

Celebrate Generosity 1

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship Romans 12:1-2

Introduction:

Samuel Clemens, better known as “Mark Twain,” was once on a train car with a Mormon back in the days when that church practiced polygamy or multiple wives. The Mormon was bragging throughout his journey about how great it is to have more than one wife. In fact, he insisted that Solomon had many wives. There is nothing in the Bible that forbids having more than one wife.

Mark Twain replied, “I may not be too well-read in the Scriptures, but I seem to recall a passage that says, “A man cannot serve two masters.”

The point that Mark Twain wanted to make is that we all must choose which God we will worship.

On this first Sunday of the “Celebrate Generosity” series, we are talking about “Giving as an act of Worship.”

I shall also try to integrate this theme with our Gospel lesson on “The Rich Man and Lazarus.”

- The lesson opens with a rich man who is dressed in purple and fine linen. This means it was imported from the richer nations—not a Chinese sweatshop. His clothes are like from London or some place in Switzerland.
- Being wealthy and having money in and of itself is not wrong! There are many good people in the Bible with money and wealth: Joseph in Genesis, King Solomon, Joseph of Armithea in the gospels, Zacchaeus had much money.
- The Book of Proverbs and even Ecclesiastes reminds us that it is good to enjoy the fruits of our labor and wealth. Having wealth and money and of itself is not “evil” in the Bible.
- It is when we tend to think that it makes us “better” than other people. It is when we tend to make it into a false “god” along with our own God of the Bible that it becomes hurtful.

In today’s lesson, we are asked by St. Paul to give all that we have as a spiritual worship to God.

God has given us all that we own and possess. All of life is a gift from God.

Some might object and say, “Listen here, I went to school, built a business and worked hard for all of what I possess. What do you mean I should give it all to God as a way to Worship God?”

But one only has to see on the stock market or Fortune 500 businesses as well as now “rich people” are Billionaires—rather than millionaires today, to see that money is here today and gone tomorrow.

All that we have in terms of abilities, brains, physical gifts and family—are gifts from God.

We came into this world with nothing and will leave the same way in terms of material wealth.

The Rich Man in Luke 16 forgot that all that he has is from God. It is not his own. It is only on loan from God while he is living.

- To forget those who are less gifted is to place one at a higher level than one of God’s creation.
- In the Amos 6 text, the prophet is critical of those who “forget the poor,” not for being rich and of themselves.
- Lazarus, the poor man only wants some of the Rich Man’s food. He is not expecting the Rich Man to kill the “fatted calf” or give him a coupon for the “Olive Garden or Red Lobster.”
- All God wants is a portion of our bounty.

In the days of the Old Testament, the people would bring cows, chickens, grain and other crops to the altar. The priests would literally burn it. This would be like burning dollar bills today. This was to show that God is to get some of their bounty back. It was a gift to begin with.

Then, as time marched on, the wisdom of the community of faith was to give to the temple, poor and community needs. In this way, they are serving God.

They were to give of their first fruits, not leftovers.

One day the Butterball Turkey Company got a phone call from a lady who had a one-year turkey sitting in her freezer. She asked if it is good to eat. The Customer Service clerk said, it is OK to eat, but it will be dry and not taste as good. So the lady told the Butterball Turkey representative, “Good, I will donate it to the church then.”

This is NOT what God intended. This is not worship. It is giving God “leftovers.”

The reality is that God does own all that we have! He gave it to us to glorify his name and become lights to other people while we are here.

The Law is that we do not like to talk about “money, politics and sex” in church—some say in that order!

It is like the Fighting Middle Ages Gaul Soldier who got baptized by immersion. While he was getting baptized, he had his whole body go under water—except his right hand. When asked later why he kept his right hand out of the water, he replied, “This is my sword hand, and I want to keep it to do with what I like, and not give it to God.”

The Gospel is that God wants us to grow spiritually and have a meaningful life that is beyond all material wealth.

The modern commentary on this story is some people in the church hold their right hand and their wallets out of the water while getting baptized.

Romans 12:1-2 says that God wants all of our life to worship him. This is a spiritual sacrifice.

How does one grow in spirituality? We are to give all to God—without expecting immediate returns or practical rewards. We do this to God because he first gave to us.

The ultimate gift was his son Jesus the Christ, who died on the cross for our sins, so we may have eternal life.

Giving back to God is a way of saying “Thank you for new life after every death.”

Giving is a way of saying, “Our hope and fulfillment in life belongs to YOU oh God, NOT television, entertainment, possessions and toys—though they are not BAD in themselves. They are only bad when we act like the Rich Man in Luke 16, and think that elevates us above others.

When we give to God:

- We do it for the sake of saying, “Thank you” to God.
- We do it for the sake of the community of faith called the church.
- We do it for our own spiritual growth.
- We do it because we are reminded in the God who really gives our lives meaning, when all other forces may die, leave us or evaporate.

In this “Celebrate “Generosity” ministry of Stewardship, we are invited to see our giving as an act of Spiritual Growth as Romans 2 discusses.

For the Romans, the Empire just wanted the people’s taxes. They will take all that they can get! The pagan world wanted the people’s money for wine, and entertainment. Anybody with a child knows that entertainment games are a bottomless pit when it comes to spending money on toys and computer games.

The God of Israel and the Church simply want a portion of our money as a way to grow Spiritually, as individual Christians and as a church.

St. Paul reminds the people in Rome that the God whom they worship wants them to grow spiritually. The mind and body grow old. The spirit lives on unto eternity. Giving a portion back to God of what he has first given us is a path to Spiritual Growth.

Talking about “money” is sensitive to many people. Hucksters and fast talkers might have hurt us. But today, this is your local congregation of St. Mark Lutheran Church on the corner of Lincoln and Johnson Streets who loves each person who is speaking to us.

Please prayerfully consider what kind of giving God has invited us to consider.

To conclude:

We read in Acts 11, Romans 15, 1 Corinthians 16, and 2 Corinthians 8-9, that St. Paul tried hard to gather offerings for the Jerusalem Church. It was a church that was struggling. It was a church that was at the margins of the huge Temples of other religious groups. They needed help badly.

This was the church that James led. Paul and James did not agree on this Justification by Faith idea. James says, “Faith without works is nothing.” Paul says, “The Just Shall live by Faith alone.” Much theology has been written about these two opposing sides in the church. These men probably did not even like each other—both being “Type A Extroverted Personalities, that clashed!.

But still, Paul put these differences aside for the sake of the gospel. Today, that would be like a Baptist Church in Ohio giving money to a struggling Catholic church with sex scandal court settlements.

We give to God to glorify the Kingdom and grow spiritually. We give as way to say, “Thank you to God for all he has given us.” If two strong personalities in the New Testament times can agree on this point, then Scripture suggests that this is a good pattern for the church of all times—including ours here at St. Mark in Ada, Ohio. Amen.

Works cited:

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