

I. Introduction

A preacher was finishing up a sermon on the work of the Church. As he concluded, he said to the congregation, “The church has to walk the walk!” The congregation enthusiastically replied, “Yes! This church is going to walk!” Then the preacher cried out, “The church must run the race!” The congregation enthusiastically replied, “Yes! This church is going to run!” Then the preacher cried out, “This church must soar like an eagle!” The congregation enthusiastically replied, “Yes! This church is going to soar!” Then preacher said, “But it’ll take money to soar!” And the congregation replied, “This church is going to walk!”

That, unfortunately, is the attitude of some congregations – satisfied to just walk rather than soar. I believe our church is not like that because we want to make a difference for Jesus Christ. One of the ways we can make a difference is by our giving to the church. We might not think that giving money is a way of serving God, but it is.

While we don’t always like talking about money and finances, it is an appropriate topic in a church setting. The reason is that Jesus spoke often about money matters, and other parts of the Bible discuss giving and making offerings to the Lord. While the church’s needs may resonate with us as a reason to give, the real motivation should be spiritual.

II. Practical Aspects of Giving

Before talking about the spiritual aspects of giving, let me briefly discuss those practical aspects I alluded to (discussed in more detail next Sunday).

1. Local Church Is Self-Sustaining

First of all, every United Methodist Church is self-sustaining – we receive nothing from the conference or the denomination. If a church can’t make it financially, it closes – there’s no bail out. All the money we collect goes towards either paying our bills or supporting the work of the denomination.

2. Apportionments

That money we send every month for the work of the denomination, called apportionments, is about 12% of our budget. So rather than receiving money from the conference or denomination, we actually send money to support their work. It goes towards missions work, supporting the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), retired pastors’ health benefits, and various outreaches. At the conference level our apportionments pay the bishop’s and District Superintendents’ salaries and expenses, among other things.

3. We Have Obligations

Lastly, we have to pay for electric, fuel, water, sewer, snow plowing, copier paper, and other expenses. The biggest expense is personnel. Besides the pastor's salary, there are health benefits, pension, and expense reimbursements that have to be paid.

4. Cost Savings

In the interest of practicing good stewardship of what has been entrusted to us, there are things we have done in this church to save money.

- ① We eliminated a church secretary, and we don't have a music director.
- ② We use volunteers as much as possible to get things done.
- ③ We don't pay to print bulletins, dinner tickets, or fund-raiser fliers, but we make our own.
- ④ We keep the thermostats turned way down when the building is not being used, and we charge for use of the building.
- ⑤ When we needed a new furnace, we got the most efficient gas unit available to save money on fuel.
- ⑥ We are gradually converting to more energy-efficient light fixtures.

III. Spiritual Aspects of Giving

The second aspect of giving is much more important, and that is the spiritual side of the equation. As I see it, there are five principles from the spiritual perspective. These spiritual aspects can be a little difficult, especially if you weren't brought up learning these principles. I know it took me a while to get a handle on these because some of them were foreign to me. Time doesn't allow an in depth discussion, so let me summarize these spiritual aspects of giving.

1. God Owns Everything

The first principle is that God owns everything, and anything we think we own is just on loan to us. That's why the term "stewardship" is used – it means caring for something that belongs to someone else. Psalm 50:10-11 tells us that everything belongs to God:

For every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. NIV

We read Psalm 8:6-8 that God gave us responsibility for his creation – we don't own his creation but have dominion and responsibility for them:

You have given [humans] dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, what-ever passes along the paths of the seas. NRSV

Giving to God is simply returning to God some of what is already his out of love, thanksgiving, and appreciation for all that God has done for us. Remember, we're really giving to God – the church is the intermediary.

2. God Provides Everything

The second spiritual principle is not only does God own everything, but he provides everything. You might say, "Wait a minute! I work hard to earn a living. What do you mean God is the provider?" Yes, we earn a living, but it is God who gave us that job, and it is God who provides the food on our tables and the air we breathe. All the money in the world couldn't feed you if the food stopped growing. We read in Psalm 147:8-9:

[God] covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. NRSV

So we give back to God out of gratitude, remembering this from today's epistle (2 Corinthians 9:10):

For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. NLT

3. Giving Is a Statement of Faith

The third principle is that when we give to the Lord, we are making a statement of faith.

a. Give Sacrificially

This is especially true if we give out of our scarcity, which is to give sacrificially. The widow in today's Gospel gave sacrificially, trusting that God would provide for her. Jesus commended the widow's faith by saying about her: "This woman is very poor, but she gave all she had to live on." (Luke 21:4, NCV) In giving sacrificially we are simply trusting God's promises.

b. Giving by the Well-Off

If somebody is well off, it is difficult to give sacrificially because the well off are giving out of their abundance. However, such people should give especially generously because they have been especially blessed. By giving generously you are giving glory to God and acknowledging his provision to us.

c. Give First Fruits

In the Old Testament, God required that the people give to God the first of their harvest and the first of their newborn animals as a statement of faith. The equivalent of these first fruits today would be to write the first check out of your paycheck to the church.

4. God Blesses Us When We Give

The fourth principle is that God does bless us when we give. Today's epistle reminds us of that (2 Corinthians 9:8-9, NLT):

And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.

God told the Israelites in Malachi 3:10-12:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. NRSV

We shouldn't give so that we will be blessed, but because we love God and want to be a part of his work on earth. Any blessing we might receive is the icing on the cake. When talking about blessings, we mustn't get sucked into the so-called "prosperity gospel" preached by certain TV preachers. The "prosperity gospel" teaches that any blessing we receive is dependent on our generosity in giving, especially to that preacher's ministry.

In reality, most of the blessings we receive are based on God's unconditional love for us, not on our performance. Nevertheless, some blessings result from our generosity and obedience to God, done with the right attitude, of course, as we read in today's epistle:

Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. (2 Cor 9:6-7a, NLT)

5. God Commands Us to Give

The last principle is that God commands us to give, specifically a tithe, which is 10%. Leviticus 27:30 (NRSV) tells us that a tithe is to be given to the Lord:

All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the LORD's; they are holy to the LORD.

We also read in Deuteronomy 12:5b-6 (NRSV) about giving to the Lord, including the firstborn of our animals:

You shall go [to the temple], bringing there your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks.

Having said that, we have to remember that Christianity should never be considered a works-based religion, because it isn't. It is faith-based, and it is relationship-based. When we have faith in Jesus, we have a relationship with him that will last for eternity. Because of that faith and relationship, we give cheerfully and joyfully, not grudgingly or because we feel it is our duty. We should get to the point where it is a joy giving to the work of God on earth because we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Once you are there, it is a great place to be.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, every United Methodist church has the responsibility to pay its staff, contribute to health benefit and pension plans, pay its bills, and support the denomination's works thru apportionments. Ideally, the proceeds from our fund-raisers should go to missions and ministries beyond the local church, in addition to apportionments. In reality, 90% of the proceeds from our dinners go to this church so we can meet our obligations. We do tithe 10% of the proceeds to local charities within our community.

Giving back to God is a spiritual exercise in that God owns everything; all we have we owe to God's provision; giving, especially sacrificially, demonstrates our love for God and our trust in his provision; God expects his followers to give of their time, talents and treasures to God's work on earth; and we are blessed by God when we give cheerfully and generously, although that should not be the primary motivation.

As Christ's followers we have the privilege and joy of supporting God's work on earth thru his church. Let's make the most of it, to God's glory. Amen