

MATTHEW 13:44-46
THE VALUES OF THE KINGDOM

In his book, "Blue Like Jazz", Donald Miller recalls a conversation with his friend Curt.

Miller visits Curt's apartment, and he discovers a huge jar on Curt's dresser - stuffed with money. Meanwhile, Curt is wishing he could get a raise, so he can buy a new motorcycle.

Donald says, "You must have thousands of dollars in that stinking jar, Curt. Use that."

"Can't."

"Why?"

"Isn't mine...It's God's."

"God's?"

"Yeah, that's my tithe...You tithe, Don?"

"Well, Curt, I guess I don't."

"You should be tithing. That is not your money. That is God's money. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Stealing from God and all. You write Christian books and everything, and you're not even giving God's money back to Him."

"You don't have to go making me feel all bad about it. You haven't exactly given your money to God either. It's right there on your dresser."

"Don't you worry about that...That's God's money, and he's gonna get it. I've never stolen a dime from God, and I'm never gonna start."

Miller writes, "Curt went down about two weeks later and turned all his money in to a church secretary. More than three thousand dollars. I started feeling so guilty I couldn't sleep."

That conversation is filled with words we use when we talk about giving to the kingdom:

Tithe. Giving God's money back. Stealing from God. Feeling guilty.

Last week, we started to ponder these parables, in the hope of gaining a vision for the kingdom. We discovered that God's kingdom is forever, and that God's kingdom is glorious.

I spoke of how we will all invest in what is important to us. Then I asked you to pray about two questions:

- 1) Do I have a vision for the kingdom?
- 2) Does my living and giving reflect a kingdom vision?

Yet these parables not only offer us a vision for the kingdom. They direct us to the values of the kingdom. They tell us why we give, and how we give.

WHY DO WE GIVE?

Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."

Why do we give to the kingdom?

Because of GUILT?

Last year, a researcher from Arizona described how organizations are learning how to shame people. For example:

* An electric company issues notices, telling people how much power they are using, compared to their neighbors.

* A hotel offers the information that most guests use their towels more than once.

* A state government reminds people that most people don't cheat on their tax returns.

Christians are so good at guilt! We dish it out, and we take it in. We feel guilty before God, so we want to "make it up" to God, whatever "it" is.

Should we give out of guilt? Not if we believe the gospel. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, our sin is forgiven. As we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us, and cleanse us.

Why do we give? Guilt? PRIDE?

Pride is the flip side of guilt. If guilt says, "You are not good enough," pride says, "I am good enough." Look at me in my goodness.

Last week I watched a news story about a statewide institution, with an affiliate here, that has given 15-hundred basketballs to needy kids around the state. That's nice, but I was struck by the tone of self-congratulation.

Call the television stations! Call the newspapers! Let's let everybody know that we are giving away these basketballs!

Guilt? No. Pride? No. GAIN?

Giving for gain comes to us in two forms:

* One is the "prosperity" gospel. The preacher says, "God wants to make you rich. You give us what we want, and God will give you what you want."

This is simply greed. We are to guard against greed, not feed it.

* The other form of "giving for gain" is the "blessing" gospel. The preacher says, "If you give to God, he will bless you."

This is true. For example, we read in Proverbs 11:25: "A generous man will prosper: he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."

God blesses giving. Sometimes our gain is spiritual. Sometimes our gain is emotional. Sometimes our gain is financial.

Yet this is not the best reason for our giving. If we give just to gain, then our hearts are living for such gain. If we give and don't gain, we might stop giving. Gain may be a reason to give, but it is not the first reason to give.

Why do we give? Guilt? No. Pride? No. Gain? Not first.

How about DUTY?

Duty says, "God commands you to give. You must give, whether or not you feel like it. When you give, you must give a tithe."

We will talk about the tithe in a few minutes, but what about duty as a reason for giving?

In his book, "Holiness By Grace", Bryan Chapell writes while we live by grace, we can still talk about duty. As we read in the book of Titus, God's grace teaches us to say no to ungodliness, and yes to holiness. Jesus told us, "If you love me, you will obey my commands."

Yet we must be careful. When we talk about duty, we can easily drive ourselves or others back to that great guilt in times of failure, and back to great pride in times of success.

Why do we give? Guilt? No. Pride? No. Gain? Not first. Duty? Not just that. Jesus' words direct us to a greater reason. We give, out of JOY.

Jesus proclaims that when the first man discovered the treasure, "in his joy" he went and sold all he had, and bought that field.

Jesus' desire is that because we have been brought by grace into this forever and glorious kingdom, we will have great joy, and we will give.

Joy is a feeling, but it is more than a feeling. It is our wholehearted response to God's grace.

* We love him, because he has first loved us.

* We trust him, because we can now call him Father.

So we give with joy.

"But pastor, you don't know what is going on with me. You just don't understand. Times are tough."

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he praises the Christians in Macedonia. They were facing a "severe trial." But their "overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."

They were poor. They were not being paid enough. They were probably being taxed too much. Maybe they were behind on their mortgages. Surely they had children to feed, or aging parents to care for, or

both.

We don't know the details, but we know their desire. Their gospel joy welled up, and they "urgently pleaded" for the privilege of giving to Paul's collection for the Christians in Jerusalem.

The issue with giving is not what is happening in our lives. The issue with giving is what is happening in our hearts. Jesus' words call us to tend to our hearts, so that filled with gospel joy, we will give to the kingdom.

So how will this happen? As I did last week, I urge you to pray.

Bryan Chapell writes, "Spiritual change is more a consequence of what our hearts love than what our hands do."

John Murray wrote, "The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, and therefore as the Spirit of love he captivates our hearts by the love of God and of Christ to us."

If your heart is not right about giving, ask God to give you a new heart. Pour out your heart to him. Plead with him for a joy that will flow in you and flow from you, a joy informed and inflamed by the gospel.

Why do we give? Joy.

Yet Jesus' words guide us toward a second kingdom value. HOW DO WE GIVE?

Do we give, SPECIFICALLY? Is the issue of giving all about getting to a specific amount, and matching that amount?

This is the issue of the tithe. The word "tithe" means tenth. So if you receive a thousand dollars, you would tithe a hundred to the church.

Where is the first time we see the idea of the tithe in the Bible? It is in Genesis 14, after Abram rescues Lot from some local rulers. A mysterious person named Melchizedek appears, and Abram gives him a tenth of what he has won in the battle.

Like the Sabbath, the tithe is a teaching that goes all the way back to the early days after the creation. We have no evidence that God has given up on the idea.

So should you give a tithe? I would say yes. The concept of the tithe gives us specific direction for our giving.

Yet while this is the start of the answer to how we give, it is only a part of the answer.

Do we give GENEROUSLY?

Remember what Paul wrote about the Christians in Macedonia: "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."

We don't know exactly what they gave. We don't know whether they gave a tithe to their local church, then gave more to Paul.

But we know they were generous. We see a group of joyful, cheerful givers, generously offering gifts for the sake of the kingdom.

God has given generously to us, so we give generously to him. He has given us much through his kingdom, so we give much to him.

Yet what exactly is "generous"? Let's say three people give:

* One is very rich, and gives a thousand dollars.

* One is middle class, and gives three hundred dollars.

* One is pretty poor, and gives twenty dollars.

Who is being generous? I would say, "All of them." They are all being generous, and they are all giving well.

Generosity is wonderful, but even the idea of generosity does not quite capture all that Jesus is saying here.

These two parables are similar, but not quite the same. Yet there is something common to the men in them. Both of them sold all they had, then bought the field.

Should we give specifically? Yes. Should we give generously? Yes.

But if we are to truly follow Jesus' words here, we must think about whether we are giving SACRIFICIALLY.

Now we're getting nervous. Now we start to scotch our feet under our seats, because the pastor is about to step on them.

But I plead with you: don't let your heart run to guilt, or pride, or gain, or even duty. Immerse your heart in the joy of Jesus, as you hear me in the next few minutes.

What is a sacrifice? It is when you give, by giving up. When you give sacrificially to the kingdom, you give up something, for God's forever and glorious kingdom.

Listen to more of Paul's words about the Macedonians: "For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability."

Listen to Jesus' words about the poor widow who gave only two small copper coins to the temple treasury: "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.

"They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on."

They may have given specifically. They surely gave generously. But they also gave sacrificially. They gave up, to give.

They are responding with joy to Jesus - the One who sacrificed himself, for his people, that they might enter this forever and glorious kingdom.

Maybe you are willing to give specifically and generously. I hope you are. We all come to this place, from different places, so I realize you may struggle with even giving in those ways.

But what if I called you to give sacrificially to the kingdom? What if God asked you to give up, so you could give to the kingdom?

Here are some possible examples. I offer these from my imagination, and from my experience.

* You could give up...some or all of the expensive entertainment you receive from your television.

* You could give up...the plan for remodeling your home so that it looks exactly the way you want it to look.

* You could give up...the security you seek from pouring the absolute maximum into your retirement account.

* You could give up...the freedom and flexibility of a cell phone plan that works so well, but costs so much.

* You could give up...Starbucks.

* You could give up...the vacation you think you deserve.

* You could give up...the habit of letting restaurants cook for you, and serve you, whenever you want.

* You could give up...your desire for a newer and better and more impressive car.

* You could give up...your passion for the newest and best clothes.

* You could give up...your hope of paying absolutely every dollar for your children to get through college.

* You could give up...your plan for paying off your mortgage in a certain amount of time.

* You could give up...getting all the newest stuff for your children.

* You could give up...another round of spending for your hobbies and interests.

* You could give up...getting the latest gadget first, or maybe even at all.

Notice that I say, "could." I am not called to dictate your decisions. But I am called to challenge your heart, and to ask all of us, including me, if we ever think like this!

Have you ever asked God to move your heart past the idea of giving specifically, and generously, and into a place of giving sacrificially?

I do not offer you guilt. I do not offer you pride. I offer you more than gain. I offer you more than duty.

I offer you the joy of the kingdom, and I offer you kneepads, because I believe that if we are followers of Jesus, we must follow him into a place of prayer, and we must fall on our knees before him.

We must search our hearts and our lifestyles, and we must seek his grace, that we might be willing to joyfully give up even all we have, to invest in the treasures of the forever, glorious kingdom.

In his book, Randy Alcorn writes of speaking to a businessman who had learned to earn much, but had also learned to give well.

The man said, “When I give, I’m saying, ‘I love you, Lord.’”

That is my heart for us. My heart is that we would be a people whose hearts and minds are full of the joy of the forever, glorious kingdom. As God fills our hearts in this way, may we give, specifically, generously, and sacrificially, and may we say as faithful stewards with our treasures,

“I love you, Lord.”