

TAKING THE STEW OUT OF STEWARDSHIP

I am not trying to accuse any of you of anything untrue. I think most of you carry more guilt, not less guilt, than you should. But I have run into more than a few people who fret and stew over how much to give to the church. In part that is because the churches in our time always seem to need more money than they have, and some of us care about that. Most of us want the church we belong to to be effective and look successful in our community. There are many dimensions to this, but we suspect that Jesus has a right to expect at least *that much* from His faithful followers.

Of course, some of us fret and stew on a more basic level. If we give money to the church, we do not have as much money for our own needs and desires. There may even be other causes we think might be more important than the purpose of the Christian church. Clearly the church has been dropping down further and further on the priority list in our culture and in our time. Few families, even among church members, spend as much money on the church as they do on vacations, sports, gifts, automobiles, or a host of other items they consider to be more important than Jesus or His purpose among us. Not all families have a clear enough budget to add this up and realize that it is true. Nevertheless, not only is it true of our money, it is true of our time. Many forces are at work to squeeze the Christian church out of our budgets and out of our calendars. We have many members for whom this is not true, and that's probably why we are not going under, at least not yet. Even so, and even in our own membership, we have a few voices that are working and hoping for our failure more than for our growing stronger and more faithful.

My point is that there is still a lot of fretting and stewing going on about stewardship. This fretting and stewing does not serve Jesus or His Kingdom. If a person gives money to the church and they really wish they did not have to, that is not clean money. The church would be better off, and they themselves would be better off, if they would stop giving any money to the church until they really want to. God is not poor. God is not a beggar. If we are not giving to the church in joy and praise and gratitude, then the money cannot possibly help to build the Kingdom. I deeply and truly believe this. Silly little games do not work against Satan.

If the people of Jesus cannot return to the ways and principles of our PATH – to the ways of the Christian Life – then the church will continue to die out until the Holy Spirit brings us to true renewal. Meanwhile, “the remnant shall remain.” And those of us in the remnant will find ways to stay faithful regardless of what the world around us is thinking or believing. So I will give you the conclusion of the sermon now, and those of you who wish may go back and muse with me about how we got to such a conclusion.

Taking the stew out of stewardship means that we will never ever give money to a budget or attach our giving to any effort to balance a budget – not ever again. If we think the Christian church is just another organization trying to survive in our society, we already lost the battle. Giving to a *budget* breaks the cardinal principle of the Christian Life: it is not personal and it is not relational. A budget is not a *being*. We do not give to a budget; we do not even give to the church. We give to God. Or we give to Jesus, the Messiah of God. That is personal and relational. Tithing may seem stupid or irrational to some people, especially to people who have never tried it. But you cannot talk a tither out of tithing, because there is a love-bond underneath; because tithing honors a relationship; because tithing is the outward sign of an allegiance, a gratitude, a partnership with God. Tithing has nothing to do with raising a budget. Tithing has nothing to do with what anybody else is giving. Tithing is about my own relationship with God. When that comes clear, all the stewing and fretting is gone.

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So now let's back up a bit. Jacob is running from the wrath of his older brother, Esau. He has stolen the birthright, and now, adding insult to injury, he has also stolen his father's blessing for the firstborn. So Jacob is running for his life. He is heading north, to Haran, where he has relatives. Some of Abraham's kin never made it past Haran – way north between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. They never got to Canaan (Palestine) on that first momentous journey out of Ur. So there is a pocket of relatives there in Haran.

We discovered last week in a Disciple Band that some of us did not know that Abraham was the first Jew or that he had come from Ur – way south of Babylon, almost down to the Persian Gulf. Of course, Abraham brought his culture and his religion with him, and his traditions and heritage were pre-Jewish. It was about 2000 B.C.

Stories of Adam and Eve, of Cain and Abel, of Noah, and of the Tower of Babel have been told in Jewish circles for eons, but they originated in a pre-Babylonian culture. They never got entirely “cleaned up.” In the story of the Tower of Babel, for instance, the gods were alarmed at human ingenuity and went down to confuse the language, lest the humans build a ziggurat that would reach clear up to heaven. What gods? Well, the gods that were worshipped before Yahweh. Abraham’s relatives did not yet know that Yahweh was the supreme and only God. They did not even know that Yahweh was the Creator of all things, and thus beyond nature itself. Until Yahweh came along – that is, before humans began to sense *the presence* of Yahweh – the gods were of nature, and they were symbolized by their totem animals or the sun or the moon.

Judaism is spiritual and religious dynamite. What is the Second Commandment? *“You must not make a carved image for yourself, nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.”* (Exodus 20:4) It is a huge and revolutionary new awareness of God. Yahweh cannot be defined. Yahweh is beyond all nature. “Yahweh” itself is not really a name; it is a form of the verb “to be”: “I am that I am.” This is how God identifies himself to Moses. “You cannot define or grasp or understand my true essence. It is enough for you to know that I exist – that I AM.”

And so the concepts, the desire to relate, and all the expectations began to shift and change. For example, some of you remember the great lengths to which Yahweh had to go to eliminate child sacrifice from Jewish worship. Abraham just assumed that Isaac must be sacrificed: the firstborn was the most precious gift, and therefore the firstborn was the price the gods would require for giving prosperity and favor to the people. But this new God (Yahweh) forbid child sacrifice forever. Always before, you were in trouble if you did not make this sacrifice; from now on, you were in trouble if you did. Some people try to tell us that religious truth never changes. I am always grateful not to be one of their children.

Anyway, Jacob is running from the wrath of his brother Esau. It is a profound time in our tradition. Jacob is also going to find the love of his life when he gets to Haran. It is one of the great love stories in the Bible. Jacob will marry Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban. As far as we know, Rachel is the only woman he ever wanted or truly loved. But he will get stuck with the sister, Leah, and eventually the two handmaidens, Zilpah and Bilhah. And he will have twelve sons,

from which come the twelve tribes of Israel. His name will be changed from Jacob to Israel: *Jacob* = heel grabber, supplanter; *Israel* = “may God contend” or “may God rule,” or possibly “he who contends with God.” Hence the children of Israel *are* the children of Jacob (as everybody knows).

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Have I thrown enough dust in the air yet? Whenever we talk about money in the church, especially if we talk about tithing, we like to throw dust in the air. If the dust gets thick enough, we can pretend that it is all very confusing and that we really cannot understand what it is about or what we should do.

In my first parish, in Paxton, Massachusetts, there was a big blue arch behind the pulpit. There was no cross; just a huge, beautiful blue arch. In gold letters around the top of the arch, it said, “This is none other but the house of God.” Every Sunday we all saw it; we could not miss it. But it did not seem to have any impact on the life of that congregation.

I was twenty-four years old, and the Trustees came to me to make sure I knew I had to have an especially persuasive sermon ready for Stewardship Sunday, which would kick off the “every-member canvass.” That, in turn, would decide the size of our church’s budget for the following year, which they always mentioned included my salary. This last part was pure mendacity, but it took me several years to figure that out. Anyway, there in the place of highest honor was this quote from the story of Jacob’s ladder. Every year they would fret and stew for two months about their budget and how to raise more money, and there was the simple and beautiful solution staring them in the face. But it was too obscure, too confusing, and they could not grasp the connection. Well, a few did – enough to keep us alive; they were the ones having all the fun and getting in on the promises. But that was not very clear to most people either.

In any case, I did not like Stewardship Sunday back then – not for years. Something felt false and wrong about preaching to raise money, but I could not quite put my finger on it. For even more years now, I have loved Stewardship Sunday. I never preach to raise money, but money is a good subject for Christians to talk about. Giving money to God is a great privilege and a great blessing. You can never outgive God. A friend of mine likes to say: “Money is a really good servant – and a really bad god.”

Back to Jacob's ladder for a minute: Jacob has a marvelous experience that night. He is not even out of Palestine; he is just a few miles north of Jerusalem on his way to Haran. But he gets this marvelous vision – this encounter with God, who gives him great encouragement and support, even promising to make of him a great nation. In response, Jacob makes a promise back to God. Are you getting ready to throw dust in the air? *“Whatsoever thou givest to me, I will give a tenth to Thee.”*

This is relational. God and Jacob are going into business together. It is more profound than that, but at the heart and core it is *at least* that. All the power and purpose and capital and wherewithal are coming from God. But God is hugely generous: ninety percent of the proceeds will go to Jacob; ten percent of the profits will go to God. And of course God can have more whenever he wants it. All he has to do is increase Jacob's prosperity. Something, by the way, that God does continually. It's easy: Ten percent of zero is zero. Ten percent of a million is a hundred thousand. It is not easy to get confused here, unless we really work hard at it. *“Whatsoever thou givest to me, I will give a tenth to Thee.”*

God knows that Jacob will have many obligations in this life – a huge family and an even bigger clan, as it turns out. His uncle Laban will try to cheat him blind at every opportunity. Eventually Jacob will have to go back and face his brother Esau and set up his legacy in Palestine. Jacob has worries and obligations galore. So he *needs* the ninety percent. Most of us have no problem understanding that. In fact, many of us realize with greater and greater clarity that we also need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to manage the ninety percent that *we* are in charge of. That is the real “stewardship” for sincere Christians in our time. Ten percent goes to God, but the relationship does not end there. Now, how and for what purposes do we spend the ninety percent that *we* are in charge of? “It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day.” And we have lots to pray about. Nobody who is trying to live their life for God is ever bored.

There is one question that almost all Christians run into sooner or later – a question that is not simply throwing dust in the air: Okay, we give a tenth to God, but why does it go to “the church”? I have friends who do not give the same answer to this question that I do. If your prayers assure and reassure you that you should give your tithe to some agency or person or organization other than a Christian church, you have no choice. For us, obedience to the Holy Spirit outranks all other priorities.

But the reality for ninety-nine percent of us is that we need to give our tithe to a church, to some *ecclesia* – that is, to some “faith family” that we are part of and participating in. Despite all the foibles and imperfections of human churches, there are not many organizations in our world that carry the Name, the Purpose, and the Invitation of Jesus Christ our Lord. Maybe not for you, but for me those are essential ingredients. If we want to further the mission of our Lord here on earth, we have to be part of some *ecclesia* – some faith family. Of course, I know all the rationalizations and all the subterfuge; I probably hear them a lot more often than you do. But you cannot play football or basketball or even tennis all by yourself. We need the community of other believers if we are serious about walking the Christian WAY. We also need some community into which we can invite others if they become interested in the New Life in Christ Jesus.

So most Christians end up giving their tithe to God via some church to which they belong. It is not perfect; it is merely the best we can do. As a faith community, we give our tithes to the church. (Well, some small proportion of us do, anyway.) And they are given freely to God – part of our partnership with God, and part of our allegiance and loyalty and gratitude to God. Once given, our tithes belong to God. No strings attached.

But then we do change hats – a thing that happens without subterfuge or apology in many situations in this life. Having turned the money over to God and without any personal claims on it, we then meet as officers, committees – eventually as a whole congregation – and we try to spend this money to build up Jesus’ church: to make it effective, and to use its resources for the Kingdom we believe in and want to serve.

Never ever, by the way – at least not in my experience – do we all think that we have used all the money wisely. Every individual, including me, has opinions about how or where the money might have been spent better. But as an organization, within the limits of our understanding and our responsibility, we make a plan – a budget – for how we will use our tithes to honor and serve our Lord. And so we go from year to year, trying to learn as we go.

So where is the “stew” in stewardship? Actually that is easy to answer. There is a constant tendency in the realities of our world to mix the concepts of stewardship and of tithing with the *needs* of a

human organization. These are categories that do not mix. This is an “apples and oranges” kind of thing that gets many people into a stew – into confusion and consternation and stress – that is entirely unnecessary. And of course it weakens the resolve and the commitment of churches all over the land, year after year, so one suspects it’s no accident. But that’s a different matter.

Tithing is a relational affair – a partnership with God. It is a beautiful and fulfilling discipline of the Christian Life. The people who have tried it love it. They would not give it up for any argument or persuasion you could imagine. And this discipline costs them a fair amount of money each year, so there is a built-in reward for giving it up. Still they do not. Those who tithe do not think of this money as belonging to them; it belongs to God. It comes off the top, and we live on the rest. “*Whatsoever thou givest to me, I will give a tenth to Thee.*”

So what has that got to do with some budget made up by a human institution? Absolutely nothing. What has that got to do with what some organization needs or thinks it needs? Same answer. If, as a human organization, we get together, decide we need a new roof, get estimates on the cost, and determine that if we each give such-and-such an amount, we can buy a new roof – well, that is all well and good; nothing wrong with that. But what has that got to do with our promises to God? Or with God’s promises to us? Giving to a budget will have *no impact* on our relationship with God. Tithing always has a *huge* impact on our relationship with God. That is because we go into business together – we form a partnership together.

“Well, so why can’t I form a partnership with God on the basis of giving *one percent* of my income to God?” Hey, if you can talk God into it, it’s fine with me.

A tithe is an act of allegiance and devotion and gratitude to God. If somebody does not want to tithe, nobody is going to make them try to tithe. In fact, if a person does not want to tithe, they are far better off – and the church is far better off – if they do not tithe. Tithing without gratitude or allegiance or devotion to God is a lie, and it will backfire big time. Nobody needs that – not the person themselves, and certainly not the church. We have problems enough without a lot of unnecessary resentments and smoldering anger.

Besides, God is not a beggar. God is wealthy beyond our poor minds to imagine it. But if you want to go into partnership with God, the invitation is open. There are promises involved, both from God and from us. And it is one of the best deals to be found anywhere in this world.

If you die without trying it, no skin off my nose. But if you die and your Pastor has never mentioned it or tried to describe it clearly, well, I don't think my boss would be too pleased about that.

But no need to throw dust in the air. It is really very clear and straightforward: *“Whatsoever thou givest to me, I will give a tenth to Thee.”*