

Nov 17 How Will You Measure Your Life?

By How and What You Give

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-19

As we continue to ask, “What is really important when it comes to how I live my life?” we hear today that God’s people are called to be generous people. Now many of you are probably thinking, “Oh no, here it comes, the annual stewardship sermon where the pastor makes us feel guilty about what we are giving to the church so we will up our pledge.” You have all sat through those kinds of sermons and I must confess to having preached some of them! Now, of course I did it more subtly than just turning the screws of guilt, but often we think of fall as a time where churches come to us with their hands out for money. So, take a deep breath, press eject on those old tapes running in your mind, and be open to what I have to say. This is not a typical stewardship sermon, trying to make you give more. You are all doing a good job of faithfully supporting the ministries of this church and are very generous in your giving to needs in the community and the world.

When we talk about how you will measure your life, we need to understand that the concept of generosity is a call to discipleship. Disciples of Jesus are also generous people because giving is a measure of faithfulness. Repeatedly, giving and faith are linked in the New Testament. We are reminded that we are stewards, not owners, of the blessings of God. So when called to give, we are actually giving back some of what we have been blessed with. When we embrace this concept the call to generosity becomes also a tie to give thanks for all that God has given us. The thought I want you to hold on to as we move through this sermon is this: God measures our lives, not by how much we have, but how much we have given away.

With that in mind we must remember that we give from the gifts that God has given us. Today we heard the familiar parable of the talents. Did you know that our current definition of the world talent stems from this parable? When Jesus spoke, a talent was a unit of money. A “*talanta*” was a lot of money—up to 20 years of a typical worker’s wages. Today we might say, “One was given gold worth 5 million, another 2

million and another 1 million. Talent had nothing to do with natural gifts we might have been given like a good singing voice or athletic prowess or a caring spirit. To hear that we have a show called “America’s Got Talent” would have seemed very strange to Jesus’ listeners. Why would you celebrate that people have money? This parable changed the definition of the word!

In the parable we have three servants—two are called “good and faithful.” The third ends up in trouble for being “wicked and lazy.” In Jesus’ story, the servant with two talents was as faithful as the one with five. Jesus said our faithfulness to God shows in our willingness to use whatever resources of energy, time, skills, money or other assets God gives us to bless others and build God’s kingdom. The one was condemned not because he had just one talent but because he did not do anything with it.

So, when we talk about how we are measured, we are to ask how we have used the resources God has placed in our lives. How are you using those resources to serve the Kingdom of God and bless others? Are there any resources you have “buried in a hole in the ground,” so to speak? If so, how can you begin to use them actively for God’s purposes?

The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians, and I am freely translating his words, that living selfishly destroys our faith and that serving each other in love is the divine antidote for selfishness. See, the reason we are challenged to be generous of the resources God has given us is because it is a spiritual matter. When we hang on too tightly to our gifts, Paul says we become self-centered. Self-centered people are not good disciples. We become concerned about getting and keeping our stuff. We become selfish. The only antidote to that is to love others.

Yes, as the parable says, it is risky to be generous. We will not always receive a rich return. The one who hid his money was afraid, thinking the master was a hard and uncaring person. We often fear the world too much. We don’t want to be gullible or foolish. We are afraid of the “what ifs” of life. And the parable says, God is not happy with that mindset. We are invited to trust and at times risk.

We are called to give of our resources, our gifts, when we get that nudge because it is a form of spiritual discipline, a way of deepening our trust and a way of showing our love for God and for others. To my way of thinking the parable could have ended up this way. And the man who had been given the one talent came and said, I did my best and failed. I lost it all. And the master's response, "Well done." The parable is about giving, using and trusting, not about results.

Also when we think of giving, it is more than about money, or other assets. It is also a call to be generous with our time. Again, discipleship is about living the faith not just believing. So, how are you doing? Are you willing to give generously of your time and volunteer to help in one of our ministries here at church? Are you willing to be inconvenienced to help another? Are you willing to tell a friend no because you are busy with the work of God? Generosity of our time is another mark of discipleship.

As I said, coming to the end of our days we won't be asked how many things did you get done in your lifetime. We will be asked, "Did you take time for the least of these?"

Always we need to remember that we give because God first gave to us. We serve a generous God. Think of all the ways God has poured blessings into your life. Aren't you at times overwhelmed by all that God does for you? I know I am. Since we follow such an awesome giving God it just makes sense that part of how we are to grow faith is to grow in our own practice of generosity.

So, in the measure of your life when the yardstick is generosity, "How well are you measuring up?" Does God see a faithful servant who is using the resources God has given them, whether that be time, talents or money, for the Kingdom? Or, does God see one who has buried his or her treasure?

It doesn't matter how rich or poor you are. Faithfulness by the measure these verses suggest comes by what you give. How content are you with what you are giving of your resources and your time? If your "contentment quotient" is strong, reflect on how it got that way. Is it strong because you see that you are truly giving a fair share of your time to the work of God? God doesn't expect you to be run ragged but you know what a

good sharing of that time would look like. Are you content because you know what you give to the work of God, in this church, in the community, and the world is a true expression of your love of God? Then I am sorry for you having had to sit through this sermon. It is not for you.

But, if your contentment is strong because you ignore or reject some demands on your time because you want to do other more fun stuff, then perhaps this sermon has made you a little uneasy. If you are content with what you share of your resources because it is easy and convenient, and not what would be an appropriate response to the blessings of God then again perhaps you are a bit uncomfortable.

Generosity is about faithfulness, about commitment to God about growing in discipleship, about putting God in the center of our lives. Those who do this will hear the blessings of the master.

A generous life is one that is truly worth living. This is why it was so important that Jesus talked about wealth and generosity so often. Jesus wants you to measure up. This, as I said, is not a sermon to make you give more to the church. But if this is what God is laying on your heart, we won't refuse it! This is a sermon more importantly to remind you that generosity is a measure of faithfulness and discipleship. And, at the end of our days, the true measure God will use is not how much you have but what you have done with what has been given to you.