



Why Do We Do That? Give

Matthew 22:15-22

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We continue in this month of April to look at some of the foundational practices of our faith. Too often we engage in a pattern of discipleship with no understanding *why* we are doing *what* we are doing. From coming and participating in worship, to studying the Biblical text, to praying, to serving in the community, to giving financially – we often only do these things because they are normative and expected practices, but do you know *why* you do them? That is our task this month – to ask the question, *Why do we do that?* Today, we are considering the practice of financial giving.

Now, before you get up and leave, believe me when I say, I know you don't want me to talk about financial giving as much as you actually don't want me to talk about financial giving. I learned early on in ministry that talking about financial giving is like talking about a woman's age – it's taboo, and should be avoided at all costs.

I think one of the reasons financial giving is so off limits in the church is because it's off limits in our society. It's rude to ask someone how much they make, or how much they spend on their mortgage, or how much they give to charities, or how much they have saved away for retirement. If politics and religion are the top two things one shouldn't discuss at a dinner party, financial well-being would be a close third.

We don't like to talk about money because we believe what we do with our money is our business and no one else's – and we maintain that cultural mindset when it comes to giving to the church.

I heard a story of a pastor back in Georgia who called out this mindset during their church's annual pledge campaign. It came to be celebration Sunday, when everyone would turn in their financial pledge for the coming year. In the front of the church was a sealed box with a small slit – just big enough to slide in a pledge card. As she was preparing to invite the congregation forward to dedicate their pledges, the pastor offered a word of instruction that went something like this:

"You know what I find amusing about how we turn in our pledge cards? As people come forward, they will fold their pledge card in half, sometimes even folding it twice, before putting it in the sealed box. They might suggest they are trying to keep hidden their personal information – like their address, email, or phone number. But that doesn't make much sense, because all of that information is available in the church directory. It's already public." ... She continued, "I wonder if the reason we fold the card in half is because we hope that by hiding

the numbers we've written, we can hide even from God what we're dropping in the sealed box."

Her point, in naming our timidity around our financial gifts to the church, was that for many of us, giving to the church isn't a financial problem, it's a spiritual one. To understand this claim, we have to know *why* we give.

In our Scriptural text this morning, we find Jesus once more being challenged by some of the leaders of the first century Temple. Only this time, the Pharisees didn't go themselves to entrap Jesus, they sent their lackeys – their disciples – to do the job. Along with sub-group of the Pharisees was a group of Herodians. The Pharisees were Palestinians, and they opposed the Roman Government control of the land. The Herodians were those who supported the Roman occupation – likely taking their name from their support of the present local Roman ruler, Herod Antipas.

This odd mixture of leaders approaches Jesus and asks, "We know you are sincere, and teach the way of God with truth, regarding no one with partiality. Tell us then, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

The text tells us Jesus is aware of the malice – as I'm sure you can easily pick up as well. Just listen to their ask: "We know you are a nice, gentle man, who speaks with truth, and who loves everyone." Riiiiiiiggghhhhtttt. This kind of buttering up isn't too different than when my child says, "Daddy, I think you are the best daddy there is" You start to feel all warm on the inside, thinking, "I've finally done something right!" Yet, it is not uncommon that such a buttery sweet statement is followed up with, "You're so sweet daddy, can we go to Target and buy some legos?"

Jesus isn't so easily fooled, he sees through their inquiry. Jesus knows that saying 'no' – that it, saying it is *not* lawful to pay taxes to the emperor – would be a dangerous repudiation of Roman authority. The Herodians are there, and surely they would run swiftly to the local Roman authorities to have this Roman-objector arrested. Yet, if Jesus says 'yes' – that it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor – then he will alienate his Jewish followers, who, like most Palestinians of the time, objected to the Roman occupation.

Seeing through their entrapment, Jesus calls them out, "Why are you testing me, hypocrites. Show me the coin used for the tax." The tax of which they are speaking is an occupation tax. There were many taxes the Palestinians had to pay – temple tax, land tax, and others. But this tax, which costs a denarius per year, was an imperial tax. This tax was paid by the local residents to the Roman Government so that the Romans could occupy their land. "They were paying their oppressors to, well, oppress them."ⁱ

Bringing forth the denarius, Jesus asks them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" Having come with many words to entrap Jesus, they are left with only two, "the emperor's," they respond.

Then Jesus offers this final response, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

While this passage is perhaps one of the more well known passages in the Biblical text, I find it is often misused. More times than not, this quote is used to set up an argument around the separation of church and state, and often it is used to argue about whether it is right for faithful disciples to support the decisions of their ruling government – like paying taxes, supporting the decisions of politicians, or participating in voting. While I would be willing to justify this text offers that Jesus *allows* for loyalty to the ruling government, it seems clear to me that Jesus is subordinating any other loyalty to our loyalty to God. “One may give to Caesar his due, but only if it does not conflict with what is due God, because what belongs to God, the creator and Lord of all, encompasses everything else.”ⁱⁱ

Jesus’ response calls to mind what he had earlier said in Matthew’s gospel, “One cannot serve two masters.” At the time, Jesus was referring to God and wealth. Yet, “If one cannot serve two masters, surely Jesus is not now discussing how to divide one’s loyalties [between Caesar and God].”ⁱⁱⁱ It seems that Jesus is not inviting us to consider how to compartmentalize our lives, deciding how much we should devote to the ruling government, and how much we should devote to God. Instead, Jesus seems to be inviting us, even beckoning us, to offer everything – our entire lives – to the divine. “Jesus is calling us to do all things with an understanding of who is truly sovereign.”^{iv}

There is little question that Jesus believed our financial practices were indicative of our faithfulness to God and our understanding of this call, “to give to God that which is God’s”. In his earthly ministry, Jesus talked about giving about as much as he talked about anything else. But just as he does here in Matthew, Jesus doesn’t talk about giving to God out of a sense of guilt or law, he speaks of giving to God from a place of sharing in the generosity of God.

If you search the Biblical text, from start to finish, for the word *give*, you’ll find a fascinating pattern. I encourage you to do this when you get home – fact check me – pull a snopes: go online to biblegateway.com, or any Bible search site, choose any version of the Bible you wish, and search for the word *give*. The word appears almost 1500 times. You’ll find that in the first two books of the Bible, in Genesis and Exodus, the word *give* is not once used to define our giving to God. In these foundational books of the Bible, wherein God’s covenant is being established with God’s people, the word *give* is used only to talk about how God is giving to us. In the creation story, in the story of the flood, in the story of the Exodus, in the story of God’s people being established as God’s people, the only person *giving* anything is God giving to us.

The instruction for us to give back, the Biblical laws that mandate giving to the temple, the rules suggesting that giving is a necessity, any language around tithing ... they don’t show up until you get into Leviticus.

When we understand giving simply as an instruction that is mandated by the Scriptural witness, we fail to understand *why* we give. The call to give is not simply a guilt-filled obligation. The invitation to give is a response to that which God first gave us. To pick up on Jesus' phrasing, we give to God that which belongs to God – and rooted in the Biblical witness, we find that everything we have belongs to God, for it was God who created it and who gave it to us first. Only after giving us all that we needed is there ever a call in the history of our faith for us to respond by giving to God.

That's a hard concept to understand, because I know how hard we work for what we have. I know that many in this church grew up with nothing, but through dedicated resolve, through pulling up your bootstraps, you've made for yourself a better life than perhaps you experienced as a child. As such, surrounded by this mindset in our culture, we claim that what we have is ours, and that as the owners of what we have, we will hold on to and reserve for ourselves all that we wish. I can only pull from the story of the Georgia pastor, who is known for saying, this isn't a financial issue, it's a spiritual one. Because, when read in full, the Biblical witness, the foundation of our faith, that which we claim is sufficient for salvation, makes clear, created in the image of God, we are to share life with others as life has been shared with us. As those who are created in such a divine image, you are right to ask, *why do we give?* We give because what we have was given us by God, and we are called to share in the giving work that was modeled for us by God.

But, if I may, for as much of a theological reason there is to giving, seeing in the Biblical text a call to give simply because we should in response to God, who gave to us – there's also a practical reason.

In a world, and in a community, that offers so many opportunities to give, it can be hard to give financially without knowing how what we are giving is being used. Just this past week, over 150 local organizations raised money through the Spring2ACTion giving day. Over \$1.7 million dollars was raised in the City of Alexandria. Each person who made a gift choose which organization would receive their gift. I don't think this is a failure of faithfulness. As those who understand that what we have is of God, we should also see ourselves as stewards of such resources. As stewards of God's goodness, faithfulness in use is still important.

I can't speak for every church, but I can speak on behalf of Washington Street UMC. If you want to know to what you're giving, let me tell you. Your giving to this church is best defined by three categories.

First, is worship. As you hopefully heard a few weeks back, Rev. Gina Campbell talked a little about the importance of worship. It is a necessary act in our witness as disciples. If you break down every penny of our spending as a church – dividing out how much staff time, office resources, building utilities, planning time – breaking down every budget line, you'll find that about 31% of our budgeted spending as a church goes to making worship happen on Sundays. That means that about 1/3 of every dollar you put in the offering plate goes to making Worship happen.

Second is discipleship. We grow, learn, and further our discipleship in many ways. From Sunday morning Sunday School and Children's Church, to the prayer group, to small groups who meet here or in people's homes, discipleship focuses on helping us share in faithfulness with one another while growing in our understanding of God in the world. Again, if you break down every budget line, you'll find that about 25% of our budget goes toward discipleship efforts. That number is a bit lower than even I expected, but that's largely because most of our discipleship groups don't meet here at the church, so there are very few utility costs associated with discipleship. But, that means, one quarter of every dollar you put in the offering plate on Sundays goes to helping disciples all ages in our church grow in their faithfulness.

Finally, the third area is Community Engagement and Service. This includes things like Open Table, the computer lab, the preschool, Carpenter's Shelter meals, and the times we open our doors for the Arts Festival and First Night. All combined, our community engagement and service expenses total roughly 44% of our budgeted expenses. On top of our budgeted expenses, I would estimate that over 90% of in-kind or special offerings go directly to community service related ministries. For example, each week servants directly provide the food for Open Table. Each month the Carpenter's Shelter meal team provides the food needed to offer meals to the shelter residents. Throughout the year, outside of the budget, donations are provided for book bags, Christmas gifts, breakfast meals, and school supplies for our local elementary schools. So, while only 44% of our budgeted expenses go to community service and engagement, a much larger percentage of our total resources go to such ministries.

We give firstly, because it is our faithful response as those created in God's image to the giving of life and resources God has given us. But we also give, practically speaking, because the ministry of the church helps us respond to God's call on our lives. Gathering in the church helps usher us to the throne of God each week in worship. The community of the church invites us to grow deeper in our faithfulness alongside one another in discipleship. And the witness of the church serves the community, showing up, working and speaking on behalf of God, making it plain and clear that all are invited to come and know God is love. So let us give as faithful disciples, who give to God that which is God's, who respond in love and share together in the work and ministry of the church.

ⁱ David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved April 26, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Susan Grove Eastman. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglas T. King. *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

^{iv} Ibid.