

“AS HE MAY PROSPER”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 7, 1965, at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

How long has it been since you heard a sermon on the subject of giving? The chances are that it has been a good while. Critics of religion, those who stand outside the church and find fault with it, have often charged, “All they preach about is money.” This has led many of us to become a bit squeamish about preaching on the subject of giving. We have shied away from sermons about money.

To be exact, I have checked my records concerning the sermons which I have preached at this place, and I find that I last spoke on giving on Sunday evening, December 6, 1964, when I presented a message on the theme, “The Right Use of Money.” The last time that I spoke on the subject of giving on a Sunday morning was August 9, 1964, when the subject was “Leave It To The Lord”--a sermon emphasizing that Christians ought to remember the Lord in their wills. Frankly, with these facts before me, I am a bit embarrassed at my failure to speak on this vital responsibility of Christians. Especially do I feel that I have neglected this theme when I realize that the New Testament devotes more space to man’s financial responsibilities than it does to many other important themes. More is said about stewardship, for example, than is said about baptism or worship. The Lord and his apostles did not hesitate to emphasize that man must not center his life upon material things, but rather that he must be willing to leave them as he becomes a disciple of his Lord.

God’s Teaching on Giving

In our message today I should first like to repeat the clear teaching of the New Testament. Let us begin with several of the passages of instruction written by the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth, as he was guided by the Holy Spirit. In I Cor. 16:1-2, he wrote, “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I gave order to the churches of Galatia, so also do ye. Upon the first day of the week let each one of you lay by him in store, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come.” Paul had taught this to several churches in Galatia; now he teaches it as a universal plan for Christians everywhere. Upon the Lord’s day, when Christians customarily come together to worship, they are to give in proportion as they have prospered in order that the needs of their Lord’s cause may be met, without the need of emergency collections.

In II Cor. 8:1-9 he continued, “Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God which hath been given in the churches of Macedonia; how that in much proof of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.” Notice that the Macedonian Christians were liberal out of their deep poverty. “For according to their power I bear witness, yea and beyond their power, they gave of their own accord, beseeching us with much entreaty in regard of this grace and the fellowship in the ministering to the saints: and this, not as we had hoped, (an alternate translation suggests not as we had expected) but first they gave their own selves to the Lord, and to us through the will of God.”

Notice here the crucially important fact that they first gave themselves. “Insomuch that we exhorted Titus, that, as he had made a beginning before, so he would also complete in you this grace also. But as ye abound in everything, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all earnestness, and in your love to us. see that ye abound in this grace also. I speak not by way of commandment, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity also of your love. For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might become rich.”

Notice finally in this important passage that the real motivation for our wanting to be generous in the Cause of Christ is his initial love for us. Pause for a moment and think of the generosity that our Lord has showered upon us: life itself, physical health, family and loved ones, opportunities for education, opportunities for employment, a land of freedom and opportunity, and many other blessings. Then, to these add the greatest of all blessings, the spiritual blessings of forgiveness of sins, the adding of eternal purpose to our lives, and the divine nature that is within Us. When we comprehend even a part of God’s vast blessings for us, which were given liberally out of his love for us, then inevitably we want to love him back by giving generously to his Cause.

In II Cor. 9:6-11, Paul added, “But this I say, he that soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Let each man do according as he has purposed in his heart: not grudgingly or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound unto you; that ye, having always all sufficiency in everything, may abound unto every good work: as it is written, He hath scattered abroad, he hath given to the poor; his righteousness abideth forever. And he that supplieth seed to the sower and bread for food, shall supply and multiply your seeds for sowing, and increase the fruits of your righteousness: ye being enriched in everything unto all liberality, which worketh through us thanksgiving to God.”

The Lord Himself

From the writing of the apostle Paul, we now turn back to the words of the Lord himself. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven,

where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also.” (Matt. 6:19-21). Notice particularly that our Lord says that our hearts follow our treasure. Where our money is, there will be our hearts also.

In Luke 6:38, Christ added, “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, shall they give into your bosom. For with what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again.”

Finally, I would remind you of the parables which our Lord told, such as that found in Matt. 25: 14-30, in which he plainly declared that man is God’s steward. The idea is that expressed by David in the opening verse of the 24th Psalm, “The earth is Jehovah’s, and the fullness thereof: the world, and they that dwell therein.” Man enters this world with nothing; man leaves this world with nothing. Everything that he is and everything that he has, he receives from God. As God’s steward, he uses this bounty for the years that he is privileged to live and then must make an accounting to God. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.” (I Cor. 4:2). Man’s eternal destiny largely depends upon the faithfulness with which he has used his Lord’s capital.

Three Questions

There are three questions that each of us needs to answer. The first is “How much did you make last year?” Before taxes, before payroll deductions, and before anything else, what was your total income last year? Most of us can call a figure to mind that is reasonably accurate. The second question is “How much did you give to the Lord last year?” Remember each of the fifty-two Sundays, remember any other contributions that were made, and then arrive at a figure that represents your total giving for last year. Finally, there must come the question, “How much should you have given? How much do you wish you had given to the Lord last year?” Most of us would have to say something like this.. “At the time I gave all that I thought I could afford to give, but frankly now that I look back at it I realize that I did not give as much as I should have given or even as much as I wanted to give”.

Sometime back, a successful but deeply spiritual-minded business man came to his preacher and asked him the last of the questions that we have just considered. He asked the preacher to evaluate his own giving in the year that was just ending to see if he was giving as much as he should have given, or as much as he really wanted to give to the Lord. After some thought the preacher admitted that he had given less than he really should have given, less than he really meant to give. The business man then made him this proposition: “In the new year about to begin give what you feel you should give as a Christian and as a leader of God’s people, then keep a careful record of the deprivations and real sacrifices that you have to make during the year as a result of this more generous giving. At the end of the year I will reimburse you for everything you have really needed, but have not been able to provide for yourself and for your family.” At first the preacher thought it was just a conversation--that the man was just talking. However, the friend insisted and eventually the preacher took him up on the proposition.

Near the end of the year the man again approached the preacher and asked that he prepare his list of sacrifices that he had been forced to make. The preacher sat down in his study at home and tried to make a list of his real sacrifices. There were some things that he and his family had not been able to do that ordinarily they would have done. There were purchases that they had not made; there were places that they had not gone. Yet, as he considered the matter, he realized that he had not missed a single meal, that they had been well housed, that there had been ample clothing, and that the other necessities of life had all been present in full measure.

A few moments later his wife entered the room and found her husband with tears streaming down his cheeks. He told her, “I have just realized that the proposition that my friend made me is just exactly what the Lord has been telling me all along.” He was thinking of such passages as Matt. 6:33, “But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Christ had just been talking about food, clothing, shelter and the other necessities of life. God has long assured us that if we will make him first, he will see that we do not suffer for the necessities of life. It is as David said it in the long ago. “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” (Ps. 37:25).

An Example Of Our Day

This past week I spent part of two days in Houston, Texas, as a guest of Brother Gen Darby and his family. The parents are in their middle thirties; a daughter is sixteen, a junior in high school; a younger son is in an earlier year of high school; and the youngest son is in the sixth grade. They live in a modern, expensive home. The walls are largely of plate glass. Several of the rooms are bounded on three sides by plate glass from corner to corner and from ceiling to floor. One gets the feeling that he is living outdoors, surrounded by God’s handiwork. For several years Brother Darby has been the general manager of a large road-building firm. Under his direction there have been many men and much equipment. Although he does not own the firm, he is in a position where in the years ahead he might well be expected to make millions of dollars.

I mention the Darbys to you, not because of their income, nor the lovely home in which they live, nor even because of the members of the family. I mention them to you because they are turning their backs upon this lovely home and this more than ample income in order to become missionaries to Perth, Australia. The job has been resigned, the house is for sale, and the tickets for Australia are

bought. When you talk with them about the change in living standards and the things that they will miss when they are living on a missionary's income in Australia, they tell you, "What we will miss most is being able to help others financially."

Gene Darby has an unusual but deeply penetrating analysis of Christian commitment. He says that step one is the giving of one's financial support to a cause. Then, inevitably there follows step two, which is the giving of one's interest and concern to the cause. Finally, there is step three, which is the giving of one's self to the cause. When I first heard him say it, I found this a rather strange arrangement. I would have thought a different order would have been the case, but he illustrated out of his own experience. He said, "For some time my family and I supported a missionary in Perth. He had the picture of this family on our bulletin board in our home. We remembered them in our prayers. We found ourselves foregoing certain personal expenditures in order to send the money to these missionaries. After a while we discovered that our interest and concern had grown into a deep love for this family and for the work that they were doing. Ultimately, we felt the strong desire to go and help them personally in the work." First, one's money; then one's interest and concern; finally, one's self.

I came home and read my Bible, and sure enough that is what the Lord had taught 1900 years ago. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also." Our hearts follow our money. If we want our hearts ultimately in heaven, we must first send our treasure there. Financial involvement in a cause leads us to involve our hearts and ultimately to involve ourselves. Knowing this, Christ commanded that we lay up our treasures in spiritual things for he knew that our hearts and our lives would follow.

When I first heard that the Gene Darbys were going to Australia as missionaries, I felt that probably they had made a mistake. Should not a man with his opportunities to make millions remain in the States and provide the means for dozens of missionaries to go into foreign fields? Now after meeting them and knowing them, I realize that I was wrong. What is more needed in our world today, than the real-life example of one who will turn his back on several millions of dollars and go out to carry the gospel to the lost? An example so unusual, so striking, is what the rest of us need to shock us out of our lethargy and complacency. Such commitment to Christ is the only hope of our salvation, too. As long as our hearts remain on the material things of this earth, centered in the here and now, our souls stand in jeopardy.

Conclusion

Some of us in this congregation need to double what we are now giving to the Lord. I expect that I personally am among them. All of us need to increase what we are giving. In many instances our incomes have risen sharply in the last five years or so, and yet we have not greatly increased our giving to the Lord. We need to restudy the amount and the percentage of our income that we are returning to God. Further, there is the urgent need for more financial resources to help in the Lord's work. Our elders constantly have to say no to worthy appeals that come to them when they ought to be able to say yes. Finally, we need the blessings that come to those who give generously to the Lord. Our hearts and souls need to be anchored in Christ and the way to anchor them in His Cause is by investing our treasures in His Cause. Our hearts will follow our money. It is true that we must give as we prosper, but it is also true that our souls will prosper as we give.