

"RENDERING UNTO GOD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
November 10, 1996

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### INTRODUCTION

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"It means nothing to him...the thing that would make him happiest right now is some ice cream before going to bed."

Most of us can only dream of getting something back from the IRS, particularly a refund for a sum over \$200,000. And so we keep on dreaming....

### DEVELOPMENT

Over there in Matthew's Gospel, in the 22nd chapter, Jesus said something for us to reflect upon. He told us to

"Render unto Caesar the things that are  
Caesar's and unto God the things that are  
God's...." (Matthew 22: 21)

Let's face it...the IRS is very helpful to us all when it comes to calculating how much we owe to Caesar, but what do we do when it comes to those "things that are God's...?" Some do nothing. Some do quite a bit, but this morning we're going to think about these words of Jesus and talk a bit about money. Certainly you'll agree that talking about Christian discipleship without ever talking about one of the prime manifestations of that discipleship is absurd. Those of you who follow the preaching of this pulpit regularly know that I don't do this often...maybe once in a five year period.

Priests and pastors and ministers are continually trying to find new and exciting and creative and soothing ways of dealing with the subject of money. I heard about a colleague recently who announced to his people that if the congregation reached a certain pledge goal that he would permit them to place a clock here in the pulpit. And if they exceeded that goal by a thousand dollars, he would then let them plug it in. And if they exceeded the goal by five thousand dollars, he would even consent to look at it. Well, that's one way of dealing with money. And parenthetically let me say this that the way this congregation has responded to our annual pledge goals the past three years, why you could have half a dozen clocks around here...all plugged in and going...for me to look at! And I would!!

Some of you may remember how Jack Benny on Sunday night radio helped to drive away our "depression blues". Remember the episode when a burglar broke into his home and holding a gun to Mr. Benny's head said, "Mr. Benny...your money or your life!" Silence. Again, "Mr. Benny...your money or your life!" A third time. And then finally, Jack Benny responded..."I'm thinking....I'm thinking."

Well...let's think about the words of Jesus here in connection with our giving to God and to others through the church. He said,

"Render unto Caesar things that are Caesar's and unto  
God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21)

PAYMENT ON A DEBT AND NOT A BRIBE

One thing we need to think about in connection with our text is that our gifts to God are payment, if you will, on a debt and not something of a bribe. We're on the wrong track if we think of our gifts to God as a way to get something back in return. That's approaching it the wrong way. That's not the right way to look at it.

"We got another large check from Major Bell" reported the church book-keeper on Monday morning. "For several years, he has given more than twice his pledge" continued the book-keeper. That did it for the pastor. He felt he had to get to know this Major Bell a bit better and so further on down the line as they had lunch together, his minister said to him,

"Major.....I'm curious about something. You're very generous with your gifts to the church. The person who keeps track of our pledge gifts recently told me that your gifts were double the pledge amount. What's going on....."

The napkin came up to soften the Major's embarrassment as he responded,

"Well, pastor....whatever the amount....I know it is not enough. You see, I've known all my life that God loves me and has been very good to me....and a few years back, it occurred to me one Sunday morning in church that God was doing all the giving...the real giving, I mean. Oh, I gave regularly to the church, but it was way short of proportion to what I feel my Lord has done for me....."

"So....." asked his pastor. "No mystery, preacher" said the Major...."I guess you could say I'm just trying to

'catch up!'. *NEVER TOO LATE FOR SOME OF US*

To me, there's a person who has some understanding of what he owes to God. We don't give to God because we hope to receive some special favor in return. We give...or, we should give...out of gratitude for what God has already done in our behalf. And it concerns me that there is a trend...a growing trend in Christianity today...to be self-indulgent. Far too many churches seem to be "packaging Christianity" to fit the wants of people and not their real needs. For example, some churches seem to foster the idea that if we give to the church then God will prosper us in all things. That's the "standard pitch" of many preachers and many tele-evangelists as a means of enticing people to send their checks in to support their ministries. It troubles me....it's not New Testament Christianity.

A BIT LUDICROUS IN ITS THEOLOGY

And in order to see how shaky and yes, ~~even ludicrous~~ such theology is, all one has to do is to go back and take a look at what happened to those first Apostles. Surely, if a group of Christians ever deserved to prosper because of their devotion and their giving of themselves, those early disciples and Apostles did.

Every one of them deserved a Mercedes in the driveway to get them around town...or perhaps a swimming pool in their back yard....and a few gold trinkets around their necks or hanging from both arms. But, is that how the story turned out? Absolutely not!

Here's how the story ended, according to one of the commentaries on John, the disciple. Let me share it with you. Matthew suffered martyrdom by the sword in Ethiopia. Mark died in Alexandria after being dragged through the streets of that city. Luke was hanged on an olive tree in Greece. John was put into a caldron of boiling oil, but escaped death and was banished to the island of Patmos. Peter was crucified at Rome with his head downward. James was beheaded at Jerusalem.

James the Less was thrown from a pinnacle of the Temple and beaten to death below. Philip was hanged against a pillar in Phrygia. Bartholomew was flayed alive. Andrew was bound to a cross, from which he preached to his persecutors until he died. Thomas was run through the body at Coromandel, India. Jude was shot to death with arrows. Matthias was first stoned and then beheaded. Barnabas was stoned to death at Salonica. Paul was beheaded at Rome, by Nero.

And when those early disciples and apostles talked about stocks and bonds, they weren't talking about General Motors and Tax-Free Municipals. They were talking about the stocks and bonds that prisoners wear. And when they talked of chains, they were not talking about the golden variety but about some heavy chains of cast iron. They offered their prayers of thanksgiving, not from the decks of yachts, but from damp prison cells.

And if someone were to preach the gospel that God will bless you and that God will prosper you because of your offerings to the church, he or she would be guilty of the worst kind of self-serving blasphemy. Our gifts are a debt and not a bribe.

GOD DOESN'T NEED OUR MONEY. IT IS WE WHO NEED TO GIVE

And here's another thing that we would

do well to consider and to reflect upon. God doesn't need our money. But rather it is we who need to give.

It's a bit like the wealthy man who was determined to "take it with him" when he died (which you really can't do...horses don't have luggage racks...perhaps you've noticed). Anyway, this man prayed and prayed until he was convinced that the Lord had given him permission to bring his wealth inside the gates. But there was one condition. He could bring only one suitcase of his wealth with him. The rich is reported to have filled his suitcase with gold bullion.

St. Peter was there at the pearly gates to meet him and greet him and told him he'd have to leave his suitcase there at the entrance gate.

"But Peter....I have an agreement with God...an agreement to bring one suitcase in with me..into heaven."  
"Well, that's mighty unusual" said Peter. "Let me look inside the suitcase." And with that the man opened the suitcase and in so doing revealed the shining gold bullion. St. Peter was amazed and asked, "Why on earth would you bring more pavement into heaven....."

The point is that there is nothing that we have that God needs. That our gold is as asphalt to God. Our diamonds are like water. God doesn't need our money. Some may believe that God must have our resources in order to fulfill His plan. That's not the case...nothing could be farther from the truth. When we give our gifts to God, it is not because God needs anything. It is we who need to give and WHY, you may ask...WHY, you may be wondering.

In order to combat the power of materialism in our lives. There is no more deceptive and deadly power on this earth than the power of materialism. It's an addiction as strong as heroin and cocaine combined. Here's how the deadly power of materialism works...

"The more goods of this earth that we have, the more we feel we need. Luxuries have a way of becoming necessities. What was once extravagance becomes an essential in our lives. And even worse, the more we have, the more we feel we deserve, until the power of materialism separates us from our neighbor and ultimately from God."

And that is why Jesus had more to say about money than any other subject, not because needs our money, but because we need to give. It is the only way to break materialism's hold. And friends....never has materialism been stronger in this nation than right now. Mammon reigns triumphant and all of us are affected by it.

There was an article in US News and World Report entitled The State of Greed that caught my attention in the dentist's office. (I was hurting when I went in, but hurting even more as I came out....). It said this,

"That the percentage of Americans who say they want to earn a lot of money grew from 38 percent in 1975 to 63 percent in 1995.....that college freshmen who said it was essential or highly important to be very well off financially grew from 41 percent in 1968 to 74 percent in 1995. At the same time developing a meaningful philosophy of life (top priority in 1975....83 percent) fell to 41 percent." And meanwhile in 1968, the typical church member gave 3.14 percent of his income....by 1992 it was down to 2.52 percent.

First, our gift to God is not a bribe, but a debt. We give not because God needs it, but because we need to give...we need to show that it is God who rules our lives and not greed. And then one more thing to underscore.

OUR GIVING TO GOD COMES OFF THE TOP, NOT FROM WHAT'S LEFT OVER

And that is that our

giving to God comes off the top...it should come off the top and not from what we happen to have left over.

I have always tried to practice this in my own life. I remember as a thirteen year old when I first started to earn that my parents encouraged me to tithe and that the first dollar of the ten dollars that I made weekly as a paper boy belonged to God and how good I felt as I put it into a special envelope and used it for church or for some other charitable purpose. To this day, I continue to write my first check "to God" even before I write the one for Caesar, for taxes.

I think that the person who confesses to believe in God, but does not have faith in God is apt to be the kind of person who says, "Don't ask me to pledge to God's work....I'll give as I am able in the coming year". I know of people who rest in that category...the idea being..."I'll give if I have enough left over after satisfying my creature needs and desires". Too many Christians practice this kind of giving....who give out of fear rather than of real faith, and so their offering is but a "token gift". And a token gift grows out of a token faith.

Some are like the little boy who when asked to offer a verse of scripture in Sunday school as he stepped forward to drop his gift in the basket responded enthusiastically, "The Lord loves a cheerful giver". I know of people like that boy, too. He was followed by another youngster who as he came forward and put in his gift, said, "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". Yes, that's were many of you are and I am grateful. Then a third boy stepped forward with his gift and verse and he said, "A fool and his money is soon parted!" I hope and pray that none of you are in that category. If you are, please...get to know us better and find that special joy that is there in giving to others.

#### CLOSING

You've been patient long enough so let me bring it together. I think that the person who gives to God only out of what is left over will never be a cheerful giver. He or she will always be giving out of a resentful, stingy heart. But that person who gives God the "first fruits" will come to know the deep joy and the lasting satisfaction that comes only with trusting God. So, try to remember these three points over the next few years before I come at you with another stewardship sermon.

FIRST: Our gifts are a debt...not something of a bribe.

SECOND: We give not because God needs our gifts, but because you and I...we need to give them in order to fight the power and the pull of materialism all around us.

THIRD: And we should always give "off the top", so to speak...from the "first fruits"...and not from the left-overs. Try it in the weeks ahead and see how much stronger your faith becomes!

#### PRAYER

And now make us sensitive to your nearness and to your presence in these moments....moments when we feel the deepest things within us being stirred up....and that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be. Wrestle with us until we are conoured by Your love. Grant us spiritual wealth that we may always be aware of eternal truths and realities and by a vision of the truly Christian life...that we will be lifted...up and out of our littleness and our pettiness to some everlating purpose. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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