

BASIC BIBLE KNOWLEDGE

17. STEWARDSHIP: GIVING TO GOD

I wish to consider with you the Christian's use of money toward the support of God's work. This is a subject fraught with misconception and confused thinking, even among old-timers in Church. It is also a touchy topic, for no one likes another to touch his or her purse! However, as members of Christ's family, let us put aside all sensitivity and ceremony; rather let us examine the subject in the light of God's Word, to our mutual edification and benefit.

Firstly, let us consider some common attitudes in giving towards the support of the Church. "If I like the Pastor or Session, I'll give more." "Others give, so I'd better give too." "The offering bag is coming! Quick, drop something in!" "Nobody knows, I'll give as little as I can." "Let the rich members give. Wait till I earn more." These are some of the common but erroneous attitudes which Christians adopt, largely due to ignorance of Biblical teaching. As a result of such ignorance, the blessing of giving is turned into a burden. Many Christians then lose the blessing, while God's work is not adequately supported and the Gospel programme is hindered. In such a situation nobody gains but Satan.

Some Biblical Principles

What is the Bible teaching on material possessions? Let me enumerate four important principles.

1. **WE OWN NOTHING.** "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Timothy 6:7). Job said: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave and the LORD hath taken away" (Job 1:21). The Lord said: "Every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills ... the world is mine and the fulness thereof" (Psalm 50:10,12). God is Creator and Sustainer, Provider and Protector. It is only by His grace and mercy that we, His creatures, are able to acquire wealth and own property.
2. **WE ARE STEWARDS.** Every Christian is a steward, put in charge of what he possess - time and talents, property and money. We are to manage all these wisely for our Master.
3. **GOD'S WORK MUST BE SUPPORTED BY GOD'S PEOPLE.** The continuing work of salvation through the Gospel is entrusted to us. It is our responsibility, nay, privilege to see to its adequate support.
4. **WE MUST BE FAITHFUL.** The Lord expects this of every true believer. The Apostle Paul exhorts us, "It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2). All that we have should be used to the glory of God's name. In so doing, then, we acknowledge the sovereignty of God in our lives. As we so give to Him, it becomes an act of worship: "All that we have is thine. Be gracious to accept it, Lord, for thy use."

A Christian is a traveller - Passing Through

But alas! Many Christians fail to grasp this spiritual truth. Instead, they just grasp all that they can for themselves. They are dazzled and charmed by the attractions of this world and its riches. They forget that the Christian, although in the world, is not of the world, and indeed he has no real lasting part or inheritance in it. He is a traveller, a pilgrim, only passing through. In the words of Paul, "Our citizenship is in Heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ."

We need to constantly remind ourselves that we are heavenly citizens. Then we will not fall into the snare of concentrating our attention on the needs and attractions of this transient earthly existence. So the Lord says to us, "Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:25,33). It is a matter of priorities; first things first. If we put God first, and give Him the rightful place in our lives, He promised to supply all our earthly needs. The trouble is our faith is so weak that we dare not take Him at His word, and consequently we bring much needless worry and anxiety on ourselves.

The traveller in a far country would not for a moment dream of furnishing his hotel room with expensive articles. His one burning desire is to be home, and while he conducts his business in that foreign land out of necessity, he is certainly not willing to be involved in any kind of elaborate plans, which have no bearing on his ultimate destination. His affection is to his home, and he orders his actions accordingly. Similarly, the Christians must regard this earth as his very temporary abode. His vision must extend beyond this world and its passing attractions to behold the Heavenly home above. "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: ... are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). We should set our affections "on things above, and not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2).

Where is your Treasure?

What does our Lord say on the matter of a Christian's attitude towards his worldly possessions? First and foremost, He lays down a command, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth ... But lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven" (Matthew 6:19,20). Our Lord leaves us in no doubt what He means, and what He expects of us Christians. If any of us should find ourselves receiving a poor reward when we meet the Lord because we have laid up earthly treasures which we have had to leave behind on earth, we shall have no one to blame but ourselves.

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth." What does He mean by this? "Treasure" is a broad term and includes all those things which we value most highly. And what determines whether a thing is a treasure or not is our attitude towards it. It is not so much what a person has but how he regards what he has. Therefore our Lord's command applies to all of us, rich and poor alike.

The great danger is for Christian people to get their satisfaction from things of this world - temporal things which we have to leave behind one day.

Our Lord therefore warns us against focusing our thoughts and interests entirely on this present life - lay not up treasures upon earth. "Don't pin all your hopes on houses or land, career, status or position, husband or wife or children, or anything which demands your total affection. No matter what it is, if it takes first place before heavenly and everlasting things, then you are guilty of laying up treasures on earth!" This is the message we must not miss.

Some Christians may be under the misconception that having obtained salvation they have arrived, and there is little else they need do. And so they build their hopes and ambitions on earth, caring little for the support of the Lord's work. So says our Lord: "Stop now, you are pursuing a foolish and dangerous course, because on earth, moth and rust doth corrupt, and thieves break through and steal" (Matthew 6:19). Nothing in this world is immune from moth, rust and thief - from change and decay, from loss and mishap. We see it all the time around us, in society, in the world at large, in our own lives, in our very homes. Nothing is permanent and secure: investments fail us, valuables are stolen, stocks and shares tumble, money shrinks through inflation or devaluation, natural disasters of fire, flood, and earthquake damage and destroy. Why then, dear Christian people, says our Lord, do you lay your treasures on earth? We must not hold these things close to our hearts. They are not part of us and never can be.

"But lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal" (Matthew 6:20). This is the other side of the picture, and what a wonderful contrast to the previous verse. There is the heavenly domain, our Heavenly Father has prepared a place for each of us, free from the attacks of moth, rust and thief. In Heaven there is nothing impure, no sin, no decay or corruption, no growing old or out of fashion. It is the realm of eternal life and eternal light. It is perfect, and the everlasting treasures of soul and spirit belong there in Heaven. And Heaven is our home. Nothing can take it from us or spoil it, for the great God Almighty Himself has graciously and wondrously prepared it for us, and even now He is keeping it reserved for us His children, and waiting for us to inherit it. Catch a glimpse of this glorious vision and we shall henceforth direct our entire hope and ambition heavenwards, in the words of Peter, "to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in Heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4), where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal.

Close to the Heart

But there is an even more compelling reason against laying up treasures on earth. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21). This is a statement of profound spiritual meaning. A man's treasure holds his heart. If his treasures are on earth, then his heart is earthbound and he becomes a captive of his own worldly possessions. He is in a very serious condition. Even Christians, and old-timers, often do not realize that the world and its good can and do exert a very powerful influence control on one's life. We see the subtle and gradual change in men's lives as they succeed and prosper. Slowly but surely, the base and corruptible material values take over and displace the spiritual.

Many a young Christian start out with zest and zeal to serve the Lord and to support His work, but over the years as he goes through college and university or goes into the world of business and finance, his heart is captivated by worldly treasures. Eventually, his outlook becomes essentially worldly. His love for God and His kingdom grows cold. How then can he yet support the Lord's work? So, you see the very real and grave danger facing us and our young

people. Only the constant indwelling of the Holy Spirit can protect a Christian from this danger.

There is yet another reason why we should not lay up treasures on earth. “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24). This is a solemn and serious warning. Two opposing forces are claiming our allegiance, God and mammon.

Mammon means the world and its wealth, and it is constantly bidding for our love and affection. And so with God. He wants us to serve Him with our whole being, not merely part of us. Our Lord says, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength” (Mark 12:30) and again “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37).

It is a total demand on us: our body, our will and desires, our plans and intentions, our strength and ability, our possessions and wealth - all these are to be used for the service of God. There is no room for compromise. “Either he will hate the one and love the other.” It is “either ... or”. You cannot serve God and mammon.

If a Christian puts the world first, devotes his energies and talents to the pursuit of worldly things, his love for heavenly things will proportionately diminish and grow cold. His attitude toward the Church will change. Then no longer will he be able to give the loving support that he should. It is either God or mammon, and, Christian friends, we must make very sure by constantly examining ourselves that we are not serving the wrong master.

How Shall We Give?

How shall we lay up treasures in Heaven? How much of one's income should one devote to the support of the Lord's work? We shall not lay down a rule or figure. Our giving must be out of spontaneous gratitude and not by compulsion of law. As we have said before, it is a matter between a Christian and his Lord. If that relationship is right then the giving raises no problem. It will certainly be a generous and liberal giving of one's utmost. For Zacchaeus it was half, for the widow - all.

When one's giving has to be painfully extracted in absurdly small sums, then there must be something seriously wrong with one's relationship with the Lord. Our giving must ever be a measure of our deep love and undying devotion for Him. It must bear a right proportion to the blessings which we have so freely received out of His hand. The more we love Him, the more we will give. The more grateful we are, the more will we want to support His work. This is only natural and reasonable. We cannot justify our giving a pittance by saying, “It is the heart that counts.”

What would the young lady think of her young man if he should present her with a plastic engagement ring, saying, “It is the heart that counts.” We must take care that we do not honour the Lord with our lips and insult Him in our giving.

We have all heard of the Biblical command to tithe. This is God's ordained means of grace and blessings. It is also an important aspect of our worship. Yet only a small percentage of

Christians practise it regularly. This is because many Christians have not understood the truth, or they have not the faith to carry it out. Let me say this: for those who really love the Lord and have been blessed with plenty, the tithe is only a beginning and a minimum.

I firmly believe that tithing is meant for all Christians, for, no matter how much or how little we receive, the tithe is reasonable, practical and feasible. Furthermore, it carries a promise of blessing to the giver as we read in Malachi 3, for the Lord promises to “open the windows of Heaven, and pour out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it.” God’s promise are true, and He is no man’s debtor. What we lack is not funds but faith. O, we of little faith!

Tithers Testify

Some among us refuse to tithe for no good reason. Let us stop and think for a moment. We are mindful to give the restaurant waiter his 10% tip for the meal he serves us. Why then should we neglect to give God His 10% for giving us strength and ability to earn the money to buy the meal? And how shall we thank Him for the appetite without which we could not have enjoyed the meal, even if we had the money to buy it? Because God is gracious and lenient, He leaves this aspect of our worship to us. Shall we take advantage and withhold from Him what is His?

Indeed, all that we have and all that we are belong to Him, even the very breath in our nostrils. Shall we not show Him our hearts of love and devotions in the giving of regular tithes and offerings? Let us know this one thing: no Christian who tithed has suffered or become poorer because of it.

Robert LeTourneau as a young Christian proposed to begin tithing when his financial position was better. Within a year he was near bankruptcy. Realizing the folly of holding back from God, he immediately took a step in faith and began to tithe. Within a short time God opened Heaven’s windows and LeTourneau became one of the biggest manufacturers of heavy earth-moving equipment in the world. Then instead of giving God one-tenth, he gave nine-tenths, keeping only one-tenth for himself, for by then he had become a multi-millionaire.

As a boy of sixteen, William Colgate left home to seek his fortune in New York, with only a small bundle of personal belongings, an elementary knowledge of soap-making, and the determination to put God first in his life. Reading in his Bible how God commanded the giving of the tithe, the young man obeyed by making ten cents in every dollar sacred to the Lord. In New York he joined another man in a soap-making business. He did not forget his earlier resolution to give the Lord one-tenth.

Later his partner died and left the entire business to him. Blessings from Heaven began to flow in ever-increasing torrents, and as he prospered he gave more and more to the Lord, until eventually, he gave all to Him.

Steps to Blessing

Let me conclude with a few practical suggestions. As children of our Heavenly Father, and citizens of His Kingdom, let us lay up treasures in Heaven by meaningful and honest giving in support of God's work. Let us extend our vision beyond our own Church circle and support the work of missions so that souls may be saved into His kingdom. Let us engage in works of compassion and charity towards those in need. Let us give the Lord His portion now and not put it off till "times are better". Let not the schoolboy or girl say, "Wait till I earn," or the earner say, "Wait till I earn a little more."

All these excuses profit no one except mammon. If the schoolboy is unwilling to give God ten cents from his dollar, he will more likely than not withhold the giving of \$10 to God from his first \$100 salary. And this same grasping, ungenerous spirit will dominate his heart when he is rich. Let our giving be systematic and regular, even as the Apostle Paul commands: "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him" (1 Corinthians 16:2). Let us give joyfully, "not grudgingly, or of necessity, for God loveth a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). Let us as true Christians resolve by faith to show our love in tithes and offerings to our Lord, who "though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich." "Therefore see that we abound in this grace also" (2 Corinthians 8:9,7).