CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

Your Story—Living for the Neighbor: We Use Our Financial Resources for Others

GOAL OF THE STUDY

For generations in the church, it was assumed that stewardship did indeed equal money. Stewardship meant fund-raising and budgeting. Together with this perception of stewardship was another widely held perception that people did not want to hear about money at church. The result is that there are many church leaders today who conclude that discussing money at church should be avoided. How widespread these ideas really are is an interesting topic for research, but for this study, it is enough to explore the thoughts of your immediate group.

ANSWERS

1. Creatures, by definition, are contingent and dependent on their Creator. All that happens in our lives happens only according to the will of God. Thus the appropriate phrase appended to many a letter in the ancient world: Deo volente. In him we live and move and exist (Acts 17:28). We do not merit what we have, and we do not earn what we get regardless of how hard and how honestly we labor. Everything a person has, including talents, skills, and even a paycheck, is a gift from God.

2. It is rather rare for individuals to accept that everything they count as their own is actually a gift of grace, and not their due. The reasons for this include the entitlement mentality encouraged in our modern western world, and the notion that equity demands a fair share and a fair wage for a days' work. At heart, though, one can detect the machinations of the sinful ego fostering and enflaming these ideas. Suggestions to people that they do not have rights that deserve to be fulfilled, and that their wages are not earned but a benefaction ultimately from God, will typically be met with resistance.

3. If you have time, start at verse 25 and benefit from the powerful way that Jesus develops the argument that culminates with verse 33. Seeking first God's kingdom does not mean going to church and giving your tithe as your firstfruits. Seeking God's kingdom and righteousness includes being in a right relationship with God through faith, as well as striving to live in the context of God's revealed will for his human creatures. In other words, stand firm in the reality of your justification in Christ, and then get busy with what God has given you to do. Pursue your vocational responsibilities to the best of your ability, and let God take care of providing all that you need. The freedom and focus that come when a person strives to heed Jesus's word is life altering. Such a person will be marked with contentment, generosity, compassion, a zest for life, and an eagerness to serve.

4. Heavenly treasures are treasures that endure. They have eternal value. Concretely, these treasures are the investments we make in other people and in striving to accomplish what God has given each of us to do. Fulfilling one's vocation to the best of one's ability is storing up treasures in heaven because it is God-pleasing work done in conformity with God's will. The often-overlooked core of this text is Jesus's point that motives and attitudes of the heart follow the choices and actions of one's life—and not the other way around. Jesus does not advocate the idea: cultivate right intentions and dispositions, and then

ANSWERS cont.

the fruit will follow. He preaches the opposite: teach and encourage people to do what God calls them to do, and their heart will follow. Once a person determines to use resources in God-pleasing ways, with a heart set on God's things and focused on serving God's people, then the door is opened for that person to flourish. Right choices, then, can have a profound eternal impact.

5 This verse is often misquoted. Paul does not declare money to be the root of all evil. Rather the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil. Money is not the problem. What people do with money and their efforts to get it can be a problem. A Christian should view money as an earthly resource. It is mundane—bound to this world. But since God created this world and all that is in it, money is a gift and not inherently sinful or wicked. In fact, seen correctly, money has a spiritual component that is manifest when we use it in ways that honor God and serve those around us.

6 The Corinthians, mostly, were enjoying more financial success and prosperity than most were in the ancient world. They certainly were better off than the believers in Macedonia. Paul's goal is simple: he wants the Corinthians to provide a significant contribution to his fund-raising effort. Paul is not addressing "tithing" or the regular giving of the people. This is a special "above and beyond" offering to meet a crisis need. Fellow Christians in Jerusalem and Judea were enduring hardship, and Paul knew that it was critical for the unity and the faithfulness of the young church that those with resources help those who were in need. It is interesting that he begins his appeal by singling out the remarkable generosity of another group of Christians, the Macedonians. Essentially, Paul is saying, "Look how generous they were . . . how are you Corinthian believers going to compare to them?" Paul sees this financial appeal as a test for the Corinthians.

7 On the face of it, this is gospel as good as it gets. Christ becomes poor that we might be rich. It is the heart of Luther's "blessed exchange." In the context of the chapter, though, Paul uses this gospel truth not to comfort and reassure the Corinthians, but as an example to inspire and direct their own behavior. Now that the Corinthians are rich (materially as well as spiritually), they are to follow their Savior's lead and use their riches to help those who are poor. The gospel declaration is used for a law purpose.

8 Paul uses a variety of methods to evoke a good response among the Corinthians. He has already appealed to their pride by comparing them to the Macedonians (in the mind of the average Corinthian, a much less sophisticated people), and now he uses the same motivator exhorting them to finish what they started: "Don't be quitters; don't flame out on the last lap." Next, Paul appeals to the Corinthians' sense of justice. It is only right that those who have much should share with those who have little. Finally, Paul hints at the adage, "what goes around comes around" and suggests a reciprocal effect of the Corinthians' generosity. Their sacrifice today could be to their benefit on another day. All these appeals have overtones that would have to be labeled as law.

9 In the final verses of the chapter, Paul assures the Corinthians that their gift will be handled with integrity, and goes to great lengths to deflect any possible problems or charges of corruption. The important axiom is that what people perceive and think does matter. Yes, God's judgment is supreme, but there should be nothing in a believer's life that would justify the rebuke and censure of godly human judges. Christians do need to be concerned about the messages they give.

10 For Paul, a right motive is not the only means to right behavior. He is willing to use a variety of tactics—even employing "law" exhortations to help the Corinthians learn to see, and use their resources, rightly. A critical lesson, then, is that in our own lives, and in our congregations, sometimes we need to do the right thing even if we don't feel like it or "want" to do it. Good motives are great, but absent the right motive, the right actions are still good. It is also clear from the text, that from Paul's perspective, money clearly was not a topic that was off limits. Money mattered to the Corinthians and to Paul, and he did not hesitate to urge the believers in Corinth to do the right thing with their money. The church today needs to be honest about the role of money in the life of the congregation and the individual believer. The church should be willing to teach God's perspective about the responsible use of financial resources, and to urge people to give appropriately to creaturely needs. While God does not need our giving, his world, his people, and his church do need it.