

Cirrhosis of the Giver

Sermon by Nancy E. Muth

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Malachi 3:1-10

Matthew 6:19-34

I was inspired by this stewardship idea from a church that was facing some difficult financial struggles. Their ministry might need to be severely cut back and staff may have to be let go if their congregational giving did not drastically improve. The minister toiled over his sermon for Stewardship Sunday as he wondered how he could motivate members to be more generous in their giving.

Sunday morning arrived and just prior to the service he learned that the regular organist was sick and a substitute had been brought in at the last minute. The substitute wanted to know what to play. Exasperated, the minister said, "Here's a copy of the service that lists the hymns. But, you'll have to think of something to play after my sermon, when I make the announcement about the finances."

It came to that time in the service, as the minister drew to the close of what he believed to be a moving sermon on Christian stewardship and then he paused and said, "Brothers and Sisters, we are in great difficulty as we look at our next year ahead. The roof repairs will cost twice as much as we expected, the insurance, electric and oil bills are increasing, our staff has not received a salary increase in three years and we have more outreach ministries that need our help. Our budget expenses will be increasing significantly this next year. We need you to rethink your priorities and give more. Any of you who can pledge \$10,000 or more, please stand up."

At that moment, the substitute organist played *The Star Spangled Banner*. And my friends, not only did they raise more than enough money for the next year's ministry and mission, but that is how the substitute became the regular organist!

It's an idea we might borrow from another church. The apostle Paul used to tell stories of one church to another in the hopes of offering inspiration to fellow believers in a neighboring community. For example, in his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul told them of the Macedonians as he wrote: "We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints." All this was in an effort to inspire the Corinthians to be as generous in their giving as were the Macedonians.

In a similar effort your minister and I have exchanged pulpits today, as Cindy is down at First Germantown and I have the privilege to stand in this pulpit once again. It is a joy for me to be with you.

So, how are you feeling? It has been said that "The first symptom of a sick Christian is a sharp pain in the area of the pockets." If this is a symptom you experience then you probably have the spiritual condition called CIRRHOSIS OF THE GIVER! I want to warn you this disease can be fatal . . . spiritually fatal that is. There are three

tests that we can perform to check if you are one of the many Christians who suffers from CIRRHOSIS OF THE GIVER.

First is the “Heart Test.” This test asks the question, “What excites you the most, heaven or earth?”

Listen to what Jesus tells us, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” That sounds backwards, doesn’t it? It does to someone suffering from CIRRHOSIS OF THE GIVER!

Jesus does not say that where your heart is, there you will place your treasure. . . . He does not say, where your heart is your money will follow. No, instead Jesus is saying wherever you put your treasure, your money, there your heart will follow. Your heart will follow your treasure.

This is how it works. Wherever you invest your money, will dictate what is important to you. If you spend a great deal of money for a new home, you’ll make sure it is well maintained. If you buy stock in GOOGLE, you’ll start watching how the company is doing. If you make a generous donation to a non-profit organization, you are going to keep tabs on the work of that group and may even become one of its volunteers.

These same principles hold true in our relationship with God. When you choose to generously invest money in God’s purposes, you will find that your spiritual life is elevated to a higher level because you will be more conscious of God’s purposes and you will be invested in them!

We tend to put our trust, our confidence and hope in our “investments.” “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” That is the “Heart Test.”

The next test is the “Honor Test.” To introduce this test let me tell you a story about six college students, three from Temple and three from Penn State. The students are traveling by train to Florida for Spring Break. At the station, the three Penn State Nittany Lions each buy a ticket and watch as the three Temple Owls buy just one ticket.

“How are the three of you going to travel on only one ticket?” asks one of the Lions.

“Watch and learn,” answers one of the Owls. They all board the train. The three Nittany Lions take their respective seats but all three Temple Owls cram into a toilet together and close the door. Shortly after the train has departed, the conductor comes around collecting tickets. He knocks on the toilet door and says, “Ticket please.”

The door opens just a crack and a single arm emerges with a ticket in hand. The conductor takes it and moves on.

The Nittany Lions see this happen and agree it was quite a clever idea, so they decide to do the same thing on the return trip and save some money.

When they get to the station, they buy a single ticket for the return trip, but see, to their astonishment, that the three Temple Owls don’t buy any ticket at all.

“How are you going to travel without a ticket?” says one perplexed Penn State Lion.

“Watch and learn,” answers an Owl from Temple.

When they board the train, the Nittany Lions cram themselves into a toilet and the three Temple Owls cram into another toilet just down the way. Shortly after the train is on its way, one of the Owls leaves their toilet and walks over to the toilet in which the Lions are hiding.

The Temple Owl student knocks on their door and says, "Ticket please."

Amazing how creative people can be when it comes to cheating. The "Honor Test" has us asking ourselves if we are among these creative cheaters.

The prophet Malachi warns us not to cheat God as he shares these words from our Lord: "Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me--the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."

Are we robbing God? Are you? Am I? Are we bringing "the full tithe into the storehouse?" That's what it says we are to do, but those suffering from CIRRHOSIS OF THE GIVER hold back and do not offer to God a full tithe. They give to God a bit of their left overs rather than a tithe from the top.

The third test is the "Master Test." The question is, "Whom do you choose to serve today?" Be completely honest with yourself. Will you serve money and allow it to be your god, a symptom of CIRRHOSIS OF THE GIVER or will you serve God by using your money for the building up of God's Kingdom?

Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Money becomes our master because we are so easily consumed with worry about not having enough of it, how to get more of it, or about how we're going to use it.

The fact is, most people on earth serve money as their god. It is a natural trap to fall into. We tend to worship that which we think will bring us the most security and comfort in life.

The one suffering from CIRRHOSIS OF THE GIVER tends to trust money to give security and comfort. That person is living by sight, and worships the god that can be seen. What Jesus calls us to do is to trust in God to provide for our security and comfort. We are to live by faith and worship the God we cannot see.

The choice is our's. Whom will we serve? It's got to be one or the other. Either we serve money as our god, or we serve God with our money. Which do you choose? It's impossible to do both.

"You can't have two masters - You can't serve God and wealth," warns Jesus. If you serve wealth you will always be worried about what you will eat and what you will drink and what you will wear. But if you invest your life in God, God will provide for you just as God provides for the birds and the flowers.

It's your choice. Which is more important to you, God or money?

These are the three tests to see if you have CIRRHOSIS OF THE GIVER? The “Heart Test,” asking what excites you the most, earth or heaven? The “Honor Test,” asking if you rob God and The “Master Test,” asking whom do you choose to serve today? How did you do? Remember, this disease can be fatal . . . spiritually fatal.

Assuming that many here might be experiencing one of more of these symptoms, I have good news, there is a cure for CIRRHOSIS OF THE GIVER. It is a simple cure and it involves looking at our resources . . . all of our resources . . . but first our financial resources because our heart and everything else will follow where we put our treasure . . . our money.

We are always uncomfortable when we need to listen to these sermons on our financial resources yet that is exactly what Jesus preached about more than any other topic! Jesus’ teaching was about generosity! And generous giving is a matter of faith and trust.

This year’s stewardship program at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill is asking you to make a choice . . . to choose between investing your money in furthering God’s Kingdom and letting your heart and your life follow or investing your money in your heart’s desires here on earth . . . to choose between honoring God by giving a full tithe rather than cheating God by giving some a morsel of what is left over . . . to choose between serving God or serving money.

You are being asked to make the choice . . . make the decision . . . to grow in your giving to God . . . to take one step up . . . to move closer to tithing your financial resources . . . and if you already tithe, to move beyond tithing. Are you ready to make that choice?

I have been serving the First Presbyterian Church in Germantown for eight years and each year at stewardship time my challenge is the same: Move closer to a tithe by considering increasing your current pledge by 1% of your income. Has everyone risen to that challenge? No! But enough have so that our congregational giving has doubled over these years.

I offer to you that same challenge. Actually it is challenge given by God, not me. Take the challenge! Determine what your financial income is and then determine what 1% of that income is. You don’t need a calculator to do that. Simply imagine in your mind or write on a piece of paper what your weekly or annual income is. Can you picture that number? Now delete the last two digits and you have 1%. Now add that 1% onto what you currently give to the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill in order to further God’s Kingdom through the fantastic ministry and mission that is happening here. Are you willing to make the choice to grow by that amount in your giving?

Let me share with you a story that comes out of Second Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Sunday School students were to tithe their Halloween candy so that it could be shared with visitors to the church's Walk-In Ministry (a ministry similar to the Germantown Avenue Crisis Ministry) and also put in bag lunches that would be given to local homeless people.

The Sunday the children brought their candy in became special for them, their families, their teachers, and the whole church community. The young people were willing to give something away that was of value to them because they knew their sacrifice was going to make a difference for someone else. Their generous giving provided a witness to the whole congregation.

But the story does not end there, as a few days later a mother shared the following: "We had three bags of candy left after bringing our tithe to the church, so I told the kids we should donate one of the bags. My daughter immediately protested that we were only supposed to tithe, so we emptied the bags, counted all the pieces, and put aside one tenth. The kids and I were immediately amazed at how small the tenth pile was and how large the remaining pile was. There was still so much left for us. It was one of those moments of overwhelming realization, that God asks for so little, and gives us so much. So I called the church treasurer this morning, and I'm having my pledge increased and I am also having it automatically withdrawn from my checking account each month. What I give back to God is important, and I don't want to miss doing it."

What a wonderful illustration about the value of tithing and the fact that each of us has the ability to offer 10% of our resources to the church. We have been richly blessed by God and our giving represents our gratitude to God for all of our blessings. Consider showing your gratitude by having your pledge to the church represent a tithe. My friends, each of us can make do with 90% of what we have. It may mean you have to readjust your priorities and how you do things, but you can be assured that the 10% you share with this church will make a difference in the lives of others through your ministry as you share the love, compassion and Good News of Jesus Christ. You don't have to jump to giving 10% right away. Work your way up to a tithe and consider beginning by increasing your current pledge by 1% of your income this year.

I want to tell you that I am not asking you to consider doing anything that I myself am not doing. I made the decision to grow in my giving a number of years ago and now I tithe. In fact a few years ago I grew above a tithe and I plan to grow further this year.

Take the challenge and step up in your giving. Move closer to a tithe in your support of building God's Kingdom . . . in your support of the ministry and mission of the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill.

Thanksgiving will be upon us very soon, a time when all of us are to stop long enough to count our blessings . . . and we have many. May our giving reflect our gratitude. May our giving reflect our faith. May our giving reflect our commitment to God and God's Church.

You don't have to be a sufferer of CIRRHOSIS OF THE GIVER. There is a cure.

Thanks be to God. Amen.