

ATTITUDE: THE RESPONSE OF A STEWARD

LUKE 10:25-37

I invite you to participate in the message's introduction this morning! I want you to picture in your mind a person whom you admire, respect and love. Is someone's face – other than mine, of course – coming to mind right now? Good! Now as you picture that person in your mind, I'd like you to tell me what it is about that person that you like. Why are you drawn towards that person? What's attractive to you about that person? What is that you admire, respect and love about that individual? Go ahead, just call those out while I write them down up here..... Now, here's a couple of observations. First, very few – if any – of those qualities have anything to do with skills, abilities or physical appearance. Our culture puts a premium on those qualities as all important – skills, abilities and physical appearance. But apparently they don't draw us to other people all by themselves. Second, most – if not all – of these qualities you gave me today are attitudes. Let's review the list....

Over the next three weeks, I want to explore with you some very basic but important teaching from the Bible about something called "stewardship." In your message notes today, I've provided a great definition of stewardship. By no means, is it original with me, but it's still very good! Stewardship is utilizing God-given abilities to manage God-given resources to accomplish God-ordained results. In my study and preparation, I came across a series of messages called "The ABCs of Stewardship" and today I want to share with you about the "A." It stands for attitude if you haven't guessed by now. The right attitude is the response of the successful steward. It's where we begin this teaching and reflection on what the Bible means by stewardship.

If what makes us attractive and pleasing to each other is primarily in the area of attitudes – not skills, not abilities, not physical appearance – why do you think God operates any differently? What makes you attractive and pleasing to God is your attitude towards Him and your attitudes towards all He has blessed you with in life. Do you remember the story in the Bible of the very poor woman who gave her last few coins as an offering at the temple? Do you remember Jesus' observation about her gift? He said that she had given more than all the rich people who put in large sums of money! How could that be? It makes you wonder if Jesus' really struggled with math in school! No, it's because God looks at giving differently than we do. What impresses God isn't what you give, but instead what you give up. Attitude matters to God far more than abundance. You've probably heard this observation somewhere before. You can give without loving (which is essentially what those rich folk did by putting in large amounts of money but who didn't really love God) but you cannot love without giving. That's Jesus math, Jesus accounting and Jesus economics: when it comes to giving, attitude matters more than abundance.

Now today's Bible's passage is Jesus' well-known story about the Good Samaritan. Let's look at it again. I suggest that Jesus' story illustrates three attitudes towards all of life, generally, but also in the area of giving, specifically.

THREE ILLUSTRATIONS ABOUT ATTITUDES

The first attitude is illustrated by the robbers or thieves who mugged the unfortunate man in Jesus' story. What is yours is mine and I'm going to take it. Wasn't that their basic attitude? They stole from the man everything of value, beat him up badly and left him to die on the side of the road. Now, each one of us here today finds this attitude personally abhorrent. Every time we hear of a hold up or a break in, we are apt to say, "That's just terrible. People should not do that. It's wrong, wrong, wrong!" Such an action is the clearest expression of what the Bible calls greed. Greed involves taking what doesn't belong to me or what I have no right to take and using it for my own personal needs.

But, greed can express itself in subtle ways. Stewardship is more than managing just your money in a God-honoring way, but it does involve money. I submit to you that failing to give your tithe to the Lord is one expression of greed. At its root, failure to give your tithe is really one and the same as the thief in Jesus' story: what is yours is mine and I'm going to take it. But instead of saying that to a fellow human being, you say it to God when you withhold your tithe from Him. "God, what is yours is mine and I'm going to take it." Too strong a statement? Too opinionated? Just my interpretation? Well, listen again to what the Bible says. This is God speaking through the Old Testament prophet, Malachi, to the nation of Israel. "Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated me! But you ask, 'What do you mean? When did we ever cheat you?' You have cheated me of the tithes and offerings due to me." (Mal 3:8 NLT) I'm glad that it's not my responsibility to call you a thief if you don't tithe. But it is my responsibility to tell you that God calls you a thief. Are you offended? My friend, if you don't tithe and you don't like being called a thief, I encourage you to take your offended feelings to God and work them out with Him.

What's the biblical teaching on the financial aspect of stewardship? Let's say you earn \$500 a week. How much of that \$500 belongs to God? Someone might say, "Well, the tithe or 10% belongs to the Lord. That's \$50." That answer sounds right, but it's actually wrong. The Bible clearly teaches that the entire \$500 belongs to God. God is the ultimate owner of everything in this world. All any of us ever do is to manage those resources for some period of time. Money is just one resource in life. So are houses, cars, food, clothes, investments, your health, your time and the gifts and abilities God has given to you. Even God's blessings are a resource. True, some of us manage more resources than others. But even the most destitute follower of Jesus has something in common with the wealthiest follower of Jesus: you only manage what ultimately belongs to God.

Well, if all of your money belongs to God anyway, what's the purpose of the tithe? God is the ultimate realist, of course. He knows that you need stuff to live: money, shelter, food, transportation, clothes. The tithe serves the function of continually reminding you of who owns everything in your life. Can you give 10% of your income to the Lord with a wrong attitude? Of course! Here's what it would sound like: "Here, Lord, is what belongs to you – my tithe. Now, leave me alone so I can spend the other 90% that belongs to me on whatever I want." By way of contrast, tithing with the right attitude sounds like this: "Here, Lord, is my tithe. Everything I have belong to You and I give this back to You in order to remind myself that everything You have entrusted to me to manage (that's stewardship) really does belong to You. Thank You!"

You can very quickly determine your attitude towards stewardship by recognizing your attitude towards your possessions. Do you own what's under your control or do you truly believe God owns it and you manage His resources? In the message notes today, you'll see two headings with space to write a word or phrase under each one. I'd like you to observe with me the stark differences in attitude between managers and owners. Please write "thankfulness" under the manager heading. Stewards always have a grateful heart towards God. They're always talking about what God has done for them. They love to tell you about God's goodness and God's blessings. Now under the owner heading write the word "pride." Owners want to tell you about what they've done, how they've succeeded and how they've sacrificed to get what they have. No thankfulness!

Next, under the manager heading write "God's Kingdom." Managers understand that everything belongs to God and all of it should serve the same purpose in the end – bringing in and building up God's Kingdom. Now, under the owner heading write "my kingdom." Owners believe everything under their control belong to them and serves the purpose of meeting their needs and desires. Under the manager write the word "transient" next. Managers understand that every possession in life is here today and gone tomorrow. They don't set their hearts on their belongings because they know they will take none of it with them when they die. They enjoy the stuff God gives them to manage but they hold it lightly. But managers are never careless with God's stuff. No, they know God will hold them accountable for how they've managed His resources. Under the owner heading write the word "permanent." Owners have deceived themselves into thinking that money and things are around forever. Owners answer only to themselves. They end up either hoarding or squandering what belongs to God. Finally, under the manager heading write "please God." Stewards want to please God above all else, but they end up blessing many other people as a byproduct. Under the owner heading write "please myself." Owners just care about how money and things will bring comfort and pleasure to themselves. Now, in the privacy of your heart, look at that list and try to answer this question as honestly as you can, "Do my attitudes towards giving make me a manager or an owner?"

The second attitude is illustrated by the Levite and the priest in Jesus' story. What is mine is mine and I'm going to keep it. These two men saw the man all beat up and left for dead on the side of the road but decided to pass him by and keep on traveling. Now the Levite and the priest were very religious men. They took care of the temple in Jerusalem where the Jewish people worshiped God. Why didn't they help this unfortunate man? Here's a possible answer. Once a year the Levite and the priest performed some kind of service or ministry at the temple for one week. The Mosaic Law has instructions concerning when people were considered ritually clean or unclean to worship God or serve in the temple. Both of them probably thought the man was dead. To touch a dead body would make either of them ritually unclean. They would be unable to serve in the temple until another time when they would be declared ritually clean.

You've met folk like this on your journey through life. They hurt no one. They make no enemies. They break no rules. They keep to themselves. They're usually nice, pleasant creatures. They simply choose to live life in an isolated way. There is your world and their world and they want to keep those two worlds as separate as possible. They make no difference to anyone or anything. They make no impact. They influence no one. What is mine is mine and I'm going to keep it. Sadly, some people who consider themselves followers of Jesus live out their spiritual lives enslaved to this attitude. Into this group put the legalistic Christian. Law always comes before love. They see people bleeding and dying along the sides of the road of life well enough but their attitude is like this: "Gee, let me check my manual on life, here. Nope, don't see helping with this specific situation in there. Not going to go there!" Into this group put the self-centered Christian, also. Here's the attitude: "Look, I'm responsible just for my own little circle of life. Nothing beyond that! I don't have any responsibility to serve the Lord. I don't have any responsibility to use my talents and abilities to serve others through the church. I don't have any responsibility to share the good news of Jesus with others. What is mine is mine and I'm going to keep it."

There's a story about a boy who learned a lesson in attitude from his grandfather. Grandpa had a farm and one hot, summer day he was planting apple trees with his grandson's help. At one point, this sweaty, tired teenager made a comment that indicated it made no sense for an 80 year old man to be planting apple trees. Grandpa put his arm around the young man and said, "Son, it's true that I'm 80 years old and it's also true that I will never eat even one apple from these trees that we're planting today. But there are many things I've enjoyed in life because other people who lived before me made those things possible through their sacrifice and giving. One of them was apples! Have you ever eaten an apple from a tree that you didn't plant?" The grandson replied, "Sure, Grandpa. In fact, I've never eaten any apple from any tree I've ever planted!" Every time you eat an apple, you give witness to the reality that life is more than my little circle and, "Please, bless me, God!" and no more! The attitude of the Christian is this: "Lord, help me to serve You faithfully my whole life long and let me leave something behind of You for others when I'm gone!"

The Samaritan man illustrates the third and final attitude in Jesus' story. You could put it this way: what is mine is yours and I'm going to give it. Samaritans and Jews hated each other at this time in history. But this Samaritan man just saw another man in need and he was able to put aside all of his prejudice, all of his cultural taboos and all of his religious rules that would have stopped him from helping. By his actions, here's what he said: "My donkey is your donkey and I'm going to give it. My time is your time, and I'm going to give it. My energy is your energy, and I'm going to give it. My money is your money, and I'm going to give it." And that's exactly what he did. Each of these men saw the same problem – this needy, dying man on the side of the road. But only one man did the right thing. Every single one of us has the same opportunity to give – your time, your talents, your tithe, your love. Giving has little to do with your abundance. It has everything to do with your attitude. Now, very quickly, let me make ...

THREE OBSERVATIONS ABOUT ATTITUDES

One, your attitude is more important than your ability. The two religious men in Jesus' story – the Levite and the priest – probably had greater ability to help this man with his needs than the Samaritan. They'd been trained to know what God expected of them. The Old Testament – which they knew well – taught them to serve God by being compassionate to those in need. The Samaritan's ability to help was probably inferior to the Levite and the priest, but his attitude was far superior to theirs.

I wish I could tell you that the most gifted people are the best givers. Sadly, just the reverse is often the truth. It's not usually the wealthiest people who give the most money either in percentage or actual amount. It's not usually the most talented people who give the most time and energy to serve the Lord. Instead, it's often the kind of average people who have the right attitude and just give God their very best. And God takes it, blesses it and uses it in powerful ways to build His Kingdom. Don't make excuses. Just jump in and do something! Give God what belongs to Him – be it time, talent or tithe - and He will honor it. By the way, God will entrust you with tomorrow's blessings on the basis of today's faithfulness. Don't you remember Jesus' story about the three men who were given sums of money to invest for their master? Each of the servants was tested on the basis of what they had– not what they didn't have. The ones who turned out to be faithful were given greater responsibilities and greater blessings.

Two, your attitude is more important than your position. Who was in a better position to help that dying man in Jesus' story? The Samaritan knew he was despised by Jews and perhaps he didn't like Jews much either. But this man in need was a Jew. The Levite and the priest were not only fellow Jews but they were religious professionals. If anyone was in a position to help it was those two gentlemen! Too many people say, "If only I was a pastor... if only I was a missionary... if only I had a degree. Attitude is far more important than position.

The best way to learn is just to jump in and do! Simply holding some position doesn't qualify you to be used of God. What qualifies you is your attitude.

Three, your attitude is more important than timing. The Levite and the priest were the first two men to see the dying man in Jesus' story. If he was half-dead when they went by, he was all but dead when the Samaritan came upon him. God forgive us when we see need around us and we end up saying something like this: "Well, you know, the timing is just not right. Let me consult that life manual a bit more. Let me read my Bible a bit longer. Let me pray a bit more. Then, I'll be better prepared to help later on." The fact is that you'll offer some other excuse then. The right time to love, the right time to give, the right time to meet needs is now... now... now. Not tomorrow; now! How does the story end? Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robber?" The lawyer replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." Follower of Jesus, do it now. Christian, the very best time is now. Start tithing now. Today. Find a place of service in the church now. If the Holy Spirit brings someone with some kind of need to your mind just now, do something to help this afternoon. Attitude is always more important than timing. And the time to serve the Lord is always now. You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.

Here's a legendary tale that hopefully makes a point. A very wealthy man stood at Heaven's gate seeking admittance. Peter met him there to escort him to his new home in the celestial city. Peter led him down streets of gold and by magnificent mansions that defy description. The man paused, expecting that at any moment Peter would point out one of these incredible dwellings as his new home. But Peter continued on and the man followed. Finally, Peter came to a rather poor looking neighborhood there in Heaven – kind of worn down and beaten up looking. He stopped in front of a tiny shack and said to the man, "Well, here's your eternal home." The man became very angry and said, "This just isn't right! On earth I lived in the lap of luxury. I had everything anyone could ever desire. Now you want me to live for all eternity in this shack? There's been some kind of mistake!" Peter replied, "Sir, you must understand something. All we had to build your house up here were the materials you sent to us while you lived on earth. We would have been happy to build you an incredible, well-decorated mansion, but you never sent us the proper materials." It's true: Heaven itself is a gift. You can't earn it or deserve it. It's a gift given by God to all those who put their trust in Jesus. But what happens after you get to Heaven will be your reward." What on earth are you doing for Heaven's sake?

God never asks you or me to do something that He has not already asked of Himself. What kind of attitude do you think Jesus exhibited when He walked the earth? What is yours is mine and I'm going to take it? No. What is mine is mine and I'm going to keep it? No. What is mine is yours and I'm going to give it? Yes. That's the attitude behind the cross and the empty tomb, is it not? That's how Jesus lived. And that's how you and I can live to God's glory.