

## “GIVING IT YOUR ALL”

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Text: I Kings 17: 8-16; Mark 12: 38-44

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Stewardship sermons are tough for the following reasons:

Some people think all the church ever does is ask for money and they turn off immediately.

From another perspective, money is tight for some other people and they probably can't do more. I always recall the phone call I got one Monday morning after preaching on stewardship. A woman in the congregation who was really struggling to make ends meet said she was going to try to tithe. I so appreciated her commitment but told her God was pleased with what she was doing.

On the other hand, there are people who have said to me, “Bob, I just can't give any more this year. Oh by the way, we will see you when we return from our ten day cruise.”

Obviously some can and some can't when it comes to increasing our support for ministry in 2007 but all of us need to consider the following question **COULD IT BE POSSIBLE THAT STEWARDSHIP, THE GIVING OF TIME, TALENT AND MONEY, ACTUALLY MAY BE GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH?** Lots of jokes could be made about that question but it is asked in all seriousness.

2 widows....living centuries apart...each scrapping to make ends meet...often wondering where food was coming from for the next meal...both challenged by God to give of their very meager material goods for a larger purpose...both responding.

Let's not glamorize the two stories just read from scripture. The women must have agonized before making a decision. The widow in the Old Testament might well have said to herself: “why doesn't Elijah go down the road to the house where there is plenty to eat?” Surely the widow in the temple must have thought: “why should I give my last coins when these rich people in long robes easily can afford to do more?” Out of their struggling and agonizing...both are remembered and become a model for what stewardship is all about.

There is a true story that fits in so beautifully with our Bible passages. The writer related this experience.

My friends Eric and Felicia live in No. Carolina. She's a minister and he's a physician. A couple of years ago Eric was diagnosed with cancer, a rare type that usually attacks people twice his age. He was told that he had only a short time to live. Eric went into depression, even some fits of rage, though the medicine was partly to blame. Recently he's felt pretty good. One day Felicia called me. She said that they wanted to give some money to help with our kids' college fund. I was overwhelmed. I sat in stunned silence. What do you say? “Mike,” she said, “you have to take this money.” She went on to tell me that it was her husband's idea. “All of a sudden he's become very generous.” Don't misunderstand; this man never has been selfish. He's a very kind and gentle person. A good Christian. A bright and articulate man. But now, she said, “he's become incredibly generous. He volunteered to do eye exams at the elementary school and has decided to give money to several different causes.” As Felicia said, “he told me that looking at death made him rethink some things. He said that he wants to be remembered as a person who gave...”

Sometimes the assumption is made that stewardship is just about giving money or about giving time. Stewardship, as the story suggests, is all about a way of life. The comment of this man touched me deeply. It made me think, along with our scripture lessons, about my own life.

“I WANT TO BE KNOWN AS A PERSON WHO GAVE...” Wouldn't we all like to have that epitaph? The New Testament says that “God so loved the world that he gave...” and that's the basis of our faith. Jesus came and gave his life so that our lives never would be the same.

Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, said, “good works flow from faith like water from a mountain spring.” We give because of all that God has given to us. The two women in scripture understood and appreciated God's blessings. They gave deeply as a result in contrast to the wealthy temple leaders who basically skimmed off a little of their abundance. I'd like to follow the example of those two women.

“I WANT TO BE KNOWN AS A PERSON WHO GAVE...” then, if we are honest with ourselves, how come our lives don't measure up better? How come so often we find it hard to be as generous as the two widows? A couple of years ago there was a panel discussion led by retired pastors on the theme: “what I would do differently.” One pastor from a large church said that he regretted not spending more time with his family. Without being critical, I thought to myself: “Sure, we all say that but in reality it's a lot more difficult in everyday life to balance all the demands placed upon you.”

The women in scripture actually may prove to be an embarrassment. While we, like the scribes, debate about how much we shall give of what is left over when all our other needs and wants are satisfied, the women gave even when it meant real sacrifice. One of the good things about having a time of stewardship each year is that we are compelled to face the question: Does my philosophy of life, my stewardship practices, most resemble the attitude of the widow or the scribes? Do you see why that can be an embarrassing question? It's clear that Jesus was saying that the gift that really has value is not determined by its monetary worth BUT by what it costs the giver. It's no wonder that every Sunday there is need for a time of confession and God's forgiveness.

“I WANT TO BE KNOWN AS A PERSON WHO GAVE...” We may not be all that we want to be or should be but we can be extremely thankful that God has used whatever we have given as a thank offering, whether it be time, talent or money. The widow in the temple couldn't believe that her small token would find favor with Jesus but it certainly did. God uses our gifts. That's why I say that practicing stewardship may be good for your spiritual health because it brings such satisfaction and meaning. You may not be thinking of that when you make a commitment for ministry in the New Year but you need to. Whatever you give may make the difference in the life of a child in church school, someone who comes to worship and is touched by the music, a villager in Guatemala who senses God's love in the gift of medicine or books made possible by our giving. Even more importantly, **giving generously may make a difference in how you feel about yourself.** Whatever we choose to offer up to our lord in the spirit of the woman in the temple becomes a priceless treasure that is used as another building block in the coming kingdom.

When I was serving as pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Little Falls, NY, a church very much like this one, I confessed to one of the town's leading businessman that I always felt uneasy asking for money. I never will forget what he said to me, “Bob, do you believe that the money given will be used for very good purposes?” I assured him that I did. “Then,” he said, “don't be afraid to challenge people. My college does, the Rotary does and you should too if the ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ is important.”

The doctor decided that he wanted to be known as a person who gave; the two widows gave generously. Next week it will be our turn. We have to consider our other loyalties. Sometimes selfish desires get in the way. We may wish that we could do much more.

Wrestle with all those feelings. Struggle this week with what it means to be a follower of Christ in terms of how you use your time and spend your money. Lets each of us in our own way strive to be remembered as “ONE WHO GAVE.”