

Once upon a time, I used to worry about preaching about stewardship. Coming out of seminary, I thought preaching about money and tithing and generosity would make people upset. That they would be angry that I was telling them to give. That they would be annoyed with me. That they would be annoyed with the church.

I worried that they would see the church like the IRS, demanding their hard earned dollars. That they would feel like the church was just another non-profit, begging for more of their limited resources. As an inexperienced pastor, these were the thoughts that went through my mind.

But in the 15 years that I've been a pastor, I've found that I was completely wrong. By and large, faithful Christians do not mind hearing the occasional sermon about stewardship. It's not a problem. Because, by and large, faithful Christians want to be generous, especially with their church.

In fact, I would say, the average Christian would like to hear more about stewardship. More about tithing. More about God's expectations for their money. Because they know what the Bible says. They know that the Bible has some pretty strong statements on the matter. And they're worried about whether they're using their resources in the right way.

We had a moment like that last week. The rich young man comes to Jesus asking what he needed to do to attain eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the law perfectly. The man claims that he has. But Jesus soon reveals that that is a lie. This wealthy man has not kept the law, because he is not willing to part with his wealth in order to follow Jesus. He has made money his god. And it has come between him and his Lord.

It's a sad situation. But it's also a worrying one for us. Because Jesus tells him, *“Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* And that makes people wonder: Do I need to sell all I have and give it to the poor in order to follow Jesus?

That question is still hanging in the air when we read our Gospel lesson for this week, which directly continues from last week. But now, it is no longer a discussion between Jesus and the rich young man. It's a discussion between Jesus and his disciples. And Jesus doesn't sugarcoat it for them.

*“How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”* In other words, greed has no place in God's kingdom. God does not look at a man's wealth. The pursuit of possessions will only hinder your faith and witness.

And this continues to leave us with some tough questions. Questions like: How much should I give to the church? Where is the line between prudent savings and greed? How generous do I need to be? Jesus is pretty clear about what we shouldn't do, but he's not quite so clear on what we should do.

But that's why I love this passage from Ecclesiastes that we read along side this Gospel lesson today. That's why I love the book of Ecclesiastes in general. Because there's nothing like a grumpy old man to 'tell it like it is'.

That's what we've got here. Solomon is at the end of his life. He's been king for close to 40 years now. He's got 700 wives and 300 concubines (which is more than enough to make any man bitter). And so he finally sits down to write a very wise, very Godly, but very blunt assessment of life for his sons.

And what does he say? Money is not all its cracked up to be. And he should know. He's one of the richest men who ever lived. But that's what he tells us over and over again. *“As [a man] came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand... just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?”*

As the old saying goes, you can't take it with you. In fact, as he previously explained in the passage, you can't even pretend to take it with you by saying, for example, that you want to leave it for your children. Because chances are, you'll lose it anyway. The stock market will crash, or you'll end up in the hospital, or you'll be robbed. Or even if your kids do get it, they'll just waste it.

We try all these different ways of convincing ourselves that the actions of our life have some sort of eternal meaning. That we can somehow cheat death by accumulating wealth or prestige or the admiration of those around us. But the truth is, you are going to die and be nothing more than a pile of dirt in the ground. And that is all the meaning your life will have.

It seems like a pretty hopeless way of looking at things. And yet, Solomon still finds a reason for hope by the end of our Old Testament lesson. He tells us that everyone should accept his lot and rejoice in his toil because this is the gift of God. In short, Solomon still has hope because there is still a God above giving good gifts to His children. And that alone is a reason for joy.

If that was enough to give Solomon hope, then our hope should be so much greater. Because we don't just believe in a God up above. We believe in a God who came down to earth and dwelt among us.

Our hope lies in Jesus Christ, and our meaning lies in what He is doing here among us right now. We live in the hope of something greater than a pile of dirt in the earth. We live in the hope of a God who loves and forgives. The hope of Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead. The hope of a God who raises the dead and brings life back from dust. From dust you were created. To dust you will return. From dust you will be recreated.

And so we echo Solomon's words all the more joyfully. Don't spend your life working for something that will be nothing more than dust in a few years. And don't despair in that fact. Enjoy your life! God gave it to you as a gift. In fact, he's made that gift even greater than it once was. For we don't just find enjoyment in the few days of life that God has given us. We find enjoyment in the eternal life that God has given us.

You can't take any possession from this life with you. Not even this life itself. But you can take the new life given by Jesus Christ with you. It's the one thing you can hold onto through the despair of death and still find it in your hands on the other side. Which makes it more valuable than anything else you will ever possess.

And it is the one thing that brings true joy and meaning to your life. But only if you remember that this is not your life. This is the life that God has given you. And this is not your wealth, these are not your possessions. These are the wealth and possessions that God has given you.

If you were a worker in a factory, would you consider the machines you use, your own personal machines? Of course not! They're the company's machines. All you take from the factory is a small paycheck in return for the work that you agreed to do.

When you were a child doing chores in your family's home, did the fact that you did chores there mean that you owned the home? Of course not! You did the chores because you were told to. And because your parents were putting food on the table and clothes on your back.

We are workers in God's kingdom. We are children in God's family. The life and wealth and possessions he has given us are tools for the glory of His kingdom. They were not yours to begin with. And they are certainly not yours after you give them back to God.

So the question, "How much do you give to God?" kinda has no meaning. You give nothing to God. Because you have nothing to give. The question is really, "How much do you give **back** to God?" And to that, I give you the answer of a man much wiser man than I am.

Have enough to eat and drink. Have enough to find satisfaction in your labor. Enjoy what God has given you with gratitude in your heart. But also accept your lot in life, and be happy with your work. Let the Lord keep you occupied with gladness in your heart.

So that when your last day comes, you don't spend it reflecting on the days of your life and how meaningless they ultimately were. But instead you reflect on the days of your new life. The life awaiting you in paradise. Where suffering and death will end. And meaning will finally begin. Amen.