

The Gold And Silver Are Mine

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on November 8, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Haggai 1:15b-2:9.

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

John Smith is a good man. He's a good Presbyterian. Faithful. Honest. Hard working. Committed to Christ. John was baptized in the very same church in the small, rural town where he grew up, lived, and worked all his life. He attended church every week. He heard many sermons on tithing and giving and stewardship. He remembered Bible verses read in the worship service. The words of Haggai: "The gold and silver are mine." The words of the Psalmist: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. The world and they that dwell therein." He was deeply moved by testimonies of men and women who tithed. But John Smith was a moderate man. He lived moderately. He spent his money moderately. He ate with great moderation. He exercised in moderation. And when the annual stewardship campaign came round, "He pledged moderately." This is how he determined what to pledge. He looked at what he'd given the previous year and he gave a moderate increase. He had no idea what percent of his income he gave.

John Smith is now in his late seventies. Some people were surprised to hear the other day that his kids were trying to get him committed to the mental health unit in a nursing home. His friends were surprised, because, as far as they knew, John was in perfect health. John had always been hail and hearty, an avid outdoorsman. But his friends were told that his family became concerned with John's bizarre behavior. This surprised his friends even more. John was a thoughtful, intelligent, engaging sort of person. Had age taken its toll on him all of a sudden?

"Well you see it's like this," a friend was told. "His children got upset about his mental well-being. After John retired he started to volunteer a couple days a week at the church sponsored *Habitat for Humanity* project. He was having a ball and, for the first time in his life he felt he was really living out his faith. He got so involved that he sat down last week and wrote them out a check for \$100,000! A \$100,000! He said he'd been thinking about it for a long time. He'd estimated how much money he'd made over a life time. He estimated how

much he'd given. He was astounded at how much he'd made, and how little he'd given back. So after a lot of prayer and thought he wrote out a check for \$100,000. Never told his family. A \$100,000! Most of his life's savings! His children quickly moved in and urged him to give his oldest son power of attorney. They want him to go into a nursing home where he'll receive proper supervision. But John insists he's okay. He's just now realizing that his money isn't his own. "That money wasn't mine!" John argues playfully. "The money doesn't belong to my kids either. It belongs to the Lord. And not only the money. I belong to the Lord. What a wonderful discovery after all these years." John now believes with his heart what he believed in his head all those years. His family thinks he's crazy.

The story of John Smith reminds me that all that we have belongs to God. We're the steward of God's gifts. God has given me enormous financial benefits. For one thing I was born in America. That's an enormous economic advantage over someone born in Haiti. I was born white and male. ^{1/2 of mature assets for white, males,} Sad to say, that still gives me economic advantages. God has given me health. What an tremendous asset health is. I've been given the opportunity to be educated. Sixty years ago I wouldn't have gone to college coming, as I did, from a working class family. But the American people helped me go to college through federal student grants and loans. I've been blessed. God has blessed me. And to whom much is given, much is required. God has blessed all of us more than we realize. We need to return to God and to neighbor something of what God has given us. Ten percent of what God has entrusted to us, we need to return to the Lord for the building up of his kingdom. And if we're not giving ten percent for the work of the kingdom, we need to start working in that direction. Most of us already tithe whether we realize it or not. We tithe to *Visa* and *American Express*. Why not tithe to the Lord? If we tithed to the Lord we'd begin to get our priorities straight and we wouldn't be having to tithe to credit card companies.

You might be surprised, as John Smith was when he sat down and estimated how much he'd made and given in his lifetime. This afternoon I want you, first, to write down how much you make. Use last years W-2 forms, line #1, "Wages, tips, other compensation." Second, ^{OR ADJUSTED GROSS INCOME}

divide that figure by 10. That's the amount you should be giving to the work of God's kingdom. Third, determine how much you actually gave to all charitable giving last year. You may be surprised at how little you're giving. Fourth, increase the percentage of your giving. The session is asking you to increase your pledge by 8%. That's about half of the interest rate of a *Visa* card. Many of you will be able to increase your pledge far more.

If every member of our church got payed what my youngest son makes working at Ware Presbyterian Village in the kitchen, and tithed on that amount our giving would increase dramatically. If we all received the average Social Security monthly check and tithed on that amount our giving would increase dramatically. We'd be able to increase our mission giving. We could pay off our debt. We could increase our evangelistic outreach into the community. We could strengthen our music ministry and our youth ministry. When I see what we're capable of giving and what we're actually giving I feel that there's something seriously wrong with our relationship to the Lord or to this church. And I pray that God will work in our hearts the way God worked in the heart of John Smith.

Jesus once told a story of a merchant in search of beautiful pearls. One day the merchant came upon an exquisite pearl of great value. We can imagine the dialogue something like this.

"What does that pearl cost? Do you think I could afford it?" the merchant asks.

The owner replies, "I know you can afford it. How much do you have? It'll cost you everything you have."

"I have \$100,000."

"I'll take it."

"Good, I need to drive to the bank to withdraw it."

"Oh, you mean you have a car too? I told you, it'll cost you everything you have."

"My car too! But how will I get home?"

"You have a home? I want that too."

"Well, where's my family going to live?"

"Ah, you have a family! This pearl will cost you your family."

“But if you take away my family, I’ll be left all by myself.”

“Ah, you have a *self*. It’ll cost you that, as well.”

So we give all we have to obtain the pearl of great value. The price tag on the kingdom of God is everything we have. If we want the kingdom of God to come to Oxford, it will cost us everything we have. We can’t just give our leftovers to God and expect God’s kingdom to be made visible here in Oxford. It will cost you your life, your money, all you hold dear. But the wonderful thing is that when we’ve given everything, we discover that we belong to the Lord. In life and in death we belong to God. And the promise of the Lord is that “He who gave Christ up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” “All things are yours” Saint Paul writes. “All things are yours... and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.” Not just the Gold and Silver, but our hearts and minds and wills and hands and feet.

I use to sing a chorus in Sunday School when I was a boy:

*He owns the cattle on a thousand hills,
The wealth in every mine;
He owns the rivers and the rocks and rills,
The sun and stars that shine.
Wonderful riches more than tongues can tell,
He is my Father so they’re mine as well.*

The story of John Smith is based on a story told by William Willimon in a sermon preached at Duke University Chapel.