

The Wealth of Nations

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, November 5, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Haggai 2:1-9; Psalm 65:1-8; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12; Luke 19:1-10.

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

What do you give to the one who has everything? As we approach Christmas, less than two months away, the advertisers are busy suggesting what gifts we should offer our friends. Some advertisers even suggest gifts to give to the person who has everything. Of course, there's no man or woman who has everything. The Billionaire well may be starved for love. But God is, by definition, the One who has everything. Speaking through the prophet Haggai, the Lord said, "Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house (he was speaking of the temple in Jerusalem) with splendour, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts."

How can we give anything to someone who has it all? Children have a way of raising awkward questions. I read recently of a mother who was comforting her daughter on the loss of a kitten by telling her that kitty was now "happy in heaven with God." Her daughter answered, "What does God want with a dead cat?" When we sign our pledge cards next week, and when we put our tithes and offerings in the collection plate this morning what does it mean?

One of the most common temptations is to think that somehow our tithes and offerings are dues that we pay to God. Ever since I've been a minister there've been people in my churches, good people, lovely people, who tell me that they're going to raise their dues to the church or that

they've gotten behind in their dues. I feel like shaking them. We could never pay our dues to God. If we could pay our dues we wouldn't need Jesus. Jesus paid our dues when he died on the cross and went to hell in our place. By definition a Christian is someone who is trusting that Christ has fully paid our dues.

Years ago there was a doctor in a very small rural town. He kept books on all the people he treated and how much they owed. And in his many years as a doctor there were a lot of people who'd never paid him. Near the end of his life he went through his books and for every one that hadn't paid him, he put beside the name: FORGIVEN... FORGIVEN... FORGIVEN. When he died his wife decided she'd collect the doctor's fees. She went through the book and saw how much so and so owed, and they had never paid a dime... never paid a dime.

The judge demanded to see the book. "There's no court on earth that could award you this morney," he said. "It's Been FORGIVEN! You can't collect on something that's forgiven! It doesn't work that way. That would not be justice."

In your life today-- thinking in terms of money-- how much do you owe the Lord? For everything you *haven't* done-- which is sin-- and you knew that you should have done it. And everything you *have* done, and you knew you should not have done it... But you did it anyway. How much in terms of money is your debt to Christ for sin?

How much would you have to give in order to completely repay that debt? What if you gave \$500 this year for the work of Christ through the church? What if you increased your pledge to the church this year by 10% so that next year you pledged \$550? And what if each year from now on you increased your pledge by an additional 10%... how long would it take

for you to pay your debt to the Lord?

Maybe you've never tithed and you say I really should start tithing. Say you begin to tithe this year... how long would it take for you to repay the debt you owe the Lord?

Maybe you're like Zacchaeus and you give half of all you have away and then repay those whom you have defrauded four fold. Would that repay the debt you owe the Lord?

The good news of the Gospel is this. God the Father Almighty looks at you through the eyes of Jesus Christ who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all your sins. On the balance sheet has been written, "Paid in Full". "Forgiven". You don't owe God anything.

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father in Spain whose son, Paco, had become alienated from him and left home and wasn't seen or heard from for years. The father finally went from village to village looking for him. Then he decided to run an ad in the big paper in Madrid. It read: "Paco (a very common name in Spain), meet me Tuesday at 2 p.m. in front of the newspaper office. All is forgiven. Love, Papa."

At 2 p.m. on Tuesday, when the father made his way to the front of that newspaper office, there were 800 Pacos waiting to be reconciled. That's the message of Christ. All is forgiven. We don't owe God anything any longer. Christ has paid our debt.

I hope you understand that when you give to God and for the work of Christ through the church it doesn't mean that we're paying our dues. I hope that you understand your inability to pay and the absolute necessity for the forgiveness of Christ?

Last week most of you receive a copy of next year's Budget along with a letter from me and a page of testimonies on giving by some of our

members. They were all so good because they all emphasized that giving is an expression of love for God and neighbor; an expression of gratitude. I think especially of Peter and Laura Kings words: "There are no rules or regulations, we can do as we please. As Christians, what better way to thank Him than by supporting His work via our tithes?"

"There are no rules or regulations." I, personally, don't believe that the tithe is a *requirement*, a *rule* for Christians. I don't think that God wants us to feel like we *ought* to give our tithes and offerings. Imagine hugging your child because you feel it's your obligation to hug your child. Imagine telling your husband that you love him because you feel you really ought to every once in a while. How do you feel when someone gives you a gift and you take it and you say, "You didn't have to do this." And the giver says, "Well, I felt obligated." That's not what you want to hear. You want to hear them say, "I just wanted to. You really mean a lot to me." We like to receive gifts that are given freely, without being required, given out of love and gratitude, without anything expected in return. I think that's the way God is too. "The Lord loves a cheerful giver," St. Paul writes.

Does God need the checks and the dollars collected by a church? Of course not. All the gold and silver in the world belongs to him. Gratitude is the motivation behind Christian giving. We can't repay our debt but out of gratitude we can offer God our lives, our money, our time, our talent in response to Christ's offering up of himself for us. The money we give, the money we pledge is symbolic of our total self offering to Christ.

And what is it that I'm grateful for? I'm grateful, above all that I belong to Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" And the answer: "That I belong-- body and soul, in life and in death-- not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus

Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins."

I'm so grateful that I don't belong to myself anymore. I belong to Christ.

A lot of people think that their lives belong to themselves. A lot of times even Christians live as though our lives belong to ourselves. But if we've received Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we *know* that our lives no longer belong to ourselves. We belong to Christ. The basic truth about ourselves is not that we possess a family, a home, some land, two cars, a boat, a summer cottage, a swimming pool. The basic truth about ourselves is that we, and all that we have, belong to Jesus Christ.

Have you ever felt like you don't belong? You don't fit in. You feel left out. How does it feel? How does it feel to be excluded? How does it feel to not be chosen when teams are divided up? One of our most basic needs is the need to belong.

What gives me the deepest meaning in my life isn't what belongs to me, but that I belong. I belong to a family. I belong to the Church. I belong to Jesus Christ.

There's a contemporary song that talks about this.

I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God-
I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by His blood!
Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod,
For I'm part of the family, the family of God.

From the door of an orphanage to the house of the King-
No longer an outcast, a new song I sing;
From rags unto riches, from the weak to the strong,
I'm not worthy to be here,
But, praise God, I belong!

When we know that the deepest meaning in life comes, not from our possessions, but in knowing that we belong we're freed to be generous knowing that in plenty or in want, in joy or in sorrow, in sickness or in health, we belong, body and soul, to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all our sins.

Think about that when you place your money in the offering plate this morning. Think about it next week when it comes time to make your pledge to the work of Christ through this church.