

What Shall I Render Unto the LORD?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on October 25, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Psalm 116:12-14

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

He was close to death. Friends and family gathered around his bed to pay their last respects. He had the look of a man distressed and anguished. "What's he trying to say?" someone asked. His wife leaned over him to listen. "O Lord, I pray, save my life." Over and over with labored breathing he prayed, "Save me, Lord. Please, save me." The sun set and many of his friends left. Near dawn, however, his breathing became more peaceful. He slept and, hours later, awoke. In a few days he was sitting up and eating and laughing with his friends. When anyone came to his bedside he'd say, "The Lord is gracious and merciful. When I was brought low, he saved me." Eventually he fully recovered. "What shall I render unto the LORD ~~for~~ all his benefits to me?" he asked. I know what I'll do, "I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people." A vow is a solemn, voluntary commitment. So the recovered man went up to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill his vow. He sacrificed a cow at great personal expense. Besides his friends and family he invited widows, orphans, and the poor to share in the feast that followed. And while they were all eating he stood up "in the presence of all God's people" and testified to how God had helped him when he'd been brought low.

But what shall we, today, render unto the LORD for all his benefits to us. Many Christians simply don't know how to answer that question. A minister that fails to help church members answer is as derelict in duty as one who fails to talk about the cross of Christ. I, therefore, want to tell you how I answer that question.

What shall I render to the Lord? I will make an ~~annual~~ vow or pledge to the Lord's work through the church. My effective salary for 1992 is \$35,341. That includes my salary, utilities, and manse allowance. I use this money to pay Social Security, federal, state, and local taxes, mortgage, personal use car payments, utilities, home improvements, clothing, food, savings, life insurance, and entertainment. When I get paid on the 15th and 30th of each month I immediately write out a check to the church for \$135; that's \$270 a month or \$3,240 a year. That doesn't include my pledge to the building fund or contributions I make to other charities. *This is part of the vow or pledge I make in response to all the benefits God has given me.*

I tell you this for two reasons:

First, I want to give you a specific guideline as to one way you can answer the question of the Psalmist, "What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?" I have bills just like you do. I have a mortgage to pay. I have car payments. I have grocery bills. I have clothes to buy. I have medical bills to pay which aren't covered by health insurance. I'd like to save up a little for college for my boys. I like to have a little extra money. I like to take my wife out to dinner every once in a while and buy her a piece of jewelry from time to time. Having the same kind of wants and needs you have, a tenth of my income is the guideline I use when I make my pledge. I believe it's a biblical guideline.

But, secondly, I've told you my pledge because I want you to know that I'm committed to the ministry of this church. God called me to this church. I want to give it everything I've got. I care about you. I care about your families. I care about this town and about the ministry of our church around the world. And that caring costs. I

need you to share the cost. I want you to be as committed to the ministry of this church as I am and I know that many of you already are.

Now I need to make one thing clear. We aren't saved by giving money to the church. The only way anyone is saved is through Christ. Salvation is a free gift. Therefore the first thing we need to do, before we pledge is to receive that free gift of salvation. The Psalmist wrote, "I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord." The cup of salvation reminds us of Holy Communion. Jesus said, "This cup is my blood poured out for the remission of sins." That cup reminds us that we're saved in spite of our sins by the blood of Christ. So the first thing we do in response to God's grace in Jesus Christ is to take the cup of salvation. Receive and trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior!

Why, then, pledge anything if what we give doesn't contribute to our salvation? We give out of gratitude. We don't give in order to get. We give because we've already gotten so much. What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits? Right off the top of my head I can think of four benefits.

Benefit one: In life and in death, we belong to Jesus. We belong! It's a terrible thing to feel that you don't belong. But it's a wonderful thing to belong. We belong to Christ. When we consider who we are isn't it wonderful that Christ would want us? What shall I render unto the Lord for that benefit?

Benefit two: Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. God won't abandon us. God won't necessarily reward us financially, or heal all our illnesses, but "I will never leave you or forsake you", Jesus said. What shall I render to the Lord for that benefit?

Benefit three: God has blessed me, personally, with so much more than salvation. My parents only went to fifth grade, but I had the opportunity to go to college. My parents raised three kids during the great depression in a home without plumbing but I've always had a nice home. I have a faithful, loving, and multi-talented wife and three healthy children. I've been so blessed. What shall I render unto the Lord for these benefits?

Benefit four: I belong to a family of faith that will support me if I suffer economic disaster. In 1955 my father was hit by a taxi-cab in Philadelphia three years before he was due for retirement. His leg was broken in several places. Months went by before he began to receive disability payments and health care benefits. The bills piled up. No money was coming in. But the family of faith supported us. When we're involved in the life of the church the family of faith supports us when we're down and out. What shall I render unto the Lord for that benefit?

But in addition to these benefits, I have other reasons for giving to the Lord's work through the church.

Reason one: I pledge because I was taught to give to the Lord's work from an early age by parents, Sunday school teachers, and ministers. I can remember the pleasure I saw in my father's face when he placed his offering in the plate. My father wasn't a rich man but he felt rich when he gave away money. We need to teach our children from an early age not to be selfish and the best way to do that is through example.

Reasons two: I pledge because I want Jesus Christ and his kingdom to come first in the area of money and possessions. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God", Jesus said.

Reason three: I pledge because money and possessions exercise a powerful attraction for me and could easily become my God. Money and possessions are good in themselves. I like money and possessions. I would like to have more of both. But I know that money is like a drug. We become addicted to it. Our wants become needs and, like a junkie, we demand more and more to satisfy our increasing desires. It becomes our God. I give to the Lord's work as an expression of my refusal to let money become my God. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth."

Reason four: I pledge because what I give to the Lord's work has lasting value. So much of what I spend my money on has no lasting value but the mission hospital I help to build with my offering will be here long after I'm gone. The child who gets that Bible that my giving helps to buy may one day become a Christian teacher, lawyer, factory worker or farmer whom God will continue to use long after I'm gone. What I give to the Lord's work has lasting value.

Reason five: I pledge because Christ commanded us to take the Gospel into all the world. I want to be a part of a church for whom mission giving beyond the local church is a priority. I was raised on missionary biographies. Missionaries were my heroes; David Livingstone, William Carey, Nate Saint and Jim Elliot. We had missionary speakers several times a year in our church. We gave them the kind of welcome that's usually reserved for war heroes. They'd show their slides and talk about what Christ was doing around the world. We had maps in the narthex with colored pins indicating where our missionaries were. We prayed for them regularly by name in the worship service. One of the happiest moments in the life of my church was when one of our own

members was called to Peru as a Presbyterian missionary. I give because I want to see our church's commitment to world missions grow.

Reason six: I give because the church is the most cost efficient organization for ministering to those in need. I don't mind paying local, state and federal taxes. Some of that money provides services and eventually gets to needy people. But I know the church does it better and cheaper. And the church ministers not just to the physical needs of lost and needy men and women. The church proclaims the good news that we're loved and accepted and valuable to God. I give because the needs around us are so great and the church is the most cost efficient organization to minister to the whole needs of the whole person.

So I've told you what I give and why I give.

I'm by no means a rich man. I'm an ordinary person like you. I certainly can't write out a check for \$100,000 to local and world missions. But over a period of forty years I believe I can easily give \$150,000 to the work of Christ through my tithes and offerings. An ordinary person, through systematic, regular, sacrificial giving, can do something great for Jesus Christ.

We can make a difference through our service and through our giving. Giving money is not a substitute for other Christian obligations such as weekly worship and volunteering your time. But your annual pledge is an important part of your total response to God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Before you fill out your pledge card, please look to the God we know in Jesus Christ for guidance with this prayer, or one of your own:

"Lord, grant us a vision of the needs of the work of Jesus Christ through this Church. Then give us the guidance to meet these needs. Amen."