

GIVING GOD YOUR BEST
Mark 12:41-44
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 11, 2012

Next Sunday is Consecration Sunday here at Babcock Church but before going into any details, let's first find out what the word "consecrate" really means and how it impacts your discipleship. According to my dictionary consecrate means,

- 1) allegiance or dedication
- 2) the act of giving (intellectually, emotion ally and spiritually) to a course of action or a person.

To consecrate literally means "to give yourself over to the sacred." Not surprisingly this consecration theme runs throughout the Bible as people, places and things were consecrated or given to the service and worship of God. From the very beginning, first the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament and later the saints and apostles of the New Testament, all were consecrated or gave themselves to God.

For Christians, the act of consecration is actually an act of faith in response to the Paschal Mystery, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God for the salvation of the world. By this act of faith you're called upon to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Jesus. Another way of putting it, according to St. Paul, you're invited to "offer up yourself as a living sacrifice, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1)

The operative word here is to "offer" or "give" yourself to God.

I recently read the word "give" appears in the Bible 2,172 times. That's more than the words "believe," "pray" and "love" combined! Obviously the act of giving is God's highest priority especially when you consider the verse, "For God so loved the world he gave his only son." or "God so loved the world he consecrated his only son..."

Next Sunday you'll be asked a simple question, "What is God asking me to give from my weekly income?" Not what's Harry, the Session or the Stewardship Team asking me to give, but what's God asking me to give from my weekly income?

Some may wonder why money is ever even talked about from the pulpit. I remember once having a conversation with a man who was convinced it was scandalous to take a collection during worship because it showed all the church wants is your money. I tried to tell him it's not only OK, it's necessary to pass the plate because your giving is an act of worship. The fact is, you worship whenever you give either your time, energy, talents or treasure to God. Didn't Jesus say, "Where your treasure is there your heart will be also?" (Luke 12:34)

So, there's solid justification for both the weekly collection and the occasional sermon about financial giving. Why? Because giving is a bona fide act of faith.

In a very real sense the occasional stewardship sermon is really no different from my weekly sermons, which are all about becoming one with Christ and then striving to be Christ-like, which means like Jesus, giving yourself to serve and love your neighbor, especially those who can never pay you back, and then having the faith to trust that even when you empty yourself you'll never be left empty.

All this and more is the essence of discipleship, which is consistent, and even synonymous with stewardship.

Another thing, giving is good for you. You already know this, a generous spirit is a healthy spirit because your generosity reflects the quality of your spiritual health. Whenever you give the gift of yourself, you become richer.

On the other hand people afraid to give generously are usually timid and unhappy souls who, in Thoreau's term, live "lives of quiet desperation." Their lack of giving isolates them from being in community with God, their neighbors and even themselves because they never know the joy found in keeping the greatest commandment. But there's always hope and they can come to realize, hopefully not too late, it isn't about having the most toys but laying up treasures in heaven that really count.

Did you ever wonder what the world would be like if God didn't love the world and give his only son? We'd be miserable. The two images of heaven and hell come to mind. In hell everyone is seated at a great banquet table overflowing with rich food but they're all starving because their forks are too long to put food in their mouths. In heaven, it's the same scene but with one difference. This time everyone is full and happy because they're using their long forks to feed each other.

I'm not implying if you give your money generously to God, life becomes a bowl of cherries. God never said, "Let's make a deal, give generously and all your dreams will come true." But God does promise you'll never regret it because through your giving in response to Christ's giving himself up for you, you'll find your relationships with God, your neighbor and yourself give way to intimacy and through this intimacy you'll experience grace.

Let's now consider what stewardship looks like. In the Gospels whenever Jesus inserted stewardship into the conversation, he drew from the then current practice of a king, lord or master entrusting his servants with the responsibility of managing his property. Jesus used these stewards metaphorically in his parables to illustrate the relationships between master and steward. Sometimes the steward is honest and shrewd, other times he is sneaky and careless, but always the steward was entrusted with everything his master owned.

The common theme of all these parables is the steward taking care of everything not belonging to him, the implication being, we too are entrusted to be good and faithful stewards. The Bible is clear about this, we may think we own our homes and

possessions, even our bodies and souls, but we really don't. Contrary to what we think, God didn't create us to satisfy ourselves, but to please him.

Before anyone complains, "That's not fair, we shouldn't be required to please God and not ourselves," let's be reminded it's only when we give ourselves to God that life begins to make sense and thinking you're a free and independent agent obligated only to yourself starts making no sense.

Some might argue I'm talking like my head's in the clouds, but a life based on what you own and how you leverage it to your advantage is an illusion. On the other hand, it's liberating when you realize everything about you belongs to God, because belonging to God means God is your father and Christ is your brother, and that makes all the difference. How?

Living in hard economic times we're still confronted with a more uncertain future than most of us ever before faced, so naturally we worry.

Isn't this a good time to remember what Jesus said about worry?

"...don't worry about what you'll eat or wear... Look at the birds of the air...consider the lilies of the field... Therefore don't worry...strive first for God's Kingdom... (if you do)...everything else will be given to you as well." (Matthew 5:25-26; 28-29; 33)

This is Jesus having the guts to face people living hard and hopeless, not with platitudes, but with truth, reminding them and us to seek our security not in ourselves and our bank accounts but in God and his grace. Never forget, God made us with the capacity to have the faith of a child.

Sound good? I hope so, because if you trust Jesus with your life you won't be afraid when asked the question, "What is God asking me to give from my weekly income?"

This is an intimate question that can only be asked by God and each of us can only answer in our own way, depending where we are in our spiritual journey. And let me add, God only expects you to give the best you can, as long as your best is given honestly and faithfully.

What is God asking me to give from my weekly income?

There are a few of us who answer this question by giving a tithe, or 10% of their weekly income.

There are others who are committed to working up to giving 10% by starting to give 4%, 5% or even 7%, trusting God will recognize their decision for what it is, the

desire to spiritually grow in faith and practice by increasing the percentage they give from their weekly income.

I believe this to be true: whenever we see one of us take the risk to give even more time, energy and income to God that can only inspire the rest of us to go and do likewise.

Question: Is Christ encouraging you to give even more of your hard earned treasure? If you're being tugged and prodded, do yourself a favor, let Christ convince you it's better to give than to receive.

I can only encourage you to pray about this and then listen for God's desire that you give your best, nothing more or less, to Christ and God's Kingdom.