

Dimensions of Stewardship

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Lutheran Church, Kirkland, Illinois – Pentecost XXV, November 9, 2024

I Kings 17:8-16 ESV

Then the word of the LORD came to [Elijah], “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”

So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.” And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.”

And she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.”

And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.’”

And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Mark 12:38-44 ESV

And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.

Well, in this Gospel narrative it’s been quite a week so far. On the first day of the week Jesus rides into the city on a donkey, with people crying “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Then, the next day, Jesus returns to the Temple and creates quite a disturbance, upsetting the tables of the money-changers who took the worshipers’ Roman coins, which couldn’t be used to buy sacrifices, in exchange for special Temple coins.

Usually people say Jesus did this to protest the commercialization of the place of worship, but there’s more to it. Remember the Scripture he quoted: “My house shall be called a place of prayer *for all peoples*.” Worshipers coming to Jerusalem’s Temple were not all Jews; many non-Jews in the Roman world were attracted to the one-God religion of Judaism as opposed to the prevailing many-gods religions. In fact, wasn’t that why the Lord had called Abraham in the first place – to be a blessing to *all peoples*?

So there was a place in the Temple for these non-Jews, called the Court of the Gentiles. But that’s where the money-changers had set up their business – and their booths were crowding the Gentiles out. If you read the Gospels you’ll notice the special attention Jesus gives to the Gentiles, and I think it was the way they were being squeezed out of their place in the Temple that got Jesus so riled up that he drove the

commercial traffickers out with such vehemence. “My house shall be called a place of prayer *for all peoples*.”

In fact, when we read the Gospels it’s evident that Jesus was always concerned with those who were being excluded from full participation in the community: the Gentiles, tax collectors, lepers, people with a questionable reputation, and especially the poor. We see this in today’s Gospel reading. It’s a few days after the incident in the Temple, and Passover is approaching. Jesus and his disciples are watching as worshipers come by the Temple treasury to leave their gifts. Men of obvious wealth put in large gifts, some of them no doubt making a great show of their supposed generosity. But then a poor widow approaches, and with a hesitant hand drops in two small coins, and then perhaps slips away unnoticed. But Jesus notices. “Look,” he says to his disciples, “this poor lady gave more than those bigwigs did, because she gave all she had, all she had to live on.”

I want to consider with you several dimensions of stewardship. First, when we talk about stewardship we’re usually talking about giving for the work of the Lord, and especially the work of the church and its witness. So this incident of “the widow’s mite” recorded in Mark’s Gospel is taken as a prime example of stewardship. It’s a demonstration of commitment to the Lord, a commitment so great that it calls forth a substantial sacrifice on the worshiper’s part. And, indeed, what the Lord wants from us is our loyalty, and our expression of this loyalty is worship, so it makes sense that stewardship involves supporting the place of worship. This poor widow, by offering what little she has to the Temple treasury, has become a model for Christian stewardship.

But, to be frank, if I were to give only what this poor lady gave I would be insulting God! Most of us are not poor, and our stewardship needs to go far beyond the “widow’s mite.” That’s where the concept of proportionate giving enters in: giving a certain percentage of our income, whatever it is. Many Christians have advocated tithing, or giving ten percent for the work of the Lord. There’s no consensus about that, because some say that was Old Testament law superseded in the Christian faith, while others say the principle of tithing was never canceled even though Jesus did seem to cancel the Old Testament food laws. In fact, he seemed to endorse tithing when he told the Pharisees, “For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, *without neglecting the others*” (Matthew 23:23).

But whether you tithe or not, the stewardship principle is to give generously in proportion to our financial resources. I don’t know whether I tithe, because I haven’t sat down to figure it out; I just know that when a financial need is brought to my attention I try to respond to it. As Paul states, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: . . . the one who contributes, in generosity . . .” (Romans 12:6, 8).

When preachers talk about tithing there are some things they usually fail to point out. One of the clearest statements about tithing comes from the prophet Malachi, who declares in the Lord’s name, “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house” (Malachi 3:10). The tithe was a tithe of grain, brought to a granary and used for the support of the priesthood that conducted the Temple sacrifices. But most of us are not grain farmers, and the church is not a grain bin like those huge metal structures we see on many farms. Furthermore, the Book of Deuteronomy has a very interesting comment on the tithe (14:22-26), which I can summarize like this:

You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year. And when you go to the place of worship, you can eat of it yourself—the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock. Or if the place of worship is too far away for you to transport the grain there, you can sell it and when you get to the sanctuary you can spend the money on whatever you like, and celebrate before the Lord, you and your entire household.

In other words, the tithe is not just to be given to the place of worship. You can also use it to provide for your family’s needs so they can be more enthusiastic and joyful worshipers! Now that’s something we

don't ever hear when we talk about tithing. *Stewardship is more than a euphemism for giving money to the church.* It's also providing for your family members and helping them in times of need. That's our service to the Lord as believers; the apostle Paul reminds us that "if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). This takes stewardship into another dimension, doesn't it?

And we can go even further. If we think that stewardship applies only to church and family, we would be mistaken because our stewardship is unto the Lord. And the Lord, who upholds the entire universe by his word of power (Hebrews 1:3), is concerned with our broader cultural context as well. Martin Luther is known for his doctrine of the two kingdoms, the spiritual kingdom of those who are his worshipers and the temporal kingdom of earthly authorities. But, as a writer noted in an article in the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*:

it is God Himself Who rules in both these realms. . . . To speak of either is thus to speak of a kingdom which is God's, and it is with Him that we deal in matters spiritual and temporal both. . . . The temporal is not foreign to God, and Luther does not regard it as such. To him there is nothing which is profane, and no sphere in which God is not at work." (Anders Nygren, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, August 1, 2002)

If that's the case, then shouldn't our stewardship extend into other arenas that affect people's lives for good or ill? We can give to assist those who, through no fault of their own, find themselves disadvantaged; there are many Christian organizations that have that as their mission. We can use our resources to support organizations that are upholding Christian values in our national life. We can donate to political candidates whose policies are consistent with biblical values, in contrast to candidates whose views are quite obviously opposed to the standards of the Christian faith. The Lord is concerned not just with the spiritual kingdom, but also with the secular or temporal kingdom, because he has made all things and all things are his.

And there's one final dimension of stewardship we need to talk about: the stewardship of prosperous living. Proverbs says that "the reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life" (Proverbs 22:7). The apostle Paul reminds us that "God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Paul could have been stating what we know as Isaac Newton's third law of motion: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In our lesson from 1 Kings, when the widow of Zarephath blessed the man of God with her last remaining oil and flour, they were multiplied to her.

As Proverbs 11:24 states, "One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want." Our giving opens up what we might call a "cybernetic loop," a circle of events that brings financial resources back to us. Jesus put it this way: "Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:38). Ordering our life responsibly according to this biblical principle can result in financial prosperity that expands our ability to exercise Christian stewardship.

But in fact, there's nothing wrong with being wealthy. Jesus wasn't a poor man. He was a contractor; the Greek word is *tekton*, not just a carpenter but a guy who could do all kinds of construction and maintenance. He could repair his own roof when a man was let down through it. Several women of means accompanied Jesus' mission and contributed to its support. One of his disciples had been a tax collector and was therefore pretty well off. The disciples maintained a treasury out of which they gave to the poor — so they, themselves, were not "the poor." Jesus owned a garment of such high quality that the Roman soldiers at his crucifixion didn't want to split it up. The idea that Christians are supposed to be "poor like Jesus" is a lie of the devil, intended to keep us from having an impact on the godless culture around us.

But the stewardship of prosperity doesn't mean we luxuriate in ostentatious spending and greed. In fact, we can live modestly in order to have more financial resources available to support the work of the church, bless our family, and contribute to organizations that help the disadvantaged or to leaders whose policies line up with biblical values. For example, we can avoid an expensive car payment by driving an older car, so that more of our financial resources are freed up for us to give away. *We're not prosperous because of what we hold onto and clutch for ourselves; we're prosperous because of what we're able to contribute to the work of the church, to our family, or to the benefit of our community and the welfare of our society.*

So we've looked at several dimensions of stewardship: contributing to our church, blessing our family, assisting benevolent causes, supporting organizations or movements for righteousness and truth in our surrounding culture, and living the responsibly prosperous life with the resources it makes available for us to use. It all comes from the Lord, who is the greatest steward of all, for he gives to us enabling us to give back to him. "All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee."

Sermon text ©2024 Richard C. Leonard

Bible text © as applicable