

***Beyond Our Expectations*** (Ephesians 3:14-21)

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[This sermon influenced by notes by Rev. Hugh Wilson, Norman, Oklahoma]

There is a story about a man who was hunting in the forest when a storm came up. Looking for shelter from the rain, he found and crawled into a hollow log, which fitted him quite snugly. The rain lasted for hours and soaked the wood. When the storm was over, the hunter was unable to get out. He was held in the log. Finally, exhausted he gave up, figuring he would starve to death. His life flashed before him. He remembered all the excuses he had given for not being a practising Christian especially a Christian steward, he felt so small that he was then able to crawl out easily!

There are many reasons we tell such old stories treating a serious and vital subject with some humour.

I wish that it were possible to bring different messages to different people when talking about Christian stewardship. Trying to challenge and inspire some, we may create guilt for others. Congratulating some, we may induce false complacency among others. Often, I would desire three stewardship messages: one for persons new to this congregation, new to the Christian life; one for those whose income and especially their interest has been growing; and one for those whose ability is no longer expanding but who have been consistent and faithful throughout many years.

The letter to the Ephesians speaks about Christian growth in general, but one expression of our loyalty and our willingness to follow Christ is the way we use our money. Stewardship of life includes more than possessions, but it does include money. There are three messages in this passage. We need to wear the shoe that fits, even if it hurts a little.

First is the message to new members or new questions: stewardship is an integral part of being a Christian. *I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, [God] may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being ... and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...* Christian stewardship involves all we do with life. Stewardship is expressed in church attendance. That is only the beginning, but it represents a dedicated use of time. Stewardship is expressed in singing, teaching, sewing and cooking and baking, welcoming, and caring, using our talents for God. Stewardship is also expressed in our gifts of money, our use of

resources, our financial support, using the ability that God has given us for the purposes and ministries of God.

You belong to an active, committed, historical congregation. Over 250 families and individuals give close to \$300,000.00 for the expenses of this church and its outreach efforts and another 25,000.00 to reduce the debts. Our engaged families represent a strong commitment to this ministry and mission.

Many of the congregation of which you are a part, are deeply concerned persons who practice a regular discipline of giving, make significant sacrifices for what they believe to be important. You are surrounded by people who take the church and the claims of God seriously. That is reflected in their stewardship of money. There are enough of us to do significant work, but there are not enough that we can say, *let someone else do it*. Or let us use up the generosity of the deceased.

A man told his young son, who brought to his attention an offering box that he had brought home from Sunday school. *Dad, have you put any money in it yet? No, I haven't*, the father replied, **it will have to come out of your allowance. Not from my allowance!** His quick reply was the end of the discussion. Isn't that typical? We want to fill our offering envelopes or boxes – but not necessarily from **our allowances**. (First Christian Church Newsletter, Annabelle, Missouri).

What you give is a decision that you and God will make. Your stewardship will be the result of gratitude and a desire to share. There is no coercion, no pressure, no comparison with others that should be allowed to rob you of your decision to be a good steward of possessions, along with the rest of life. You and your conscience will wrestle with God. When we wrestle, we will give more than anyone would ever dare to ask of us. We hope your stewardship will be an example to the rest of us.

There is a message for the new in our midst. There is also message to growing Christians: God's cause can be advanced as you reach for new levels, *...that you ... being rooted and grounded in love... may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*. We are challenged to reach for new levels.

We deal with the question, *Why?* We give not simply because the church needs are real, though they are. There are possibilities for strengthening, enabling development, enhancing growth of young and mature alike that are very exciting. But the basic issue is not *What is your fair share of the budget?* but, *What is God's share of your income?* not, *What does the church need?* but, *What does God want?*

Theologian Aute L. Carr suggests that, *everything we possess in life is on loan. You could all be stamped, "on consignment". Whatever we consume is gone; but whatever we attempt to keep for ourselves will have to be given up in the end. The only thing we can really keep is what we give away. Reach out and touch someone in need and you widen the horizons of the soul, expand your spiritual vision and understanding, increase your capacity for sympathy and love... Every time you give in Christ's name, your participation in the eternal life of the spirit and in the peace of God increases! You become more of a real person. (Christian Ministry, September 1979, P. 36).*

We also deal with the question, *What?* A tithe or 10% has been a plumb line since biblical days: sometimes the goal, sometimes the norm, sometimes the base on top of which additional gifts are possible. It is not a magic formula. God does not expect us to go hungry and build mammoth church buildings, nor is God happy when we tithe while squandering the other 90%. The Gallup organization was commissioned by a coalition of 650 not for profit organizations, corporate foundations, and volunteer groups to research giving patterns. What they discovered was surprising; moderately poor families are more generous than upper- middle-class families. Those with household incomes of \$18,000 or less gave 2.8% – almost double the 1.5% of those earning between \$50,000 and \$75,000. This study led them to suggest a unified campaign: donate 5% of income and five hours a week to charitable causes. That is not a tithe, obviously, but for many it is a significant challenge. Each person and each family must try honestly and reverently to find and express God's will. How does God want us to use the resources entrusted to us – those resources that we have *on consignment?*

The third question dealt with is always the most difficult – the *How* question? There is the easy way. It is how I came into stewardship. I can remember being given an allowance – a quarter. It was understood that a nickel of that was for the offering plate. In addition, something would be given over and above on birthdays – usually a penny for every year of life. Then I got a job with a weekly income. That was a crucial time. Would my childhood giving pattern prove

to be only the result of parental guidance? Would I continue to give a nickel or a quarter? Or would I give a percentage of income, which would grow as my ability grew? It is easy to begin early giving 10% or more and to stay with that. It is also easier when a husband and wife have similar values. That is the easy way.

Another is the, *don't wait until you win the lottery* way. Take your present giving as a base and then tithe the increases in income. Simply give 10% of the added ability. Yes, it would be great to suddenly tithe cold turkey, but many think that is impossible, so they never get started with significant Christian stewardship. Take your present giving as the base and begin tithing the increased income that results through the rest of your career and life.

Still another way is also the *jerk and press* method: increase your giving by one percent of income (okay, ½% of income) next year. That will require a resetting of priorities; it will be more feasible in some years than others; and it will test commitment. Moving from 2.8 to 3.8%, from 5 to 6%, and from 8 to 9% can be a thrilling part of a growing Christian life. Having been *rooted and grounded in love*, may you now understand the wider dimensions of a growing Christian life – the breath, length, height, and depth. And may you experience the love of Christ that surpasses all we know or do.

We also hear a message for the consistent, sacrificing, generous stewards of all the years: thank God for what you have, made possible because of years of hard work. Because of faithful stewardship through schooling, through depression and recession, to the education of children, through the transition to retirement; because of your thoughtfulness in writing your last will and testament as to provide for the church after your death – you must be the ones who are mentioned in Ephesians: *I pray that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

What does the phrase *the fullness of God* connote? For a Christian it could not be material gain, for our giving is unselfish in motive. It would rather be the knowledge that our giving, our stewardship, has not been in vain. There is a purpose in what we have done. We have been part of the strengthening of our congregation's and denomination which has made an impact for good in our city and around the globe. We have cooperated with God in a mighty and valuable work. We trust God to use our efforts to affect human history.

Some of you may wonder if your offerings each Sunday will help nations around the world settled their differences. Who can say that they that they won't? Who can say that our gifts do not help a woman in India to see; a South African

child, cling to hope; an Argentinean farmer to rotate crops better; or a Japanese mother to have a larger world view? Who can deny that our gifts help Puerto Ricans both on the Caribbean Island and in the inner cities of Montreal and Toronto, to maintain dignity?

Thank God for the missionaries, for the homes for needy persons, for Sunday school classes where lives are moulded, for the street on which this church sits and reminds thousands of passers-by of their Creator whom they cannot pass by forever. These are ministries you have made possible through your consistent, faithful, dedicated stewardship.

A person is a Christian in that moment when he or she makes the first commitment, but it takes a lifetime to become a follower of Christ. You know how hard the struggle is and how impossible the goal, but may you – because of the knowledge that your labour will be continued and is important – *be filled with the fullness of God.*

This chapter closes with a benediction: *Now to him who by the power of work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.* Remember when you didn't think you could afford to give so much? Could you have dreamed a few years ago that you would be taking the church so seriously? How can you move on from here? God enables us to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think. *To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

Here ends the third chapter in the letter to the Ephesians. How will the current chapter of our lives be concluded? It is the chapter in which we decide, in which we may grow, in which we can undergird. Amen.