

WRAP YOUR GIFT IN A SMILE

Dr. John Allan Lavender

2 Cor.9:6-7

There is an oft repeated phrase that is uniquely pertinent on this dedication day of our “Program For Progress.” It is the little couplet: “Money Talks.” You’ve all heard it before. Perhaps as a child you used it yourself to quell some verbose friend whose actions did not measure up to his talk.

“Put your money where your mouth is” was the way they used to say it when I was a boy. It was a challenge to “lay it on the line,” to show the sincerity of your words by backing them up with your pocket book.

Well, there is no other situation in which that phrase is more applicable than in the life of a Christian. More than any other individual he is measured, not by what he says, but what he does. These are times when the whole, wide world is saying to Mr. and Mrs. Christian:

“Lay it on the line.

Put your money where your mouth is.

Money talks.”

It’s a disturbing thought, isn’t it? We can verbalize long and loud about our devotion to Christ. We can argue eloquently for the merits of the particular church of our choice. We can salve our conscience, momentarily at least, by daydreaming about what we do if and when. How generous we’d be in a different time and under better circumstances. But the real issue is how we act here and now.

God does not measure us by what we might become, but by what we are. He does not judge us according to our gallant proposals of how we would spend a mythical million dollars if we only had it. In all fairness, He can only judge us by what we do with what we are and how use what

we actually have. In no more personal way do we show how much we really care about this business of being a Christian than in the use of our possessions. In no other way is it so desperately true that “Money Talks.”

That’s what Jesus was getting at when He said,

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt.6:21).

He was saying that one need not be a mind reader or possess the powers of clairvoyance to know what a man really is or what a woman really thinks.

“It’s quite a simple matter,” Jesus said. “Just look at the way they spend their money. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

In other words, “Money Talks.”

It was Voltaire who said that when it comes to the matter of money, everyone has the same religion. He meant that money is the one god which is universally and religiously worshipped. Well, he was wrong. There are those in this very congregation whose stewardship is staggering proof that they have mastered this idol. People who rule instead of being ruled by the God of Mammon.

But you and I know the kind of people Voltaire was talking about. The people who invariably put their wants and wishes first. Whose whole existence is one long night of self-indulgence. Bent upon what they nebulously call “A Good Time”, they spend their money in incredible quantities for everything but that which really satisfies. You don’t need to be a psychic to know what those people think is most important in life. “Their money talks.” And it says in a way none can deny they are immersed in a struggle for material satisfaction.

And because it’s true that “money talks”, this matter of Christian stewardship is terrible important. You see, tithing is not mankind’s way of raising money. It is God’s way of building mankind. It comes down at last to a matter of character. That’s why we as a church must be

intimately involved in effective stewardship education.

I say this with whatever powers of persuasion I possess: we fail you as a church and I fail you as your pastor, if together we do not define, in unmistakable terms, your stewardship obligations and then, in turn, use every means at our command to move you to action so that you accept those obligations. We are not doing you a favor if we allow you to become “a hitch hiker to heaven”. We are not being kind if we remain silent in the face of slipshod stewardship. Instead, we are tragically failing you. In the final day of settling, when God calls upon each of us to give an account of our stewardship, we will be more guilty than you if, as a church, we have not made it clear what God requires of His stewards.

A few weeks ago I preached a sermon on tithing. I wish I could share with you some of the personal notes and words which have come to me as a result. They were written and spoken in confidence and they shall stay locked up in the secrecy of my soul. But let me say this: if for some reason God should declare my work on earth to be done, if tonight He should ask me to lay aside the tools with which I do my task, if He should call me to some higher service in the Kingdom of God, I could not ask for any greater reward than those notes and words so many of you sent as a result of that one sermon. They were words which spoke of the indescribable blessings that have come into some of your lives when you accepted “God’s I dare you” and began to practice scriptural tithing.

When we began this “Program For Progress” two months ago, we were not merely attempting to raise the largest budget in the history of our church. As a matter of fact, at the start, we had no idea what our new budget would be. We wanted, under God, to do a greater work for Christ and the primary task in that greater work for Christ was the spiritual growth of our own members. We knew then, and we know now, that we miss the goal completely unless we point up the fact that the real accomplishment in a program such as this is not the amount of money given, but the spiritual growth of those who give it. The “Program For Progress” is not simply a device for raising funds. Instead, it is a tremendous step forward in the spiritual development of every one of us who take its challenge seriously.

Now, with that brief explanation of the spiritual basis for this stewardship crusade, let us turn, for a moment, to some of the mechanics involved. There are really only two ways of giving to God's work. The first is to do it --

Impulsively

I heard of a minister here in the mid-west who preached a sermon one Sunday morning on the fascinating subject: "If I Had A Million Dollars." There was a man of means in the audience who was touched by the sincerity of the sermon and the case it presented. When the service was over, he greeted the pastor and gave him a check for a million dollars! Now, if any of you are so moved this morning, I would be the last to restrain you!

However, in all seriousness, let me say this.

"The trouble with impulsive giving," as McCracken points out, "is that it is apt to be occasional, spasmodic and ill-proportioned. It may be generous today, but niggardly and non-committal tomorrow."

There is also the danger, according to McCracken, that

"Our giving begins to depend upon how the need is presented, rather than the actual merits of the need."

If a radiant, effervescent personality makes the appeal, we give. Whereas, an equally important need is passed up because it is not presented in so fine a manner. That is exactly what sometimes happens in a court of law. The case is not determined on its merits, but rather, on the merits of the one presenting it. The lawyer becomes supremely important, not the facts.

So it is with impulsive giving. Often it becomes a matter of the wheel that squeaks the loudest getting the grease regardless of the relative importance of the needs involved.

A further danger is that

“It often robs the impulsive giver of the humility which should accompany whatever we give” (McCracken).

I have a friend out in California who is a perfect example of this. A few years ago, during a meeting, he impulsively gave \$500 to an emergency building need in his church. To be sure, he got a real glow of satisfaction out of giving the money. The whole trouble is that, since then, the importance of that particular gift has grown out of all proportion. He has never made a pledge since. With the exception of an occasional 50 cent piece, he never contributes to his church. But he constantly talks of the time he gave \$500. He is not only buying off his conscience, a conscience which I happen to know disturbs him greatly, but he is destroying the initial value of his gift by magnifying its importance in his own mind.

That's one of the values of giving by pledge. It keeps our giving in its proper perspective. We're not apt to think we have done so grandly because, every time we write out a check or place our offering envelope in the offering plate, it is a silent reminder that perhaps we could and should be doing more.

Still another weakness in impulsive giving is that it often causes us to forget the importance of what Jesus called “The widow's mite.” There is something glamorous about the fellow who occasionally tosses in a \$100 bill. But in the sight of God, a small amount used well and wisely is often of more importance. You see,

“It is not the force of what we give, but the faithfulness with which we give it that determines its final value to the kingdom cause.”

The Bible says God is not the author of confusion. The whole natural order is proof that He works according to design. And just as God's universe operates according to plan, even so must His church operate according to the plan of regular, systematic giving. To be sure, such a plan is unglamorous. It may even seem to be mechanical. But it is the way God has ordained His work

to be done.

“On the first day of the week let everyone (give) as God hath prospered him” (ICor.16:2).

And that brings us to the second way of giving to God’s work. If the kingdom of God is not to be dependent upon a magnanimous mood or an effervescent feeling, then it can only be done by following --

A Thoughtful, Prayerful, Biblical Plan.

There is a New Testament story with which you are all familiar. A story which illustrates how Jesus tackled the problem of real and legitimate needs for his kingdom cause. It’s the story of His triumphal entry. Do you remember what happened that first Palm Sunday nearly 2000 years ago, before He could complete His mission on that historic day? Let me refresh your memory.

Centuries before, a prophet had prophesied that one day the promised King, the Messiah, would make a glorious entry into the city of Jerusalem riding on a donkey. That day finally arrived. The Messiah was there. The promised King was ready to make His triumphal entry. All was set for the fulfillment of God’s great program except for one thing: Jesus didn’t have an animal on which to ride.

As the outstanding Canadian layman, Harold M. Smith, puts it:

“Poverty stopped His program. He could not go a foot further. He had the Heavenly Father. He had the Holy Spirit. He had the eternal truth. He had everything except the necessary physical equipment. He could not go forward and fulfill prophecy that day. He was too poor.

“So it is today, the Lord’s triumphal march through the earth is stalled for lack of material things. He has the gospel. The bread of

life. The light for which men are crying. But Christians are withholding the physical equipment.

“On that first Palm Sunday, the Lord knew where there was one who would give, and give gladly, in order to further the purpose of his King. And so Jesus sent His disciples to that man with a story to tell.

“Now, notice His technique: He did not go himself. He sent His representatives.

“He did not send men carelessly recruited without giving thought to their abilities. He sent disciples, the best trained men upon whom He could lay his hands.

“He did not send them to take up a random collection in the crowd. He sent them to a specific person.

“He did not send them with a general request for what could be spared. He ordered them to make a specific request for a designated gift which was in the power of the giver to give.

“He did not send them on an errand of apologetic beggary. He sent them with the request of a King.

“How can we, in our day, surpass the divine wisdom of our Lord and Master? How can we improve upon His method?

“You know the rest of the story. The man who had what the Lord

required gave it. He gave it gladly and without hesitation. Of all that joyous throng on that first Palm Sunday, he was surely the happiest man, for He knew instinctively that what God requires, man cannot afford to keep.”

And then, may I draw your attention to this final thought. When the disciples called on him --

He Greeted Them with Warmth and Courtesy.

Remember that today, and in the next few days, when our callers ring your bell. They are people who are giving freely of their time and talents. They, too, have worked hard all day. They, too, have real and pressing personal problems. There isn't one who wouldn't rather be home with his or her family. But they are on an errand for their King.

Remember that when they ring your bell. Greet them in the same spirit with which you would want to be greeted if you were in their shoes. Remember also that no one will be asking you to do what he or she has not already done themselves. All of these callers have signed a pledge, the same kind of pledge they will be asking you to make. And, they have given sacrificially. Some of them increasing 100%, 200%, 300%, yes, even 400% over last year.

Now that may not be possible with you. But whatever you give, first of all give yourself. Then give your friendship. Listen courteously to the story your guest has to tell. Pray earnestly about what your fair share will be. And then, whatever your pledge, do it joyfully and with a happy heart. Wrap Your Gift In A Smile. For remember:

“God loves a cheerful giver.”