

**Can We Talk About Stewardship?
Mark 10:17-31**

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This is the time when churches are looking ahead at their budgets, and inevitably it falls on the preacher to talk about stewardship! Let me let you in on a secret. We don't like doing these sermons! I don't know anyone who gets excited about doing another stewardship sermon. I was on a call with my Preacher Camp Friends on Friday and we all agree. No one likes stewardship sermons! No one! You don't like it, we don't like it. There has to be a better way to approach this, don't you think? Surely there is a way to make stewardship fun!

I have been giving that some thought and have come up with some ways that we can do just that! I thought I'd just throw some of these ideas out. This is a transition period, a time when we can try new idea. If they don't work, then blame that crazy preacher we had in the in-between time!

Don't pre-judge! Just think about it!

Now the first plan is one that I call the "*Rah-Rah for Jesus*" plan! This plan is very simple. Rather than talk about pledge cards and tithing and sacrifice, all the church asks is that you give as much to the church as you do your favorite college team. A variation of this plan would allow you to substitute your country club dues. The advantage for most churches is an increase in revenue and for the various members it is easier, neater, and at least equal.

The second plan that I offer for your consideration is one which picks up on some of the subtleties of the "*Rah-Rah for Jesus*" plan. This plan takes away the guilt normally associated with church stewardship and treats it more like a business. It's the "*You get what you pay for plan.*" If you give \$100 to The Rams Club you get a sticker for your car, and can buy some season tickets, but you don't get to park near the stadium. So why is it that people think they can just come in to church and get all the benefits everyone else gets. This plan lets you choose the services that you would like.

Level one is our Fun Membership. It comes for a price of \$20 a week. For that small fee, your family gets the opportunity to participate in all the enjoyable activities offered by our church. Now that might just be a band concert, or dinner. Now this means that you have the right to participate in these but if there is a fee involved you still get to pay. But you know what you are getting. We won't bother you with requests to teach Sunday School or keep the nursery. We won't clutter up your mailbox with mailings like the newsletter. At this level, if it's not fun, we won't bother.

Now the second level is what we call the *Friends and Family Level*. At this level you get all the benefits of the Fun Membership, but you also have the opportunity to enroll your children in educational opportunities. They can attend Sunday School, Youth Programs, choir, and special events. Later we might offer you the opportunity to enroll in a special

class, be a part of the band. We would invite you to fellowship times, because we want you to feel like you are a part. If you are sick, your friends will pray for you. All this is available to you for a donation of only \$50 a week.

Maybe that isn't enough for you. You want to be a member. Well, for \$3,000 you can be! Yes it is a bit more costly, but with this level of membership you have clout, you have power, you have a vote. For that fee, not only do you get power, but you get the trappings as well. You can reserve a seat in church. You can serve on powerful committees. If you are sick, we will not only pray, but we will come and visit. We will also do weddings and funerals for free. (Otherwise these must be scheduled at least 3 months in advance. Payment for services are due at time services are rendered. This is a business remember!)

Now the final level is the one which reclaims some of the real purpose, and so we call that the Christian level. In this level you receive all the benefits of our other plans, a reserved parking place in the shade or close in, plus the knowledge that you are following the biblical witness. In this plan, you give 10% of your yearly income, documented by last years 1040. For some people, this plan might be a savings over other plans offered. We recommend that you check with your accountant and read the prospectus before making any moves.

Now for many that is too harsh, too business like, too "not fun." After all, too many of us worry about money all week long. On weekends we want to have fun. Putting levels on giving will turn people off. Especially right now. We need a program that will draw people into the church. Well, do I have the plan for you.

You know the excitement and anticipation last night when the Powerball lottery went over \$1.6 Billion? We are going to bring that to worship! It is our *"Lord's Lottery Sure Fire Stewardship Program."*

Not it won't be billions of dollars, and it will take some adjustment. We will move the offering to the end of the service so the excitement will just grow! People will start looking forward to the offering! How will it work?

1. When the ushers bring the offering plates to the altar they will place all the offering envelopes in a big round tumbler.
2. We will have one of our children comes to the front, she will step forward and draw out one of the offering envelopes from the big round tumbler on the altar.
3. The 'winner' (person or family whose offering envelope is drawn) will receive **DOUBLE THEIR MONEY BACK!!**

Just think of the benefits: Fee-nominal!! Listed below are some of the outstanding benefits/blessings from this plan.

1. More and more members will begin using offering envelopes.
2. When you make the offering envelopes available only to members you will be astounded at how your membership will grow.

3. Members will naturally put in more money because they know that if their envelope is drawn they will get more back (never underestimate the intelligence of your members).
4. Our worship service will reach new heights of excitement. You can imagine the excitement and drama each Sunday as the winning envelope is drawn.
5. Our finance committee will never again have to worry about buying those expensive offering envelope boxes. When this new program catches on members will be more than willing to buy their own. You will also discover that many will buy more than one set of envelopes. I call this the 'bingo syndrome.'
6. On a personal level, I will no longer have to work quite so hard on my sermons as that will no longer be the 'main event.'

So which plan do you prefer? The "Rah Rah for Jesus Plan;" the "You Get What You Pay For Plan;" the Lord's Sure Fire Lottery Plan"? Which one? All of these are guaranteed to raise more money, and after all, that is what stewardship is all about isn't it? Raising more money? We dread a stewardship sermon the way we dread a telemarketing call at supper time. And can we talk about your car warranty? It is only about money. Or is it?

My mentor/boss/friend Hardy Clemons always reminded us, "*Stewardship is not the church's way of raising money; it is God's way of raising children.*" Our scripture this morning is the story of Jesus calling a man not to give up, but to grow up. Jesus was heading to Jerusalem. This man runs up to Jesus and asks what he has to do to inherit eternal life. Inherit, not buy. He realized that eternal life is grace. It cannot be bought, only given. You don't earn an inheritance by good works. It is given to you. It says more about the giver than the receiver. And Jesus quickly reminds this individual that God had already made known who would receive eternal life. "*Don't kill, commit adultery, steal, or lie. Don't defraud others, honor your father and mother.*" And quickly the man states that he has done all this. But something is missing. He realizes it, and so does Jesus.

And the scripture says, Jesus looked at him and loved him. The only other people that the scripture says Jesus loved were Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Why did Jesus love this man? Was it something in his eyes? Was it how close he was to the Kingdom of God? We don't know, but he was close. Only one more step.

"Go, sell what you have, give it to the poor, and come, follow me." And the man walked away, grieving, because he had many possessions. Was the grief over what he could not have, or what he could not give up?

I will confess to you that this is the most troublesome passage of scripture for me. When I see this young man come to Jesus, I see the reflection of my face. I hear him ask the question that I want to ask. I am haunted by Jesus' words. It is this scripture that sneaks into my dreams. It is this scripture that I continually wrestle with. It is this scripture that I constantly hold up and ask, "What does this mean for me?" What does it mean for you?

Jesus was asking this man to move beyond the fixed boundaries of his things. Leave your stocks alone and quit watching CNBC. Instead, sell it. All of it. The house, the car, the insurance policies, the jewelry, the artwork. Divest yourself. And give it away. This isn't

good economics. This isn't even bad economics. Jesus didn't say "Buy high and sell low." He says, give it away. Will you do that? Will you sell it all and give it to the poor?

Neither could the man in the story.

But then, we try to rationalize the story. "That command was only to that one individual." That does not pertain to me. We live by grace now and are no longer bound by the law. Jesus wasn't making that a requirement. And on and on we go. Trying to dodge the story. Trying to get out of Jesus gaze as he turns to the disciples, as he turns to us.

And he says, You missed the whole point. It isn't about buying your way into heaven. It isn't about raising money. It is about growing and realizing what is important. Jesus didn't give a command. He offered an invitation. Go sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me. Jesus didn't invite everyone to come with him. Some he commanded to stay, but this one, this one, Jesus loved, and invited him to come along for the journey. It was a hard invitation, but it was going to be a hard journey. If you can't give up your stuff, how will you carry a cross?

The fact of the matter is that for many of us, our stuff, our wealth, becomes our prison. As Tony Campolo says too often we lives of conspicuous consumption where we spend money we don't have to buy things that we don't need to impress people we don't like. We pile it up all around us. It occupies our time, our energy, our lives. To give up any of it is to lose a part of ourselves. And that is what Jesus is asking. Give it up, and receive.

This is not a commandment. It is an invitation. It is an invitation to grow, for when you give away you are forced to take a look at your priorities, at what is really important in your life, at where you are investing your life. Is in yourself, or in the kingdom of God?

It is an invitation to discipleship, for Jesus is inviting us on a journey of faith. What do you depend on, what do you base your life on if everything is gone?

It is an invitation to life and love. Come and follow me, and have life that is deep and rich and meaningful. It is a party.

If stewardship is about raising money, let's adopt a plan that will raise money. If it is about discipleship, about raising children, let us give until it makes us happy.

What plan do you prefer?