

Why You Shouldn't Give Ten Percent Of Your Income

Luke 18, Psalm 65

Sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on October 23, 2022

It's tough luck for the preacher that on the day we launch our annual stewardship campaign we are assigned a Gospel reading where the man who gives ten percent of his income is portrayed as the villain. Do you know how hard it is to give ten percent of your income? Are you kidding?! In this housing market?! Do you know how transformational it would be for this parish if every person in this room gave ten percent of their income?

My imagination immediately starts to run wild with possibilities. We could actually, permanently, fix every leak in this building. We could hire the staff we need to adequately cover all our growing program areas with the attention they each deserve, rather than asking Casey to run both children's *and* youth ministry, or Mary to lead all things mission *and* pastoral care, or Mark to cover all music and all our bookkeeping. (Did you not know that Mark also has the expertise to handle all our money?).

We could triple—even quadruple—our commitments to mission and outreach. We could build a house at Community First! Village every single year. El Buen Samaritano, our Episcopal mission and outreach center in South Austin, which hosts a food pantry, offers adult education, job training, and affordable home goods is struggling, both for a lack of adequate food supply and from short staffing. We could step in and help solve those problems. We could, I don't know, start our own community garden right here in our front yard. We could help open a health clinic ourselves. We could dedicate professional resources to eradicating all the invasive species that are currently flourishing in our little section of the Barton Creek Greenbelt and make our property the most beautiful section of greenbelt in the whole city, a little garden of Eden. We could double down on our commitment to the arts, not limit ourselves to borrowing art that helps us see and know God but also supporting the livelihoods of local artists by creating an Artist-In-Residence program here at St. Mark's. I don't know. What do you want to do? We could run a coffee and donut food truck. We could afford VERACRUZ breakfast tacos every Sunday.

But alas, it appears the lesson of this Gospel reading is that you should not be like the man who gives ten percent of his income. Oh well. Who should we be like then? Listen again: *The tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*"

It turns out that what's in your heart really does matter. Both of these men go to the temple. Both of them pray. Both of them do the things that any pastor in the world would be delighted for any of their parishioners to do. The Pharisee, in fact, is doing more of the right things than the tax collector, but he's doing them for the wrong reasons. The Pharisee is doing them for appearances. He is doing those things to justify himself. To make himself look good to others. He is, for all practical purposes, using ten percent of his income to purchase a reputation for religious piety. The Pharisee may outwardly be praising God, but inwardly he is only exalting himself.

The tax collector, on the other hand, who is doing a fewer number of the right things, is doing them for the right reason. That right reason appears to be this: the tax collector is just asking for help. He has humbled himself. Asking for help is admitting that he can't make the changes he believes he needs to make alone. He has made himself vulnerable to God's mercy. Opened his heart, opened his life, to the possibility of being changed. This is what makes him the hero of this parable; what makes him the example Jesus holds out for us to emulate.

The difficult takeaway from this passage for me as the rector of a parish who is trying to launch an annual stewardship campaign, is that everyone in this church pledging 10% of their income is apparently not worth it if we are doing it for the wrong reasons. Think for a minute about what that would look like in actuality. Imagine we could do all the wonderful things I described at the beginning of the sermon and more, but that all of us were all like this Pharisee. We would be the kind of church that everyone hates. A paternalistic, condescending group of know-it-alls, for whom, judging by the cars they drive, the sizes of their second homes, giving away 10% seems to not be hurting them whatsoever. We'd be people who say they care about the poor with their words and maybe even with some of their money or how they vote but who in reality have never made actual eye contact with a poor person in their life.

God prefers the tax collector. God prefers those who are here to ask for help. Why? Because this is the way God prefers to act in the world, not by ruling from the top down, but by changing lives from the bottom up. God wants to do good in the world by changing your life, and then letting you loose in it. We have more than just the tax collector as proof here. We have the example of Jesus himself.

How does God act in the world through Jesus? Jesus didn't run for president so he could try to inscribe all ten commandments into Roman law. He didn't make himself a King who forced his constituents to go to the temple and pray or else. No, in Jesus, God humbles himself, like the tax collector. God, in Christ, does not presume worldly status or power. Jesus does nothing to gain it; nothing to maintain it. Instead, Jesus chooses 12 poor, working-class disciples and turned their lives so radically upside down that they couldn't not share the good news of God's grace and love with everyone who would listen. Jesus didn't concentrate on trying to convince the powerful who thought they already had all the right answers, Jesus spent his time instead with sinners, with outcasts, with the demon-possessed and down-on-their-luck because of simply this: they were honest about the fact that they needed help.

Why do you come to church? Why do you pray? Why do you give the church money? Of course, we all have at least a little Pharisee in us. Motivations are a difficult thing to be consciously aware of in the first place, much less feelings that are completely within our control to change. But I do think we can choose, in our hearts, to put ourselves on one side of the tipping point or the other. Am I coming here to be seen? To purchase for myself a reputation for being a do-gooder in the world? Or do I come here actually asking God for help? Do I come here actually open to my life being changed? My habits being altered, my mind being convinced of something new?

Listen to the words of the Psalmist today: *3 Our sins are stronger than we are, *but you will blot them out. 4 Happy are they whom you choose and draw to your courts to dwell there! *they will be satisfied by the beauty of your house, by the holiness of your temple. 5 Awesome things will you show us in your righteousness, O God of our salvation.*

One final word on our stewardship campaign. We're asking folks over the next several weeks to consider turning in a pledge card, to make a commitment in advance of how much money they will give the church for the next calendar year so we have time to dream and budget. This is the time of the year where the leadership of the church comes to the congregation, in the spirit of the tax collector from the parable, and says to you, we need help.

But I want to encourage you not to hear this is merely a practical request. Or a financial one. It's a spiritual opportunity for each of us. The parable is clear: we shouldn't give ten percent—or any percent—of your income to the church if we're doing it for the wrong reasons. Ask yourselves this instead: Do I need help? Do I need help from God and God's Church? If the answer to those questions is Yes, give from that place. The irony is that there's hardly a more effective means of humbling yourself than by giving away your own money. You see, I think the Pharisee's problem was that the percent of his income was actually not enough. It made no difference for his life. It did not make him sufficiently humble so as to know he needed help himself. He could only view himself as the helper, never the helpee.

If the answer to those questions is yes, if you, like the tax collector, like me, maybe this is the year you give more to the church than you ever have before. And I don't just mean money, I mean your whole self. Your talent, your time, your heart, and your soul. And if you do that with a spirit of humility, I believe you will receive back much more than you give. You might just find that you get exactly the help that you need. You might just find that you get Christ himself.

Amen.