

Bob Russell offers a powerful lesson learned. He writes,

“A few years ago, our family got involved in a game of Monopoly. I was on a roll. The first time around I stopped on Illinois Avenue and Park Place and bought them both. Then I added Indiana Avenue and Boardwalk. Let anyone come down that street and I had them dead. I bought all four railroads. I had houses and hotels; I couldn’t keep from smirking. I had so much money; I had to set some on the side. Everyone else was counting their little dollar bills and I had hundreds and thousands! Finally, about 1 a.m., they all went bankrupt, and I won! They got up from the table with no word of congratulations and headed for bed. “Wait a minute, now!” I said. “Someone needs to put the game away.” They replied: “That’s your reward for winning. Good night!” And there I sat, alone. All my hotels, all my deeds, all my money, and I realized, it doesn’t amount to a thing. And I had to put them back in that box. Fold it up and put it on the shelf. And I went upstairs to a cold bed. My wife did not say, “You know, I’m so proud of you. You are such an impressive investor. We can never beat you. You are Mr. Monopoly.” She just gave me a perfunctory kiss and turned over.

I begin with this illustration today, not because of the role money plays in this story or to try and persuade you to give more money to the church, however great that would be. And you definitely should if you are able 😊 I begin with it because of the role of relationship undergirded by Bob’s realization at the conclusion of the game. It wasn’t that Bob spent his money or outperformed everyone else in business. It was that Bob, over the course of the game being played, committed so much of his time and effort and talent toward an end (having the most money and putting everyone else out of business) that only he benefited from and could enjoy. Bob had a relationship with himself and his own ego.

Bob’s self-reflection taught him a powerful lesson. He was a fool for thinking his money and stuff were all that mattered and that his money and stuff were the ticket to his and everyone else’s joy in life. The good thing is that Bob learned this powerful lesson from a board game. The bad thing is that for many people, this foolishness and mistake comes in real life.

In many ways, what Jeremiah was witnessing all around him with the Israelites was the foolishness and mistake of putting trust in stuff verses God. This isn’t the only time in history God’s people had gotten sidetracked and become foolish, but it is the time in which God sends a new message to the people.

What is the message God sends? It is the message and promise of a new covenant, a new binding relationship, one that will be established within, written in their hearts. The other covenants God had established had all been broken by the people. So, God was going to do something different this time. He was going to dig deep and get to the heart of the matter. By doing so, God was seeking to connect with everyone, from the least to the greatest, from the losers to the winners, from the outcast to the rulers, from the unhealthy to the healthy, from the unfaithful to the faithful. This new covenant with God will be unlike any other covenant humanity has ever known or experienced or benefited from.

What covenant is this that God speaks of? The new covenant established in Jesus. A new covenant of forgiveness and grace and mercy. A new covenant only Jesus could deliver and only God could provide. This new covenant was not going to be about business efforts or land ownership or status, for a covenant of that nature would be relevant to some and not others. This new covenant was going to be established on the primary need of every human being, the need for a Savior and Lord, to deliver and guide our hearts in faithful living.

God saw a need with God's people and God provided. God sees a need with God's people, you and I, and God is still providing. God has, is, and always will be faithful in fulfilling God's side of the covenant relationship between us. The question turns to us then as to how we can be faithful in fulfilling our side of the covenant relationship we have with God. Being a faithful follower of Christ and honoring our covenant with God is fulfilled through our responsiveness and generosity of giving back to God in at least three ways. I would like to ask us to call them our three pillars of covenant giving.

1. Offering Time
2. Sharing Talents/Skills in leadership
3. Financial

Offering Time

"There is no time like the present and no present like time."

"Time is your most precious gift because you only have a set amount of it. You can make more money, but you can't make more time. When you give someone your time, you are giving them a portion of your life that you'll never get back. Your time is your life. That is why the greatest gift you can give someone is your time. It is not enough to just say relationships are important; we must prove it by investing time in them. Words alone are worthless." (Rick Warren- Purpose Driven Life)

Offering time is an act of worship. You could even refer to it as blessing time. It is in the offering of our time in prayer, presence, and participation with God and God's church that we build the foundation of our relationship and establish our roots.

Sharing Talents

Talents are meant to be shared. Your talent is God's gift to you. What you do with it is your gift to God.

In an article on stress management it was said, "Sharing your talent and your passion with others is one of the best ways to de-stress and boost your self-esteem. When you help someone else achieve a goal, you are also helping yourself. Have you ever noticed how great you feel when you have done a good deed for someone else—especially if you volunteered without the person asking? It is gratifying to be able to share a talent or a skill with others that you may perform well. There are always opportunities for sharing your talents with others. Sharing these talents with others helps you reconnect and reassess yourself. Stress is reduced by the inner peace that comes by having a purpose greater than oneself. It is common in the frenzied pace of life today to get caught up in the details of your specific tasks. But there are larger goals that can be accomplished by working together with others. Projects can be completed when we pool our talents and resources. The impact of sharing talents and passions with others can have life altering effects." And what better community to embody this than in the church.

"Not for ourselves alone are we born." (Marcus Cicero) Humans coexist with one another. In a symbiotic relationship, one of the ideal relationships is where the two individuals benefit from each other. Our gifts or talents are purposely created not just for ourselves but to help those around us. We benefit from other people's talents. We benefit from Jobs' Apple creations, Edison's light bulb, Ford's automotive ideas or our mom's cooking. Almost everyone around us contributes to our welfare in one way or another. Imagine the world if no one shared a talent.

Financial

No matter how much you have to give, God will use it.

God gave us resources to serve and bless others, and when we adopt that stance, it becomes easier to be open-handed with money. I think this is true of our time and talent as well. We need to use what God has given us then to love others, to build up God's kingdom, and demonstrate our trust in the Lord.

Two stories stand out to me when it comes to trying to understand what God wants or expects of us financially. The first is Mark 12:41-44. Jesus is in the temple sitting not far from where people were placing their money. Jesus wasn't counting their individual offerings, he was considering the hearts of those who were giving. A widow gave a very

small amount- smaller than anyone else- and Jesus said she gave more than anyone else. The small amount she gave was more valuable to the kingdom of God and to her than all those who gave very large amounts. Why? Because she gave all she had and gave it from her heart. God knows our hearts and asks us to give financially from our hearts. The second is Matthew 19:16-26 and it follows a similar vein. In this text, Jesus is asked a question by a rich young man. This young man said he had obeyed all the laws but wanted to know the one thing he had to do to get eternal life. Jesus saw through the young man's question and went directly to the root of the problem. The problem was that the young man loved his riches above everything else and wanted to hold on to them. Jesus' request for the young man to sell all his possession, give money to the poor, and follow him was not because Jesus wanted to help the margin of the community nonprofit, however benevolent that is. Jesus knew the money the young man had was keeping him from being fully faithful and connected to God. The money had become what the young man trusted and not God.

Last week during the minute for covenant giving, Dave offered that giving requires two things: faith and faithfulness. Yes! At the very root of covenant giving is faith and faithfulness. And three of the ways we can tangibly measure our faith and faithfulness to God and God's church, three ways we can hold up our end of our covenant relationship with God, is through the offering of our time, the sharing of our talents, and the contribution of financial gifts.

I came across an interesting term recently that made me stop and think for a moment. I will close with this today. The term was "Estimate of Giving". Have you ever heard of it? The definition is exactly what you think. It is a statement that projects an estimate of how much you will give to the church in the next year. First, an estimate doesn't ring true to the covenant nature or spiritual side of giving. Second, an estimate isn't intentional- it's a symptom of what one author called "easy Christianity"- being a "Christian" without having to show any evidence of it in our lives. Third, this idea of estimating giving has been used around so many churches for so long, it's possible to think it could be responsible for the difficulties many mainline denominations are facing. The difficulty and concern of commitment. I could argue that what has become of stewardship falls in this category. With these thoughts in mind then, and more importantly with our covenant relationship with God in mind, I would like to charge us all to not rest on the surface or convenience of an estimate of giving to God. I would like to charge us and encourage us all to make a commitment to God in faith and be faithful in fulfilling it.

How can we make our commitment? Good question. We will answer it in just a moment. Right now, let us pray...