

*Matthew 6:2-8, 16-21*

*“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*<sup>5</sup> “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*<sup>16</sup> “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>19</sup> “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust<sup>t</sup> consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust<sup>[u]</sup> consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

*2 Chronicles 31:5-10*

*<sup>5</sup>As soon as the word spread, the people of Israel gave in abundance the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, honey, and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything. <sup>6</sup>The people of Israel and Judah who lived in the cities of Judah also brought in the tithe of cattle and sheep, and the tithe of the dedicated things that had been consecrated to the LORD their God, and laid them in heaps. <sup>7</sup>In the third month they began to pile up the heaps, and finished them in the seventh month. <sup>8</sup>When Hezekiah and the officials came and saw the heaps, they blessed the LORD and his people Israel. <sup>9</sup>Hezekiah questioned the priests and the Levites about the heaps. <sup>10</sup>The chief priest Azariah, who was of the house of Zadok, answered him, “Since they began to bring the contributions into the house of the LORD, we have had enough to eat and have plenty to spare; for the LORD has blessed his people, so that we have this great supply left over.”*

## *To God be the Glory, Part 2*

\*Last week we talked about the stewardship conversation beginning with OUR need to give.....our absolute need to give because it is through our giving that we can know the joy of generous gratitude to our Creator, the One who redeems and sustains us, the one to whom we belong. This week we continue our stewardship discussion, on stewardship as a spiritual discipline. Let's **think** on this.

\*A spiritual discipline, is as you might imagine, a regularly engaged in practice, one which opens us to the transforming work of the Spirit....spiritual discipline...it's a practice which helps us grow more and more into the image of Christ. In these hectic times when distractions abound, many Christians are finding great value in the time-tested rituals of our faith, in the ancient disciplines like *lectio divina* to read the Bible, labyrinths and centering techniques when praying, like fasting, and contemplative worship.

\*And also in these times....the value of disciplined, intentional giving of time, talent and particularly treasure is being rediscovered too. Throughout the whole of Scripture, we see reference to stewardship as a spiritual discipline.

\*The Israelites were told that they should practice "percentage" giving. God told them they should keep 90% of what they harvested, but 10%, a tithe, belonged to God. It is described in detail in at least 9 places in the OT, including the 2 Chronicles passage we read today. In the gospels, we see it as even part of Jesus' practice. In addition, God commanded the Israelites to give off the top, to give the first fruits of their harvest. They were not to give from what was left over after they'd satisfied their own needs and wants.

*\*My grandmother lived with my family late in her life. Much of what she did as a woman of faith made an impression on me. For instance, I remember seeing her come down the hall from her room to put her check to the church very faithfully on the planter for us to mail every month. She did it at the beginning of the month, so I'm quite sure she was giving off the top of her fixed income. I also remember her asking my mother to check her figuring ,her calculations, regarding how much she should give to the church. She had only a 4<sup>th</sup> grade*

*education and was proud of her ability to do 'rithmetic, but she wanted to be sure she was giving enough. I'm consequently quite sure she was tithing as well, a habit of giving that she and my grandfather had probably had all their married lives. Somewhere between my grandmother's time and our own, there has unfortunately come to be a term called "discretionary income," (i.e. giving from what's left over after the bills are paid and all our other needs are met). I've heard it said that, "Our hearts in these times have unfortunately become adept at practicing discretion."*<sup>1</sup>

\*There is no doubt that the Biblical commands, the ones the Israelites and my grandmother followed, served a broader purpose then. **Think** about it. Tithing not only relieves the monthly or weekly decision, nipping in the bud our human tendency toward reconsidering good intentions, but it reminds us that it all belongs to God to begin with. Giving off the top, makes us trust and remain dependent on God. It forces us to LIVE our belief that God will provide for us, regardless, giving us what we need out of the remainder. Both practices place God first, where God should be in our hearts.

*\*When I was in India, I frequently made pastoral calls with the priest of the congregation to which I was assigned. We visited homes that were very beautiful and wealth evident, but also we visited homes with dirt floors, no running water or electricity, where the children did not have shoes or diapers, and the only thing that could be offered us in hospitality was a sweet song or a performance on drums. I began to notice that in all the homes, however, no matter how poor or wealthy, there were these little cans with slits punched in their tops and church labels on them ...obviously banks. They were always by the doors or on the kitchen tables...somewhere in plain sight. I asked the priest about them, and he told me that these were for the families to put a portion of their offerings to the Lord. Probably the surprise on my face gave away my need for the priest's additional comment. He said while pointing to his heart, "ALL families have been given banks. It is a matter of health!" (point to heart)*

\*In addition to % giving and "off the top" giving, in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, we see yet one more piece of advice regarding the practice of stewardship as a spiritual discipline. Here in

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Travis. Sermon

this passage Jesus is providing instruction for pious living. It begins with “*So whenever you give alms, do not be like the hypocrites*”...and then it goes on to address praying and fasting...in that order. Jesus takes the triad of pious practices for the Jew and puts them in a very intentional and specific sequence. *Want to experience God? Begin with giving alms. Want to know God? Begin with giving alms. Want to serve God? Begin with giving alms. After this, then pray. Then fast.* Jesus teaches what we all have experienced... IT IS IN THE REGULAR DOING OF A THING THAT WE OFTEN MOST FULLY COMPREHEND THE REASON FOR DOING IT. (*repeat*) This, he says is especially the case with almsgiving. In the final words of this passage Jesus cuts to the chase... “*Where your treasure is, there also will be your heart.*” We give, friends. We give, we give, regularly we give, and then we care. **Think about it.** Hearts *follow* dollars. Dollars *lead* hearts.<sup>2</sup>

*\*In November, 2004, the company that Mike was working for was bought out by another. Shortly afterwards, restructuring began, and you guessed it, large lay-offs occurred; one included Mike. It was a dark time for us, to say the least. We knew that Belton, TX did not hold many prospects for an engineer with Mike’s specialty training, and that Mike’s age would be a factor in being considered for many other jobs. I did not have a salary which could support the family, and our eldest son, Joel, was in the process of applying for colleges. We knew we’d need to cut out much of what we had grown accustomed to, but pretty early on, we decided we would continue to give to the church and to give to it first. In fact, it was stewardship season and, in a step of faith, obstinate faith, I think, we increased our pledge. We knew we’d need to make decisions on what we’d have to cut out, but we did it AFTER we’d done this. It was not easy. It was scary. I wanted to cave in a few times. But amazingly....on the very day that Mike’s severance package completely ran out, he was offered another job, and it was a better one from nearly all angles. It still is. We did not have to move, I did not have to quit my job, and Joel was able to go on with college plans. The timing was unmistakably a divine message. We*

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Travis, Sermon

*were humbled and we learned more fully God's faithfulness to us. We grew. We changed through the whole experience. Our hearts followed our dollars.*

I would imagine that many of you have similar stories. Practicing stewardship, as a spiritual discipline makes in us a habit of giving and keeps us in a position of trust and dependence on the One to whom we belong, and who gives us all we are and all we have. And God wants us to experience the joy of giving our all in return.

*\*Remember the old Jack Benny gag? A robber came up to him and said, "Your money or your life!" Mr. Benny stood there motionless. Again the robber repeated, "Your money or your life!" Mr. Benny replied, "I'm thinking! I'm thinking!"* We make distinctions that do not exist in the eyes of God. Our money OR our lives? God wants our lives, all of us...and that includes our money, and everything else.<sup>3</sup> The alternative of not believing in God's promises to provide enough for us, of trying to control our lives and making things work by our own means, of thinking that the money is ours, that our lives are ours, to do entirely with as we want ...well...it is not an alternative at all. It is not faithful living...and it doesn't work out too well in the long run. Through disciplined stewardship, the Spirit helps us grow, change, be transformed more and more into the image of Christ.

\*So, I leave you today friends encouraged to begin **thinking about** stewardship, if you don't already, as a spiritual discipline, something you might take on, if even in a small way, regularly, intentionally, reverently way with your whole selves as a response to the gifts of God in your life. \*For as William Carter says, *"Every breath of life, every heartbeat, every conscious thought is a gift from God. Every person we meet, every friend we make, every relationship that warms the heart and challenges the soul is a gift. Every opportunity to work, every meaningful task, every dollar earned is a gift."*<sup>4</sup> *To God be the glory. Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> George Chorba, "Straight Talk and Stewardship". In: William G. Carter, ed, "Speaking of Stewardship" (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998), 35.

<sup>4</sup>William G. Carter, Speaking of Stewardship, (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998),9.