

Seeing and Stewardship

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 23, 1994, the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: Job 42: 1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34: 1-8; Hebrews 7: 23-28; Mark 10: 46-52.

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

You've probably all received your pledge cards by now. I hope you haven't returned them yet. I hope that what I say this morning will influence your decision as to what to pledge. Before you pledge I want you to see signs of the work of Christ among us.

I see signs of spiritual and physical vitality. Last week we received seven new members. This morning we'll recognize 11 young people in the confirmation class. Several new Sunday School classes were started. Jane Trimble led a new class on basic Christianity. This fall another new class started with about 30 ^{classes} ^{Adults & youth classes} parents of teenagers meeting to support one another. Our church led the way again this year in the DRGP walk. Over 30 of us walked last Sunday. The first floor of the Christian Education building will be open soon. About 10 of you saved our church over \$5000 by painting the new Christian Education building. We have active youth groups that attract not only our own young people but unchurched young people. Through Mark Paudenbush's leadership and with the help of volunteers like Cynthia Sawaya some young people are showing exciting signs of following Christ. Some adults are making risky, life-changing decisions because of their faith in Christ. I've even seen some slight growth in our Wednesday prayer group that meets at 6 in the morning.

Lots of you have volunteered time and money to help rebuild the church.

Last year you pledged an additional \$400,000 to the building fund. Suzie Jefferis led a summer aerobics class in our church the contributions to which were contributed to the building fund. The steeple was replaced. Many, many members volunteered to help in the auction and Apple Festival and other fund raising activities to help raise money for the building fund.

But I also see some things to be concerned about. Even though our overall giving has risen dramatically, most of that increased giving has gone to the building fund, leaving the general budget to operate on a bare bones budget. In fact giving to the general budget has remained basically static since the fire. This year we reduced our mission giving in order to pay salaries and utilities. We're spending more and more on ourselves and less and less for the mission of the church beyond our walls.

I see our church like blind Bartimaeus, constantly begging for money. Coming to you several times a year to tell you that we're behind in our giving and that our giving isn't keeping pace with our spending. We're like blind Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus was reduced to begging because he was blind. When Jesus asked him what he could do for him, Bartimaeus didn't ask for money. He didn't even ask for more people to put money in his tin cup. He said to Jesus, "I want to see." When Jesus opened his eyes to see, he no longer had to beg. He was free to follow Jesus.

We need to have our eyes opened. Let me say quite frankly that we don't need more money, we need to have our eyes opened. If all of us moved in the direction of tithing we would see that our lack is not money, but faith. We need

the risen Christ to open our eyes to see what he's doing in our lives, in this church, in this town, and in the world. If our eyes were opened we wouldn't have to beg. We could follow Jesus joyfully.

The official poverty level in the United States for a family of four is \$14,335. If every family in our congregation were at the poverty level and we were to tithe, our giving to the general budget would actually increase. (And I might mention that I know personally families at the level of poverty who tithe and still live fulfilled, happy lives serving Christ).

But most of us don't live at or below the poverty level. The median household income per family in the Oxford area is about \$38,000. That means that the income of over half of the households in Oxford is greater than \$38,000. We have about 200 households in our congregation. If we all tithed based on the median household income - that is, if we all gave \$3,800, a tenth of the median household income, we would contribute \$760,000. We wouldn't come begging with our tin cups every month or so. We would have enough to complete our building and increase the ministry and mission of our church.

I urge you to ask Christ to open your eyes to see what God has already given you. I urge you to move in the direction of tithing. Tithing is giving one tenth of your income to the ministry of Christ through the church. It's pretty hard as an adult to start tithing unless you have an intentional plan to increase the percentage you give. For example, if you're now giving \$1 a week (~~and it's amazing how many adults give only \$1 a week~~), increase it to \$1.50. If you contribute \$10 a

week, try upping it to \$12. Sit down and write out your yearly income on a piece of paper. Take 10% of that and write that down. If you make \$15,000 a year, that's \$1,500. Then draw up a plan, maybe a five year plan that will gradually move you in the direction of tithing. Ask Christ to open your eyes to see the part he wants you to have in the work of his church. Follow him in your giving.

See, our problem is not money. Haitians and Somalians may have money problems. We don't! Our problem is poor eyesight. Faulty vision. So often we think we have a money problem if we can't take a vacation or eat out once a month. But most of us don't have money problems. We have faulty vision. Blindness to what we have already and blindness to Christ's mission makes beggars out of us. We don't have to beg. We only need to ask Jesus to open our eyes.

Like Blind Bartimaeus, God wants us to open our eyes and follow Jesus. Notice what Bartimaeus did when the disciples called to him. He threw aside his cloak. He jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. Bartimaeus responded wholeheartedly and enthusiastic^{ly} to the call of Jesus. He responded in faith before even he received his sight. He presented himself - his whole self to Jesus.

God doesn't want just our money. God wants ourselves. He doesn't want us to throw a few dollars in the collection plate. He wants us to throw ourselves in faith at his feet. In the days of Isaiah the prophet the people of God gave their offerings and sacrifices but God said, "I hate them. Take them away. I don't want your money. I want you. I want all of you." God doesn't want our money unless he has us as well.

Several years ago Florence Brown invited me to a pre-school assembly in our old fellowship hall. I stood with all the kids in a circle on the stage and we danced the hokey-pokey. Have you ever danced the hokey-pokey? Remember – you put your right foot in, you put your right foot out, you put your right foot in and you shake it all about. Then it's your left foot, then your right hand, then your left hand, and so on. But that can't happen in real life. You can't split yourself up and let one part of you do one thing and another part of you do something else. People try. They try to do their homework and watch television. It usually doesn't work. Sometimes people try to eat and talk at the same time. That's a mess. You can't really put a part of yourself into anything and do a good job – least of all into our service of Christ. If we're going to follow Jesus, as we have promised to do, we've got to present our whole selves as a a living sacrifice to God, not just \$5 or \$10 a week. Blind Bart, threw his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. He threw himself – his whole self – at the feet of Christ.

So I want to urge you to do something really radical as you think about signing your pledge card. I urge you not to pledge anything until you first pledge yourself to Christ. "Here I am, Lord Jesus. I bow to you as Lord and Savior. I don't want to be conformed to the world. I want to be transformed. I want to be renewed. I want to approve your will. I want to serve you with all the gifts you've given me. I want to follow you wholeheartedly."

Let me repeat. Don't give any money to the church until you give yourself to follow Christ. We can't bribe God! We can't tip God! We can't pay God conscience

money! God hates that kind of stuff! God doesn't want our money unless we give ourselves to him.

When Christ opens our eyes so that we can see, we shall follow him. We will think, not so much of all the things we don't have but want; we'll begin to see all the things that Christ wants to do in and through us with the wealth that we already have.

Maybe you've already filled in your pledge card. I urge you to tear it up and take another. Ask Christ to open your eyes to see him - to see what Christ wants to do through your wholehearted support of Christ's ministry and through your contributions. Tell Jesus that you want to see. Ask him to give you vision - to give you faith to follow and obey. That's a scary prayer because Jesus will most certainly answer it. There's no doubt about it. He will open your eyes and you will see and follow Jesus. And that's very, very risky.

Remember most of us don't have money problems. We have faulty vision. We need, above all, to come to Christ - tell him in faith, "I want to see." And he will show you and you will follow.

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen