

"Where Do We Place Our Trust?" 2015
2 Samuel 24:18-24 Mark 12:38-44

Kathy and I had a fairly large yard back in North Carolina,
especially when I had to mow the lawn more than once a week,
but still I resisted the urge to buy a riding lawn mower.
In fact, when someone offered me their old riding lawn mower,
I turned them down and preferred my old push-style lawn mower.

So why not a riding lawnmower?

Because mowing the lawn was my solitary and undisturbed time,
that allowed me time to think, plan, pray, even meditate,
and all that walking and pushing a lawn-mower
provided much needed exercise, good for my health.

I was way better off putting something more into mowing the lawn.

Or suppose you decided to join a gym or health club.
It would be a pointless unless you actually went regularly,
and did exercise involving some sweat & heavy breathing...
... for it only works to your benefit if you put something into it.

In the Second Samuel passage,
David was commanded to construct an alter and offer a sacrifice
at the threshing floor that belonged to Araunah the Jebusite.

When Araunah saw King David coming and heard what he wanted,
he offered the threshing floor to David as gift. vs. 22-23
Then Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to
him; here are the oxen for the burnt offering, and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen
for the wood. All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king."

David recognized that it was not about the threshing floor,
but that God wanted David to submit in obedience,
and for David to offer up that sacrifice himself. vs. 24

But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy them from you for a price; I will not offer burnt
offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing."

**I will not make an offering to the Lord that cost me nothing.
If I am not making some sacrifice, it's not really an offering.**

Since we will be presenting our stewardship pledge cards today
David's perspective is a helpful notion for our consideration...
**... because, when we think about God's blessings, our stewardship,
and our offerings to the church, it is so easy to miss the point.**

I want to be very clear that when we give an offering or make a pledge
it is absolutely not a duty or trying to earn something from God.

God's love, God's grace, mercy, favor, and abundant blessings, all of these things the Lord has freely given
us in abundance, and there is nothing that we can do or not do that ever changes any of that and even if we
don't do a thing or ever give an offering, even that won't cause the Lord to love us any less.

Last week you should have received a stewardship letter,
along with a pledge card to help with planning the budget.

In fact, our stewardship is not about the amount we give,
but rather, it's how the amount we give
effects our lives, our wealth, purchases and pleasure...
... as it reflects the authenticity of our trust and commitment.

Last July, Warren Buffett was all over the news again
when he donated 2.8 billion dollars to several charities,
to some non-profit agencies that deal with world hunger.

Such huge contributions always capture the world's attention
because we are very impressed by the largest contributions,
assuming that more is better, and a lot more is a lot better.

But in Mark's gospel,
Jesus challenges this world's understanding of value and worth.

The kingdom of God has a different measure of value and worth
as Jesus illustrates when he and the disciples
are at the Temple in Jerusalem watching as people
are contributing their money into the treasury.

We know from archeology and biblical historians that
there was in a large courtyard area near the temple entrance,
where along one wall there were 13 curled brass receptacles
that looked like metal ram's horns, called "shofars".

When people dropped their coins into them,
they banged and clanged going down these trumpet-like spouts;
so that everyone nearby could hear their offering,
with the sound indicating the amount they had given.

vs. 41-44

He (Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

** Apparently,
Jesus did not understand the basic arithmetic of fundraising...

... for the widow's pitiful offering was an insignificant amount;
far too little for anyone even to bother take notice...
... surely not enough
to make any difference in the Temple operations budget.

** **So in what sense had she given more than all the others?**

Jesus explains it in vs. 44b

for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

His point was one of contrast, that even after
the wealthier folks had made their more substantial offerings
they would still continue to be very wealthy people,
for they were giving from their surplus and excess
in amounts that would hardly be missed at all.

Warren Buffett's net worth still exceeds 30 billion dollars,
so what did his donation actually cost him,
and how did it make any real difference in his life?
But the tiny and insignificant offering made by this poor widow
was an offering of trust, her total self, a sacrificial gift,
for she gave all that she had - all she had to live on.

She was holding back nothing in reserve,
but totally trusting God to provide what she needed...
... so her gift was given at great personal sacrifice and risk.

The widow's sacrifice that seems so extravagant and over the top
points to the sacrifice Jesus will make in just a few days,
the extravagant gift of God's love, mercy and grace to us.

While the crowd was impressed by the amount of the larger gifts,
Jesus is impressed by the amount of this one impoverished giver,
which reveals something of how God views true worth and value.

It's not the amount given, but **it's the cost to the giver
as an expression of the giver's gratitude and trust toward God...**
... just as David recognized and declared in 2nd Samuel, vs. 24
"I will not make an offering to the Lord that costs me nothing."

Buffett's 2.8 billion dollar gift got lots of public recognition.
But God is more impressed and pleased by those who quietly
and consistently give offerings though smaller in amount,
yet whose delight
is to give more than they can easily afford.

It's not that Jesus wants us all to give all we have to live on,
**... but at the same time, if there is no sacrifice on our part,
then our offering may be quite a bit less than we think.**

When I was a young boy, on the way to Sunday School each week,
Dad would give me a dime to drop into the offering plate,
and the offering was a fairly meaningless gesture to me.

Later, when I earned my own money shoveling neighbors' driveways
my offering became a joyful and meaningful part of worship,
an expression of commitment that helped me grow in my faith...
... for my offering was a making choice not to buy something I wanted.

You see, I needed for my offering to come at a personal cost,
to give of my own resources, to have some a sacrificial aspect...
... and I needed to make that choice to give at a cost to me.

The question is, is there any real self-sacrifice involved?

And, can I point to anything that I am willing to forgo,
so that I can give that money, that time, that talent? ...

... for if my giving is simply a little excess from my surplus,
if there is no effort, no creativity, or sacrifice on my part,
then I am shorting the benefit that might have accrued,
I will miss the blessing that might have been mine.

What matters has to do with making a sacrifice,
some pleasure or desire, something we might have purchased,
except that we chose to respond more generously to God...
... for it's not the amount or size of my offering,
but the seriousness of my commitment, it's impact on my life.
Stewardship is not just putting money into an offering plate,
but includes everything about us, do we trust God to provide,
it's who we are, what we do and the attitudes by which we live.

* My pledge is an opportunity to refresh and renew that commitment,
and to self-examine, to see **if my life is in synch with my faith.**

As we consider our own trust, commitment and stewardship today
our own situation in terms of our money, time and talents,
it's not about trying to fill every church volunteer position
- it's not about trying to balance the church budget,
however much I would like to see those things happen.

But knowing that God has something far and more wonderful in mind,
let me suggest these seven goals – 7 things we can all do,
that I have found to represent faithful discipleship,
a lifestyle of sacrificial stewardship in response
to our Lord who loves and blesses us so freely.

1st - worship weekly

to participate regularly in a worshipping faith-community

2nd - pray daily

set aside some quiet time every day, to pray and listen to God

3rd - study Scripture

turn off the TV and learn by reading the Bible,
or Christian biographies, church history or theology

One of the great challenges of this age is biblical ignorance.
Because we don't know the truths Scripture actually teaches,
we are unable to recognize the lies & distortions of culture.

4th - life faithfully

wherever we are, whatever our situation or role in life,
let our faith, our relationship through Jesus Christ
determine behavior – all that we say and do...
... so we live a life that reflects the truth and grace of our God.

5th - give generously

don't be stingy with our time, our talents, or our money,
but find joyful ways to reflect God's abundance toward us

6th - serve creatively

what are your passions in life, the things you care most about?
let them guide your faithful service and offering to God

7- witness boldly

I know we're Presbyterians here, but still Jesus did command it

Matthew 28:19-20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, ... and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

In Ghana, a favorite and most joyful part of the worship service
is when the drums and music start, and the whole church stands
with singing, dancing, swaying and waving handkerchiefs
as with great flourish and joy they present the offering.

The whole congregation dances their way up to a big plastic washtub
to drop in whatever money they can, and even those with nothing
will with dance give themselves over to the divine joy.

You see, it's really isn't the money, certainly not the amount,
but rather, the exuberant joy of giving, participating with God.

During the final hymn, I invite those who are able to come forward
and even dance as you place your offering ,your pledge card...

**... and let that symbolize gratefully-joyfully presenting to God,
all that we have, all that we value, and all that we are.**

Yes the amount on the card will help with budget planning,
but the more important part
is that when we get up from our comfortable seats,
we are offering for God's purpose, our whole selves.

It is declaring, I trust God and want to grow deeper,
for Jesus be first in my life and because of God's grace,
I want to participate in whatever God is up to in this place.

I want to be in on
all the cool stuff that God is doing in and through this church,
and for God's Spirit and gracious love
to fill and transform my whole life and being...

... and as a part of that process,
**worship weekly, pray daily, study Scripture, live faithfully,
give generously, serve creatively and witness boldly.**