



Faithful Giving to a Faithful God

Matthew 22:34-40

November 6, 2005

Stewardship Commitment Day

Two men were on an airplane that went down on a deserted island. One of the men brushed himself off and then proceeded to run all over the island to survey the island and see what the chances were for their survival. When he returned, he rushed up to the other man and screamed, "This island is uninhabited, there is no food, there is no water. We are going to die!"

The other man leaned back against the fuselage of the wrecked plane, folded his arms and said, "No we're not. I make over \$100,000 a week."

The first man grabbed the other man and shook him. "Listen, we are on an uninhabited island. There is no food. There is no water. There is no money here. We are going to die!"

The other man was still unconcerned, "No, I make over \$100,000 a week."

The first man said, "Look, it doesn't matter how much money you make back home. We're here, and there is nothing here to sustain life. We are going to die."

Other man says, "Don't make me say this again. I make over \$100,000 a week. I tithe ten percent. My pastor will find us."

To all of you who are tithers, I hereby pledge: if you are stranded on a desert isle, I will come and find you!!

Welcome to Stewardship Commitment Day at First Baptist Church. Over the past few weeks we have been privileged to hear the stories of how some of our members have been growing in their stewardship. Today we will bring forward our stewardship commitments. And later, at the Loyalty Dinner on November 20, we will be emphasizing stewardship both of our financial gifts and of our spiritual gifts.

There is a special note of urgency in this year's emphasis. Utilities and other non-discretionary expenses will drive up next year's budget by about \$50,000. At the same time, we know that the utility bills for each of you will probably rise \$300-400 in the coming winter. So the proposed budget will call for some substantial sacrifice from all of us. There is a note of urgency in our call to sacrificial stewardship.

But along with the urgency, there is also a note of excitement as our church accelerates toward the vision we have sensed from God that we call Vision 2007:

- **ONE PART OF THAT VISION IS GROWTH AND OUTREACH.** Last Monday night the Children's Festival was a wonderful sight, with the Fellowship Hall full of young families. Last Sunday we had forty more people in morning Bible study than a year ago. The new parents class, and the new young couples class, and the children they bring, are making a difference. We give thanks for the baby boom in the nursery and for the good problem of searching for volunteers to help there. The major theme of my messages in 2006 will be on relevant and biblical ways to spread the gospel and to help more people accept the forgiveness and the leadership of Jesus Christ in their lives. We are moving toward the vision for growth and outreach. Your financial sacrifices will help that continue.
- **ANOTHER PART OF THAT VISION IS GROWTH IN THE QUALITY OF OUR FELLOWSHIP.** One of our long-time members once stopped me to tell me, "You may not realize this, Doug, but we have made the transition from a big church that feels like a big church, to a big church that feels like family." That's nice to hear, and I look forward to even greater love and joy in our fellowship. When you give your share toward the ministries of this church family, you help strengthen the fellowship.
- **ANOTHER PART OF THAT VISION IS "A CONGREGATION OF DISCIPLES THAT IS GROWING** in spirit, in prayer, in Bible study, and in discovering and employing our spiritual gifts." I see that vision coming true too, in ways that we planned, and in ways we didn't plan. Ever since this spring's emphasis on "The Missional Church," it seems that God has been placing before us one mission opportunity after another. Our Baptist Men and Women have responded magnificently. We have sent mission teams and individuals all the way from India to the Middle East to Gulfport and Belle Glade and more. We are discovering our spiritual gifts and putting them to work. We are growing in discipleship. Your offerings help this to continue.
- **YET ANOTHER PART OF VISION 2007 IS THE MATURING OF OUR SPANISH MISSION.** They have great lay leadership and newly elected deacons. They also now have land. By 2007, I am confident that construction will be underway. The monetary sacrifices by members of the mission and members of this church will help that happen.
- **AND FINALLY, WE DREAM BY 2007 TO HAVE A PHYSICAL FACILITY WHOSE BUILDINGS ARE ACCESSIBLE, FUNCTIONAL, AND INVITING.** Our new Narthex Extension was the first phase of that dream. Our Building Team is making exciting plans for an elevator and a new Youth Ministries Suite, Children's Ministries Suite, and Senior Adult Ministries Suite.

So on this Stewardship Commitment Day, our proposed budget gives us urgency, and our vision for the future gives us excitement. I pray that that urgency and that excitement will inspire even greater giving.

BUT LET ME TELL YOU A SECRET ABOUT STEWARDSHIP:
 A FAITHFUL GIVER WILL GROW IN GIVING
 EVEN IF THERE WERE NO BUDGET AT ALL,
 EVEN IF THERE WERE NO LONG RANGE VISION AT ALL.

Growing and maturing stewards will give anyway and for one compelling reason: because God has been faithful to us, and because we want to be faithful to God. The truth is, we have been given so much by the Almighty, and we want to give back. We have been loved so much by God, and we want to find a way to love God back. Faithful stewardship of all we've been given is the way to love God back. Jesus summed it up when he said:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:37)

What I'm talking about today is far greater than raising a budget. What I'm talking about today is much more important than accomplishing a long range vision. What I'm talking about today is pausing to take in all the magnificent ways that God has loved us and blessed us. When our hearts realize how gracious God has been to us, then there is nothing that will stop us from finding a way to give back to that God.

I've told you occasionally about a friend who made a big impression on me before his life was cut short by brain cancer, Glenn Hewitt. Of all the people I have known, Glenn was the most at home in his own skin. He was so un-self-conscious because he was so conscious of the blessings of God in his life. One night after brain surgery to remove a tumor, Glenn passed the night in the intensive care unit of the University of Chicago Hospital. He was in pain. He could not sleep. But Glenn remembered the old trick of counting sheep to go to sleep, and decided to go one better: he would count people. All that long night, Glenn counted people in his life, remembering all the ways God had blessed him through those people.

What if you had a sleepless night, and instead of counting sheep, you began to count all the godly people and all the other ways God has blessed you? I'll bet it would take you a while. Count the blessings of people who have believed in you and loved you. Count the blessings of forgiveness through Jesus Christ that makes it possible for you to get up with a clear conscience for a new day. Count the blessing of eternal life through Christ -- life in God's presence not only someday in Heaven, but every day right now. Keep counting, and you become so full of gratitude for God that you are determined to find a way to bless God back. Stewardship is how we do that -- stewardship of our wealth, and our time and energy and all that we are. Faithful stewardship flows from gratitude to a faithful God.

There are few people who, when given a great gift, do not feel burdened with the desire to give something in return. Fred Craddock tells about a young man in Arkansas who could not go to college until his family and some friends put together the money for him to go to Hendrix College in Arkansas. The student had such a good record at Hendrix that some folks got together and sent him off with a scholarship to Vanderbilt University for graduate school:

“He met a beautiful young woman, and they married, and he graduated. Then what? You know what he did? He went to northwest Arkansas, and he and his pretty new bride started a school for girls. She did the washing, the cooking, and the cleaning, and he was the principal and the teacher. Now girls, in that day and in northwest Arkansas, weren’t even encouraged to go to high school, much less to college, so they started a school for poor girls. Now, he has a graduate degree from Vanderbilt, but he knew what a burden a gift is.”

(Craddock Stories, pp. 69-70)

He knew what a burden a gift is. In his case it was the gift of a great education. In the case of you and me, it is the unspeakable gift of being adopted into God’s family as God’s own sons and daughters. Once you receive that greatest of all gifts, you will want to give even if there were no church budget, you will want to give even if there were no great goals and visions – you will want to give as if there were no tomorrow -- because you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

How much to give? I’ve about run out of time. But let me say quickly that if you are not giving a tithe -- that is, a tenth -- now is the time to start growing in your giving toward that goal. Look at your giving percentage now and make a plan to increase it year by year until you reach that biblical benchmark. And, by the way, if you have reached that benchmark, what’s to keep you from growing further in your giving? What’s to keep you from keeping your standard of living the same, and making your standard of stewardship increase? I could say more, but I will save it for more messages on stewardship in the coming months.

Today, let me end with this: wherever your heart is, there will your treasure be also. If your heart is devoted to the love of God and neighbor, then your treasure will be there too. When out of your gratitude the love of God and neighbor are your top priorities, then everything else in your life will fall into place, including your finances, and your time, and your energies.

Today is no day to talk about supporting just another institution, no day to talk about meeting just another budget. Today all that matters is loving God. Today all that matters is showing our total gratitude to the God who loved us all the way to the cross and beyond.

-- Douglas E. Murray