

Give Until It Stops Hurting

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 26th Sunday after Pentecost, November 12, 1989. Scripture: Malachi 3:8-12; 1 Corinthians 9; Luke 21:1-4.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My 89 year old mother lives on a fixed income adjusted only for cost of living. I was down there visiting her a couple weeks ago. Her church was having their stewardship campaign. Her pledge card was on the dining room table. Being a little nosy I picked it up and looked at it. She had pledged \$40 a month. I quickly figured up that she was contributing \$480 a year to the church. I know she also gives to Billy Graham and a few other charities.

I asked her, "Mom, how much do you get a month?"

She said, "It's none of your business."

"Come on, Mom. Tell me."

"Well", she said, "I get \$577.79 from the Railroad." My father was a railroad engineer so she gets railroad retirement. She doesn't receive any social security.

"Do you get anything else," I said.

"I get \$5 dollars a month from the Veterans." My father was a veteran of World War I. He served in France.

I said, "Mom, how much do you get from stocks?"

"Socks?" she said.

"No, mom, stocks. You know... stocks and bonds."

"I don't have any stocks. I've got socks, but not stocks."

When I got home I figured out that my mother ^{receives} ~~lives on~~ \$6,993.48 a year and gives \$480 dollars or 7% of her income to the church. That doesn't include her giving to other charities. *And she's not hurting.*

As a boy, Beauregard went to church with his dad and noticed that his

dad regularly put two dollars in the collection plate. Beaugard admired his dad, believed him to be a good Christian, and vowed that when he grew up he wanted to be just like his dad. For years he went to church every Sunday and put \$2 in the collection plate. Many years ^{later} his minister preached on tithing. He responded to the challenge and decided to tithe. He never regreted his decision. In fact, he once said, "I hold every pastor I knew before that time personally responsible for the fact that I didn't become a tither forty years ago." He actually felt cheated because he didn't know about tithing.

Now let me tell you about Bill. He's not a member of our church. None of you know him. He wanted his children to learn to tithe. When they reached first grade he instituted the "three bottle system". He gave each of his children three bottles. Each week he'd give them a dollar allowance in change. Each child was given a dime to be placed in the "giving bottle". At first they called it "God's bottle" but the father thought that was bad theology so they decided to call it the "giving bottle". Then the father would give another dime to each of them to be placed in the "savings bottle". Finally he gave them each three quarters and a nickle which they put into their "spending bottle". On Sunday the dimes from the "giving bottles" were taken out and each of his children would put a dime in the collection plate at the church.

Bill said, "I sometimes felt embarassed when I saw other kids put in a quarter which their mother had just hurriedly fished from her purse. I almost gave in. But then I thought, 'Those other kids are learning to give a quarter. Mine are learning to tithe.'"

Bill went on to say, "I know a plumber who told me that he's a tither but that he doesn't like to talk about it. I asked him if he'd ever known a

plumber before he decided to become one. He said of course he had. His uncle was a plumber. He agreed that it was hard to imagine anyone deciding to become a plumber who didn't personally know one. I suggested that it was equally hard to imagine anyone deciding to become a tither who didn't personally know one."

Most people never think about what they give. They give kind of randomly. They notice what the person next to them puts into the collection plate or they remember what their parents gave and that's what they give. They don't give a proportion of the income.

A minister friend was having lunch with one of his parishioners whose last name was O'Neal. The minister knew that O'Neal gave \$900 a year to the work of Christ through the church. That was almost twice as much as the average member of his church gave. He asked O'Neal how he went about deciding how much he'd give to the church.

He said, "I don't have any idea. I just pick an amount that seems about right."

His pastor asked, "Why don't you pick 10% of your income?"

"That's too much!", he said.

O'Neal was practicing random dollar giving. If you're a random giver I'm challenging you to become a proportional giver. Figure out what proportion of your total income you're giving to the work of Christ through the church and instead of simply raising the amount of money you give this year, raise the percentage that you give.

Harold, whom you also don't know, was a random dollar giver who discovered that he'd unintentionally become a tither. It happened during a training session in his church for stewardship workers. Each worker was asked to write down in privacy their total annual income on one line. Then

they were instructed to list their total contributions on a second line. Then each worker was asked to divide line 2 (what they gave) by line 1 (what they received). This showed them what percentage of their income they were giving away.

Harold did this and was surprised. He tried to hide his obvious joy. Later he shared privately, "Guess what? I'm a tither. I didn't know that." *it doesn't even hurt.* Harold was a fairly wealthy member of the church. He was a compassionate and generous person. He was often asked for contributions to charitable causes and would respond as the spirit moved. He had stumbled by accident on tithing. Without knowing it he was doing what St Paul instructed the Corinthian Christians to do. "Each one should give as he has decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly."

There's a woman whom none of you know who has an interesting response to a frequently asked question. When people ask her, "How's your husband?" her favorite response is "compared to what?" How does your *mashed potatoes, ice cream* desire to see the work of Christ go forward compared to your other *Robert Redford* desires? You can tell what a person's real values are by looking at the way they spend their money. Algernon, whom you don't know, looked at the way he was spending his money and didn't like what he saw. He said, "I resolved right then and there that I wouldn't give less money to my Church each week than I spend on Scotch Whiskey." He was a real Scotch lover. He doubled his pledge. His minister had a real conflict of interest when he urged Algernon to cut back on his drinking.

How does your desire to see the work of Christ carried on compare to your other desires? Compared to the season tickets? The house? The swimming pool? The vacation trip?"

That leads me to say something about necessities. One person's luxury is another person's necessity. Just think about that for a minute. Think about some of your "necessities". Last year we put a back porch on our house and this year we screened it in and completed it. It wasn't a necessity. Not really. But now that we have the back porch it's a necessity for me to pay off the bank loan. It's a funny thing about necessities. One year's luxury becomes next years necessity.

Tithing has taught me that some things aren't necessary. There's a wonderful freedom in the discovery that I don't need all the money I make just to live. It's with great pleasure and personal satisfaction that the largest portion of my total giving is to the Oxford Presbyterian Church. It's included in my budget like the house payment or the lights or the phone and car. On the fifteenth of the month when I get paid I write out a check to the church for \$110. On the 31st of the month when I get paid again I write out another check for \$110. I don't think of it as a debt I owe the Lord. I could never repay the debt I owe the Lord. I couldn't even begin to pay the interest on the debt I owe the Lord. Thanks be to God for his priceless gift of Jesus. Jesus at the cost of his own blood has fully paid my debt to God. What I give, therefore, I give out of gratitude and love. The idea of wanting to give money away strikes most people with all the force of a brand new idea. Once they get over the shock, many decide, "Yeah, that's something I want to do."

Last week I got a little flack about what I said about tithing in my sermon. I said that I didn't think tithing was a requirement for Christians. A couple people came up to me last week and asked, "Why don't you believe in tithing?" I do believe in tithing. But I don't believe the Lord wants us to think of tithing as a requirement. I believe the Lord wants us, first, to

give ourselves to Christ, to really trust Christ as our Lord and Savior, not just in word but in deed as well. He wants us to trust Christ not with just a tenth, but with all that we have. Then I believe the Lord wants each one of us to give, as we have freely decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly.

My prayer is that you may know in your heart that God has watched over you and will continue to provide the care you need. May this assurance enable you to give abundantly to God through your church in the year ahead. May this certainty free you to give generously and joyously as you bring your tithes and offerings and present them to the Lord week by week.

Whether we're rich or poor in this world's goods, may we give with a peaceful, smiling face and a warmly extended hand, having placed our life, freely, in the hand of the Risen Christ, the One who always comes through for us.

Let us pray: Help us and all people, dear Lord, to understand the purpose and place of money in our life. Keep before us the peril of loving it. Help us to make it our servant, and never our master. And let neither the lack of it, nor the possession of it, in any degree loosen our grasp upon reality, which is ours through love of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Most of the illustrations come from an article written by William Lyon, in the Alban Institute Newsletter