

A Personal Perspective on Stewardship

Lord Jesus Christ, please inspire our personalities and deep desires with the wish to know more clearly how You want us to live. Amen.

How many baseball fans here? I'm not going to get involved with recent developments in the major leagues, but right off the bat (I think that's a baseball allusion), let me tell you what I intend to say, based on readings from the Bible: 1) We all, as believers in Jesus Christ, need to be involved in studying the Bible individually and regularly, as well as with others who want to do the same. That's how God makes clear to us the way He wants us to live. Our own definition of good deeds is not enough. Hearing a Bible passage and a sermon about it once a week on Sunday is not enough. 2) We all, as believers in Jesus Christ, need to give a percentage of our income to St. John's, working our way up from wherever we are with the goal of reaching at least 10% of our income.

From one of today's readings, here's the scene: St. Paul is in a Roman jail. Early in his career he had tried to wipe out followers of Jesus, but after a catastrophic journey when he got struck blind and a few days later was given back his sight, he spent the rest of his life preaching and teaching that the only way to live a satisfying life free from guilt and full of joy is to FOLLOW Jesus. He traveled all over the world establishing communities made up of ordinary people who turned their backs on the values of their culture and chose to live by God's values in a personal relationship with Jesus. That was very dangerous in those days! After having been left for dead several times and threatened by some of the most religious people in the world, he's about to die for his faith. This second letter to Timothy is the last one he will write.

St. Paul is worried about these new faith communities that he has established, especially the one in Ephesus. Timothy, the rector of that congregation, doesn't have the pedigree or the seminary education that some people think is important. Timothy isn't a strong, vigorous specimen—he's young (some might say too young), frequently sick and perhaps an introvert (some might say shy and timid). These two letters to Timothy are pep-talks, urging Timothy to pay attention to what's most important and not get bogged down by irrelevancies. Timothy needed a handbook to help him establish priorities. So do we!

Here's what St. Paul wrote in the text for today: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

I don't know if Paul realized that the words he was writing would become part of that collection that he called "scripture." At the time he wrote these words in the first century after Jesus' death, "scripture" was the term for the Old Testament. That's all there was. But we are blessed in our time that those who knew Jesus and became believers put down in writing all the information that we need to live in a way that pleases God, reflects God's goodness to the people around us and brings us a satisfying life of joy and freedom from guilt. All we have to do is explore IN DEPTH the Bible's meaning and then apply what we learn every minute of our daily life. People who have regularly done such study of the Bible, especially those who have actually memorized passages, find it an effective antidote to the self-centered, things-oriented obsession of our society. AND, considering that our life here on earth is a dress-rehearsal for eternity in God's presence, we need to get in practice with the kind of thinking and living that will be ours when we are with God forever after the end of our life here in Stamford.

The Bible is filled with stories about people who responded obediently to God's influence on their lives, and those who did not. There are numerous instructions from many writers about how we should live. Jesus himself said in Matthew 7, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like

the foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Is it adequate to have read a Bible passage once in your life? Not if your memory is like mine! I tend to forget what I've read within minutes. That's why we have a daily lectionary provided in the prayer book and the easy-to-use booklet *Forward Day by Day* that goes through the Bible in three years, coming back year after year to the same passages. That's why there are several Bible study groups here in our own parish, as well as the 9:00 exploration meeting taught by Fr. Jim, Mother Kathleen and Seminarian Karl. Elsewhere in these letters to Timothy is written, “Study. Do your BEST to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.” Should we be satisfied, two thousand years later, with doing less than “our best?”

Our study of the scriptures inevitably leads us to consider the stewardship of our lives and resources. Differences of opinion abound among believers in Christ regarding values and lifestyle practices taught in the Bible, and those with opposite viewpoints quote the Bible, sometimes out of context, as the rationale for their position. But one idea which strongly affects our life together seems supported by ALL scripture, from beginning to end: we don't own ourselves, and everything we have is GIVEN to us by God. That's hard to take for those of us who think our brains and hard work have earned us our position. But God's perspective is that everything we have is given to us by Him. In gratitude for God's grace to us, we are inspired to contribute our time, abilities and financial resources to support God's work in the world. From the earliest chapters of Genesis, a 10% tithe of assets is the minimum, and St. Paul urges us to go beyond the minimum with a joyful heart. He writes to the Corinthians, “Remember this: The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a CHEERFUL giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.... You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.” II Cor. 9: 6-11.

My own spiritual journey has convinced me that my need to give to God in obedience to His commands is greater than the need of the church for whatever money I contribute. There were times when that conviction limited what we had to spend on ourselves, but we never went hungry! As promised, God did provide for our needs, and we learned that our unnecessary wants were quickly forgotten.

Three weeks from today, Sunday November 7, has been designated by St. John's Parish as Consecration Sunday. This is the opportunity for all of us to express both our gratitude to God and the growth in our life of faith by pledging a percentage of our income for the support of God's work at St. John's. Between now and then you are urged to consider carefully, “make up your mind,” as St. Paul writes, how much you will give. At all three services on November 6 & 7 we will write on a card the amount we have decided, and at the end of the service will offer our pledge at the altar as an act which represents our whole being. After the Sunday 10:15 service we will enjoy a catered luncheon, hopefully in the newly renovated gym-multi-purpose space on the second floor of the Middle Building.

To again quote St. Paul, “God loves a cheerful giver!” Amen.