Stewardship Sunday

2. Give till it hurts. God did. (John 3:16)
3. Give dangerously. God dares you. (Proverbs 3:9,10)

November 29, 2015

The devotions this morning have to do with stewardship, which many people consider to be a fancy word the church has dreamed up to avoid saying the word "money." And the stereotype of churches when it comes to money is that they're always asking for it and that they play on your guilt to get you to give it.

It's an unfortunate stereotype. First of all, it's unfortunate because stewardship is not about giving to "the church." It's about giving to God. It's impossible to have a correct understanding of stewardship without realizing that.

Another reason that such a stereotype is unfortunate is because stewardship is about much more than money. Because God has given us much more than money, and we have much more to give God than our money. We also have time and abilities which we can offer to him. In these devotions the examples I give and the applications I make will primarily have to do with money. However, the opportunities we have to serve God with our time and our talents are just as numerous as the opportunities we have to serve God with our treasures. That’s why the apostle Paul encourages us to offer "our bodies"--that is, our entire beings--as "living sacrifices." (Romans 12:1)

The stereotype is also unfortunate because many churches and many sermons have contributed to that stereotype by doing exactly what the stereotype says--constantly talking about money and playing on people's guilt to get it.

The biggest and most important reason that it's unfortunate is because churches and pastors that do that--play on people's guilt--are not pleasing God. They're not pleasing God because they encourage giving out of guilt rather than love, and because they sometimes appear to equate how much you give with how much you love God--when the person who joyfully gives 10% of their income is actually giving a much more pleasing gift than the person who guiltily gives 15% of their income in hopes of appeasing God, or the person who gives 20% of their income because "the church is way behind budget."

That's not the way the Bible encourages us to give--out of guilt--and it's not the way that I intend to encourage you to give. I intend to encourage you to give by "playing on" your joy and your gratitude--your joy about everything God has done for you, and your gratitude which expresses itself in a desire to do everything you can to thank God.

That's not to say that we won't feel any guilt today. If you're anything like most of us, when you take a step back today and compare what God has done for us with what we are doing for him, we will likely feel guilt. And when we step back and compare what we are doing to thank him compared with what we could be doing to thank him, we will feel guilty.

We will feel guilty because we will realize that our giving out of love does not measure up to God's giving out of love. But as we look at that, let's not look at that as a source of guilt--for Jesus has in great love taken away those sins. Let's look at it rather as an opportunity, an opportunity for us to better serve our great and gracious and loving--and giving--God.

We'll look at three opportunities we have.
Give Until the Carts Overflow with Abundance. God does.
Psalm 65:9-13

You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it. You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops. You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness. The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing. (NIV)

Wow. What kind of a land did you picture when I read those verses?
I'll admit, I have a hard time picturing a land like that. I tried. I tried this morning from the moment I got out my comfortable bed. I thought about it as I turned on the shower and adjusted the temperature exactly how I wanted it. I still couldn't picture it as I stood in front of my closet and tried to choose from one of the many ties I own. As I went to the kitchen, I stopped considering it for a moment—because I had to choose between eggs, cereal, fruit and doughnuts for breakfast. After making my decision, I went back to dreaming about living in such a land. But as I walked out of the garage past the car that I sometimes use to drive one mile to the grocery store…

I think you see the point I'm driving at. The picture the psalmist paints is a pretty accurate picture of living in the United States. If anything, the psalmist's picture isn't ambitious enough, is it?

We live in one of the richest nations on earth. You ask just about anyone who has visited the United States. They may not tell you that they would like to live here, they may not tell you that they enjoyed their stay here, but unless they are unbelievably obstinate, they will admit that we are unbelievably rich both in the range (the width) and the abundance (the depth) of our possessions.

And most of us here are some of the richer people in this country. Oh, we don't think of ourselves that way perhaps. Maybe because our next door neighbor has more. Or maybe because we don't yet own...fill in the blank. But most of us are in the top 50% of people in this country. And all of us—every last one of us—have more than we need. Far more than we need.

Your carts may not be overflowing with abundance, but your closets probably are. And your valleys may not be mantled with grain, but I'll bet your pantries and your freezers are mantled with grain and food of every variety.

I'm not saying this for the purpose of making you feel guilty--although I would imagine that anyone who has ever stood in front of their closet and said, "I don't have anything to wear" is maybe feeling a little guilty right now.

I don't say it to make you feel guilty, but to make God look great. Look at what he has given us, and look at what he continues to give us. God says that if we have food and clothing, we should be content. God could be content to give us that, and we would be compelled to praise him for his great love. But God isn't content to fill our carts. God makes them overflow.

What about us? Are we content to merely fill God's carts? Having a balanced budget in the congregation and even some money going to missions, do we decide that God should be content?

Or do we want to make God's carts overflow? Looking at the great things God has accomplished, do we want God to be content? Or do we want to fill the carts to overflowing and see what greater things he can accomplish through us? God has given to us until our carts are overflowing with abundance. Praise be to God for the opportunity to do the same!
Give until it hurts. God did.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. (NIV)

Think of the person you love the most in the world. Think about how dear they are to you and what it means to have them in your life. Now think about losing them. Think about losing them in a terrible tragedy. Think about losing them years before you were done with them. Think of losing your spouse after only a few years of what was supposed to be a long and wonderful marriage. Think about losing your children at the age where they were moving from being your dearly loved child to being your dearly loved child and one of your dear friends. To say that it would hurt would be to put it mildly.

Now imagine not only that such a thing happened, but that you allowed it for the good of someone else. Suppose you encouraged that person to stay on a sinking ship while giving the last life jacket to a stranger.

Could you do it? Or how about doing it for the person who cut you off in traffic, the person who cuts you down in front of others, the person who never does anything nice for you? Could you give up the person you love most for the sake of such a person?

God did. God gave up his Son Jesus to a very painful death, to death on a cross, so that our sins would be paid for, so that we could be saved. God gave Jesus into death so we could live. And Jesus willingly gave himself. Do you think that hurt God? Do you think that hurt Jesus? Of course it did. Praise God that he gave till it hurt!

If God had decided not to give till it hurt, Jesus would never have come down to earth. If Jesus had decided that he was going to give only up to the point at which it began to hurt, he never would have been arrested, much less tried, sentenced and crucified. And all this for you and me--people who had never given anything to God except back talk, rebellion, and spite.

Give till it hurts. God did. At this point, maybe you feel this talk has degenerated into cheap theatrics. You might feel as though I'm playing on your emotions here. But if emotion isn't a part of God-pleasing giving, what is? God himself says that he loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7) And that's the emotion I'm trying to play on--gratitude. Not guilt. It's true that God doesn't love a guilty giver. But God loves a giver who is filled with joy at the great love of God shown through the sacrifice of his Son, a giver who cheerfully gives till it hurts. If you hear the story of what God has done for you, if you hear that not only has God given you earthly things until your carts are overflowing with abundance, but also that God has given until it actually hurt him, if you hear that, you ought to feel some emotion. An emotion of overwhelming gratitude. A feeling that we want to return the favor--that we want to give till it hurts.

Do you feel that emotion? Do you want to give till it hurts? Be careful what you wish for. Because here's what it means to give till it hurts. It doesn't mean that we give the money we really couldn't find a decent use for anyway. It doesn't mean that when we make our giving plans for 2016 we say, "Yeah, if I really wanted to, I could add "surround sound" speakers to my TV—but I think the sound is already pretty good and anyway, I really ought to give as much to God as I gave last year."

That's being like me if someone asks if I'm giving up anything for Lent, and I say I'm giving up golfing. The fact is that I only golf 1-2 times a year anyway—and almost never during the Lenten months. That's giving from the unwanted excess—if it can even be called giving at all. It’s certainly not giving till it hurts.
Giving till it hurts means saying, "I really love going out with my wife once a week. If I cut back to once every two weeks, that will hurt. But I could take that $700 and give it to God." That's giving till it hurts.

Do you want a real surprise? Want to get a close up, ugly look at the sinful nature that still lives in you? Want to learn just how powerful that old man still is? Go home today and think about some of the things you really love. And then think about giving them up and giving the money to God. Then sit back and be surprised by all the reasons that come into your head why you shouldn't do such a thing. Be surprised by all the ways you find to rationalize away such an idea.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that you should live on bread and water. And I'm not even saying that you shouldn't eat out. But don't let anyone--especially the devil and your sinful nature—convince you that you owe these things to yourself, as though you have somehow earned that right. And don't let anyone tell you that there comes a time when it's enough for God and now you have to indulge yourself. The temptation to think those thoughts will be there. It was there for Jesus. But he kept on giving until it hurt. Just as God gave till it hurt. Praise be to God for the opportunity to honor him by doing the same!

Give dangerously. God dares you to.
Proverbs 3:9,10

Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. (NIV)

In addition to having the opportunity to give until the carts overflow, in addition to having the opportunity to give until it hurts, we also have the opportunity to give dangerously--because God dares you to.

(Actually, the term "give dangerously" is a bit misleading, but we'll get to that in a moment.)

To give dangerously is to give to God from our firstfruits--and to be committed to it. To give to God from our firstfruits is to make our giving plans for 2016 before we have made our spending plans. That's "dangerous" because it means that instead of giving God what's left over after we've finished buying the things we want to buy and doing the things that we want to do, we're the ones who have the leftovers.

And to be committed to that is particularly dangerous--and difficult. If we had planned to take a vacation with what we expected would be left over once we had given God the firstfruits, what happens when a major, unavoidable expense arises?

Do we still honor the Lord with our wealth, with our firstfruits, and face the very real possibility that we'll need to give up our vacation, or do we have the attitude of the girl who was given two dollars by her father--one that she could spend at the candy store, and the other to give to God on Sunday. As she skipped to the candy store, one of the dollars blew out of her hand and down a sewer. She looked at it sadly and said, "There goes God's dollar!"

When our finances change, do we say "There goes God's dollar"--and even think that we have some justification for doing so, since God should have kept that dollar from going down the sewer (or into the pockets of the man who rebuilt the transmission, or the orthodontist, or...)

Many people would consider it dangerous--foolhardy, even--to do anything other than that--as though pretty soon we're going to end up having to choose between giving to God and feeding our family.

Do you really think God will force you to make that choice? Have you ever tried him on it?
God says he won't force you to make that choice. He says that when we honor him with our
wealth and when we give our firstfruits he'll fill our barns to overflowing and make our vats brim
over with new wine. God doesn't say this as a bribe--although such passages are used that way by
churches eager for money. People giving to God in an effort to force him into giving them more
aren't giving in a way that pleases God.

God doesn't say this as a bribe, but as a promise. He's saying, "Don't worry. I won't let you
outgive me. You worry about honoring me by giving to me out of your firstfruits, and I'll take care
of all the rest. I'll give you so many clothes that your closets will be filled to overflowing. I'll give
you so much food that your pantries and freezers are mantled with grain and fresh food of every
sort."

Elsewhere, God speaks of this kind of "dangerous" giving in terms of a dare. In Malachi he
says to the Israelites, "Test me in this"--and then he goes on to promise "See if I will not throw open
the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store
it." (Malachi 3:10).

If you've never given dangerously, I hope you will. And if you have, you've known the joy
that comes from giving to God first, trusting fully in him to provide for you--and then seeing him
do exactly that!

Actually, for the Christian such giving isn't really that daring (because to trust in the
promises of God is the safest and most certain move a Christian can make), and it's dangerous only
in the eyes of a world that doesn't realize the goodness of God.

As you make your giving plans for the future, I'm not going to tell you how much to give.
I'm not going to give you an amount. I'm not going to give you a percentage. I won't tell you what
level of lifestyle you should lead, either. God hasn't done any of these things, and so neither will I.
But although God hasn't told us how much to give, he has told us how to give. So before you make
your giving plan using exactly the same formula as always, ask yourself these questions. Am I
giving to God as he has given to me--until the carts are overflowing? Am I giving to God as he has
given to me--am I giving until it hurts my sinful nature? Am I giving to God dangerously--with a
commitment to trust in him to provide for me? Then, with joy in your hearts, make your giving
plan--a plan that will praise and "honor the Lord with your wealth." Amen.