

## A Stewardship Note

I recently read the book, The Giving Myths: Giving Then Getting the Life You've Always Wanted by Steve McSwain. I would like to share some quotes from the book that might be a starting point for evaluating your own position on Christian giving.

"The life (of giving) I describe in this book will take courage to pursue and is not without its struggles. In fact, it's like a battle--and, although internal, it's a battle nonetheless. The pathway to the blessed life is neither heavily traveled nor easily traveled.

Jesus himself said, "The gateway to life is small, and the road is narrow, and only a few ever find it" (Matt 7: 14).

Before going any further, however, I offer a word of caution. Throughout the first steps you take on this journey, don't be surprised when your ego rears its ugly head. Your ego is the part of your personality that will try to get you to go back and chase after our culture's myth--the "happiness-is-in-what-you-get-in-life" myth, that "big lie" that defines your worth and importance by what you have, where you live, how much you make, the titles you've earned, and so forth. This ego is what is referred to as "flesh" in the New Testament, and it is that which has driven you toward a lifestyle devoted to the accumulation of more and more, duping you all along by the illusion that what you really want will be only found in the material stuff of life.

So stay strong. Tell your ego that it no longer occupies the driver's seat in your life. Ego will have to take the back seat. You're in the driver's seat now, and you're taking a different road. You have all the infinite resources of God to help you stay the course. He will occupy the seat beside you and, like an electronic navigation system in a rental car, he'll provide your internal spirit (the real you) the guidance you need for the journey. Eventually, your ego will subside and all but disappear. The cultural myth will be silenced in your soul and the life you've always wanted will be yours forever. You will face death with peace instead of fear because you'll know that the One to whom you have given yourself completely welcomes you as you step into the journey called eternity.

The happiest people are those who have learned (or are learning) to give away themselves and their resources.

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20: 35).

Again, the happiest, most contented people are those who are learning how to get outside of themselves and give themselves away.

You say, "I don't have any wealth"? Compared to whom? Of course, you do. If you could afford the purchase of this book, you've spent more money than half the world's population will earn in an entire week, maybe a month. Who do you think you're kidding? You may not have as much as Tom Cruise or Bill Gates or even your next-door neighbor. But you have more than most and you have much to give away. You might look around at others who live in more luxurious neighborhoods, make more money than you, drive more expensive cars, serve larger churches than you, or seem to get the most coveted promotions, and measure your worth by such insidious comparisons. But you have more than most in this world, and much of what God has given to you, he has done so with the intention that you will give some or all of it away. The Bible is unmistakably clear about this: "you will be enriched so that you can give even more generously" (2 Cor 9: 11).

When I talk about giving being the purpose of your life, don't misunderstand me. I'm not talking about token giving--the kind most frequently practiced by people in the pew. And outside the pew, I might add. I'm talking about generous giving--even outlandish giving, giving that often defies rational thinking. Giving that may go beyond tithing (the giving of 10 percent of your income away).

Saint Paul described this kind of giving in 2 Corinthians 9: 7: "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."

Growth in giving is that last frontier to conquer within your soul. But it must become your first priority if you want to experience the abundant life. That's a fact. If you haven't already, you'll soon discover that the cultivation of a generous heart is a formidable task. A charitable heart is difficult to develop. Everything in you conspires against it. Your ego will fight you for as long as it can. Nevertheless, you can conquer this if you avail yourself of the liberating power of God's Spirit whose presence is within you to enable you. Once this last frontier--your inner world--is conquered, every other area of your life will fall into place. When you get this right, you'll understand why Jesus talked so much about it. It is that one place where the greatest need exists for life change and transformation. If you permit God to change your heart and how you define your worth, you'll begin to experience a life filled with such incredible blessing and self-abandonment that it will defy explanation. You'll receive in return far more than you'll ever be able to give away.

I believe this is what God has done in His world. He is the creator of all things. He distributes His gifts to human beings as he wills. These gifts to us, however simple or complex, equal or unequal, express His hope in us. Everything we have--indeed everything we are--is an expression of His reckless hope that you and I will respectfully respond to His gracious trust and take responsible care of this world, treat all people as potential members of our own family, and share our abundance with everyone. Instead of giving based on the prompting of God's Spirit and in grateful response to God's grace and gifts, giving has become a competition to see who can give the largest gift and get the most recognition and praise.

You are blessed for only one purpose--so that you might be a blessing to others. God has given you all that you are and have in the hope that you will prove to be like the five-talent person in the story Jesus told. You ask, "Doesn't God know what I'll do with what he's given to me?" Frankly, I'm not sure he does. But that's a question you'll have to direct to the theologians. What I am sure about is that every talent, gift, and resource you and I have is a divine trust--a blessing given so that you might in turn be a blessing to this world.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Your giving never has to be cajoled or coerced when you've experienced grace.

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 religious leaders are 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.

In the spiritual realm, we are all sinners in need of grace and mercy. Sin means to "miss the mark." Some may miss the target only slightly while others are nowhere near. But in reference to the bull's-eye, and this is the point, everyone misses the mark. Both the woman of the street, who anointed Jesus' feet, and Simon, the respected religious Pharisee, needed the gift of grace. The difference is that the woman recognized the gift and received it. Simon did not and missed it.

The same is true in the church. The primary reason most church attendees are only marginally involved in the church is because their giving is minimal. It is here that church leaders must change the focus of their energy and message. I believe church leaders must challenge people not only to increase their giving but to grow in the grace of giving and do both without hesitation or apology. The end result will be greater involvement.

But I believe a broader understanding of involvement in kingdom-building causes will be seen and must be embraced by the church. As people learn to give their financial resources away more freely, they'll look for ways to be involved not only in the church but, more importantly, in the world. Both places of involvement must be embraced and advocated by the church.

If you are giving financially but not involved personally, your giving is nominal at best. When giving is great enough, however, to "hurt" so to speak, then your involvement will be automatic. "Where your treasure is, there your heart and mind will also be," said Jesus.

It was Jesus himself who gave his followers the metaphor of "salt." If the church is like a saltshaker and Jesus' followers are like salt themselves, then for that salt to have any worthwhile impact on its environment, it must be released from the shaker. The goal of the church should not be to see how full the shaker can get, but how much salt the shaker can disperse into the social, economic, and political structures of this world.

It is true God has asked people to do some rather remarkable things. The Bible is replete with such examples. Your own life may be, too. But in every instance, I know of no person God has ever "hung out to dry." All God asks is that you start where you are. Then, in time, as you demonstrate your willingness to make good use of what He's given and to trust Him for the results, you'll have more and greater opportunities to be generous. This is how His universe works."

If you would like to read the entire short paperback book, ask to borrow a copy from one of the council members, and then, in the spirit of the book, buy a copy for someone else.

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