

ONLY TWO CHOICES

Genesis 28:20-22; Matthew 6:19-34

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People have many ideas about giving to the church. Some are just as logical as the three pictures of giving we just saw. One reason there is such confusion is that we preachers often are confused ourselves. Many pastors are hesitant to preach on giving because they're uncertain of the Bible's teaching and such messages can bring pain. I've had parishioners withdraw after a stewardship campaign. Other pastors have experienced this too.

I heard about a church that had different preachers supplying its pulpit. One day, they posted this notice in the local newspaper:

In the future, the preacher for next Sunday will be found hanging on the bulletin board.

Do you suppose those preachers had been speaking on money? Many of us are touchy and defensive about money. But we preachers must speak on this subject. So much of our lives are consumed with gaining and managing money. Did you know that the *number one issue* dividing families today and *precipitating divorce is money*?

Every time we spend a dollar we share something of our values. When you spend money at the grocery store, you are declaring that you value food. Of course, the issue is even deeper. You say something about your values depending on the type and brands of food you purchase.

The value issue is critical because many things compete for our money. Husbands and wives frequently differ over what money should be saved, what should go into insurance, what should be spent on electronics, clothes, recreation, home, vehicles and so on. Who controls the money flow? How are decisions made? What input does each spouse have? All of these things say something about not only what we value, but who we value. Do we value our kids? Do we value our spouse's opinions or desires?

It's precisely because we are talking about values when we discuss money that the Bible emphasizes it. Did you know that over 2,000 verses are found in the Bible on this issue? Did you know that Jesus talked about this subject more than any other? And remember, Jesus wasn't a fund-raiser? He had people who were privately caring for his needs so that when he spoke on money he had no hidden agenda. He wasn't trying to line his pockets. In fact, Jesus handed the job of managing money to his associates. **When Christ spoke on money, he was focusing on our values and our vision rather than his pocket.**

Did you know *vision determines our values, and values determine our behavior*? When I made my first large purchase, my vision was filled with the image of a nineteen year old brunette. Because of that vision, I valued a diamond ring more than anything else. I rehearsed in my mind asking her to marry me and giving her that ring. One of the most vivid memories I have is giving Diane that ring. It is on her finger because of my vision and values.

Do you know what you're talking about when you talk about people's vision and values? You are talking about their hearts. You are not simply talking about their heads. Vision and values go beyond simple logic. They go beyond simple reasoning. They strike at the essence of who we are. When you talk about vision and value, you are talking about someone's heart.

It is difficult to walk with anybody any length of time if you don't share a common vision and values. Tension develops over how time and money is spent. Resentment and anger grow. Emotionally a couple begins to part. Consequently, for most couples they really need to dig into this area and develop a common heart.

If that is critical to a healthy marriage, how much more important is this to a relationship with Christ. If you are going to walk with Jesus, his vision and values must become yours. If they don't, you can't walk with him any distance. He can't lead you into life... because you won't follow. He can't help you taste God's love and provision for you, because you won't go with him any distance. You're off in a different direction.

Jesus sought and is still seeking first God's kingdom. That is Jesus' vision. If you want to walk with him, that passion must come to dominate your vision.

A perfect example of this is a young woman named Agnes. Agnes committed herself to walking with Jesus. As God's Spirit filled her life, Jesus's words became precious to her. They dominated her vision and her values, and as a result, her choices. She became a missionary to the poor in Calcutta as she walked with Jesus. Agnes, known world-wide as Mother Teresa, Angel to the Poor, was simply a sister of ours; but she carried Christ's vision and values and thus walked with Jesus.

Unlike our Christian sister, many Christians relate to Christ and his church differently. They have radically different views. Some think of the church as a club or lodge. It's a place for weddings; a place from which to be buried, and they pay their annual dues. Giving is an annual payment for the special privileges they wish to receive. Pam Young's challenge last week to grow-one-step won't affect people with that vision. If that's your vision, your goal right now is to endure my message and get out of here. A second group of people value the church as an important tradition and institution. They want to see it continue. They are most concerned about a budget. They want to make sure it isn't unnecessarily high, that we don't do any unnecessary spending, that we are frugal and ensure this institution's survival. They see in this "Grow One Step" challenge a way to meet the budget, and they hope it helps, but they are not thinking about their relationship with Christ. They want to assure this institution's survival and the benefits they receive from it. A third group is guided by guilt. They think God is constantly picking on them. They want to do their duty and keep God off their back.

However, there is a view that I believe God's Spirit is seeking to implant in you today. This view believes certain

things. **First, it affirms that life is in Jesus.** It believes that in walking with Jesus we discover life and fulfill our purpose. If that is your vision, if that is your conviction, "*in Jesus is my life,*" you're ready for the next step.

The next step does not simply affirm that life is Jesus; it acts on it. It actually embraces Christ's words and acts on them. **It embraces Christ's perspective or vision** not as an intellectual proposition, but as a way of ordering one's life, **If you actually walk with Christ, you'll begin to see what he sees, believe what believes and do what he does. Student like Teacher. Follower like Master. Believer like Lord.** Consequently, this question is critical for church-goers. Is that happening for you? Are you becoming like your teacher? Are you treating money like your master? Are you investing your life like your Lord? Are you walking with Christ, or are you just being religious? Are you walking with Christ, or are you stuck at a crossroad trying to get him to walk in your direction. If what dominates his vision doesn't begin to dominate yours, you won't walk with him long. That's why repentance is necessary for nonbelievers and believers; and that's also why your calendar and checkbook are important. An honest look at them cuts through all the rationalizations, all the deception by your spiritual enemy and exposes the heart. Jesus frequently told his disciples and hearers not to be fooled. *Talking faith isn't walking faith. Calling him Lord does nothing. **Walking with him as Lord changes everything!***

Our *Grow One Step* challenge can help you look at yourself honestly. However, it takes courage. Moreover, a single person earning \$35,000 is in a completely different situation than a single mother of three earning the same thing. Regardless of the situation, when Jesus's vision and values dominate your life, you become **generous** and **strategic** with whatever you have.

By **generous**, I mean that you are not dominated by fear or greed. Your focus is not an empire of power, possessions and pleasure. It's not even personal comfort. Your major goals are less about getting and more about giving. You are not embarrassed to pray about your finances; at the same time you are not afraid to share what you have. You plant a garden, you share its fruit. You earn an income, and you share its blessings. Jesus's vision and values makes you **generous**. They also make you **strategic** in your spending.

By **strategic** I mean that you think how everything you have can best advance God's work in your family, community and world. Incidentally, you recognize that God has sovereignly put you into a special relationship with other believers as a team to advance the gospel; that's your local church. Understand that your most significant work will be done as you team with your local church and utilize special gifts God may be giving you at even this moment.

The problem we all face is that there are other voices telling you they know better and love you more than Jesus. *"You can't face winter without a new snowmobile." "Prestige and trust come with designer clothes and expensive new cars." "You deserve a Caribbean cruise." "Give less and invest more so that you will have security, esteem and pleasure."*

There is nothing wrong with owning nice things, enjoying recreation and making wise investments. But understand that Mammon is calling for your soul through many voices. It hints that there is no hereafter, and no loving God who really cares about you or cares for you. It lies, *"You got to care for yourself, and I, Mammon, will help you."* Mammon wants your service. Mammon will fill your vision with fear and greed, and dictate your values.

Maybe you're a sincere believer who says, *"I really think Mammon got me with fear. I'm insurance poor. I really want to walk with Jesus."* The *Grow One Step* challenge provides you a practical way of acting in faith rather than fear. Maybe you're someone who really wants to grow spiritually; but your charge cards are maxed out, and you are wondering if you are spending way too much on clothes or recreation. The *Grow One Step* challenge offers you a start in a new way of managing your money. Maybe you're someone who has had the "club dues" mentality. You thought your once a year gift of \$500, or \$1000 was really something, but when you look at it in relation to your weekly income, you recognize it's not that much. You're free today. Mammon had you deceived, but now you see. Consider making the jump to tithing. At minimum, try growing one step. Maybe you're somebody who just doesn't make much. You want to give, and you feel guilty. Ask God to show you ways you can become generous and strategic with your time and money, and consider trying to grow just one step. Ask God to bless you and your act of faith.

The key issue for us all comes down to *only two choices*. Who will dominate your vision and values? Who will have your heart? God or Mammon?