

I invite you to open your bibles this morning, to today's scripture text, which can be found in the book of Matthew, the 5th chapter, verses 23-24. Which can be found on page ____ in your pew bibles. We continue in our series "Taking care of God's gifts" Today's scripture reveals a lesson of God's Motive for Giving.

Mt 5:23-24

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

We are today engaged in preparation for the sacrament of the Lords Supper. The Lords supper is of course a covenantal meal. It is unlike the food and the meals that are prepared for us at home, breakfast lunch and dinner that we eat day by day. The Bible teaches us that the Lords supper brings to us the signs and the seals of God's covenant of grace. In this ordinance we have a giving and receiving. The Lord stoops to us and feeds us with Christ himself in order to nourish, and to strengthen our souls. It is an occasion in which we renew our covenant with the Lord and our engagement to be the Lord's.

But as we think along those lines, the bands of the covenant, which tie us to God himself. They bring us into an affectionate and close relationship with the Lord. But they also extend beyond that, to binding, or tying us together. Tying the Christians together as fellow members of the body of which Christ himself is the head.

At the supper, we see this manifest, because we come to have communion, and fellowship with Christ, who is spiritually present in that supper, and we are drawing near to Him, to feed upon Him by faith. So, there is a vertical communion or fellowship that's being had between the Christian soul and Christ himself. But there is also this horizontal aspect of the supper in which we are having communion and fellowship with one another. Which strengthens the bonds of Love and commitment to one another. This is manifest in many ways including the Lords appointment of the common table, and cup, and bread, and the sharing together in this communion with Christ.

While we tend to think primarily about preparation for the Lords supper along the lines of our relationship to God, rightly so, we also need to be thinking about our relationship to one another. As we are preparing for the Lords supper, we are engaged in a spiritual inventory, a self-examination that takes place as God has commanded us. We are examining ourselves as to being in union with Christ, in regards to repentance, faith, Love to God, Love of our neighbor, obedience to His law, and a whole host of other things. It's a description of spiritual exercise.

But part of that spiritual inventory includes this idea of our relationship to the brethren. That shouldn't surprise us, because as you will be reminded more of that concept in a moment, if we love God, we will love the brethren, these two things are inextricably connected to one another.

Just as we are to be keeping short accounts with the Lord, in our walk with Him, repenting over sins, exercising fresh faith in His promises, looking with affection to Christ, in Love and obedience to Him. Likewise, we are to be keeping short accounts with one another in our love for the brethren. This is all part of the exercise of our souls, because in the supper, as in all of the Lords ordinances, we are not merely interested in outward show. We are not interested in merely outward observance, a form that is gone through as it were, perhaps even mindlessly in the worst case. Rather, it is a spiritual exercise that we are engaged in where our soul is being engaged with the Lord. We are holding intimate fellowship and communion with him. So, it means that this spiritual inventory must include keeping short accounts in our relationships with one another.

We often in our time of communion are emphasizing some of the other aspects, but this morning, we are going to give our attention to this element of preparation in our relationship with one other. This brings us to these words of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, here in Matthew chapter 5, verses 23 and 24.

We cannot truly worship God when we have unresolved conflicts with our brethren. This is why Christ said in verse 23 and 24 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

This is talking about worship of God, that we cannot do, if there is an unresolved conflict. If that unresolved conflict comes to mind, you just stop everything else. Nothing is more important than seeking reconciliation. That's what Christ said, that's one of the rules of the savior. We must be slow to take offense, always ready for reconciliation, and mindful of the rules of our savior to secure it without delay.

We must resolve our conflicts. So many of us say, "I don't think I can!" Its amazing how our minds will build up obstacles, and we will convince ourselves that there is no use to try. I must simply say to you that it is your responsibility to carry out your part of what the savior says here that pertains to your particular situation. How that is received, what ever the other persons does in response, is not your responsibility. But it is your responsibility to carry out your part of the reconciliation with the right attitude, a humble attitude. With a humble, prayerful spirit you take responsibility of your part, and then leave it with the Lord.

If it doesn't work, it doesn't work, but then the other person will have to bear the responsibility for that if you have carried out your part. We must not forget that we cannot resolve our conflicts with others by simply confessing them to God.

Once our reconciliation has been achieved, then the bond of love and commitment to each other, the Church, and God is strengthened. A unity of the brethren results, then acceptance of our offering will be blessed by our Lord. As our offering to the Lord is blessed, the Church is blessed, our ministries are blessed, our effectiveness in being Christ's ambassadors to the world is blessed, and God is glorified. We begin to grow in our willingness to serve God with all of our lives, all of our time, and all of our possessions.

One measure of our Christian Growth is the extent to which we are narrowing down those areas of our lives in which we try to hide from the Lord. The more we want to bring every part of our lives into our relationship with God, the more real His presence becomes to us.

We all remember the Gospel Story of the "Widow's Mite." Jesus is seated outside the Temple Treasury watching people make their contributions. Why was He sitting there? Obviously, Jesus knew that watching people put their money into the Church treasury is a surefire way of discovering a lot about who they really are. Perhaps He was there for that reason.

We can only speculate. In any case, He saw that the people who were depositing large sums into the Temple Treasury did so in a rather haughty, detached manner. Jesus never said that giving large sums of money to the Church is bad. The problem with these people Jesus saw was that they were giving out of their abundance. Instead of giving the best to God they were giving the leftovers.

It didn't mean anything to them in the sense of sacrifice. Consequently, they were not into what they were doing. Their gift was spiritless. They were giving out of a sense of obligation. The gift was being extracted from them. This heavy atmosphere of "extraction" has endured through the ages. We in today's Church are familiar with the problem.

There is this cartoon which depicted two men marooned on a desert island. One of them is standing at the water's edge looking extremely distraught and worried, the other man is sitting back against a palm tree, looking perfectly relaxed. "Don't worry," he says, "I know we'll be found soon. My Church pledge is due this week." Unfortunately, many of us feel this way about our Church giving: "Wherever I go they're going to track me down. They'll find me, so I might as well give something." You may even give a large sum, but if it is given in the spirit of "extraction," you are missing the whole point of Christian giving.

The Church will benefit from your gift, but you will have lost an opportunity for your own life-enrichment, and that is unfortunate. As Jesus watched at the Temple Treasury, a poor widow came and offered but two copper coins. Her gift could not have benefited the Temple very much financially, but it is obvious that in her total giving, God was becoming more real to her. It is obvious that she had experienced God's power and God's love in a special kind of way. She is in touch with the great reality that the more we experience the love of God, the more intensely we want to love in return. We want to love Him in return with every part of our being-even our money. That is what the widow did: She loved God with every part of her life-even her money-because she gave everything she possessed.

I say "even her money," because for many of us that is the real fortress behind which we hold out against God. It is the one area of our lives in which even some of the most devout Christians say, "God stay out! This is top secret! This is mine and nobody else's, not even Yours! There is no way I am going to bring any significant part of this into the Church and let it be baptized!" As a result, we not only keep God out of that very important area of our lives but, because it is so important to us, it blocks God's Spirit in every area of our lives. We go on praying, we go on worshipping, and we go on looking for other ways to find God's presence, but it all falls short. Nothing really works because we are not ready to do as the widow did, or as Jesus did in His relationship to the Father.

In the book of John, chapter 17, Jesus prays to the Father, "4-10

4 I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. 5 And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

6 "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. 8 For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. 9 I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine.

We need to be haunted by the image of the poor widow at the Temple Treasury, saying to God, in effect, "Here is my whole life, every part of my life, even my money! How will I live this week? How will I eat this week? These are not the questions I ask. God, I love You. I want to show You that I love You. Everything I have is Yours because I know that You have given all Your love to Me!"

Money and our possessions are, for many of us, the most important, most secret, most treasured, most protected, most vital parts of our lives. The evidence for this is all around us in our culture and in our society. This is where we really are as persons: our money. The money part, is the last aspect of life people are willing to reveal. They may bare their souls publicly about their work-life, their home-life, their sex-life, their leisure-life, but not their economic-life.

That is the last secret to unfold, the most painful to reveal. Why? Is it because money, in the last analysis, represents power? We all want to be powerful enough to be free of fear about the future, about food, about shelter, about clothing, about medical care, about education, about leisure. We all like to think we can possess this kind of power in some absolute sense and that we are moving toward it.

The whole Gospel is saying to us "No way; turn that around! It's not the ego trip, the quest for power, that makes you a whole, fulfilled person. Fulfillment comes in being present to others in such a way that they feel loved, feel wanted, feel worthwhile. Again, in Jesus' words, true success arises out of our ability to love in a way that says to God, "All that belongs to me is Yours." One of the things we discover about being a Christian, as we get closer and closer to Christ, is that we become, more and more, men and women for others. The Christian is not a person who finds his deepest fulfillment concentrating on the self.

Jesus tells us it just doesn't work that way because the more you are open to God and the more you are open to your neighbor, the more you become fulfilled as a person. It's a strange paradox, but it is a Christian paradox. We are successful as Christians not to the degree to which we find ways for our own ego to be pumped up, but to the degree that we are present to others for the love of Christ. Do you identify with those who give money-perhaps even in large sums-out of a sense of obligation, without really being involved? Do you identify with those who give money in a manner which suggests that the gift is being extracted from them, so you hold back? Or can you identify in a new kind of way with the widow at the Temple Treasury whose one concern was to give everything to God because He had given everything to her?

Can you, deep within yourself, say "Yes! The gift of God's love is so good for me, so life-enhancing for me, that I will put every part of my being, my whole self into my response. I will let the Holy Spirit baptize my time, my skills, my feelings, my mind, my body, yes, and even my money, as I offer them sacrificially to God in the service of others. "

Gracious Lord,

Thank you Father for sending us your Son, our Lord, Jesus.

For the amazing sacrifice He has made on the cross.

For the promise of eternal life with you in heaven

that he has promised to us and to the rest of the world.

Help us to be faithful and obedient in the sacrifice of our time,

our talents, and our possessions as we offer them to you.

Forgive us when we hold back our sacrifice, not even approaching the altar.

Help us to give with a heart that says, yes Lord, all that I have,

my time, my talents, and my possessions are yours because you have

given me all that I have, and I only desire to bring you pleasure

in my obedience to you Father.