

Everything We Have Comes from God's Gracious Hand
Stone Church of the Brethren
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In 1992, Goldie Hawn and Meryl Streep play characters Helen Sharp and Madeline Ashton, in a movie titled *Death Becomes Her*. A story about good friends who have a falling out over a man (Dr. Ernest Menville, played by Bruce Willis) – with Helen being a “dowdy” looking woman and Madeline an attractive actress. For their own personal reasons, each find their way to Lisle Von Rhuman, played by Isabella Rossellini, a 71-year-old whose appearance leans more towards someone in their late- 20’s/early 30’s. During a conversation between Lisle and Madeline, Lisle explains she has a tonic that produces eternal beauty when ingested; to which Madeleine asks, “How much?” Lisle responds, “Ah, the sordid topic of coin, I’m afraid is not so simple. The cost, you see, is different for everyone.”

That is how I will begin our time together this morning, as you have explored over the past several weeks other aspects of things we are given to steward, it is now time to examine the “*sordid topic of coin.*”

From *Beyond the Offering Plate*, chapter 3, Stewardship of Money and Finances, there were several nuggets I found myself examining, considering, and shaking my head in agreement over. Things like: “Money remains *the* taboo topic for American Christians. Anthropologists define a cultural taboo as “something so sacred, so powerful, that to touch it or even talk about it is to expose oneself to considerable danger.”¹ “As we manufacture natural buffers to avoid discussing money directly, we also know that our relationship with money is perhaps one of the best windows into the practices of the Christian life.”² “A holistic stewarding of our finances reshapes our attitudes toward wealth and possessions, but it also shifts our relationships with one another while reacting our vision of the good life in the midst of the multiple economies in which we take part.”³ It’s a very rich chapter written by David P. King from the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO TALK ABOUT MONEY?

This is one area of discipline we find ourselves, as a society, doing our best to steer clear from when we come together around dinner tables, water coolers, and social gatherings. While we may joke that at most family gatherings we stay away from religion and politics as topics of discussion, I would add money to that list as well.

The topic of money makes some in our secular circle feel uneasy as the subject of finances have become personal and private in nature. No talk of salaries, as we might fear if people knew what we made that they might ask for financial help or expect us to give for every school fundraiser their child had to participate in, or [gasp] expect a certain amount in the offering plate each week. When talking about investments most speak in terms of highs and lows, not dollars and cents. When it comes time to pass the offering plate, we may openly drop something into the plate during the service so that those immediately around us know

¹ Adam J. Copeland, editor, *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 32.

² Copeland, 32.

³ Copeland, 34.

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with certainty that we gave something towards our work together, yet we remain stealth and strategic in how we do it. If it's cash, it will be folded strategically so no one around can tell the denomination amount, or it is in an envelope. We will freely talk in generalities when it comes to how we use our financial resources, but never get into the nitty gritty of budgets, understanding expenses and income (what is going out and what is coming in) or the importance of looking at tithing as a discipline or a holy practice instead of an obligation.

Because of our posturing when it comes to finances and our lack of open conversation around the topic, money becomes a hindrance and aids in individuals and churches to be short-sighted and visionless when it comes to stewardship of money. And when we do talk about it, it is a small focus during a strategic time of year and becomes more of a checkbox item off a list than a practice that we educate, guide, show by example, and disciple, which ever perpetuates the topic into a taboo-esque state of being.

This doesn't need to be the case. I will confess I am a convert standing before you today. Seven years ago, I too felt like most where-in I didn't feel it was anyone else's business as to the state of my finances and whether or not I could or could not give towards the missions and ministries of God's kingdom, whether or not I could or could not live the life style I am accustomed to living, or whether I will or will not live comfortably during my twilight years. In fact, when I interviewed for the position I currently hold within the denomination in the Mission **Advancement** office, I said, "If you're looking for someone to beat down the bushes for money, I'm not your girl." Through examination of the work through my office, that of educating and interpreting the missions and ministries of the Church of the Brethren to encourage financial support and engagement of that work, I delight in helping others consider and discern their philanthropic endeavors so that they might achieve those goals. I now recognize the blessing from God that it is when aiding in the caretaking of those resources as a discipline we are called to do rather than an awkward moment in the room when the topic arises. Viewing it as part of our Christian practice does change the lens of how we feel about and discuss money. It is no longer about the transaction of "giving over" our tithe to the church, but instead it shifts the focus towards the transformative nature of God whereby taking what He gave to us in the first place and purposing it for the good of our neighbor, to aid in justice, and to bring equity across the community.

INSTRCTIONS TO THE ISRAELITES

This [Deuteronomy] is the fifth and final book of the Pentateuch and is Moses' farewell address to the second generation of Israelites. It is structured like the treaties of that day, in which a king would spell out the laws, standards, and stipulations by which he would rule his nation. Moses' message to this new generation (the children of those who were apart of the exodus from Egypt) was basic – it was their choice to either follow God's law or disobey it.⁴

Throughout the book, Moses outlines everything that they will need to know as it concerns God's expectations of how they will worship and interact with the Almighty. God has done this since the beginning, providing clear instruction and expectations of how He wants to interact with His creation. Beginning with His initial conversation with Abraham when he

⁴ Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 208.

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initiated the covenant within that specific family lineage, through the exodus out of Egypt and now, with a generation passed and their entrance pending to move forward into the promised land, He once again sets forth His instruction on what He expects of His chosen people.

As we heard the text read, Moses has provided insight into the laws of the tithe, or the tenth, which were another way of reminding the Israelites that **everything they had, came from God's gracious hand.**⁵ And while we could get stuck in debate about how these instructions speak to us in today's understanding of how the world operates, the bottom line is this: Not only were they to enjoy the fruits of their labor through a communal meal, but they were also called to set aside (every 3 years) a means by which to care for the tribe of Levi, the resident alien (i.e. the immigrant), the fatherless (i.e. orphans), and the widow. It was understood that if the Israelites were faithful in this way [of taking care for those who needed aid because they couldn't care for themselves], the Lord would bless them in all the work of their hands.

GIVING AS COMMUNITY FOR THE GLORY OF GOD AND OUR NEIGHBORS' GOOD

The Hebrew community had an obligation to care for its own priests, the Levites, as God had chosen that lineage to serve the community in that specific capacity. The Levites were dedicated to the service of the Lord and were responsible for accepting and overseeing each families' tithes and offerings. As such, they did not own land themselves, but instead were given "the offerings by fire to the Lord God of Israel as their inheritance" (Joshua 13:14).

As we think about this in today's terms, we would see it as supporting our pastors and spiritual leaders. Their work is just as important today as it was then. While we may not ask of our pastors to slaughter animals and prepare them for offerings of atonement, we do set expectations on them of equal value and it is our responsibility as a community to provide, as best we can, for their needs and the needs of their family. This shows them how much we value them AND how much we value God through our obedience to support those called into set apart ministry. *I use the term "set apart ministry" to distinguish pastors from the rest of us; since in our tradition we understand the phrase "priesthood of all believers" to mean that ALL who have accepted Christ and were baptized are set apart to minister under the instruction of the "great commission." But there are some who are clearly marked to become pastors.*

The Israelites were also instructed to support the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. This is a calling that we, within the Church of the Brethren, feel deeply enough about that we focus on these ministries at almost every level together as the larger body of Christ. In a world where we discard one another if we do not fit a certain definition or are not viewed as a productive part of society, we witness these groups, and others, being forgotten, pushed aside, left to fend for themselves. So, to offer our resources together as a fragrant offering to God, whereby he blesses and multiples them so that we might provide opportunities to help those in need is not something we do begrudgingly. This is where our understanding of transformation begins to shape how we, not only view, but treat folks who find themselves in anyone of these categories. It is our calling from God to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves, easily. This, at times, means our financial resources will be given to assist

⁵ Evans, 224.

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places, organizations, or people who can handle doing this type of work so that we might focus on other areas that we are called to serve within.

Giving to God first is crucial because it shows how much we value him, and it expresses our faith in his ability and willingness to provide for us. When Israel gave the Lord their tithe, they were not saying that ten percent belonged to God while the other ninety belonged to them. Instead, giving a tenth to God was their way of acknowledging that everything that they had was from God.⁶

DOING THIS TOGETHER AS COMMUNITY

This idea of coming together to minister and support the “least of these” within our “city gates” is one that translates well and speaks to our heritage in the Church of the Brethren.

While there are missions and ministries we work at together as communities in our local areas where our church is, where we live, work, and play; there are also missions we focus on together as a district that allow for a longer reach of resources across regions; finally, there are things that we can do as the larger body of Christ in communion with other churches from across the country that we wouldn't be able to support if we attempted to do them on our own. The bringing together of our financial resources to support the work done through the Emergency Disaster Fund, Global Food Initiative Fund, Nigeria Crisis and Church Rebuilding Funds, the Haiti Medical Fund, Emerging Global Mission Fund, and the Core Ministries fund shows clearly how we can extend our wealth collectively to “invest in God's kingdom.” For me, we are living into (to some degree) what we understand the early church did: “All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had. The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great blessing was upon them all. There were no needy people among them because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need. [Acts 4:32-35, NLT]

God's kingdom agenda for his people's money is the opposite of the world's advice. According to the world, hoarding our money leads to prosperity. But God says that giving is the way of blessing (2 Cor 9:6-8). God does not call us to give generously to him so that he can make us rich however.⁷ Instead, we are called to be generous and to give with a cheerful heart.

Remembering God's perfect and total provision is one way to displace the fear that often prevents giving. The word translated **sufficiency** means “all that is needed.” Christians can rest in the grace that multiplies resources and opportunities so that in all things they have all they need.

May we find encouragement and rest in knowing that he provides for us in the same way he provides for the birds of the air. We long for nothing nor need anything for his grace shown to us through the sacrifice of his only Son, Jesus Christ, is sufficient.

⁶ Evans, 224.

⁷ Evans, 224.