

The Life of Moses: A People Who Belong to God

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 17, 1999;
Scripture Lessons: Exodus 33:12-23, Psalm 99, Matthew 22:15-22.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Today is stewardship Sunday. My sermon will mesmerize you, hypnotize you so that at the end you will say, "Give me a pledge card, I want to tithe. I want to return to the Lord 10% of my income - before taxes."

Take my silver and my gold,
Not one mite would I withhold.

At the end of this service you will want to go home, calculate your income, divide by a tenth and pledge that amount to the church. If my sermon is really successful, tomorrow you will call your lawyer and ask to have a new will drawn up to include one tenth of your inheritance to the work of Christ through the church.

I have all kinds of obstacles to overcome to accomplish my goal. Some of you have already dug in your heels to resist what I say. "What will he do this year to wring my money from me? Will he go the old guilt route and tell us that we're more wealthy than 90% of the people in the world?"

I don't plan to lay a guilt trip on you. Guilt is not a very effective motivator. Even if guilt is effective, it often produces hostility at being manipulated. So guilt is not my theme. Rather, gratitude is my theme. The theme of my sermon is that tithing is our joyful and grateful response to the costly commitment God has made to his people.

Take a look at our Old Testament Scripture lesson, a very unlikely source for a stewardship money. It says absolutely nothing about money or giving. The Old Testament lesson lets us overhear a conversation between Moses and God near the end of the life of Moses. Moses is concerned about what's going to happen to Israel after he's gone. Three times Moses reminds God that Israel belongs to God. Three times he reminds the Lord that Israel is "your people."

Biblical scholars who have nothing better to do have counted 2000 occurrences of the phrase “your people” or “my people” referring to the people of God. For example, early in the life of Moses, the Lord says to Moses, “I have seen the affliction of *my people*” Later the Lord tells Moses to go to Pharaoh and say, “Let *my people* go” After crossing the Red Sea the Lord says, “I brought *my people* out of the Egypt, out of slavery.” And when the Lord gave the Ten Commandments to his people he said, “I will be your God, you will be *my people*” Hundreds of years after the death of Moses the Lord said to the prophet Isaiah, “Comfort ye, comfort ye, *my people*.” Over two thousands times the Lord reminds us of his unconditional love for his people. God loves his people. And because God loves his people unconditionally we respond to his love through joyful and grateful giving of our time, talents and money to the work of God’s kingdom.

Now turn to the New Testament and we hear the same message. Jesus told three stories about the lengths to which God goes to find his people when they’re lost. ³ God is like a woman who, when she loses a coin of the least value, sweeps and cleans every nook and corner of the world until she finds her lost possession. ¹ God is like a father who runs to welcome home his prodigal son. ² And God is like a shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep and goes looking throughout the wilderness of this world until he finds his lost people. All three of these stories underline the commitment that God has made to us his people. ⁴ Because God has given himself to us unconditionally- we joyfully and gratefully respond through giving ourselves to God.

(4) The story of the coin - we have God's image stamped on us belong to God

Both Old and New Testaments proclaim that we belong to God. Karl Barth writes, “The only thing to be said of (humankind) is that we belong totally to Jesus Christ, body and soul, in life and in death. (We) belong to Jesus Christ without limit and without reservation.” We give joyfully and gratefully because we belong to someone who loves us unconditionally.

We are God’s people. Our *Brief Statement of Faith* begins with these words. “In life and in death, we belong to God.” And in our new *Study Catechism* we’re asked in the second question, “How do you live by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ?” The answer: “I am not my own. I have been bought with a price. The Lord Jesus Christ loved me and gave himself for me. I entrust myself completely to his care, giving thanks each day for his wonderful goodness.” And

when I baptize someone I say, "Child of the Covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as ^{Christ's} God's own forever." Our creeds and confessions and sacraments remind us over and over that we belong to God who loved us long before we loved him.

I've known two parents for many years. I've seen them raise their children from childhood to adulthood. I've often heard them tell their children over the years, "There's nothing you can ever do that will make me love you less." The children were not ever perfect. They haven't always been well behaved. But as I've watched that family over the years I'm amazed at how those children, now young adults, are willing to do just about anything to please their parents. Not out of guilt. Not out of fear. But as a joyful and grateful response to the love they've received. In Jesus Christ, God tells us, "There is nothing you can ever do that will make me love you less." ~~Believing~~ ...

God loves us unconditionally. God does not say, "First, you obey my laws then I will save you." God saves us and then gives us his law. Obedience is a grateful and joyful response to God's unconditional love. Sometimes the Gospel is preached as a threat. "If you do not trust in Jesus Christ you will go to hell." But how could we ever trust someone under threat of damnation? The Gospel is good news. The Gospel proclaims God's unconditional love for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. While we were still sinners Christ died for us. Christ chose us before we chose him. We love, because he first loved us. We gratefully and joyfully trust Jesus Christ because he has unconditionally chosen us as his own. And we gratefully and joyfully respond to his love through faith and obedience and the sacrificial giving of our tithes and offerings.

Some time ago I was sitting in my office. Ann, our church secretary, knocked and said "There's someone here to see me. Do you have time?" "Send him in." In came a man I had not seen in years. He hadn't shaved in days. His clothes were crumpled. He had the look of a man who hadn't slept for days. He had a habit of covering his mouth with a shaky hand when he spoke. His eyes never met mine. He was out of work. Declining health. Insurmountable debts but he didn't ask for money. He just wanted to talk. "Do you have any family?" "No." "Do

you have any close friends?" "No." "Do you have a job?" "No." "Do you belong to any clubs, any organizations?" "No." Then he said words to the effect that he had a hard time keeping commitments. My first thought was to tell him to straighten up, pull himself together or go out there and try harder to keep his commitments. But instead I asked him if anybody had ever loved him unconditionally? He said, "It's hell to go through life without ~~ever~~ feeling ^{that I belong} love unconditionally" I wish I had thought to say, "Ah, but ^{you belong to Christ} Christ loves you unconditionally."

God loves us unconditionally. Go home and think about God's unconditionally love for you. Then think about your commitment of time, talent and treasure to God through the church. You will be receiving a pledge card soon. I hope you'll make a commitment to pledge. I hope you'll pledge, not out of guilt or fear but out of joy and gratitude. I hope that you will tithe. We pledge our money, not to win God's love, for God already loves us. Not to earn our salvation, for Christ has earned it for us. Not to avoid being punished, for then we would obey out of fear. With gladness in our hearts we pledge out of gratitude, for God has blessed us and, in Christ, has given us himself.