

## Lesson Three: The Symbolism of Giving - “*Why Money Matters*”

(All Scripture references are the New International Version unless otherwise stated.)

### Reflect: Giving or Receiving

What's in a gift? Read the collection of sayings about giving and receiving. Which best describes your philosophy about giving? Which best communicates the proper attitude toward giving to God?

*He that gives quickly gives twice.*

Cervantes

*The only gift is a portion of thyself.*

Emerson

*Love that is hoarded molds at last  
Until we know some day  
The only thing we ever have  
Is what we give away.*

Gilman

*The gift without the giver is bare;  
Who gives himself with his alms feed three,—  
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and me.*

Lowell

*That man may last, but never lives,  
Who much receives, but nothing gives;  
Whom none can love, whom none can thank,—  
Creation's blot, creation's blank.*

Gibbons

*I love the Christmas-tide, and yet,  
I notice this, each year I live;  
I always like the gifts I get,  
But how I love the gifts I give!*

Wells

Of all we do in church services today, nothing is more historically and biblically worship than when we present our gifts to God. The oldest example of this is the first offering, recorded in Genesis 4:1-6.

Genesis 4:1-6 *Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.” Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?”*

For reasons that are not fully explained, Abel's offering was acceptable while Cain's was not. There is a significance beyond comprehension when a person presents an offering to God. Giving is pure worship, and yet it can be easily defiled.

This session provides an opportunity to examine the elements of the offering: the gift, and the giver.

### Look for the answers to:

- What possible significance could our gifts have to God?

- What determines a gift's value before God?
- What is the relationship between the gift and the giver?
- Does money matter to God and, if so, why?

### The Symbolism of the Gift

What is the significance of an offering? Why has the act of giving always been deemed an appropriate and necessary human response to God? All religions have practiced *the offering*. The sacrifice of human life as an expression of religious devotion may have passed away, but offerings of every imaginable kind are still presented on a daily basis around the world. Within the Jewish and Christian traditions, the *offering* has always held a central role. Throughout the Bible, we find people giving offerings to God and God welcoming the offerings.

The gifts we bring to God are important because of the needs they meet and because of their positive impact on givers. The most important aspect of giving, however, lies in its symbolism. Only limited satisfaction is derived when we give in order to pay the church's bills. To experience the genuine joy of giving, we must know the powerful symbolic significance of the gift.

### The Giver is in the Gift

2 Samuel 24:18-25 *On that day Gad went to David and said to him, "Go up and build an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." So David went up, as the Lord had commanded through Gad. When Araunah looked and saw the king and his men coming toward him, he went out and bowed down before the king with his face to the ground. Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to the servant?" "To buy your threshing floor," David answered, "so I can build an altar to the Lord, that the plague on the people may be stopped." Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take whatever pleases him and offer it up. Here are oxen for the burnt offering, and here are threshing sledges and ox yokes for the wood. O king, Araunah gives all this to the king." Araunah also said to him, "May the Lord your God accept you." But the king replied to Araunah, "No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen and paid fifty shekels of silver for them. David built an altar to the Lord there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the Lord answered in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.*

It's often been said that "the gift represents the giver." However, the gift is more than just a "representation" of the worshiper. As we present our gift, we present ourselves. In fact, the value of the gift is determined by how much of ourselves is actually "in" the gift.

2 Samuel 24:18-25 tells an unusual story. King David could have obeyed God without any personal costs. Araunah had generously offered to David everything that was needed to fulfill God's command - the land, the wood for the altar, and even the animal to sacrifice. David could have made his offering to God without it costing him one cent.

David, however, refused Araunah's offer. Why? What did David know that we don't? David understood the symbolic identification that exists between the giver and the gift. David could not offer anything to God that did not personally cost him. The gift that does not touch the giver does not touch God.

### My Money and Me

The relationship between purse and person is intimate. **Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Matthew 6:21** That's intimacy! Find the treasure and you find the heart.

There is a sense in which *money is me*. Why? Most people receive their income from their employment. Suppose you work for a company forty hours per week. You give your time, energy, physical and mental abilities and yourself during those forty hours. At the end of the week, your company gives you a paycheck.

Analyze what has occurred. You have given forty hours of your life. In return, you received a paycheck. That paycheck in very real terms is you, at least part of you! Every dollar you make has you "in" it. My money is me!

Consider the implications this has on how we spend our money. To spend money is to spend life! Where I put my money is where I put my life. We are in everything we purchase because we are "in" our money.

When Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," He was speaking on several levels. Jesus' statement refers to the intimate relationship that exists between our lives and money. We spend a great deal of our lives thinking about money; earning it, saving it, investing it, spending it, and worrying about it.

The word "heart" may refer to the emotional aspects of our lives. Money stirs emotions, touches our hopes, fears, insecurities, plans, ambitions, and more. It is no wonder that a high percentage of divorced couples identify money as a major contributor to their failed marriages. Money is a hot topic.

Luke 22:19-20 *And he took bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave unto them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."*

At the Last Supper, Jesus presented a beautiful symbolic message in which he identified his life *with* the wine and the bread. As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we remember Him. In a similar fashion, we as givers are *in* our gifts. As Christ gives himself to us *in* the bread and cup, we give ourselves to Him *in* the offering.

### **The Value of the Gift**

Mark 12:41-44 *Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on."*

What determines the value of a gift to God? Is one gift better than another? Is God more receptive to some gifts than others? When we consider acceptance of Abel's gift and the rejection of Cain's, then we must answer yes.

What does make a gift valuable? American culture would dictate, "The more you spend on it, the more valuable the gift!" Jesus, however, never equated a person's contribution with a financial amount.

One day Jesus stood at the temple treasury to see what people gave. Jesus saw some give great sums. He makes an interesting comment about the gifts of the rich. He doesn't condemn the gifts of the wealthy, but recognizes that the gifts were given out of their abundance. They gave from the overflow and their gifts didn't cost them anything personally.

Jesus watched the widow give two small copper coins, a very small amount. In practical terms, the widow contributed nothing of real value to the Temple. However, the widow gave "all she had

to live on.” Those two coins represented the totality of her life. She didn't just put two worthless coins into the treasury; she put herself *in*! The value of the widow is not found in the coins, but rather the value of the coins is found in the widow.

### **The Value of a Gift is Determined By Its Value to the Giver**

Mark 14:3-9 *While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly. “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body before-hand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”*

The greater a gift's value to its giver, the greater its value to God. The gift that touches the heart of God must first touch the life of the giver. The disciples didn't understand the actions of this woman. They condemned her generosity by suggesting the money should have been given to the poor.

The value of the perfume was equal to a laborer's annual income. In today's economy, the vial of precious ointment would have been worth tens of thousands of dollars. This was indeed a valuable gift. Unlike the widow's gift, the alabaster box had great financial value. Jesus was so impressed with the gift that he said the story would be told as a memorial to her. What made this gift so special?

Scholars have long wondered what the woman was doing with a possession of such enormous value. We know that she was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. We know she deeply loved the Lord and her actions showed that she was willing to give anything and everything to Him. Scholars suggest that the alabaster box was Mary's dowry. Eastern customs demanded that each bride bring to the marriage a dowry of great value in relation to the bride's station in society. No dowry meant no marriage.

If scholars are correct, Mary gave away her right to marriage when she poured out her dowry on Jesus. Mary's gift was of immense personal value. Mary's future life was *in* her gift. Her husband-to-be and her children-to-be were *in* her gift. Like the widow, Mary gave everything she had. This gift was special to Jesus because he recognized its special meaning to Mary.

### **React:**

Compare the gifts of the two women. Who gave the most? What made each gift important? How were the women alike in what they gave?

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Have you given a sacrificial gift? How did it make you feel?

### **Some Gifts Defile God's Altar**

Malachi 1:6-8 *“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the Lord Almighty. “It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name. But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’ You place defiled food on my altar. But you ask, ‘How have we defiled you?’ By*

*saying that the Lord's table is contemptible. When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the Lord Almighty.*

Not all gifts have value before God. The Old Testament prophet, Malachi, recorded this complaint from God about the gifts of His people. God questioned the gifts of defiled bread and diseased animals instead of gifts of the *first-fruits* of the harvest and unblemished animals. The Jews had been told to give their best. The first-fruits and disease and blemish free animals symbolized the best. Only perfect gifts truly symbolized God's worthiness. Instead of the best, however, the Hebrews gave what they no longer wanted or could no longer use.

The Jews became adept at giving less-than-perfect or *costless* gifts. They brought to the Sacrificial Altar those animals that were sick and dying for sacrifice instead of finding the finest animal from their flock. These givers even convinced themselves that they were worshipping God and He would be pleased to accept their offering. God's judgment of their gifts, however, was you "show contempt for my name."

We are still in danger of defiling God's altar. The act of giving is more than putting something on the altar or dropping something into the offering plate. What we give should have meaning to us. If it means little to us, it will mean little to God.

### **A New View of Giving**

True giving, as presented in Scripture, is a joyous and worshipful experience. However, giving can easily become hollow, meaningless, and rife with hypocrisy. When giving loses its meaning and message, it cannot possibly be joyful.

The Old Testament required numerous offerings be made to God. Among these were burnt, drink, fellowship, freewill, peace, grain, sin, thank, trespass, and wave offerings. The wave offering provides an example of the sense of the spirit in which offerings were to be made. The worshipers, gathered in praise and worship, would lift their hands filled with grain, bread, or even a portion of an animal sacrifice and begin to wave their offerings before God. The wave offering was a public demonstration of gratitude, praise and worship and demonstrated a people celebrating a love relationship with God. It was a joyful and symbolic way of saying, "God, we love you. We thank you. All of our resources come from You. We rejoice in Your Presence."

If the joy of giving is ever to be renewed in our churches today, we must begin to see giving in a new way, or perhaps, in the old way.

### **Giving as a Gift**

*1 Chronicles 29:10-16 David praised the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly, saying, "Praise be to you, O Lord, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. O Lord our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you.*

I Chronicles 29 tells of King David's efforts to raise money for the construction of what would become Solomon's Temple. David expresses his heartfelt commitment for the project, pledges

his own financial commitment, and challenges the leaders of Israel to consecrate themselves to. The chapter documents how the leaders willingly and joyfully make their financial commitments and finally how the people of Israel joined their leaders with joy and great enthusiasm.

Overcome with emotion by the people's overwhelmingly positive response, David seems to struggle in an effort to understand and explain the magnitude and meaning of what has occurred. Consider the following paraphrase of David's reaction:

*Lord, everything is Yours! You have all the greatness, power, glory, victory, and majesty. Everything that is in heaven and earth is Yours. You are above all. All riches and honor and power come from You.*  
*But, Lord God, I just don't understand it. Who am I and who are these people that we are able to give so willing to You? Everything comes from You. Everything we have has come from You. The only things we have given to You are those things that were Yours in the first place. God, we are just sojourners in this world. We don't own anything. We are just passing through. Not one of us will last long in this world. And now, God, somehow we have given all these resources to build a house for You. And everything we have given has come from you and belongs to You.*

David was overcome with the realization that he and his people have been given a high honor and rare privilege. God had provided a way for them to participate with Him even though God didn't need David or his people. God created the world with a word; He could build the Temple with a thought. Yet, God invited David and the Israelites to join Him in this work.

David saw this experience for what it was. God had given them a wonderful gift, the Gift of Giving. God has favored us by giving us the opportunity and the ability to give to His Work. His invitation to join in His Work is, in itself, a gift.

**Reflect:**

Those of us who are parents can remember special gifts that came from our children. We gave them the opportunity and the means of giving. All of us can remember times when our parents helped us learn how to give. Do you recall having received special gifts from your children? What makes the gift so special? Would the gift have been possible if you had not helped provide the opportunity and the resources?

**This is the heart of our Heavenly Father. He needs nothing from our Hands. It is for our benefit and blessing that He gives to us the Gift of Giving.**

## Notes from Lesson Three