

HERBERT LESTER

AS THE LORD HAS BLESSED YOU

Give as the Lord has blessed you” is the gist of what I usually say in good times, bad times and all the in-between times.

My lay leaders and staff often ask me to say more about our giving than I do. Our out-go often appears to be greater than our in-come, but money problems in the church are spiritual and not financial problems. I believe that even in the worst times, there is enough money in the pockets of members to meet the church’s needs. The challenge is one of education and spiritual formation, not money. I remind

them that our giving has increased, over the past 13 years, more than 400 percent; our physical plant has increased by nearly 25,000 square feet; our average worship attendance has remained consistent for the same period, with no significant

changes in our number (given normal attrition and transfers of membership in a 137-year-old urban congregation.)

Among us there are tithers, so committed to giving 10% that nothing can deter them; we also have those who give nothing. In between, we have persons who would give their bill money if I assured them that God would meet their needs according to their faith—which I cannot with integrity do. There are those who give a set amount on a regular basis and those who give what they can, when they can. To minister to this diverse need, I often preach stewardship and discipleship sermons, especially since Sunday morning is our main opportunity for stewardship education and discipleship training.

Wesley’s Sermon (#50) “The Use of Money,” from Luke 16:9, is an excellent model. Wesley said:

“We ought to gain all we can gain but...we ought not to gain money at the expense of life, nor at the expense of our health... Having, first, gained all you can, and secondly saved all you can, then give all you can.”

I stress that “the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7 NIV), and use variations on a theme a preacher friend shared: “I’m scared not to give God what God is due. I’m just scared that if I don’t, one night when I take my little money out of my pocket, and I put my checkbook and my Visa, my MasterCard and my American Express card and my ATM card

on the dresser, that God might come to get his fair share and just decide to take it all; just take what’s mine and what’s his! I’m scared not to give God what’s right.”

I “Lesterize” and contemporize Wesley to teach the difference between having money and having material wealth. Material wealth is measured in terms of equity, assets and net worth, not solely in dollars and cents. Unfortunately, we acquire symbols of success instead of investing our assets to create even greater assets, and then delude ourselves about real material wealth.

On the other side of the coin, the scriptures assure us that God has a preferential place in God’s heart for the world’s “least of these,” yet there is nothing noble or grand about choosing to live in poverty, powerlessness, and degradation. As the

Rev. Dr. Frederick Eikerenkoetter (“Rev. Ike”) says: “The first thing to do for the poor is not to be one of them.”

I also find that object lessons work extremely well and that the children’s message is a wonderful time to help drive home an adult theme. I have a favorite story about a young girl who had nothing. God gave her ten very special apples. She set one aside as a thanksgiving offering to God; she used the other nine to secure food, clothing, and shelter. But the more she looked at her offering, the more inviting the last apple seemed, so she ate it and gave God the core—not what was right, but what was left. I would have cut the apple so that I can pull the core out in dramatic fashion to illustrate my consistent theme: “Give as the Lord has blessed you.” □

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