

We are Stewards, not Owners

A sermon preached by Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Stewardship Sunday, the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, November 2, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 1:10-20; Psalm 24; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 13:44-46.

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

On this stewardship Sunday I have good news and bad news. *First, the good news.* Last Sunday Cheryl Eckman pointed out that our Sunday School is growing. So many young children have been coming that we've had to divide some classes. Last Sunday, during Joys and Concerns, Dick Fowler spoke of the enthusiastic youth group that met in Nottingham Park, and then, afterwards, at their home. We've made progress on the renovations of our church. We have our building open to scouts, senior citizens, exercisers, moms with babies, pre-schoolers and more! And what is particularly significant on this Stewardship Sunday is the fact ~~that our giving has surpassed the budget so far this year.~~

But there's also bad news. At our last Session meeting we read statistics showing that we're one of the largest congregations in Donegal presbytery but our mission giving is among the lowest. That concerns me. Mission is the life-blood of the church. We exist to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ, not only here at home, but across the nation and world. We have an opportunity to change that this year.

I read somewhere that the official poverty level in the US for a family of four is a little over \$11,000. I was thinking of what would happen to our local and mission giving if every family in this church lived on the poverty level of \$11,000 and tithed. Now we've got about 250 families in our church, over 500 members. A tithe of \$11,000, would be about \$22.00 a week. If every family were living on the poverty level and we were all to tithe we'd have a budget of over \$275,000.

I know it's pretty hard to start tithing as an adult unless you have an intentional plan to increase the percentage you give. For example, if you're now giving \$1 a week, increase it to \$1.50. If you're contributing \$10 a week, try raising it to \$12. Sit down and write out your yearly salary and wages 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.

Now let's look at this good and bad news in the light of our Scripture lessons. I want to spell out three principles of stewardship which, if understood and believed by all of us, would motivate us as Christians to increase our mission giving, and meet all our needs here at home.

Principle one: We're not owners, but stewards. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, the world and all that dwell therein." I once heard a story I've never forgotten. A little boy made a wooden boat for himself. He carefully cut out the hull, a keel, and a cabin. He drilled a little hole in the hull for the mast and cut a piece of cloth to make the sail. He sanded it smooth and painted it a shiney red and yellow. He was really proud of it. He took it down to the stream to float it, but one day the boat drifted away and got lost. The boy went home sad that day without his boat. A few weeks later there was a garage sale down the street. And as he looked at the different items for sale he spotted his red and yellow boat among them. It was dirty and the paint was chipped, but he knew it was his. Somebody had found his boat and wanted to sell it. He just had to have his boat back so he dug into his pocket and paid for the boat that already belonged to him. Then he said to the boat, "I made you, and now I've bought you. Now you're twice mine."

That's what God says to us. He made us good, but we got away from him. We were lost. Then Jesus came and found us and bought us back. We already belonged to him because he made us, but because he loved us he bought us back at the cost of his own blood. We doubly belong to God. All that we have belongs to him. We don't own anything. We're merely God's stewards. That should put a new perspective on our giving.

Principle two: God doesn't want us to give our money unless we give ourselves to him. 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 our souls and bodies as well.

Last Spring Florence Brown invited me over to a special program with the pre-school. One of the things we did just for the fun of it was dance the hokey-pokey. I jumped in with the pre-schoolers and we had a good time. Have you ever danced the hokey-pokey? This is how it goes. You get in a big circle and then "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. Sometimes people try. They try to do their homework and watch TV. It's not usually a success. Sometimes they try to eat and talk. That's a mess. You can't really put a part of yourself into anything and do a good job- at least not when it comes to our service to God. If our lives are going to be transformed we've got to present our whole selves as a living sacrifice to God.

So I want to urge you to do something really radical as you think about

signing your pledge card. I'm urging 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." Let me repeat. Don't give *any* money to the church until you give yourself to Christ. You can't bribe God. You can't tip God. You can't pay God conscience money. God hates that kind of stuff. God doesn't want your money unless you give yourself to him.

Principle three: Jesus is the Pearl of great price. All of us are merchants seeking for happiness, for security, for fame, for eternal life. So often we try to find what we're looking for in our possessions. And so often *our possessions become a curse to us.* A fellow was riding in an airplane. He looked across the aisle and there was a beautiful woman. She had a huge diamond on her finger. He was really interested in gems. He slid across the aisle and spoke to her. "I couldn't help noticing your diamond," he said. "Tell me- it's so large- is it famous?" She said, "Yes, it's a Klopman diamond." He said, "A Klopman diamond? Can you tell me something about it?" She said, "Yes, it has a curse with it." Now he was really fascinated. He said, "What's the curse?" She said, "My husband, Mr. Klopman." So often our possessions carry a curse with them. They become the source of worry and anxiety. We become possessed by our possessions.

But what we're really looking for in life can't be found in possessions. It can be found only in Jesus, the Messiah. He has happiness, joy, peace, healing, security, eternal life, status, power, everything. So we say, "I want this pearl. How much is it?"

"Well," the seller says, "it's very expensive."

"But how much?" we ask.

"Well, a very large amount."

"Do you think I could buy it."

"Oh, of course. Everybody can buy it."

"But didn't you say it was expensive?"

"Yes. Very expensive."

"Well, how much is it?"

"It will cost you everything you have," says the seller.

We make up our minds. "All right, I'll buy it," we say.

"Well, what do you have?" he wants to know. "Let's write it down."

"Well, let me see, I have ten thousand dollars in the bank."

"Good- ten thousand dollars. What else?"

"That's all. That's all I have."

"Nothing more?"

"Well, I have a few dollars here in my pocket."

"How much?"

We start digging. "Well, let's see- thirty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred, a hundred twenty dollars."

"That's fine. What else do you have?"

"Well, nothing. That's all."

"Where do you live?" The seller is still probing.

"In my house. Yes, I have a house."

"The house too, then." He writes that down.

"You mean I have to live in my camper?"

"You have a camper? That too. What else?"

"I'll have to sleep in my car!"

"You have a car?"

"Two of them."

"Both become mine, both cars. What else?"

"Well, you already have my money, my house, my camper, my cars. What more do you want?"

"Do you have a family?"

"Yes, I have a wife and three kids."

"I want your wife and kids too. What else?"

"My wife and kids? If you take them I'll have *nothing* left! I'll be left all alone."

Suddenly the seller exclaims, "Oh, I almost forgot! *You*, yourself too! Everything becomes mine- wife, kids, house, money, cars- and you too."

Then he goes on. "Now listen- I'll allow you to use all these things for the time being. I want you to be my steward. But don't forget that they're all mine, just as you, yourself, are. And whenever I need any of them, you must give them up, because now I'm the owner." That's how it is when we discover that Jesus is the Pearl of great value and we come under the ownership of Jesus Christ.

Maybe you've already received a pledge card. Maybe you've already filled it out and plan to put it in the collection plate this morning. Don't put it in. Think about what God has been saying to you. Don't sign the pledge card until you've thought all this through and thoroughly prayed about it. Don't sign anything at all until you realize-

- that you and all you have belongs to God;
- that God doesn't want just your money. He wants all of you;
- that Jesus is the Pearl of great price, more valuable to have than anything else in the world. In him we find all that we're looking for in this world.