



Means of the Heart

November is stewardship month in many Covenant congregations. As church budget committees begin to sift through priorities for the year ahead, it is timely for church members to also think deeply about personal commitments around investing in the work of God.

When you get right down to it, money in and of itself has very little utility. Take a \$5 bill. You can't wear it. You can't eat it. It won't protect you in the rain. What gives money its value is what it can be exchanged for. As we examine our priorities around what we will exchange our resources for, what can be more valuable than exchanging it for the work of God's kingdom?

We know that Jesus is upset in the temple when he watches people make a travesty of temple gifts. It becomes perfunctory to some, and so he chastises the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 for meeting the letter of the law of the tithe, but whose hearts remained hardened to injustice.

To others, it had become exploitive. And so the money-changers, involved in a sort of foreign currency exchange for people from other countries on a pilgrimage to make temple gifts, turn a spiritual act into a usurious business transaction and incur the wrath of Jesus.

But there are three other instances where we see offerings that move Jesus. First, a little boy gives Jesus five loaves and two fish. He gives away what he has to stave off his own hunger and watches Jesus ward off the hunger of 5,000 others. Then Jesus looks on as a destitute widow willingly drops two copper coins—two cents—into the temple offering. A miniscule gift measured financially, yes, but a huge commitment when measured by what is available to her. And finally there is Mary, near the end of Jesus's life, breaking open a jar of perfume to anoint his feet, a display of devotion so extravagant that Jesus says the story will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached. And so it is.

Three distinct occasions. A sum total of five loaves, two fish, two cents, and a jar of perfume. When we give to meet the needs around us like the boy, in ways that represent sacrifice as the widow, and that reflect deep devotion as Mary, we give in a purity of motive noted by Jesus.

When money becomes a means of the heart,

it is good. But when money becomes the pursuit of the heart, life gets warped. It becomes a pursuit when we confer god-like status on finances.

Author and consultant Mark Vincent talks about ways we presume money to have god-like power. For example, money creates access to technology that leave us feeling all-powerful, all-knowing, and even present in multiple places at once. Money promises everything God promises in the New Jerusalem. Money is used to steer circumstances. Money lives on after you are gone. "It is money's mimicry of God that leads so many to pledge their lives, sacrifice their children, mistreat their neighbor, cheat their customers, and destroy their nation's economic strength. All to get just a little more of the stuff," Vincent says.

So, how do we use money as a means of expressing our heart without it becoming the pursuit of our heart? Paul points the way by lifting up the example of the Macedonian Christians. He commends them for their generosity in taking up a special offering for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. In encouraging the Corinthians to follow their example, he says, "they gave themselves first to the Lord" (2 Corinthians 8:5). In other words, God remains God in our lives, money remains money.

So, here are three challenges for you and your congregation. Like the boy, what is the need of the crowd who is all around you? God has given you something right in hand to make a difference. Like the widow, are you giving at a level that demonstrates sacrifice? In God's economy, something given in sacrifice is always worth more than something given from abundance, regardless of the relative amounts. Like Mary, have you ever given unreasonably and extravagantly simply to be able to tangibly express the depth of your thankfulness and devotion? Although not always true, there are those rare times when the value of a gift does communicate how we value the other party.

It is Thanksgiving this month, at least in the United States. May the giving of our own two fish, fives loaves, two pennies, and bottle of perfume reflect the thanks indeed of a grateful people. ■

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