

The First Commission – “Go, Sell, Give & Follow”
 Stewardship Sunday
 Malachi 3:6-12, Matthew 6:19-24, Matthew 19:16-24
 January 15, 2012

I would like you to think for a minute, who was the richest person that we read about in the Bible? Let me give you a clue, perhaps the two richest people? I would like to make the claim that the two richest people described in the Bible were Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden. They had everything they needed and they lacked anything. That is what it really means to be rich. Yet, they had no money. They had every reason to be content and yet they weren't and because of that they lost everything.

This morning is designated as “Stewardship Sunday” by Mennonite Church USA. Exactly how many of our churches look at “stewardship” on this given Sunday, I have no idea. But taking a Sunday at the beginning of the calendar year to focus on “stewardship” seems to be a very good idea.

What does “stewardship” really mean? Well, a steward is a person who has been put in charge to look after someone or something. It is the title given to a person who looks after the passengers on a ship or an airplane, thus we get the title “stewardess.” Steward was also the title given to a person who looked over a large house or estate, including the people who lived there. Interestingly, when we think of “stewardship” today, we often think of it in terms of looking after our own finances and affairs. Stewardship involves concern for others and “Christian Stewardship” is different than how most of the world looks at stewardship.

The Bible speaks more about money than just about anything else. There are about 50 references to baptism in the Bible, our topic last week, 225 references to prayer, 300 references to faith and 700 references to love? How drastic is the difference? There are about 2,500 references to money and possessions. That's the entire Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. What are the two things that the New Testament speaks most about? The two things that we have the hardest time talking about in church, money & sex. Why is that? Because they are the two things can distract us the most from our walk with God. They are the two things that tell us where our allegiance really lies.

When it comes to talking about money, there are some important biblical concepts for us to understand, like stewardship, tithing, firstfruits, thanksgiving, grace and generosity. They all go hand in hand. When we talk about money and the Bible there are also some important questions to consider, like what does God expect from us today and why do we give?

History – First, a little bit of history.

Adam and Eve were rich when they lived in the Garden of Eden, they had everything at their disposal and they lacked nothing. Adam and Eve were rich and then they lost everything and thus we have the beginning of the story of human beings and the ups and down of being rich and being poor. Most biblical historians believe that Abram, who would become Abraham, was a wealthy man when called by God. He is called to leave his fortune, his homeland, in order to

enter a new land. And for his faithfulness he is blessed, and through him all peoples will be blessed:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Genesis 12:1-3 (ESV)

Thus, very early on in the biblical story we have the purpose for God blessing the people he would call to be his own. So they can be a blessing to others. Blessings were tied with faithfulness to God, but it is very hard to draw a direct correlation between being God's people and financial blessings at any given time. Sometimes they were blessed financially because of their faithfulness and sometimes they were not. Perhaps the best example is that of Job, who was declared "blameless and upright" in the eyes of God. He went from having a large family of a wife, seven sons and three daughters, owning 7,000 sheep, 300 camels, 500 oxen, 500 donkeys, and a whole host of servants. It says, "He was the greatest man among all the people of the East" (Job 1:3). The word "Greatest" there meaning he possessed more than anyone else. And then he lost it all, only to gain it back again, and then some. So when was Job more righteous, when he had it all or when he had none? When was he more blessed?

So we have the story of blessings in the Old Testament. What can we draw from the Old Testament regarding blessings, some basic principles of blessings by God:

1. Blessings by God always pointed beyond themselves. God's people were blessed so they could be a blessing to others.
2. Material blessings by God always implied justice and concern for the poor.
3. Material blessing in the O.T. never implied ultimate ownership.

"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine (says the Lord). For you are strangers and sojourners with me." Leviticus 25:23

"The land cannot be sold permanently because the land is mine and you are foreigners - you're my tenants." Leviticus 25:23 (*The Message*)

Do you really think of the things that you own - your land, your house, your car as God's as opposed to your own?

4. Because material blessings point beyond themselves, there is no guarantee of economic prosperity for the righteous today. That is very different than what some are preaching today. Sometimes the righteous did prosper and sometimes they did not. But even in prosperity or in want, there was always to be concern for the poor and the less fortunate.

Even in his great pain and suffering, Job reminded his accusers that he had fulfilled God's commandments to care for the poor, whom he categorized as the needy, the poor, orphans, widows, the blind, the lame, and strangers (Job 29:11-18).

In the O.T. blessings received from God implied giving back. For God's people, giving back was mandatory. Not just money, but everything, even one's own children. For the blessing of receiving children, it was implied that one would give back their firstborn son, to God. From that which was produced from the land, a tenth, or a tithe was to be given back to God. A certain amount of one's land was to be reserved for the poor.

A couple very important concepts developed regarding O.T. giving:

1. The tithe - A minimum of 10% was to be given back to God.

Very early on in the Bible, the story of God's people, in Genesis 28, God reaffirmed the covenant he had made with Abraham, his son Isaac, and then his son Jacob. Jacob responds with a vow: "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you" (Genesis 28:20-22). A tenth of their income would become the Israelites expression of their commitment to God.

A second biblical concept which developed early on is that of . . .

2. Firstfruits - that which was given was supposed to be first, signifying the best. It was the "firstborn" son who was to be given back to God. It was the first and the best of the crops and the animals which were to be given back. It was by giving that which was first, that one was putting their faith and trust in God to provide. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his firstborn son, Isaac, back to God, out of faith that God would provide more children, that which He had promised. Giving our "last-fruits" takes no faith at all.

O.T. giving was mostly motivated by the law and by what one expected in return. It was the legal requirements and the sense was that if one gave to God that which was expected, they would be blessed in return. Can I say with much confidence that is what motivated them to give? Yes, because that is human nature and it did not often have very good results. Hence we get to the end of the Old Testament and we have God speaking through the prophet Malachi. Read Malachi 3:6-12.

So we get to the New Testament, and just as everything else has changed with Jesus' coming, so should our giving – both the amount and the motivation.

Our motivation should not be out of expectation for future gifts but out of gratitude for what we have already received.

Jesus tried to change the entire way His followers viewed money and material blessings.

In his *Sermon on the Mount* we have his exposition on treasures, possessions and money:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures. . . But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Matthew 6:19-24 (NIV)

Then we get the story of “The Rich Young Man” found in Matthew 19:16-30. A very challenging passage indeed. One that we often want to dismiss, “Jesus can’t be talking to me, I’m not rich.” When we do, we dismiss it with great peril.

We are all familiar with Jesus’ final commission, *“therefore go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”* (Matthew 28:16-20), which might be able to be shortened to Go, Make, Baptize, and Obey,”

Here in Matthew 19:21, we have Jesus’ first commission – *“If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me,”* which can be shortened to “Go, Sell, Give and Follow.” This commission follows the all important question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” or “what must I do to be saved?” In this encounter Jesus is making a connection between stewardship and discipleship.

While we find it difficult to talk about money in the church today, Jesus did anything but shy away from it. The question that begs a response is whether this “first commission” is an isolated case or part of a larger collection of texts? Is this instruction given by Jesus to just one man, the rich young man, or is it meant to be prescriptive of all followers? And a careful review of Scripture shows that it is most likely prescriptive of all followers/disciples of Jesus. I have included on your outline just a sampling of New Testament passages both while Jesus was here on earth and then immediately following his ascension and the story of the early church:

Audience	Teaching	Text
Young man	Go, <u>sell</u> all and give . . .	Matt. 19:21
Disciples	Man <u>sold</u> all to buy . . .field . . .pearls	Matt. 13:44-45
Disciples	<u>Sell</u> your possessions and give	Luke 12:33
Followers	Sold possessions, goods and gave	Acts 2:45
Followers	<u>Sold</u> lands and houses and gave	Acts 4:34-35
Barnabas	<u>Sold</u> a field and gave	Acts 4:36

The early church, once empowered by God’s Holy Spirit, was just following what Jesus had commanded them to do. The book of Acts provides a wonderful look into the life of the early church and is probably the best example that we have of what the church is supposed to be and look like. We get enthralled when we read about the story of the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the violent wind, tongues of fire and people speaking in numerous languages. But why do we stop there? Because the further we read we discover another supernatural act every bit as miraculous.

People sold their goods and shared with others as they had need. Not only their good and possessions, but their lands and their homes. Why was it a supernatural act?

Well I don't know about you but giving doesn't come easy for me. I'm not generous by nature. It is beyond my natural inclinations and as such is supernatural. If I wasn't concerned about being a disciple of Jesus I would not give 10% of my income to the church. It's not in me to want to do that. In fact there were a lot of years that I didn't do that, even when I attended church on a fairly regular basis and called myself a "believer." I was a "believer" but I was not a follower or a disciple of Jesus. It just wasn't in me – except for my desire to follow and I began to give out of obedience. But something followed my obedience. Blessings in ways that I find it difficult to describe. Contentment within myself, the ability to live on a lot less than I once thought, much more concern for the poor. Generosity. Generosity is evidence of the activity of the work of the Holy Spirit in one's life just as much as any of the other supernatural acts described in the New Testament – and maybe even more so.

Jesus seems to be discouraging his disciples concerning accumulating stuff. He calls on them to sell, to divest themselves of their belongings. Our current culture suggests anything but!!! How much of what we buy do we really need? How big a house? How nice a car? How biblical is it to go in debt? How much money do I need to make? And when I think about making more money, do I think about it from the perspective of what I can use for myself or do I think about it from the perspective of how much I can give to God or those who are less fortunate?

The pathway to salvation and following Jesus does not mean that all are called to sell everything they have and give to the poor. The story of Jesus and the rich man was unique to that man in that context. Hopefully that should make you feel a little better this morning. But that doesn't mean we are off the hook. All of us need to think through our use of money, our accumulation of possessions, how much debt we should incur, how much is enough, and am I giving as much as I should be giving? It's not just about the 10%, God wants to also know what we're doing with the other 90%.

Perhaps the **big** question for today? Does God still expect a tithe, 10%, from his people? And the answer is no! He probably expects more! The demands of the New Covenant have always been greater than the Old. The only thing that changes is the motivation.

O.T. giving was based on the legal requirement and what one expected in return.

N.T. giving is based on generosity and in thankfulness for what one has already received and the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.