

“Is It Worth the Sacrifice?”

Do you ever “people watch”? A lot of times at the mall you will see men sitting on the seats in the mall area while their spouse is shopping. It’s easy to people watch at that time. People come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. People watching takes place in the church too! I’ve heard some people admit that’s why they like to sit in the back!

Jesus apparently “people watched”. One day He was in the temple. In the Court of the Women there were 13 collection holders called “The Trumpets”. They were named this because they were shaped like a trumpet – the narrow part at was at the top and it was broad at the bottom.

Each of these 13 collection containers was for a special purpose. People would use these to make contributions for the daily sacrifices and expenses of temple: for instance, for the incense used, or for the wood burned for sacrifices, or the upkeep of the gold vessels, etc. Jesus sat there and watched what people gave. (Imagine a pastor doing that today!). Luke 21:1 says this: “He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury.” Some put in a lot of money. The first century Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that some Pharisees (religious leaders) actually had someone blow a trumpet, then they deposited their bag of gold into the offering containers with great fanfare! I once heard of a man who got up in a meeting where they were taking pledges for a certain cause and said, “I want to give \$100 *anonymously*.”

As Jesus is watching people give, a widow comes by, and quietly puts in 2 coins. The Greek word for the coin is “lepton”, which meant “thin one”. It was the smallest Jewish coin in circulation. It would be like a penny today. Jesus response? “He said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 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’” (Luke 21:3-4).

In this simple event, Jesus defined how and how much we are to give. It isn’t the *amount*. Some of us could easily write out a check for \$5,000 and never blink an eye. Others of us may not have \$5,000 to our name. So what determines the value of our gift, according to Jesus in this story? I believe it is this: *Does what we give represent a sacrifice?* Rich people gave large amounts, out of their wealth. But this lady was a widow. Widows then did not have pensions or Social Security income. They often lived on the edge of survival. And these 2 copper coins represented all she had to live on!

I want to talk about giving to the Lord today. The ancient Israelites gave to support their religious structure and help the needy. First century Christians gave to the needy and to the missionary outreach of the church. Today, churches and ministries depend on the giving of God’s people. People in the church often ask: How much does God expect me to give? God is not silent on subject!

Much of what the Bible says about giving is centered around the tithe – 10% of one’s income. People in the Old Testament times were *commanded* to tithe. Leviticus 27:30 says: “All the tithes of the land, of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord’s; it is holy to the Lord.”

Actually, Hebrews gave more than just the tithe. There were other offerings. There are 5 categories of offerings in the Old Testament: (1) burnt offerings, (2) grain offerings, (3) peace offerings, (4) sin offerings, and (5) trespass offerings. So, giving didn't stop with the tithe, or 10%. Tithing is not a legalistic thing, where one can say, "Well, I'm up to 10% now, so I'll stop and use the rest of my money as I please." *Everything* we have belongs to God. Our entire self and all we have should be dedicated to God. The Israelites had a beautiful way to symbolize this. They would offer "first fruits", or the first part of the harvest, which symbolized that all the rest belonged to God too.

In the first century, the churches of Macedonia became a model and example of this kind of sacrificial, total commitment giving. 2 Corinthians 8:1-4 describes these churches: "We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints." Notice, they *begged* Paul for a chance to give! Notice also in the next verse, it says "they gave themselves first to the Lord".

I think Jesus' comments about the widow's giving is telling us that real giving always represents a sacrifice. How much of what we give to the Lord represents a sacrifice? Really? In our weekly giving to the church are we really stretching ourselves to the point that it is a sacrifice for us? Does it hurt a bit to give what we give?

When is the last time we denied ourselves something so we could give more to the Lord? In the one church I served we had a Capital Fund Drive to raise money for a new church building. I will always remember the man in the church who headed this campaign. He made a decision not to buy the new car that he had planned to buy, so that he would have money to give to the fund drive. He delayed buying his new Buick a few years to free up that money.

At the time, Nancy and I had 2 children in college. I had taken a pay cut when I went to that church, and we were not in a good financial situation. What should I do? As the church's pastor, I felt I needed to lead the congregation by setting an example of sacrificial giving. One of the church leaders was understanding, and said not to worry about giving anything. But I knew I had to do something. I was doing some counseling part time with a counseling service, so I decided that whatever income I had from counseling would all be given to the church's capital fund drive. Our family could have used the extra income, but I decided to give it away. My gift was not nearly as much as my friend who delayed his purchase of a new car, but we both gave in a way that represented some kind of sacrifice.

The widow is a model for sacrificial giving. She saved all she had to live on. One of the more recent studies done on Christian giving indicates that "Christians" give 2.5% of their income to the church. Now of course, our giving to the Lord is not just limited to what we give to the church. But 2.5%! The Barna organization reported in 2012 that of those people who claim to be "born again", only 12% tithe.

You know where you stand. We know in our hearts whether our giving is a sacrifice, or if we are just skimming off the top.

Here are a couple of things to consider. First, ***our dollars don't go any further in the church than they do outside of the church.*** How much does it cost to have a meal for two at Olive Garden or Applebees? \$20-\$30 with the tip? How much for a show at American Music Theater? Or a trip to Hersheypark? How much do we spend on a pair of shoes that we probably don't need? Or clothes that we could do without?

Some people when they give money to the church think it goes as far as it did in 1960 or 1980. Back in 1971 Nancy and I bought a new Oldsmobile Cutlass. Guess how much it cost? \$4800. At the time I thought, "My heavens, it costs almost \$5,000 for a new car!" How much does a new car or truck cost today? Some people have that 1960's or 1980's mindset when they pluck a dollar or two into an offering plate. But how far will \$5 go if we eat out? How far will \$5.00 go if we stop at McDonald's? (Nancy and I the other week stopped at McDonalds and got an Egg McMuffin and a Sausage McMuffin. It cost like \$7.50). So, it's good to remind ourselves that our dollars don't go any further when we give it to the church than when we spend it on other things outside of church.

Also it is good to remember this: Giving to the work of the Lord (through the church and other ministries and charities) is a smart investment. Money we spend on a good meal – how long does that last? With me, a couple of hours – then I'm hungry again. Money we spend on entertainment or things we don't need may bring a smile and enjoyment for a little while, but it probably has no eternal significance. What we give to God is a wise investment, if it helps to get the message of Jesus into the minds and hearts of people. If our giving helps to relieve human suffering and provide for those who truly need our help, it's a smart investment of our money.

Jesus was in the temple on day and watched what people were giving. He said a widow who gave 2 small coins – all she had – gave more than the wealthy who gave out of their abundance.

The spirit in which we give, and the sacrifice it represents is what counts. Back around the early 1990's right before Thanksgiving there was a cranberry scare. It was suspected that a toxic pesticide had tainted the cranberry crop. The company involved denied there was a problem, so there was no recall. But there was enough of a panic that people left cranberry cans unopened. A young lady tells of living in a poorer family that always got a Thanksgiving basket from their church. That year her family received, in addition to turkey and other items, 56 cans of cranberry sauce! *People gave what they didn't want themselves.*

Contrast that with a different spirit of giving. Oseola McCarty was a onetime washerwoman who earned widespread recognition after she donated her life savings to a Mississippi university. Ms. McCarty lived and worked most of her life in a small, wooden-framed house, but saved thousands of dollars she earned washing and ironing clothes for people. In July, 1995 the university announced she had willed \$150,000 of her life's savings to Southern Mississippi to provide scholarships for deserving, financially needy students. In donating the \$150,000 she said

she wanted to give others the chance to get the education she never had. She had wanted to become a nurse, but had to drop out of elementary school to care for sick relatives. *Her giving was a sacrifice. She gave all that she had.*

If you are like most congregations, I would guess there are at least a few of you who don't like me preaching about giving and tithing. I've had people get up and walk out of the service when I started my message on giving. I've had people leave the church. One lady, who worked in the church office, with whom I thought I had a good relationship, left the church because she didn't want me to preach about giving. That's sad, because the need to give to the Lord is an integral part of the message of both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus talked a lot about our relationship to material things. He even said if we are too much attached to money and material things it can keep us from entering the kingdom of God!

We need to give generously and sacrificially in order to grow in Christ. I want to challenge you, and myself, to give generously and sacrificially. And if you are not now tithing, to start that spiritual discipline. If you don't have enough faith to jump up to the 10% level all at once, increase percent of giving in smaller steps until reach at least the tithe. There used to be a bumper sticker, "Honk if you love Jesus." But I saw a different one. It said, "If you love Jesus, tithe! Any fool can honk."

Some of you may be thinking: "Harry, be realistic. I just can't give that much." I can think of at least 3 things that keep us from tithing or giving sacrificially. First, ***we just don't want to!*** It's as simple as that! We want that money for ourselves. We are perhaps not really committed to Jesus. We are not committed to kingdom of God values. Basically we need a conversion to Christ and a different way of seeing life and money and material things.

A second reason some don't tithe is ***poor money management.*** So many people today are chained to credit card debt. Or they are in debt in other ways. This indebtedness robs us of the ability to give to the Lord. The first thing needed in that case is to get out of this financial hole, and to be better managers of the money God has placed in our hands. Perhaps get financial counseling.

A third reason we may be reluctant or unwilling to tithe is ***we just don't trust God enough to provide.*** The Bible promises that if we give, God will provide our needs. We can't outgive God. A Philadelphia cab driver tells of sitting in his cab in front of a hotel, thinking and praying. This particular Sunday, business was extremely low. He was wondering where he was going to get the \$60 to pay for the daily rental of his cab. He could lose the cab, and his livelihood, if he didn't come up with the money that day. Just then, a young woman got into his cab and said, "I know it will cost \$25 for this ride, but I can only afford to pay you \$15. I work for a charity, and that's all they gave me for cab fare."

The man says he thought a minute, but then figured he would probably lose his cab anyway. Why not help someone else to have a good day? So he agreed to take her for \$15. When they reached their destination, the woman paid her \$15 fare, then reached into her purse and laid a

\$100 bill on the seat. “The \$15 was the charity’s money,” she said. “This is my own money. God told me you needed it.” With that, she left. *We can never outgive God. God will provide our needs!*

If you are a member of Community UMC within the next few days you will be getting a pastoral letter. Included in the mailing is an estimate of giving card, where you can indicate what you intend to give to this church in 2019. You can return it next week, or the next time you come to our worship service, or you can mail it to the church office.

I hope that this church and its ministry is important enough to you that you will give generously and sacrificially to the work of the Lord here.

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