

April 3, 2022

## **Nuts and Bolts of the Christian Life: Giving**

2 Samuel 24:18-25

When I was in third grade, in 1972, my father began giving me a weekly allowance: a whole dollar. (Now, before you get the laughable impression that my father is a big spender, I should say that this was when we lived in Singapore, and at that time the exchange rate was three Singapore dollars to one US, so my allowance was 33 1/3 cents.) But, as you may have heard, with wealth comes responsibility. My father made it very clear that every week ten cents should go in the church offering plate. Or, in US currency, three and a third cents. Tithing my income was not optional. From then on, through college, I continued to receive a regular allowance from my parents. As I got older, the amount went up, but so did the responsibility. By high school I was getting over a hundred a month, but with amount I was responsible for my own school lunches, my own clothes, and my own personal toiletries. And my tithe. That was still not optional.

Throughout Lent, we've been talking about basic habits to develop as a part of a growing Christian faith, and one of the things we've noted several times along the way is that at the beginning, these habits may feel like legalistic duties that we just have to suck it up and do, but that after that time of drudgery, we should reach the point where the habit is no longer a burden, but something that we have found life-affirming and valuable for its own sake. Thus we might have to be dragged to church as children, but in theory we should discover when we are older that we *want* to gather with other believers. Or we might do grudging acts of mercy in the early days of our faith – because, you know, that's what good Christians do – but that should be only a first step to the point where mercy and compassion becomes a part of our very being. Well, today we're talking about giving, and you can probably see where I'm going with this. You can start out, as I did, with a mathematically precise and highly legalistic view of giving, but when our faith begins to mature, we should move past that to a more joyous and willing attitude.

However, in the case of this particular Christian practice, we have a unique obstacle to growth that we have to overcome, something that we didn't have to deal with when we talked about growing in prayer or scripture reading: the church itself doesn't always want us to grow. You see, churches that would love to see their people achieve mature levels of prayer or scripture study would often much prefer to keep people at the legalistic level when it comes to giving. Churches that joyously proclaim the New Testament message of freedom from bondage to the Old Testament law will, during pledge season, conveniently forget all that and remind people that Leviticus and Malachi command God's people to tithe. How many of you have ever heard a preacher say that the New Covenant sets us free from the law of tithing? Well, it does. (Aaron, can you edit that bit out before this is posted? What if someone from the conference heard me say that?)

Seriously, we do have to move past the legalistic approach to church giving. This is partly for the sake of intellectual consistency and integrity, as I just noted. We don't have the right to pick and choose how far Christ's freedom extends, as if Christ set us free from all the laws of Moses except the ones that help our institutional budgets. But even more than that, the strict tithing approach too often turns our giving to God into a transaction. After all, if church has a set price tag, then it seems fair to ask what you're getting in return for your money. That's the underlying assumption behind a huge number of church splits and also behind the heresy of the

Prosperity Gospel, that if you invest your dollars in the church then God is *obligated* to bless you in return. Legalistic tithing theology also sends the unfortunate and inaccurate message that ten percent is *all* we owe God, so what we do with the remaining 90% of our income is none of God's business. For all these reasons and more, we need a more mature understanding of giving to God. I'm grateful for the teaching my parents gave me as a child, which was completely appropriate for my child's mind, but is there a deeper way to think about giving?

I'd like to come at that question through a story. Remember last week, when I talked about reading scripture, I admitted that much of the Bible is all too human, that some parts of it are more a reflection of the times when those passages were written or even of the personalities of the writers than they are of the mind of God. But then I said to read scripture anyway, because God is still found in surprising ways in even the strangest of biblical stories. So let's test that by looking at one of the strangest of biblical stories.

In 2 Samuel 24, which takes place during King David's reign, we read that God grew angry at David (it doesn't say why) and inspired him to take a census. No, I have no idea why taking a census is a bad thing. Scholars suggest all sorts of possible reasons, but none seems adequate. So David sends his commander-in-chief Joab out to count the population. Then, when it's done, God decides to punish David for taking up the census. I know: Huh? But God told him to do it! Now God punishes him for being obedient? That feels really sketchy. The problem is so bad that when 1 Chronicles retells the story, it tries to smooth this out by changing it to say that it was Satan who inspired David to do it.

(By the way, this is an interesting problem for those who want to treat the Bible as inerrant in every detail. The inerrant 2 Samuel 24 says God made David do this, and the inerrant 1 Chronicles 21 says it was Satan. Let me know how you sort that.)

Back to the story. God now sends a prophet named Gad to David to let him choose his punishment: either three years of famine, three months of military losses, or three days of plague. At this point it starts to feel like we're in a folk tale, and we're *really* confused. David chooses the plague, rather than, for instance, military defeats, because he trusts God's mercy more than the mercy of his enemies. The plague begins, and David immediately starts praying for leniency. We read 2 Samuel 24:18-25.

*<sup>18</sup>That day [the prophet] Gad came to David and said to him, 'Go up and erect an altar to the Lord on the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite.' <sup>19</sup>Following Gad's instructions, David went up, as the Lord had commanded. <sup>20</sup>When Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming towards him; and Araunah went out and prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground. <sup>21</sup>Araunah said, 'Why has my lord the king come to his servant?' David said, 'To buy the threshing-floor from you in order to build an altar to the Lord, so that the plague may be averted from the people.' <sup>22</sup>Then Araunah said to David, 'Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him; here are the oxen for the burnt-offering, and the threshing-sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. <sup>23</sup>All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king.' And Araunah said to the king, 'May the Lord your God respond favorably to you.'*

*<sup>24</sup>But the king said to Araunah, 'No, but I will buy them from you for a price; I will not offer burnt-offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.' So David bought the threshing-floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. <sup>25</sup>David built there an altar to the Lord,*

*and offered burnt-offerings and offerings of well-being. So the Lord answered his supplication for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.*

Did you catch that? I can't prove it, of course, but I have a sense that the whole weird story was all a set-up for that one gleaming insight. David goes to seek the Lord's mercy – goes to worship – and, following Gad's instructions, he goes to a threshing floor belonging to a non-Israelite named Araunah to buy that site for an altar. Araunah, showing respect both for the king and for the king's God, offers to give him the land, along with the materials for the altar, the wood for the fire, and the animals for the sacrifice. David insists on paying for them because, "I will not offer sacrifices to the Lord that cost me nothing."

Why do we give to the church? It's not because God needs money. A part of reaching maturity in this facet of our Christian life is realizing that we give because a relationship that costs us nothing means nothing. We give because God matters to us, and this is one way to express that value. And at this point, we're no longer talking just about money, are we? In fact, the principle is even more clear when we move to other currencies that are even more rare and precious to us: time and attention.

Time is a particularly good example, because in one sense, we all have the same amount: we all have twenty-four hours in every day, and how we allot that finite daily resource is perhaps the best measure we have of what matters to us. That's a little simplistic, because we don't always have complete control over our time, but generally, when we say, "I didn't have time for that," what we are really saying was, "That wasn't as important to me as the things that I did find time for." Whether it's scrolling through Facebook or working extra time at our jobs or spending time with our children or exercising or praying, the time we devote to something is a strong indication of how important it is to us. And if that makes you uncomfortable, maybe it should.

These days we have a new currency: our attention. Facebook and Google and the rest of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse have learned how to monetize our attention. The longer they can keep us glued to our screens – clicking and liking and sharing and commenting – the more they can charge for advertising. But again, whether we realize it or not, what we give our attention to is a statement of what matters to us.

God, the Hebrew Bible reminds us often, is a jealous God. God longs for relationship with us – it was for that purpose that we were made – but God does not want to be our piece on the side. God has no intention of being a peripheral part of our lives. God's heart is not thrilled when we "find time" for God in the midst of our busy lives. God doesn't want a few moments snatched from between meetings; God wants to be at the meetings. God does not yearn for scraps of our attention, during the ads. Nor does God jump for joy over our spare change. When we give only the time, the attention, and the money weren't using anyway, then we have given a sacrifice to God that costs us nothing, and as David reminds us, that's not really giving. Our giving is an expression of our value, and if God is truly God to us, then our giving should be intentional, complete, sacrificial, and joyous.

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Final word. I need to correct one possible mistake in my sermon. I said that we all have 24 hours every day. But that may change. As you may have read, the US Senate has unanimously passed a bill to keep the clocks at Daylight Savings Time. The bill is called the "Sunshine Preservation

Act,” and if that is approved, we’ll have an extra hour of sunlight every day, because that’s apparently how Daylight Savings Time works. It’ll be good for the flowers.

But however many hours we have, it’s a good idea to regularly look at how we spend them. Do an accounting of how we use our resources, and I would say to start with time and attention, rather than money. How much of either is spent in the presence of God? What does that say about what we value? What can we do?