

**BE A GIVER, NOT A KEEPER****PHILIPPIANS 4:14-20**

When you go to the doctor for a routine medical check-up – like a yearly physical, for example – it can be a kind of humbling experience. Your doctor may well prod, poke, and press on various places in your body as if you were a side of beef. He or she may ask, “Does this hurt? Does that hurt?” If at some point, you say, “Ow! Watch it – that hurt!” one of two things has happened. On the one hand, sure, it’s possible your doc was less than gentle. On the other hand, there may be something going on wherever he or she prodded, poked, or pressed that’s not so good. In that case, the doctor might say, “My friend, it’s not supposed to hurt there!”

Today, I want you to think with me about money and giving. There’s a lot of truth in the old saying, “People get funny when you talk about money.” It can provoke a negative response from people, “Why is the church always asking for money? That’s what’s wrong with churches today. Instead of focusing on Jesus and spiritual things, they always want to get into my wallet.” Sure, sometimes pastors and churches say and do stupid things when it comes to money and giving. But the Bible is never timid about money and giving, nor was Jesus. He said, “Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.” (Mt. 6:21 NLT) He knew how people handle their money reveals more about their real priorities, values, and goals in life than any other single factor. How you handle money – as well as how and what you give your money to – is a deeply spiritual issue. It’s an essential part of being Jesus’ disciple. If the subject causes you immediate annoyance and irritation, may I say this to you with respect? It’s not supposed to hurt there!

Money – how you handle it and how you give it away - is also part of your legacy. We’ve been thinking about what it means to leave a godly legacy for those around us and those who come after us. It’s what people remember about you after you’re gone. It’s the impact and influence you have on others – your kids and grandkids, other family members, your neighbors and friends, people you do church with. Everyone leaves a legacy. If you’re a disciple of Jesus, you want to leave a godly legacy. You want to finish well. While your legacy is always more than money and property, how you manage your money and your giving will be part of the legacy you leave behind. Will you be remembered as a giver or a keeper? As generous or stingy? As a wise steward of your finances or someone who was financially inept?

As he finished up a letter to fellow followers of Jesus living in the Greek city of Philippi, the great Christian leader, Paul illustrated some basic principles about money and giving that definitely apply to you and me today. Let’s read the passage first and then think about it together. Apparently, the church at Philippi had sent Paul some kind of financial gift as an expression of their love and support. He was sincerely grateful. After all, he was in prison for preaching about Jesus. Back in those days, the Roman government didn’t provide food and clothing to prisoners. You were dependent on your family and friends to meet those basic needs. Paul was very thankful for their generosity, but he also recognized a teaching opportunity. He praised them for supporting him financially. Not every church Paul started or founded did that. But he

also wanted them to know that what brought him the most joy was not their money but the evidence of their spiritual maturity. Their giving underlined the fact they were growing spiritually and living as true disciples of Jesus. Paul's words here point to some matters of real importance when it comes to money and giving. First, it's good to

### **GET THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE ON MY GIVING.**

Contrary to what many people think, God is very interested in your money. It tells Him a great deal about what's truly important to us. While the Bible never says money or things are evil in and of themselves, it warns us against loving money and the things money can buy. It can result in a kind of spiritual cancer that destroys people. By the same token, we're exhorted many times to give to the Lord's work in this world. Giving is one measurement of spiritual maturity and health. When it comes to financial giving, it's impossible to fake spiritual maturity. You can offer up an incredible prayer – beautifully phrased and full of heartfelt emotion – that makes people believe you're some great prayer warrior when, in fact, there's nothing praiseworthy about your prayer life. You can recite Bible verses from memory creating the illusion you know Scripture inside and out, but in reality possess no real understanding of the Bible. You can tell people, "I love you!" but not really care about them at all. But when it comes down to giving your money to the Lord, you either do it or you don't. You either put your gift into the offering plate or hit the online send button. You can't fake giving.

Getting a right perspective on giving starts with the fundamental recognition that giving is an act of obedience to God. The whole biblical concept of stewardship – not a word we use every day (think "management") – is built on the truth that everything belongs to God ultimately. In other words, the real owner of your house, your car, your clothes, your savings, your vacation money, your investments, your retirement nest egg, your insurance policies, and your charge cards is God. It all belongs 100% to God. The difference between a real disciple of Jesus, and someone who is content to be just a believer in Jesus, is acknowledging that truth and living it out. A disciple of Jesus recognizes that he or she is simply a steward or a manager of God's resources. Our stuff is given by God to us as a kind of long term loan. Now, God owns all our stuff whether we acknowledge that fact or not. That's not up for debate. That's just the way it is. But God does allow every human being the freedom to be a good steward or a bad steward - to be a faithful or an unfaithful manager – of what ultimately belongs to Him.

How we manage our money and how we give it away is part and parcel of recognizing Jesus' Lordship over our lives. Should Jesus have ultimate say on how we spend our time? How we relate to people? Over our goals and dreams in life? How I conduct myself at work? Most of us would say, "Absolutely!" Then, Jesus must also be Lord of my financial world: accounts, cards, and investments. Any and every financial instrument at my disposal needs to be offered up or surrendered to Jesus. Now, don't get nervous! God is never stingy or tight-fisted when it comes to how you and I use His money. He's a whole lot more generous than you or me! But getting and keeping the right perspective on money and giving demands we acknowledge that everything about our finances is subject to the Lordship of Jesus every day and all the time.

But getting the right perspective on money and giving is more than just obedience. There's got to be more here than just duty and responsibility. What Paul appreciated most about the gift from the Philippians was the motivation behind it. They didn't give because they had to give, but instead out of a heart of love for Jesus and for their spiritual brother, Paul. It reminds me of something Paul wrote to another group of Christians. "You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." (2 Cor. 9:7 NLT) When our giving is healthy, we have the right motivation to give. We don't give in to unworthy attitudes like "Oh, I guess I've got to fork out more money for the church or it will go down the tubes" or "I better give my tithe or God will punish me and my family." The Philippians' motivation was love for Jesus and love for Paul. As a result it was willing giving, joyful giving, and enthusiastic giving. If you give money to the Lord or to this church begrudgingly or because you're afraid God will punish you if you don't, your perspective is wrong. But when love for Jesus compels us to give to and support His work, then God is pleased and we're blessed.

Gordon Cosby pastored a unique congregation in Washington, D.C. known as the Church of the Savior. Earlier in his ministry, Cosby pastored a small Baptist church in Virginia. On one occasion, a church leader came to him to share a concern. In the church family was a very poor widow with six children. Nevertheless, she was giving \$4 a month to the church which – hard as it might be to believe - represented 10% of her income at the time. Both the church leader and Cosby decided it would be appropriate to go to this dear woman and assure her she was under no obligation to give anything to the church. So, Cosby went to this woman's home and told her of the concern he and the church leader had regarding her giving. He told her as graciously, as supportively, and as pastorally as he could that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. He didn't get the reaction he expected. As he spoke to her, tears welled up in that widow's eyes and she said, "I want to tell you that you're taking away from me the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning." Gordon Cosby admitted that woman had a better and more biblical perspective on giving than he did at the time. Whatever your income level, are you a giver or a keeper? What kind of a legacy are you leaving? Is it a godly legacy? Getting the right perspective on my giving will lead to ...

### **DEVELOP THE RIGHT PRACTICE IN MY GIVING.**

It's become my firm conviction from studying the Bible on this issue that the Lord expects us to tithe our income to His work – 10% of our income. Tithing is the biblical standard. For example, it says, "One-tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain from the fields or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD and must be set apart to him as holy." (Lev. 27:30 NLT) Granted, it was an agricultural economy back then, but the principle remains. Another Scripture says, "'Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,' says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, 'I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!'" (Mal. 3:10 NLT) The tithe was never considered the goal of our giving – something we gradually move toward and

hope to reach someday eventually. It's where our financial giving begins if we consider ourselves Jesus' disciples – God's minimum expectation for me not His maximum goal.

I've heard all the objections against tithing. "Rick, tithing is Old Testament. It's not mentioned in the New Testament; therefore, it's not expected for Christians." I suggest it's not mentioned in the New Testament simply because God felt no need to repeat Himself. He'd already made His expectations on financial giving clearly known. It's dangerous to assume God no longer holds us to Old Testament standards of behavior and lifestyle simply because they're not expressly mentioned again in the New Testament. God did change some things, to be sure, and on those He's been specific. But He never changed the expectation regarding the tithe. "But, Rick, tithing was part of the legalism of the Old Testament and keeping the Law. We're under grace now. We don't have to keep the Mosaic Law." So, if God expected His people in the Old Testament to give the tithe, we – who have received so much more spiritual blessing than they ever did as a result of what Jesus did at the cross and the empty tomb – are expected to do less? Really? It was Jesus who said, "When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required." (Lk. 12:48 NLT) The blessings we've received on this side of the cross argue that we should be giving more not less than those who are on the other side of the cross.

Here's an uncomfortable conclusion: A Christian who doesn't tithe is disobedient. Now, be careful. I didn't say you've lost your salvation, you're going to hell, God hates you, God is going to punish you, or you're a terrible person. You can be a wonderful person and not tithe. You can have your ticket punched for Heaven and not tithe. But the fact remains that when it comes to handling money and giving, you're content to remain disobedient to God. You might be thinking, "Rick, you don't know my unique financial situation. I'm the only person in the history of mankind to have experienced what I'm experiencing right now financially. I just can't tithe. At least not right now." It's not my expectation. It's God's expectation found in His Word. God never asks us to do what we cannot do. He'd never given us the expectation of the tithe if He knew it was impossible for any of us to fulfill it. The issue, then, when it comes to giving the tithe is not our capability, but our willingness. The question to be answered is not, "Can I tithe?" but "Will I tithe?" God sees withholding the tithe as theft. God confronted His people back in Old Testament days with these words, "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. You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating me." (Mal. 3:8-9 NLT) Stealing from God is stealing from God. A rose by any other name smells the same!

There's a story of a man who was struggling with this concept of tithing. One day, he revealed his doubts to his pastor, "I just don't see how I can give 10% of my income to the church when I can't even keep on top of my bills." His pastor said, "If I promise to make up the difference in your bills if you should fall short, do you think you could try tithing for just one month?" After a moment's pause, the man said, "Sure, if you promise to make up any shortage, I guess I could try tithing for one month." "What do

you think of that?" mused his pastor. "You'd be willing to put your trust in a mere man like myself, who possesses little materially, but you can't trust your Heavenly Father who owns the whole universe!" His friend started to tithe the next Sunday.

Our church has a remarkably positive and generous history when it comes to financial giving. I believe the amount of our giving is praiseworthy. Yeah, church! Now, I don't see anyone's actual financial giving to this church. There's been a tradition in many churches to keep that kind of information private even from the pastor so that no one is given special treatment on the basis of what they give financially. That's OK with me. But here's what I do know. We have a few wealthy people in our congregation and some of them give substantially to the Lord's work in this place. Probably the tithe and maybe beyond it. Others in our church have more modest incomes, but they give the tithe and beyond the tithe faithfully and enthusiastically. But I also know beyond any shadow of any doubt that more than a few of us out there are quite content to be disobedient to God when it comes to how we handle money and how we give to His work in this world. Instead of tithing, we give the Lord tips. Are you a tither or a tipper? Are you quite content to let others fund the Lord's work in this place while you just "nickel and dime" it? I don't know who you are, because I don't see your personal statement of giving. But God does. And you do. He knows. And so do you. Are you feeling a little annoyed, irritated, or defensive right now? "Churches are always asking for money, money, money.... That's just your interpretation of Scripture.... You don't know my situation." Well, here's what I do know. It's not supposed to hurt there.

What's the result of obedience in any and every area of our relationship with God? Blessing. Blessing always follow obedience. What's the result of disobedience? Forfeiture of blessing. I'm not of the "health and wealth" persuasion. You will never hear from me that if you tithe, or give God some lavish financial gift, or plant some kind of "seed" in faith, that God obligates Himself to make you rich and financially prosperous. Absolute nonsense. But I would be less than biblical if I didn't point out there's a relationship between obeying God and being blest by God. Of course there is! When you obey God, you will receive His blessings. When you're content to disobey God, you block God's blessings from getting to you. That's true in every area of life and also when it comes to money and giving. If you make up your mind to do life God's way, blessing will follow. That doesn't mean you will escape all hardships – even financial ones. Trouble comes to all of us in life even when we obey God. But I can guarantee blessings will be far more numerous than if we're content to disobey God. A lot of blessing gets left on the shelf because we're content to disobey. Get the right perspective on my giving. Develop the right practice in my giving. Finally ...

### **EXPECT THE RIGHT RESULTS FROM MY GIVING.**

Paul and these Philippian followers of Jesus shared a unique, joyful relationship. It's almost as if they shared a kind of spiritual checking account. Paul deposited spiritual knowledge and teaching into it from which the Philippians withdrew understanding and spiritual growth. The Philippians put in material gifts – money - which Paul withdrew to meet his physical needs. One result of my giving is the knowledge that I'm sharing and

participating in the Lord's work with others. Through their financial gifts, the Philippians genuinely shared in Paul's joys and triumphs, his trials and difficulties. Their giving resulted in an investment of themselves in Paul's ministry. For his part, Paul was blest and encouraged by the Philippians' generosity and practical love. When you give to the Lord's work faithfully and sacrificially, you, too, will experience this powerful sense of spiritual participation. Through our giving we invest something of ourselves in the most important enterprise of all time and in all history: the building of God's Kingdom.

As I've said, God's blessing follows obedient giving. Now, it's true, we may have less of what this world considers "wealth," but you will become richer in the things that are eternal and really matter. Faithful, obedient giving releases God's gifts to me. Sometimes it might be financial blessing. At all times it will be spiritual blessing. There's the promise clearly stated in black and white, "And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus." (Ph. 4:19 NLT) Is that a promise for everyone? No. That's a promise made to those who are faithful, obedient, and generous with God – like the Philippians. Frankly, God can't afford to lavish His blessings on stingy, disobedient Christians. They'd squander His blessings or fail to appreciate them.

What are the "riches" that Paul talks about there? They're of an infinite number and variety. They all come from the same source: the heart of God. And God promises that those who are generous with Him will receive far more back from God in this life and in Heaven than whatever he or she ever gave to God in this life. That's how God operates. Jesus said, "Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity." (Lk. 6:38 MSG).

Stuart Briscoe, a well-known pastor and author, tells about the time he joined a book club so he could get his hands on a new Bible with four different versions all in one volume. The very day the Bible arrived, a good friend who happened to be a missionary visited Briscoe. He was a Bible translator in the country of Borneo. The Holy Spirit spoke into Briscoe's spirit during the conversation, "Give him your new Bible. It will be of invaluable use to him in Borneo." Immediately, Briscoe thought of all the reasons why he just couldn't part with his brand, new Bible. But, finally, he said to his friend, "This is my brand, new Bible. The book club I joined to get it told me it's the last one available. It's a unique edition and I'm thrilled with it. But I think God just told me to give it to you even though I don't want to do that."

Briscoe expected his missionary friend to say, "Oh, no, Stuart! I couldn't possibly take your brand, new Bible knowing how much it means to you." Instead, his friend just said, "Thanks! This will be a tremendous help to me in the translation work we're doing. When I saw it, I hoped you'd give it to me." And so off went Briscoe's friend back to Borneo with Briscoe's brand, new Bible. The next day, an identical Bible appeared on Stuart Briscoe's desk. He didn't know how it got there. A different friend called him later that morning and said, "That Bible on your desk? It's yours." Briscoe said, "No, my Bible is on its way to Borneo." His friend answered, "I don't know what you're talking

about. I got two copies in the mail yesterday and the Lord told me to give one of the Bibles to you.”

It's true: you can't out give God. You'll experience that result if you get the right perspective on your giving and develop the right practice in your giving. So, how will you be remembered? What kind of a legacy will you leave behind? Will you be remembered as a giver or a keeper? Lavish went it came to supporting the Lord's work or stingy? A builder of God's Kingdom that will last forever or a builder of your own kingdom which is here today, gone tomorrow? Make up your mind to finish well.