes the message is distorted ...”

“That’s why I’m sitting here thinking,” I said. “I mean, what am I supposed to take from all that? Where does that leave me? And what is all this ‘tithing’ business?”

“Woah! Hold on there!” said the Lord. “Perhaps it’s best to put those – ‘televangelists’ – to one side at the moment. Let’s see if we can look at it another way.

“Remember that church where you and Patti were married?”

“Uh. Yeah.”

“You’ve been there a couple of times recently?”

“Uh huh.”

“Nice grounds?” asked the Lord. “Well kept?”

“Yes.”

“The roof doesn’t leak? Tidy inside?”

“That’s right.”

“Lights? Warm in winter? Someone answers the phone? Minister there to talk to, take the services ...”

“Yeah, yeah and yeah! What are you getting at?”

“Who do you think provides all that?” the Lord asked, really putting me on the spot.

How the heck am I supposed to know, I thought. But I said: “Government grant? Local council puts in some money?”

“Yes, yes. Go on,” said the Lord in that tone that had me imagining him shaking his head.

“Um, well, a big fund in the bank maybe ...?”

“Actually,” answered the Lord firmly, “all of it is provided by the people who belong to the church.”

“Really? I guess I never thought about it seriously.”

“A lot of people don’t,” said the Lord, continuing. “A church has to pay for electricity and phones and insurance and rates – just like everybody else. Kind of like a big family – the people pitch in to help with the jobs and pay the bills.”

“The minister too?” I asked.

“Yes,” said the Lord. “People give to provide all that. And you know churches are involved in the community – visiting,

counselling, helping those in need, providing services for the elderly, for families ...”

“All this comes from just ordinary people?”

“Pretty much,” answered the Lord. “From the people who make up the church. They give the money. Usually not because some televangelist tells them to – although that can encourage or challenge people. It certainly made you think didn’t it!”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Usually,” the Lord continued, “people give money to support the church and all the work it does. They understand what it means to be part of the family and make their contribution.”

“But that televangelist guy was talking about giving and being blessed.”

“People are blessed aren’t they?” said the Lord. “People have the gift of life. They have particular skills and abilities. They have others to share things with. They have things to use and enjoy. People recognise all they have received and respond by sharing some of the good things they enjoy; which includes giving money.”

“Money huh? I knew it would eventually come down to that,” I said. “Cold, hard, cash. People are happy to give their money?”

“If not,” answered the Lord, “what would happen to the church?”

I thought a moment. The Lord was gracious and let me consider things in silence. “I guess,” I responded, “I guess eventually the church wouldn’t look so good. Maybe there wouldn’t be a minister or even someone to answer the phone ...”

“Now you’re getting there!”

“But how do people know what to give? Or if they can even afford to give? The guy on TV was really pushing this tithing thing.”

“Fair enough,” said the Lord. He always seemed so reasonable when he was about to say something really important ... and difficult! “Some people give ten percent of everything. It’s right there in my book, the Bible. It also talks about giving the

‘first part of any harvest and making an offering of the best of whatever is produced’. Sometimes people find it helpful to have a rule, so they know exactly what to do. Like paying taxes. Everyone grumbles but they have to do it; and it helps provide good things for the whole community.”

“So that would mean I give away – and therefore do without – ten percent of my income?! Wooh! No way can I afford that. I mean there are groceries. The mortgage. Car repairs. Man! Have you seen our budget?”

“Yes I have,” answered the Lord very matter-of-factly. “And I notice that in your budget there does not seem space for me.”

“What do you mean?” I shot back. “Do I owe you something? And anyway, how could I give it to you even if I did?” It was dangerous to talk to the Lord like that I know. But we’re dealing with something very seriously important here: *my* money!

Fortunately the Lord continued to be gracious and patient, no hint even of a sigh. “Think about the good things you enjoy in life. Your family. Your home. You have a job. You live in a beautiful country. Are you grateful? Thankful? Who provides all that? Who is always there to listen? It might be wise to acknowledge that! And no, you can’t give directly to me. However what you do with what you have can! Giving to the church, giving to groups that help in the community, is one way of doing that.”

“Back to money again,” I sighed.

“A budget shows what is really important,” the Lord said. “What people do with their time and their money shows their true priorities.”

“Now you’re beginning to sound like one of those televangelists.”

“Oh really?” said the Lord.

“Well, what if I can’t afford it,” I snapped back.

“What place do I have in your life?” asked the Lord.

“Growing. If I think I know what you mean.”

“Do you get the newspaper?”

“Yeah. So what?”

“Can you afford it?”

“What?”

“You have a cat?” The Lord sure was asking some dumb questions!

“Yes I have a cat.”

“Can you afford to feed it.”

“Of course!”

“You have a hobby ...”

“You know I like my golf.”

“Nice set of clubs have you?”

“So what! What are you getting at?”

The Lord used his very serious voice: “Am I more or less important in your life than the newspaper, your cat, your golf ... all of which you have no trouble giving money for.”

“Yeah. But. It’s like this ...” I spluttered.

Do you honestly think,” continued the Lord in that serious ‘you’d better shut up and listen’ tone “that I, the Creator of all, the Lord of the universe, Redeemer and giver of life, am going to allow you to be worse off because you acknowledge me through giving?”

“Um, er, ah,well. May be. Probably. Most likely ... not.”

The Lord had a way of pinning you down and being uncomfortably right. “Ah, but it’s not exactly blessing is it?” I said. “Not packed down, shaken together, spilling-over type stuff is it?”

“May be it’s more about motive,” the Lord replied. “Try it and see. Who do you think is more generous and has more to give ... you or me?” I imagined the Lord winking.

He continued, “More important than ‘blessing’; more important than tithing; I just ask that you take time to reflect on all the blessings you have already; and work out for yourself an appropriate response. Something you can feel happy with. I’m not bothered whether it’s ten dollars or one percent. If you feel that’s right, it’s a good start.”

As usual the Lord had given me much – more than I asked - to think about. I stared into the flames and the Lord slipped away as quietly as He had come.

As I sat looking and thinking I remembered a creased slip of paper that I’d found inside a book of poetry that had been my grandmother’s. I hunted it out and read:

Go give to the needy sweet charity’s bread

For giving is living the angel said.

And must I be giving again and again?

My peevish petulant answer ran.

Oh no, said the angel, piercing me through:

Just give till the Master stops giving to you.

As I read these simple lines it seemed I heard the Lord’s voice quietly saying, “food for thought isn’t it?”

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