

STEWARDSHIP

I have a very strong temptation to tell you that I tithe and the Lord has blessed our family with a measure of prosperity. God has promised that in Malachi 3:10 where He said through the prophet, “Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.” But I don't want to tell you that. I am tempted to tell you that our family is active and involved in the work of the church and the Lord has blessed us with peace and good health in our family. But I don't want to tell you that either. The problem with me telling you those things is that there is an implied cause and effect. It is true that there is peace and prosperity and health and more, it is also true that we tithe and are involved – BUT – to imply that “what we do” makes it happen is to ignore the grace of God. You see, many people who never darken the door of a church and even many in this congregation do NOT tithe and are NOT involved in the work of the church and the Lord is, right now, blessing them with health and a measure of prosperity.

So, if I am not willing to claim a cause and effect relationship, then why do I do *what I do*? I have looked back over the years of my life and asking that, question. Why do I do what I do relative to giving and being involved in the Kingdom of God? As I look back, I see myself as a child attending Sunday School and giving my nickel every Sunday, I ask, “Why?” The answer is rather disturbing, in that it seems that I was concerned with what others might think. I can remember when I was a teenager and started reading the Bible through. I started out doing so sitting on the front porch so others would know what I was doing. Fortunately, I started in Matthew and it didn't take me too long to get to the part in the Sermon on the Mount about the Pharisees giving their alms in public and praying in public just to be seen of men. That got me off the front porch – but it did not keep me from telling people how many times I had read through the Bible. I could work that into a conversation whether it was appropriate or not. What I was doing might have been construed as being a good steward – after all, I was going to Sunday School and Church, I was giving, and I was reading the Scriptures. However, my motive, the WHY, was wrong. When I went away from my home town and went to college, then those people whom I was trying to impress were no longer around and the motivation was gone. You can predict what happened: I stopped going to church on a regular basis and I stopped giving. That is one of the problems of trying to do something for the sake of others. When they are not around, then the reason and motivation cease.

I did not get started back going to church until Nancy and I were married. I did not feel any great need to tithe, although I did feel guilty about not giving. She wanted to tithe – she had always tithed and so we tithed and we attended church regularly but were not really involved.

We moved to Kingsport and our involvement in church activities grew and tithing continued and my attitude changed from what I had as a child of wanting to impress others to “this is something that I ought to do”. I agreed to teach Sunday School because I thought that it was something that I ought to do. I felt an obligation to give and to participate and to read the Scriptures. These things were not necessarily something that I had pleasure in doing, but felt an obligation to do. This is what I would call *minimum stewardship*. A steward is obligated to discharge the

duties of a steward and it is NOT necessary that he enjoy it. It is NOT necessary that he even agree with it.

When I was thirty years old, my relationship to God deepened and truly became real. I experienced what Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 5:17. "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new." My giving changed, not only in amount, but also in my attitude toward what I was doing. My involvement in the life of the church and the work of the kingdom took on a new intensity and level and my attitude changed. Now I enjoy doing what I am doing. I no longer give just because I feel an obligation, I do not feel limited to stop my giving at ten percent, I WANT to have responsibilities in the work of the church, I WANT to be involved.

Several years ago, the Lord gave me insight into a passage in I Corinthians that helped me understand why my attitude had changed. Let me share that Scripture with you from the New American Standard text. I choose the NAS because there is a key word in that translation that helped with the insight that I am going to share with you. The subject that Paul was writing about was "preaching" and not about "giving;" however, I believe that the truth of the matter applies to whatever we do.

I COR 9:16-17 Substitute the word *tithe* and see how it reads.

For if I *tithe*, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion, for woe is me if I do not *tithe*. For if I voluntarily *give beyond that*, I have a reward; but if even if I don't want to *give*, I still have a stewardship entrusted to me.

Notice that key word "stewardship" that the translators used. I made this note in the margin of my Bible at the time:

What's the alternative to stewardship? OWNERSHIP! If we give or work by compulsion, the attitude is that of a steward. However, if we see that we are co-heirs with Christ, then we will give or work voluntarily. The attitude is that of an owner and we receive "reward." This is like sharing in the profits rather than just receiving a salary.

This new way of thinking about our relationship with God is consistent with what Jesus taught. As we mature, we are to move from seeing ourselves as stewards to seeing ourselves as owners. We are not hirelings but heirs. And the reason that we can move to this point is that we have come into a realization that we are sons and not merely servants.