

## Home Economics, Church-Style

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This is my fourth fall with you, and I've never preached a sermon on stewardship. No one's complained. But I thought today, when we have voted on the 2020 budget and a substantial renovation of our 40-year-old building well-worn in well-doing, would be an opportune time to do so. So here is my every-four-years stewardship sermon.

Talking about money is not our favorite thing, whether around the kitchen table or church table. Money is a stubbornly finite resource, and as someone said, "The wallet is the most sensitive part of the human body." But sometimes we need to sit around the church family table and talk.

I am a believer in *Church*. Church as a spiritual community and church as an institution, if I may use that word. Stewardship is not just about surviving, but thriving, and I believe God wants us to thrive.

Raising a budget is like a community barn-raising. I've long been moved by the Amish barn raisings where everyone in the community comes together, young and old, male and female and help their neighbor raise a barn. I have a

photograph of such a barn raising in my house. It is a beautiful thing to watch a community come together like that.

So today I want to talk about Home Economics ,Church-Style.

## I

First, let's talk about *holistic stewardship*, the stewardship of life, which includes the whole of our personhood, our time, our personal gifts and talents, and our financial resources.

At Grace we have a wonderful diversity of gifts which we offer to the church. I am deeply touched by all you do and all the ways you contribute to the church. We also have a wide diversity of incomes. (Which I love about you.) We are not rich in the same ways, but we give from whatever fulness we have, from all the dimensions of our lives, time, talent and treasure.

So we begin here with wholistic stewardship, but today's emphasis is on our financial stewardship.

The story is told that when Charlemagne, the first king of France, would conquer an enemy army he immediately took them to the nearest river and baptized them. But, as the story goes, he baptized them with their sword arms out of the water because he wanted them still to be able to fight and kill for him.

Some Christians have been baptized with their right hands out of the water—holding their wallets in the air. I hope to get your wallets a little wet today, if not with a full-immersion Baptist dunking, at least a Methodist sprinkling.

So let's talk about a biblical view of stewardship.

## II

The second point is this: *Everything we have and everything we are come from God.* So we live in humble gratitude. In Deuteronomy the Hebrew people have just been delivered from slavery, then led across the wilderness and brought to the Promised Land, a rich, fertile land, a land “flowing with milk and honey.”

Here is what the writer instructs:

Take heed...lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, when your herds and flocks are multiplied and your silver and gold are multiplied and all you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt....Beware, lest you say in your hearts, My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth. You shall remember the Lord your God: For it is God who gives you the power to get wealth. (Deuteronomy 8:11-18)

You might not feel “wealthy” today, but all you are and all you have come from God. This is why at Thanksgiving we sing, “Now Thank We All Our God”, and “We Gather Together”, and “Come Ye Thankful People Come”.

### III

So, third, *We are called by God to be faithful stewards of what we have been given.* The Greek word for “steward” is *oikonomos*, literally, *home economist!* We strive to be good home economists of our home, our church and the earth itself. You’ve heard the word ecumenical. It comes from a sister word, *oikomenos*, which means the whole inhabited earth as the household of God. What if we lived that way, believing that the whole earth, and all its people, were part of the household of God? And that the care of the earth and its creatures were a form of the love of God and neighbor?

### IV

Next, the Bible teaches “*proportional giving*”, with the goal being the tithe, or one tenth of what we have given to God. We need not take the Old Testament literally: please, no sheep of collard greens brought to the altar. The principle is “proportional giving.”

Many of our parents and grandparents believed in giving a tithe to the church. And their dedicated stewardship helped Grace Baptist be what it is today.

Over the years I've heard the tortured argumentation: Is that pre-tax or post-tax, net or gross income? But Jesus didn't get caught up in the legalism of it; he focused on the "heart" of it. Remember how he praised the widow who gave her small coin? The deeper meaning of the tithe is that it represents some measure of sacrifice.

So here is a recommendation. Paul, a more honest preacher than most, would sometimes say: "This is not from the Lord, but from me." So this is from *me*. Start where you are, not where you *aren't*. Decide on a percentage of what you want and are able to give. It may be one percent. Then set some goals for the future for how you want to give. Maybe 2% next year. The principle is *proportional giving*.

## V

Another principle in the Bible is this: *First fruits on the first day of the week*. Paul says, "Upon the first day of the week let everyone lay up...as God has prospered" (I Corinthians 16:2). So we give on *Sunday* as an act of *worship...which it is!*

And we give first-fruits, which in Biblical times meant the first of the crops and flocks. Translated for today, write the first check of the week, or month, to the church, not from what is left-over at the end of the week or month.

I once saw a cook-book with the title *Magic With Leftovers*, a not especially enticing title. But sometimes that's what we expect from the budget and from the Stewardship Board: magic with left-overs. *So, first fruits on the first day of the week.*

## VI

The next section comes from a phrase in British mystic Evelyn Underhill's classic work on worship: "*Worship is summed up in sacrifice*". I was reading this book one summer in a cabin in the North Carolina mountains. Underhill began to enumerate the four elements of worship. The first was *ritual*, and I nodded, yes ritual, the ways we structure worship, its music and words.

Then *symbol*, she said, and I nodded again, yes symbols, they are so important in worship. Then *sacrament*, she said, and I nodded again, yes, like Communion and Baptism. Then came the fourth: *sacrifice*, she said, and I began to slow my reading down.

"Worship", she wrote, "is summed up in sacrifice." It is "our first lesson in creaturely love." I remember my early lessons as a child putting coins in the offering plate at church and at Sunday School. Its essence, she wrote, "is not something *given up*, but *given*." "It is not renunciation"; it is the "movement of generosity." And she concludes, Our giving unites us with Christ's own giving, his

whole life given for the sake of the world. Our small gifts participate in his great gift.

Worship is not just about “getting a blessing”—though I hope you do—it is also about “making an offering”, that is the offering of yourself to God.

This is why I love the classic Protestant Reformed order of worship. It is not like the old Baptist order where the offering comes before the sermon and the climax of the service is the Sermon and Invitation Hymn. In the Reformed order the offering comes after the sermon, as the final climactic act of worship, with the ushers bringing the offering plates back down to the front and the whole congregation stands and sings a Doxology. Self-Offering is the climax. It sums up our worship.

## VII

Now finally, to Paul’s words in II Corinthians. Right in the middle of the letter, in chapters 8 and 9, he stops and takes an offering! The two chapters are all about grace issuing into gratitude- issuing into giving. He is taking an offering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. He did this everywhere he went. Don’t forget the poor outside your doors, he was saying. Which is why 20% of our budget and 20% of your offerings go to missions.

He says to them, You excel at so many spiritual gifts—preaching, teaching, prayer, helping, compassion, etc. I want you to excel at *this* spiritual gift too: the grace of giving.

Then he sums it all up:

Each one of you must give as you have purposed in your heart, not grudgingly nor under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (II Corinthians 9:7)

I thought about titling this sermon: “Happy, not Grumpy Giving.” God may accept a grumpy gift (I hope so), but God loves a cheerful giver.

The Greek word for cheerful is *hilaron*, from which we get the word hilarious. God loves hilarious givers who give as lovers give to the one they love, from the heart, and wishing they had only more to give.

### Conclusion

I’ve told this story before. When I was pastor of Broadway Baptist Church, in center city Ft. Worth, Texas, we decided to build a magnificent pipe organ to the glory of God. We had an amazing every-day ministry to the poor and homeless in the city. But now we wanted to do something of musical beauty for God. The French philosopher Camus wrote:



In this world there is beauty and there are the humiliated, and we must try, hard as it is, not to be unfaithful to the one or to the other.

So we, who cared daily for the poor around us, became like the woman who poured expensive perfume over Jesus' feet. We set a goal of between 2 and 3 million dollars. Near the end of campaign I rose to announce the exciting totals to date, as I remember it, \$1,960,220.17. As I made my way to the front I was trying to decide whether to round off the total, but decided not to. So I said, as of today we have pledged one million, nine hundred and sixty thousand, two hundred and twenty dollars and seventeen cents!

After worship I was in the narthex greeting people who were leaving. A little guy, about 7 years old, slipped into the line and tugged on my robe. I bent down, and he whispered to me: "That was my seventeen cents!"

I was so glad I had not rounded it off! God doesn't round it off. Every gift large or tiny is important to God. Important to the kingdom of God, and to our little outpost of the kingdom of God at 719 Club Drive, Statesville, North Carolina.