

A STEWARDSHIP NOTE

I would like to share some additional quotes from another chapter in the book, The Giving Myths: Giving Then Getting the Life You've Always Wanted by Steve McSwain. These quotes are from the chapter on the giving myth—"The Standard for Giving Is the Tithe".

In the Old Testament, there's no question that the tithe was the standard.

Tithing is mentioned dozens of times in the Old Testament alone. It might even be a good goal to challenge people of faith to aspire to today, given the decline in annual revenues in many churches the last few years. But to teach that tithing is the standard to follow today rests on a faulty reading of the New Testament. Tithing is not taught in the New Testament.

The New Testament simply does not hold up the tithe as the standard for giving.

Even a cursory reading of Jesus' teaching will reveal how infrequently he spoke about tithing. In fact, in those few places where Jesus did speak about giving, what you see him instructing people to do is to give it all away.

What did Jesus say about tithing? There are only two places where he even mentions it, and actually these are the same words but recorded by two different writers. In reality, then, we have only one thing he said about the subject, and what he did say was hardly in a complimentary tone. In Matthew 23: 23 (and the parallel passage in Luke 11: 42), Jesus says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

Admittedly, Jesus doesn't release the people of his day from the practice of tithing, but neither does he definitively instruct his followers, then or now, to practice it.

In Luke's Gospel, the rich young ruler is defending his religious life to Jesus by saying, among other things, that he has tithed all he possesses. But Jesus wasn't impressed. Jesus suggested that, to obtain eternal life, the rich young ruler would have to give away everything--not just tithe. This may be getting at the heart of Jesus' teaching about giving and what was likely the practice of his own life.

No specific amount or percentage is outlined anywhere in the New Testament. What is taught is that we simply give in response to and in gratitude for the experience of God's grace and God's gifts to us.

[Grace giving]

Giving is demonstrated in the New Testament as our direct response to God's grace. Since grace is God's unmerited gift to us, giving is our unmitigated gratitude to God.

Take Mary of Bethany (John 12: 1-3). Having experienced the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus, her response was to give and to do so extravagantly. She broke open an expensive bottle of perfume and lavishly poured it over his feet.

Jesus responded, "Let her alone, for she has done a beautiful thing for me" (Matt 26: 10). For those who have experienced the transforming miracle of divine grace at the deepest levels of human experience, there's an almost insatiable desire to give and give extravagantly. Extravagant giving is always the response to an extraordinary experience of grace.

In the case of Mary of Bethany, my own experience has taught me that there is a time in the life of every serious follower of God when a sincere longing rises within the soul to do something extravagant as an expression of gratitude to God. I suggest that if you ever have that impulse, act on it! Do something extravagant. It can be the prelude to discovering the life you've been looking for.

If you follow this impulse, your giving might defy explanation. Instead, when your life has been divinely transformed by grace, you'll find your response is spontaneous, genuine, extravagant, and, at least in your mind, logical. You'll suddenly find yourself on the road of the life you've always wanted.

If there is anything the New Testament teaches about giving, it is this: the deeper your experience of the divine, the higher your generosity will reach.

Follow your heart. If you'll keep moving in this direction and start giving as a response of gratitude to what you are feeling inside, you'll start experiencing the fullness of life that God desires for you. Ask him to show you how and where. He will and you'll know. The need will appear at just the right moment. Don't try to create it yourself. Wait on God. He'll bring the need right to you. This will be a little awkward at first, but with time and practice you'll become adept at knowing when and where God is prompting you to give.

Saint Paul said to the Corinthians: "You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves the person who gives cheerfully" (2 Cor 9: 7).

That's where it begins for any of us. The secret to finding the life you've always wanted begins by the giving of yourself completely to God. Don't assume that people who regularly attend religious services have done this. Many of them have not. Otherwise, their places of worship would not be having the financial problems I see in many of them. Some churches may be teeming with people, but that hardly means those crowds of people have either experienced grace or are living the life they've always wanted. The fact is, a discouragingly high percentage of them are not.

The financial crisis many religious communities face is a spiritual crisis. Until the church is willing to acknowledge this, the church will continue to see declining revenues. When the experience of God's grace becomes the centerpiece of Christian ministry, rather than adherence to expectations and rules, people will naturally and generously give.

When you've experienced God's grace embrace, you'll feel a longing greater than anything else you've ever felt--a longing to give yourself to him thoroughly and completely. And, yes, even financially. In fact, the greatest proof that you've experienced God's grace embrace may be this: the life you get when you give your jar of costly perfume and the gratitude you feel as God continually repairs and refills your jar--or, your life. Thank Mary of Bethany for that.