

We Give Thee But Thine Own

A Brief Look at Christian Giving

“We give Thee but Thine own,
What-e’er the gift may be;
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord from Thee.

May we Thy bounties thus
As stewards true receive
And gladly, as Thou blessest us,
To Thee our first fruits give.
[TLH #441:1-2]

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St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist

A funny thing happened when I sat down to write this, I realized that this is the minor festival of St. Matthew (a former tax collector no less). That is quite ironic considering the fact that paying taxes is about the law, while giving to the mission of Church, is all about the Gospel! (Also, God has a sense of humor! :-)

It is also a case in point because many are skeptical about giving to churches in the manner in which some view the IRS. In a sense, we are skeptical today of everything and everyone who wants to get into our pocketbook for whatever reason, and in many instances, rightly so. Today there are so many scams out there and it seems that everybody wants what is ours. Unfortunately, some of these scams have been by so-called “religious” leaders.

When people first hear a figure like 10% they are shocked and dazed. But the truth of the matter is that God wants you first and then He does want all your money, your possessions, your abilities, and your time. God has a right to demand what you consider “yours.” However, He is not willing to take it from you, He wants to win your heart, your love, your affection, so that you give it all up to Him willingly. Why does He want it? Because it is rightfully His and He has entrusted it all to your care for His purposes through you!

Does that sound strange? Well, consider what we confess in the explanation of Luther’s Small

Catechism concerning the First Article of the Apostle's Creed (*italics* my emphasis):

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. *He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life.*

So do I provide for myself or does God? The answer: YES! Indeed, we work, we gain and education, etc. so that we can provide for ourselves and our family, yet through it all it is our Heavenly Father who is providing for us through such means.

The problem is that Satan, the wicked one, also wants all of you, your money, your possessions, your abilities and your time. He will do whatever it takes to get them, be it lying, deceiving, coercion, extortion, etc. He tempts us to think that everything that we have really is ours and is solely a result of our own doing rather than a gracious gift from God. The evil world and your own sinful nature also vie for top billing for your time, talents, and treasures.

The First Commandment reminds us that "*we are to have no other gods,*" and that "*we are to fear, love, and trust in God above **all** things.*" You see, everything that you are, everything you have is to be used in priestly service to God through the serving of your neighbor. This includes your time, your talents, and yes, your treasures. As Jesus says, "*Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.*" For this reason, stewardship is ultimately a matter of faith!

As we begin here I would like to examine a few general myths and misconceptions about the reasons for giving, or not giving:

MYTH: God needs my money in order to spread His Kingdom. FACT: **God does not need your money; God created the world out of nothing.** What is important to God is the attitude of your heart, and for this reason He wants us to give, give as we are able, and to give generously, not for His sake, but for ours. Our giving is a reflection of our acknowledgment of what God has given us. The more we realize just what we have received by God's grace, the more our hearts will overflow with the spontaneous giving of what God has blessed us with. If you remember, the Lord praised the widow who put in nearly all she had (Luke 21:1-4) not because it amounted to much in earthly figures, but because it was a reflection of her heavenly treasures.

And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and He saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites. So He said, "Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had.

Indeed, God can and does work through such seemingly small cheerful giving, the kind that proceeds from pure faith, more than He can through those who give seemingly large gifts but for ungodly reasons.

MYTH: I don't have enough to give right now (After all, I'm a college student). When I get on

my feet then I'll start giving. FACT: **If you can't afford to give 10% of what you have now, your mind won't change with a million dollar windfall.** In other words, and this is true especially for those of you in college, now is the time to develop the habit and it is actually easier to begin when you have less, than when you have more. But this is precisely why in the OT God demanded the "firstfruits" to be entered into His service, and not the "lastfruits." Do you give God the "firstfruits" of your time each week or have you piled up for yourself a plethora of worldly endeavors and find yourself with no perceived time for the Divine Service, Bible Study and the like? It also shouldn't surprise us that if we wait until the end of the month to see what money happens to be leftover, or if what we give is whatever happens to be in our pocket, that we will have little to give (i.e. lastfruits giving)

However, if you predetermine what you are going to give before you spend the rest of your money (i.e. firstfruits giving), whether it be on necessities such as housing, clothing, food, etc., or on "extras" such as "pizza, skiing, entertainment," you may well be amazed at how much you have to live on, even and perhaps, especially, as a student. You see, our capitalistic and consumer driven society has taught us to get what our eyes desire, and then worry about other things. Sound like the same trick that the serpent pulled on Eve!?! As Christians, the fact of the matter is that we are to be disciplined (that's what the word "disciple" means) and be good stewards of what God has given us in our private lives. If we do so, we will have money to give to God for the public work of the Gospel, in addition to that needed to take care of our daily needs.

MYTH: If I give 10% I'll never make it. FACT: **God can do more with the 10% that you give Him than you can do with the 100% you keep to yourself.** Let me explain: I myself have not always tithed. In fact, it wasn't until seminary, at a time when we were scraping more than ever before. I had given up my entire income and we were looking at paying huge private school bills. The Old Adam in me wanted to say, "But, golly, you are going to seminary to do the Lord's work, wouldn't God want you to keep your money so you can pay your seminary bills!?! Plus, there are others who are helping support you, so why would you give part of that money away." But my wife and I decided that we were simply just going to start doing it. My mind said, "The figures just don't add up. We won't have enough to make ends meet." But by the time we left seminary we had at least the same amount of money, if not more, than when we first went there.

Frankly, it still doesn't make sense to me, but God doesn't promise that it will. Rather, He says, "*Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, 'And see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'*" (Malachi 3:10) I can't count on how many occasions that we received financial help, literally out of nowhere. One time I went to my mail box at the seminary and there was \$75 in cash rolled up in an envelope with no markings on the envelope at all. The only one we could thank was God! Another time, I came home from school and opened up a letter from some family friends that had a check for \$1000 in it, which was sent to us simply because a dear Christian couple we knew decided to give out of their abundance something back to God. God opened the floodgates for us when we needed it. We were able to give in faith, and we received all the more at the same time. God is faithful and He truly does provide our daily bread, and even more!

MYTH: We give to keep this place going. If we are meeting budget than why the worry!?! This

kind of thinking would logically mean that if all of the sudden we had no problem paying the bills, that we could just slack off and not give at all for a while. **FACT: We give because God has so blessed us. Any other giving is idolatrous and therefore sinful.** We give in response to what He has given us. Have you ever noticed when the offering is taken in the Divine Service? It is *after* we are fed with God's Word (not to manipulate people, but rather because it is a part of our response to being served with that Word). You see as with our doctrine, so in our practice, which flows from it.

Giving is not about the Law, but solely about the Gospel! As I am constantly saying, God serves us, and *then* we respond. If someone in general doesn't respond, it may very well mean that such a person has rejected God's service to them for whatever reason. Remember, stewardship is a matter of faith, or lack of it.

In general (remember - broad picture here :-) many have developed the mentality that as long as the bills are being paid at a given church why would anyone need to give more. This would be like a husband saying to his wife, "Well, you got a roof over your head don't you!," while his affection towards her grows cold. Such thinking in and of itself is ultimately idolatrous for it takes out of the equation the fact that God's plans might be bigger than our own.

MYTH: This place will always be here and besides, the District takes care of everything don't they!?! FACT: God does not promise such things in particular and the District doesn't subsidize us because we "can't give" but because they recognize the importance of this campus ministry.

Indeed, I have yet to hear of another campus ministry throughout the LCMS that is supported in as great a measure, and with as great a breadth as our own. The people and congregations of the Wyoming District simply love this place and recognize the importance of what takes place here in this campus community. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 5-10% of the entire District budget is given solely in subsidy to our congregation for the purposes of campus ministry. I have found that often, even when money is tight, other things are sacrificed rather than our subsidy.

But the flip side of that blessing, is that we can easily be tempted to believe that everything is simply provided for us. However, that is the last impression that we need to cultivate among ourselves in this place, whether young or old. The truth of the matter is that the blessing we receive through the District should only increase our desire to be good stewards of what we receive, and spurn us on to give as we are able in support of this vital ministry. Let's think about it another way: The more we give towards our own ministry and take responsibility for that which takes place here, the more the generosity of God's people from around the District in their own giving, can be used for the mission of the Church in other ways (for instance, the all important Indian missions, Intl. Outreach at our state's community colleges, youth ministry, evangelism, planting new churches in towns which have no LCMS congregations, and the like).

Moreover, there is no end to mission opportunities that could be increased right here in the University community and even beyond. The more we give towards the mission and ministry here, might also mean the more opportunities we have to give, instead of merely receive.

For instance, when was the last time we thought about setting aside scholarship money to support a seminarian, who right now might be struggling through seminary to pay his own way through so that He can be privileged to share the Gospel with folks just like you? Further, as members of the LCMS we stand in a unique position as standard bearers and faithful stewards of God's Word and Sacraments amidst a sea of churches that have sold their soul for earthly glory. Think of the pain, think of the suffering of the countless souls who have fought the fight of good faith to hand over what we have intact today. And then think about your life, is it more fulfilling the more "things" you have, or the more that you can give for the sake of Christ?

The more you realize that what you have received is "priceless," the more 10% (simply to throw out a figure) seems like so little, especially when you realize that all that you have been given is a gift from God, and that He promises that if you "*Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness...all these things will be given to you as well.*" (Matt. 6:33)

In the Old Testament, the tithe was commanded; in the New Testament it is a matter of Christian freedom. But when you look for guidelines in Scripture about how much would be pleasing to God that is what you find. The first step is to give in terms of percentage of your income. Find out what your current percentage is. If you desire, you can look back over the year and see that God has provided for your needs. As a thank offering for His continued providence, you can increase your percentage a little bit. Test Him in this and He will provide for you. He has promised. But don't feel guilty if there is no need for you to change your giving, and don't feel bad if you have never given at all, or viewed it simply as an afterthought. Remember, God loves a "cheerful" and not a "be-grudging" giver.

Make no mistake about it, the value we place on our church and what it is about will be reflected by the "percentage" of the income we give. The great thing about percentage giving (10% or otherwise) is that everyone gives within his/her means. When our income increases, we increase our giving, and vice versa as our income decreases. Interestingly enough, recent studies in the LCMS have shown that 85% of all tithers(10% of income before taxes) started out all at once (cold turkey), and not one survey has discovered any *former* tithers. Could it be that God keeps His promises, and all who tithe truly are blessed!?! I believe so.

One of the best places in Scripture which speaks to our stewardship of God's treasures is in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. There we learn how it is that our freewill giving flows from the Gospel gifts by which we have been blessed. St. Paul is writing to "poor" Macedonians who have given generously to the collection taken by Paul for the suffering and starving believers of the church in Jerusalem. Some of the facets of faithful stewardship explained by him are:

THE JOY OF GIVING TO THE LORD: "*Their overflowing joy...welled up in rich generosity...they gave as much as they were able..on their own...they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.*" (2 Cor. 8:2,3,5)

THE BASIS FOR GIVING IS CHRIST JESUS: "*You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.*" (2 Cor. 8:9)

THE PRACTICE OF FIRST-FRUIT PERCENTAGE GIVING: *“If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable to what one has, not according to what He does not have.”* (2 Cor. 8:12)

THE PRINCIPLE OF SOWING AND REAPING: *“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”* (2 Cor. 9:6)

THE CHEERFUL INTENTION OF THE HEART: *“Each man should give what He has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”* (2 Cor. 9:7)

I would again like to encourage each of you to reflect upon your giving, and take a good hard look at it. As each of us plan how we will use our time, talents, and treasure this coming year to assist our congregation in carrying out our Lord’s Great Commission, may we prayerfully consider the following:

- ☑ How can I plan my TIME this year to be more frequent in worship attendance, reception of the Lord’s Supper, and my daily devotional meditation on the Word of God?
- ☑ How can I budget my TREASURES this year to give more money for the Lord’s work by considering a percentage of my income to be given weekly?
- ☑ How can I offer my TALENTS this year to serve in any capacity where my unique abilities are needed?

It is my fervent prayer, that you may find the great joy that such giving can bring. Again, I am available if you have questions along the way. With God’s help let us truly walk by faith and not by sight and exercise our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ in sacrificial giving! God’s promises are true and He is faithful!