

"SQUEEZING OR SHARING"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 25, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

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I'm sure you've heard it said as I have heard it said many times that the checkbook and the prayer book are the two best indicators of a person who has the proper priorities in life. Last Sunday we talked about prayer. Today we are talking about stewardship, about giving and what's expected of us.

DEVELOPMENT

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"Pastor...you sure had us worried about your sermon today...until you said, 'And I have no idea where the funds will come from!' We thought for a moment that you actually were expecting us to give it....."

This Church...your church...make no mistake today...you who hear this sermon and you who will read it in the coming days...YOU are exactly who I expect to give it and I believe that your Finance Committee and your Canvass leaders all agree. However, more importantly, God expects it, too. As a matter of fact, He is watching you...so hold on.

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The news started in the Capitol Building in Washington where the President, the Senate and the House of Representatives were hammering out a compromise budget that would pass both the House and the Senate. It dominated the media. It impacts the finances of the elderly, the poor, the rich, the doctors, the lawyers, the Indian Chiefs...everybody...nobody escapes from this budget.

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Please don't misunderstand me today. This sermon is not designed to beat or to manipulate anyone into giving money to the church. But hopefully, you may hear something that will be successful in leading you into spiritual growth and enthusiastic discipleship by being obedient to God's desires for our lives. When we learn to give and to share God's way, a great spiritual power is unleashed in the human soul that helps draw others to the saving and redeeming knowledge of Christ. Then we are set free from the shackling power of materialism and of secularism and consumerism and then we can begin to soar to unknown heights in our individual journey of faith.

Churchill it was, I believe, who once said that,

"We make a living by what we get, but
we make a life by what we give."

With that in mind, let's dig in on this stewardship concern together and let me share two things for you to turn over in your thinking as all of us pause to consider our pledge of financial support to this church in the coming days.

A DISCIPLE GIVES OUT OF COMMITMENT, NOT EMOTION

First-off, I believe that a
disciple of Christ gives out

of a sense of commitment, not emotions.

A story is going around about a circus athlete who dazzled the crowds by displaying some astonishing feats of physical strength. His act would conclude with a simple but very impressive demonstration of strength as he squeezed an orange dry. After completing his act, he would then challenge his audience to produce anyone who could extract even one drop of juice from the squeezed fruit.

One night a little whisp of a man stepped forward to accept the challenge. The crowd snickered when they saw how small he was but undaunted by their doubts, the man stepped onto the stage and took the shriveled-up orange from the hand of the circus star. And then bracing himself, he slowly and firmly compressed his right hand. Every eye was on him and the atmosphere was charged with electricity. A moment or two went by.

And then, to everyone's amazement, a drop of orange juice formed and dripped to the floor. As the cheers of the crowd subsided, the circus performer beckoned to the man to come forward. He asked him his name and invited him to tell the crowd just how he managed to develop such strength. "Nothing to it...really" replied the man. And then with a grin, he added,

"I happen to be the treasurer of the local Baptist
Church."

It is unfortunate that many churches have forced their pastors and their Finance Committees to put the "squeeze" on people for money to run the church, with the results that some folks do get uptight and unhappy when the subject is raised. Fortunately, Jacque and Jim and John haven't had to do that here... thanks to your generosity. It's been going well in recent years. The money does get raised and our bills and commitments are met. But another year now faces us and we hope and pray that you will want to "take a caring step" up the ladder in what you give to keep the momentum going in this unique church.

I recently heard a story about a woman who went to church with a one dollar bill and a one hundred dollar bill in her pocketbook. It was her intention to put the one dollar bill in the plate as the ushers took up the offering, but as the Doxology was being sung, she discovered that she had made a great mistake. Yes...you guessed it...she had put the one hundred dollar bill in the plate instead of the one dollar bill. Perhaps you know how she might have felt.

Anyway, after the service, she told the Head Usher about the mistake and she rambled on how God would be crediting her "account" with a \$100 contribution. The head usher startled her by giving her back the one hundred dollar bill and taking her one dollar bill which he then put into the offering plate....all of which was soon to be counted by the ushers. He said to her,

"This is what you really intended to give, and now I know it also...."

How would you have handled it. Never lose sight of the fact that you give and you share out of "commitment"...not mistakes.

The goal of Christianity is not "detachment" from material wealth, but the honest acquiring of it and the loving use of it. Three little boys in Sunday School stepped forward to make their offering and as was the custom, they were encouraged to say a Bible verse with their gift. The first little boy stood there and said, "The Lord loves a cheerful giver" and dropped in his gift. The second little boy stepped forward and said, "It is better to give than to receive". The Sunday School teacher smiled. The third little boy then stepped up and said, "A fool and his money is soon parted".

When trying to decide how much to give, the most helpful story in the Bible to me continues to be the story of the Widow's Mite. For it seems to communicate the truth that "what counts" is not how much you give, but how much is left after you give. Who knows, maybe a tithe for you is too little. Yes, "live simply that others may simply live" was the message on the bulletin board.

Money is not grimy or inherently filthy or evil. We wouldn't take it up to the altar and sing the Doxology as we do and pray for its rightful use and distribution through our connecional church if it were. The purpose of money depends entirely on its use to which it is directed. How proud I am to be associated with a church that gives away as much as it does each year, but...we can always do better.

GIVING - A PART OF OUR WORSHIP OF HIM

Secondly, God intended for giving to be a part of our worship of Him.

It does reflect the priorities and the purposes of our lives, doesn't it.

One of the great contrasts between the Widow in Mark's Gospel and the Rich

Men who were also giving gifts had to do with the conditions under which they were giving. The "rich men" gave to impress men; the widow to worship and to honor God. Jesus noticed the sacrifice of her gift and He also noticed the stinginess of the other givers. Remember, in just two chapters He would be sacrificing His life for the world.

We always think of Martin Luther on the last Sunday of October. Luther once stated that every person needs three conversions: the head, the heart and the pocketbook. And he further declared,

"I have had many things in my hands, and I have lost them all, but whatever I have placed in the hands of God, that I still possess!"

And in that great hymn of his which we sang earlier in our service,

"Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.
The body they may kill, God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever."

WHAT INTERESTS GOD

I suppose it is possible to give money to God and still cling to it in your heart. Ask the woman who put in the one hundred dollar bill. I think what God is interested in is your COMMITMENT and your relationship to Him that your giving represents. I believe that our responsible stewardship of money always determines and demonstrates our stewardship of all the other gifts and resources God has endowed us with. If you BLOW this one, chances are you will BLOW IT ALL.

Recently in going through my sermon notebook where I put in stories and quotes and clippings I came across an illustration that I have never used. It's been there for a while and here it is. It says,

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PRAYER

And let us move forward, O God, sharing deeply of ourselves and of that which You have given us to manage. The race is short, O God, even at its longest, and we would run it well...and always to Your glory. Amen.

"Onward then, ye people, join our happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices in the triumph song.

Glory, laud and honor unto Christ Our King,
This through countless ages, men and angels sing..."

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation...a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. <u>Vera Allick</u> | 2. <u>Willie, mother of Ann</u> | 3. <u>Daisy Herrick</u> |
| 4. <u>Ada Kinney</u> | 5. <u>Ethel Rose</u> | 6. <u>Elvira de Freitas, sister in</u>
<u>of Eric</u> |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to George L. who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need. Lynn Weddington Tucker, mother...

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"