

Your Money or Your Life

Stewardship 3

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Luke 12:13-21

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How many of you oldies here remember Jack Benny? Jack Benny was an amazing comedian – many claim he was the grandfather of modern day comedy. If you are under the age of 45 or so, you're probably saying ... "Who?" Jack Benny began his career in the days of Vaudeville before even radio, let alone TV. He ended his career in the 1960s with his own hugely popular TV show. He was a master of timing. He could have you in stitches just by the way he would pause and say.. "Well!"

Benny's real name was Benjamin Kubelsky. He began as a child studying the violin and could actually play extremely well – something very few people ever knew. Believe it or not he owned a Stradivarius. He was also a kind and generous man – again, something most did not know. You see his stage persona was the exact opposite. He played the part of a penny-pinching miser, who insisted that he was 39 years of age, and played a violin really badly – he just murdered it. And when you think of it, you actually have to be good to sound as bad as he managed to.

Jack Benny's most famous skit took place on the radio in 1948. In those years they used to broadcast before a live studio audience – just the way some TV shows like Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune do today. The big difference was in 1948 the shows were live – not taped. If you made a mistake it went out across the airways. This particular skit in 1948 held the record as the longest laugh in radio history.

In the skit Jack Benny was walking home late at night. Suddenly out of the night he was accosted by a stranger. The man first asks for light, and then says, "Don't make a move, this is a stickup. Your money or your life!"

Jack Benny paused just staring at the guy, and the studio audience, knowing what a total skinflint he was, started to laugh. The robber waits patiently. Benny is still staring at him. Finally the guy repeats his demand, "Look, bud! I said your money or your life!" Another long pause as the laughter starts to build. Finally Jack Benny, without a totally straight face says, "Don't rush me, I'm thinking! I'm thinking!" – at which point, the audience totally lost it and could not stop laughing. The show ground to a halt for over 5 minutes.

"Your money or your life?" The background to our scripture lesson was an incident in Galilee that happened as Jesus was teaching a large crowd. A young man called out from the crowd and said: "Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the inheritance of our father." It was a cry of anguish from a younger brother. How do I know that? Well, Jewish law in Jesus' time was well known. A father's inheritance went to his sons. If he had no sons, then his daughters could inherit, but only if no sons. If he had no children then his brothers would inherit, then his cousins and so on. (Numbers 27:7-11)

Now, it was the duty of the eldest brother to divide the estate. He was in charge and he held all the power. In our terminology he was the executor. Jewish law prescribed that the eldest son got 2/3 of the inheritance. Younger brothers divided up the remaining 1/3. In the story in Luke's gospel, the older brother either was either dragging his feet or was simply unwilling to give the younger brother what he considered to be his fair share of the inheritance. Such things happened all the time.

Let me pause at this point to observe that nothing in my experience divides families, brothers and sisters, more than an inheritance. How many of you here know of family members who are not on speaking terms over a will. In this, nothing has changed since the time of Jesus. Over the my years of ministry I have seen more bitterness and more family disruption over inheritances than all else put together. You all know the old saying, "Where there is a will, there is a way." Someone altered it slightly to read, "Where there is a will, there is a relative."

In this specific instance, Jesus wisely refused to get involved in the man's family quarrel. My own experience underlines the wisdom of our Lord. Over the years I tried a few times to be an honest broker and it never worked. Why not? – because it was about money! I have been told countless times that "it is not the money, it's the principle of the thing." Maybe, but I can tell you principles sure get intense when there is money involved. This is precisely why Jesus stopped and told the crowd a parable about money. In essence he said: "Beware, beware, of greed, for your life does not consist of the things that you think you own. The essence of your life is vastly greater than your financial portfolio.

There was once a man who had an unbroken run of prosperity. He had successfully played the commodities market. So prosperous did he become that his warehouses could not hold all of his

produce. His solution was to build bigger and better warehouses. With his financial life secure, he was on easy street. He could now kick back and enjoy. His philosophy – eat, drink, and make merry.

Now let's face it, you're a little envious of this guy aren't you? If you're not you're probably in denial. It is what we all want – isn't it? If only I could win the lottery, life would be so sweet! Why not me? Somebody has to win! Why not me? Do you remember Tevye's song in Fiddler on the Roof – 'If I were a rich man.' ?

Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.
All day long I'd biddy biddy bum.
If I were a wealthy man.
I wouldn't have to work hard.

And yet, Jesus concluded his story by saying that the man was a fool.

The issue before us this morning is money. Our attitude toward it can be one of the biggest bridges to the grace and love of God in Jesus or one of the biggest barriers. First, money as a barrier. There are two areas of our lives that we are inclined to shut God out of. The first is any part of our life that we are ashamed of and don't want God to know about. I don't need to give you any examples. There is not a single person here who doesn't know what I am talking about. Why we think God doesn't know about whatever it is, is a mystery to me. Trust me he does know. – and still he loves you and wants you to change.

The other area where so many shut God out of our lives has to do with our money. Money is deeply personal and private and we want total control over it. We are always short of two things – money and time.

Although outsiders will tell you that the Church only cares about money, the truth is that you will hear very few sermons on the topic of money. Ministers know how hugely unpopular it is. You have actually heard very few from me. In 20 years, maybe five times. In St. Catherines where I served First United for 9 years I recall a new couple who showed up one Sunday morning. It just happened to be the only time I ever talked about money. They left and never came back. You know even then I usually did not talk about money. I would use euphemisms like resources, or stewardship — anything to avoid using the “M” word — money. The classic comment of a Southern Baptist after the Pastor appealed for money was, “That preacher has quit the gospel and gone to meddling!”

About ten years ago, God spoke to my heart about this. I know now that I avoided speaking about money, not just because it was unpopular (and it sure was) but because for many years I did not tithe. I was generous in my offerings, (most ministers are) but I did not tithe. I had three children to raise, and bills to pay, and payments to make, and debts to pay off — you name it.

I know now that I was wrong. Anything that keeps me from God will never build up my life or bless me. What does the Bible teach about our money and our possessions? It's very clear. From front to back, the Old Testament to the New, it tells us to keep ninety percent of what we make for ourselves (and I know CCRA has its hand out) but the first ten percent belongs to the Lord. Please note it is not the last ten percent that belongs to God, but the first. In the Bible it is called the first fruits — the first fruits belong to the Lord. I now tithe, and what I discovered is that tithing is a huge blessing, not a burden at all. It is both a grace and a joy! It is in fact a huge freedom!

There are two basic reasons to tithe. The first is that the bible teaches us to. In other words we need to tithe for ourselves and our souls. What the bible teaches is that when we are faithful to God, he blesses us beyond imagination. Let me tell you a story about R. T. Kendall, an American minister who served in England. Shortly after they got married Kendall and his wife did not tithe. For one thing, they were up to their necks in debt. Every month things seemed to get worse. One day he came home so discouraged with his financial predicament, that he actually fell to his knees in his living room and prayed desperately looking for some help from God. He got up and walked into the dining room, where he spotted the white bible his grandmother had given him. It was not the bible he normally read – more of a coffee table presentation bible. He flipped it open at random, and did not like what he read — not one bit! By some strange coincidence the bible fell open at Malachi 3: 8. It reads “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me of your tithes and offerings.” Absolutely stunned, he closed the Bible and quickly turned on the TV, which he says, “I still owed for.” What happened? The programme on TV was an evangelist talking about tithing. He turned it off.

He was in a corner. He was sure he could not afford it, but he decided to listen, to be faithful and to tithe. The miracle was this. Within a remarkably short time they were out of debt. He is sure now that God honours those who honour him. How does it work? Kendall admits he doesn't know, but it does. God honours those who honour him. The first reason then to tithe is simply to be faithful, and by so doing remove any barrier between yourself and God.

The second reason for tithing is to support the mission of our Church. You see the tithes and the offerings you give are all that we have to maintain the ministry and mission of this Church. What difference does that make? My guess is that there are very few of us here who have not been touched, and touched deeply in our souls, because this Church is here. Just last Sunday during coffee hour a woman said to me, "That sermon was preached straight to me. I so needed to hear that." I didn't bother to tell her that I thought it was really for me. I only know that I needed to hear it too.

Do you know that most of those who attend the Celebrate Life evening service here on Sunday evenings are in their twenties or thirties? That is an age group totally missing from most mainline Churches. They include many who are struggling with addictions and have never been part of a Church before. Every week one of them shares about his or her struggle and how by the grace of God they have changed. I have been reduced to tears time after time just listening. Do you know that the mission of this Church is about transformation? The mission of this Church is for all our members to be transformed by the power of Jesus Christ, into everything that God intends you to be. I want you to be able run with joy the race that is set before you looking to Jesus who both begins and completes your faith.

Can you begin to understand now why I am asking you, asking you to consider tithing? You need to do it most of all for your own sake. Do not close God out of any part of your life. He wants only to bless you – yes, even your money. And He will, as you allow him to. The second reason to tithe is to support our Church. Our mission, our mandate is to reach more and more people with the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are all part of a faith in Christ where lives are ransomed, healed, transformed, forgiven – made into beautiful whole people. That is what we are about!

Let me close with a story. A teenager was admiring a beautiful red sports car. A fellow in his twenties showed up and unlocked the car. As he was getting in the teen said, "Hey this your car?"

"Yah," the guy answered. "My dad gave it to me for graduating."

"Do you mean," the teen gasped, "You didn't have to buy it – your dad just gave it to you?"

"That's right," the young man said with a smile as he turned the ignition.

"Wow, said the teen, "would I ever like..." The young man thought he knew just what the teen was going to say "would I ever like a father like that." But that is not what the teen said. What he said was, "Would I ever like to be a father like that.... Would I ever like to be a father like that." You just change one little word, instead of "have" say "be" and the entire understanding is transformed.

That is what I want for you. I want you to know that it is never, "Your Money *or* Your Life." But by the grace of God it is always "Your Money *and* Your Life." God wants to bless both. He wants us to bless His Church. My deepest hope is that you will know the joy and the love of both giving and receiving. They are a circle you see. Truly what goes around, always come around. May God bless you in all your giving and all your receiving.

Amen.