

**Where the Rubber Hits the Road**  
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I Kings 17:8-16, Mark 12:38-44

A friend of mine was once asked to deliver a stewardship sermon in his church. He gave it the title "Twas Brillig and the Slithy Toves" because he figured if he called it the stewardship sermon, everybody would tune out. I may as well be up front with you: I'm going to talk about money.

Some preachers won't talk about money, and maybe you'd rather not hear talk about money in church. Maybe it doesn't seem very "spiritual" to you. But the gospels tell us that that Jesus talked about money a lot--more than any other subject except the Kingdom. The truth is, all of us think about money, and most of us fret over it a good deal. But if we're grounded in our faith, we know that God's abundance provides for our needs.

It's not my goal to shame you into making a pledge to the church and I am not going to talk about the church budget or harangue you about supporting the church financially. I assume that you know that all of us as members of this faith community share responsibility for supporting its mission. What I am going to do in a moment is suggest three different ways to approach your financial commitment to the church.

Stewardship--the word we apply to the management of our time, talent, and treasure--is the practical side of our journey with God. It's where the rubber hits the road in your spiritual life. You would think perhaps that the more you have, the more you give of yourself, but when it comes to the money side of things, we see this isn't the case. Paradoxically, it's the people who have the least money who are most able to trust in God's providence and therefore are the most generous with their giving. This morning our scripture lessons tell of two widows, the most marginal people in their community, who are models of stewardship because they trust in God so completely.

The widow of Zarephath shares the last morsels of food in her house with Elijah. If we're worried about a shaky economy in our time, we could take a lesson from this woman who is left alone to raise a child while a terrible famine grips her land. Her faith is rewarded first by physical sustenance through the famine and later with having her son brought back to life after he dies. Mark's gospel tells us of the woman Jesus points out in the temple, a widow who is literally putting her last cent in the offering box. How rash their actions seem to those of us who live in fear of scarcity! And yet how rich these women must be in entrusting their well-being to God. Fearful hearts are not free to give because they are afraid there will never be enough. And the catch is, as long as you're afraid, there never *will* be enough. The heart of a steward is full of faith, not fear.

These widows model faithful, fearless giving. If few of us are yet able to give so fearlessly, how do you decide about your pledge to the church? As a starting point, I'll give you three choices for how to think about your giving. See if one of them suits you.

**One: Give in proportion to the value you receive from the church.**

How important is this church to you? Do you benefit from Sunday morning worship? If you didn't attend this church, would you be spending more money on counseling or family activities or adult education programs? What would you do on Easter or Christmas Eve if you didn't come here? And how much are those services worth to you? Now this is admittedly a consumerist approach, but it is an honest value-for-services-rendered approach that we can understand.

Some years ago, the King of Siam came to the United States for an eye operation. His surgeon usually set his fees according to a patient's ability to pay, but he couldn't decide how much to charge the king. A thousand dollars, to be a good neighbor? \$5000 to match his usual fee? \$10,000 to prove the operation was worth the trip? Finally he decided to check with the king's lawyer in New York for advice. "No problem," said the lawyer. "The king is an honorable man. Like you, he understands value. Simply send him an invoice with no amount indicated, and add a handwritten note: *The king can do no wrong.*" So that's what he did. Back came a check for \$100,000. The surgeon was overjoyed. He bought his wife a mink coat, ordered two new Cadillacs, and blew the rest on a cruise around the world. When he got back,

his wallet was flattened but he was happy and refreshed. In the pile of mail that had accumulated while he was gone he found a bill from the king's lawyer. There was no amount indicated, but there was a handwritten note: "*The honorable doctor can do no wrong.*"

We are a little like the doctor as we consider our financial commitment to the church: so much value received, yet there is nobody standing over us telling us how much to give in return. It comes down to a matter of conscience. Will our financial commitment cost us enough to make it meaningful? If it does, "honorable church member can do no wrong"!

**Two: Tithe.** Tithing is simple and scriptural. It's simply 10% of grain, produce, oxen—whatever you have. Malachi links tithing to abundance and blessing when he says:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing (Mal. 3:10).

We don't have sheep, grain or vineyards, but it's easy enough to calculate 10% of gross income. The mailing you should have received at home includes a chart that makes it easy to see where your giving fits as a percentage of your gross income. Most of us are still well below the tithe level in our giving. If you want to embrace the scriptural norm of the tithe, one approach is to calculate what percent you are giving and commit yourself to move up incrementally, perhaps one to two percent year, until you reach the tithe.

**Option Number Three: Give until it feels *wonderful*.**

This brings us back to the widows we talked about earlier. I once met a woman whose amazing generosity made me reexamine my own fears about God's providence. I was in seminary at the time, traveling with three other Americans in a remote part of Mexico, where we were making a documentary about a farm project. One afternoon we visited the home of Sra. Reyes, the widowed mother of one of the employees of the project. The home was two tiny rooms, enclosed in a high wall. Goats and chickens ran freely about.

Sra. Reyes invited us to sit in the shade under an arbor on chairs borrowed from a neighbor. Meanwhile, she quietly gave instructions to her daughter to prepare a meal for her guests. We crowded into the dirt-floored kitchen to eat delicious chicken soup and tortillas. The chicken that had been killed in our honor was a big part of this woman's wealth. But in the economy of the heart, she could afford to give away everything she had. She knew the joy of giving without counting the cost.

As you give prayerful thought to your commitment to this church, consider these three approaches: weigh the value of services received; give a tithe or a percentage of your income; or surrender to the joy of giving without counting the cost. Keep in mind that God is concerned not with the quantity of your gift, but with its quality. What does your gift mean to you? How does it make you feel to give it? Are you giving to meet a quota, to meet a budget, or to meet a calling?

I encourage you to consider your pledge prayerfully, in a spirit of trust in God's amazing abundance, not in anxiety about "what you shall eat and what you shall drink and what you shall put on." In two weeks' time we will dedicate our pledges during the Sunday worship service, and then we will see what God will do with us as we entrust our future to God's keeping.

May this be a meaningful time of experiencing our blessings and responding to God with thanks.

Amen.