

A Stewardship of Service
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 / Isaiah 65:17-25
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Twenty-Third Sunday in Pentecost
Veterans Day Weekend
November 13, 2022

Today is the third Sunday of this year's stewardship season. We began by considering our membership vows to support the ministries of this church by our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness, recognizing that even though now is the time we usually focus on financial support, that there are four other types of support enumerated here. Money is important, and I hope you will please keep supporting this church financially, and please consider increasing your financial commitment even a little bit, if you are able to do so. But we must not let that take our attention away from those other ways we are to support our church.

In preparing for today, it occurred to me that some people might be most comfortable supporting ministries with their money, because scripture is pretty specific about what is expected. You are to give God a tithe of what you have. Tithing has its roots in the Biblical tale of Abraham presenting a tenth of the war spoils to Melchizedek, the king of Salem, and so in the Old Testament, Jews brought 10% of their harvest to a storehouse as a welfare plan for the needy or in case of famine.

We believe that all we have is a gift from God, everything we will ever have and everything we will ever be. What can you give God in response to that? 10%, meaning 10% and you are good, you don't need to think twice about the rest of your money or material possessions. You probably should! But if not, there is a clearly articulated limit endorsed by church tradition for millennia. It's on the *other* aspects of stewardship where you might get hung up.

How much should you pray? 1 Thessalonians 5 famously states Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Without ceasing? In all circumstances? I think I'd rather give God thanks in 10% of circumstances, or pray 10% of the time. Unending is a far higher mark to hit.

How about your public witness as a Christian? Are we required to stop everyone on the street and ask if they have met Jesus? (I'm pretty sure not, so if you are holding in a sigh of relief, you can let that out now, that was rhetorical). Remember from last week, your witness isn't about proselytizing most of the time anyway, it is about how you live your life. Uh oh. Does that mean you can live in a way that honors Christ 10% of the time, and you are keeping your promise?

1 Peter 2:12: “Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, **they will see your honorable behavior**, and they will give honor to God when He judges the world.” That doesn’t seem to leave a lot of room for me to just leave the Holy Spirit you invited into your life, working within you to bring you closer to Christ — you can’t leave that home to babysit while you go out and raise a ruckus. Whether you know it or not, I assure you, people are pretty aware of how your life speaks to your Christian witness.

So that’s prayer, gifts and witness. How about presence? Last week we spent some time on that. Be present in worship, present to others, present to yourself, present to God in your life, and present to the world. We could quibble on how often counts as present in worship or to others, but to yourself, to the world, and to God? That seems to be an ongoing condition. You can see how restricting offering to a tithe suddenly becomes a lot more appealing, right?

That brings us to service. Of all of these, service seems to be the one that is most varied, as whatever you and God agree is right. There are many ways a person can serve, and I’ve asked Jay to be our liturgist today because it is good to recognize every so often that some have served in ways that are extraordinary, and that others have served in ways that give sacrificially, even to the point of giving their mortal lives in service to country. We see you, and we thank you, and we offer our respect and our thanks for all who served with you.

It also makes the point that service does not need to be restricted to one's church. There are many ways to serve, some directly to the church, some in very public ways. You should serve. I hope you serve.

One of the challenges we have as a church is there are not enough people to serve in all the ways needed in order to do all the ministries we want to do. For 2022, a few of our committees went defunct because we didn't have enough people who wanted to serve, including the stewardship committee.

You know what happened?

I now see stewardship in a completely different way, and I pray that a renewed focus on presence, service, witness, and prayer in particular would enrich the soil for God to do a new thing here.

If everything we did was undergirded by constant prayer, a strong community witness, a commitment to being present, and joyfully serving the Lord and those in need? I bet we wouldn't worry about the money as much — because while money is essential, **the rest not only fuel the work of the church, they are everything that gives it meaning.** Our scripture today speaks to what it means to be joyful in offering one's service. Let's see what joyful words we have for today: If you don't work, then you don't eat.

That's not what it says, but that's how it seems to be heard most often. I bet I'm not alone in hearing this scripture used to attack Medicaid, food stamps, and other social programs, seen as encouraging sloth and freeloading among the poor, taking advantage of decent, hardworking people. It bears repeating — anytime you see scripture being used as a weapon, someone is probably misunderstanding something important. If those being attacked are vulnerable, or marginalized, or anything of the sort, that goes double.

This is a good scripture for a week considering stewardship of service, because I fear that what we have too often is service given out of a sense of shame, or guilt, or if no one else does it then it won't get done, and the blame is on me. Why do we bother? I'd guess that you who serve do so for as many reasons as there are people here — but we are a church, and so I think in some way we are all trying to transform the world in the name of Jesus. If that is the case, how can we know if we are on the right track? Here these words from the prophet Isaiah:

They will build houses and dwell in them;

they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

No longer will they build houses and others live in them,

or plant and others eat.

For as the days of a tree,

so will be the days of my people;

my chosen ones will long enjoy

the work of their hands.

*They will not labor in vain,
nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the Lord,
they and their descendants with them.
Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
and dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,"*
says the Lord.

A description of labor that satisfies, not done in vain, building a world where God hears and answers before you are done calling out, of peace and harmony even among predators.

What you see in these words is a transformed world.

Often, we in the church talk about salvation in terms so spiritual and esoteric that ordinary people can't grasp them. Isaiah 65 uses pictures from daily life on earth to help us imagine how Easter **has** changed, and **is** changing, and **will** change life in this world. The prophet tells us that God has promised a new thing, and seeing this in the history of Israel offers an

illustration of the results of the New Thing God has done in the history of the world — and that God’s promise is for us too.

This suggests two things that I would commend to you.

You should serve, and your service should include some component of joy. If you don’t find that, then don’t feel obligated to keep at it. Think of it like Legos. You have a nice Lego airplane, but you really want a Lego car. You have all the Legos you need provided for you— it’s just that they were used to build an airplane that was pretty great weeks or months or years ago — but today, it is holding you back from what’s really needed right now. To do what you need now, you need to take apart the airplane and then you will be able to build the car.

Much of the time, and absolutely in 2022, we in the church really need that Lego car, but we can’t bring ourselves to take apart the Lego airplane that we were so proud of a decade or two ago. **We need to stop doing the old thing that was great but no longer serves.** If we can do that, we often find that God has already provided everything we need to do the new thing, even before we had a clear picture of what the new thing would be.

To wrap up, Let’s go back to Paul. Despite the common assumption that he addresses poor people taking advantage of others ’generosity, the letter does

not say that the problematic people are poor, just that they are “idle” and “busybodies.”

This could be a group of poor people who are also lazy, Paul does not identify them by economic status. **He could also be referring to a group of the idle rich, with resources for doing good, but who spend their time meddling, throwing their weight around because they can.** Or, he could be referring to formerly wealthy people who gave away resources to the community, but now are “coasting” on that gift, ordering others around while expecting now to be supported by resources that they still consider, in a way, their own. Regardless what behavior existed that Paul described as “unwilling to work,” he is concerned about its impact on the community and its ministry.

Pastor Frank Crouch points out that this section closes with the admonition, “Do not grow weary of doing what is right.” That closing offers a counterbalance to the idea that “anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” When you read something in scripture that disturbs you, or seems to condone harmful behavior, look around it for its context. Rather than advising us to pursue ways to stop ourselves from helping others in need, or limiting our help only to those who prove they deserve it, Paul ends by tilting suddenly over to the other end of the giving continuum.

He ultimately calls on the Thessalonians, and us today, to hold some combination of the following as our ethical goal: “Don’t get tired of doing

what is right. Don't get sick of doing good. Keep on keeping on in doing good things. Never stop lifting up those around you if you can. Don't ever give up on doing good. Do whatever good you can, whenever you can, wherever you can, in whatever ways you can — even if you don't have to.” Some are unable to serve in ways that are acceptable to others. That's fine. But that should not be a reason you use to justify your own idleness.

How much should you serve? Did you go to the pasta supper? It was a lot of work, but what an atmosphere of joy! Did you go to Ecuador, or on another mission trip? I bet it was a lot of work, but frequently doing that work in an atmosphere of joy.

That is my prayer for you. How much should you serve? In whatever way builds the kingdom of God while bringing you satisfaction and joy.

May it be so. Amen.