

An Economic Partner with God

Embrace Your Life Vision!

Matthew 6:33; Genesis 28:10-22

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Bethany Church

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One day a church secretary received an unusual phone call. The voice on the line asked, “Is the chief hog of the trough there?” The secretary answered, “Pardon me?” The voice repeated, “Is the chief hog of the trough there?” The secretary questioned, “Chief hog?” “Yah,” the voice responded, “The chief hog, the boss hog, the leader at the trough.” The secretary, “I think you are talking about our pastor, but we don’t address him that way.” “Well,” said the voice, “I wanted to give a \$50,000 inheritance check to the church and talk with him how to designate it.” “Just a second,” the secretary exclaimed, “the big pig is right here.”

We can say money is not important, but in truth it is. Much time, attention and energy are spent acquiring it, spending, investing, and borrowing it. Many of our goals depend on money. Vacations, transportation, shelter, education and many comforts depend on money. Since money dominates so much of our lives, I teach on Christian financial management in January. Today, however, I want to focus on how you can embrace God’s vision for your life.

God has a vision for your life. He created you for companionship. He created you to be his companion, his partner. Since God is love, since his character is love, his spirit is love, his essence is love, he is out to heal people who are hurting and redeem people who are separated

from him. Thus, if you are going to live as God's companion or partner, you will join him in those tasks. Jesus lived as God's partner. Jesus enjoyed and trusted his heavenly Father's love, and his life was devoted to the tasks that are extensions of his father's love. When Jesus did his father's bidding, his father supplied the finances. His father supplied the money. One aspect of Jesus' partnership with his father was economic. Jesus did God's bidding and God provided. We are called to that same relationship, that same partnership and that same business. Jesus exhorted not just a select group of disciples, but all his listeners, "Seek above everything else the kingdom of God and his righteousness and your needs will be provided." Personally, Jesus didn't worry about money. Some of his disciples did. In fact, I believe that is the reason Judas betrayed Jesus. However, Jesus didn't worry about money. He told his disciples to take no money bag or extra provisions when they went out to preach because God would provide for them. He told all the people that if they seek first God's kingdom, all these other things (food, clothing, shelter and so on) would be provided.

As I reflected on this, I realized that there is not a single recorded instance of Jesus fundraising. In the Scriptures we can not find him exhorting anyone to give him anything. There is one instance where he tells a rich man to sell all his possessions, give all the money to the poor and then follow him; but there is no recorded instance where he says, "I need your gifts, I need your money." There is none! Zero! Nada!

One of the burdens on my heart is that I see the church, the body of Christ, spending so much of its time and energy fundraising. If Jesus didn't, why do we? Jesus spent his time relating with and serving hurting and lost people, but we spend much of our time serving one another and raising money. Maybe it will eventually help hurting and lost people, but that wasn't Jesus' way or call. Instead, he told us to just go to his wandering children in his name.

Often churches are known in their communities, for dinners, bazaars, bake sales and other fundraisers. If we took the time, energy, and organization we spend on fundraising and redirected just half of it to serving people in the community and sharing our experience of Jesus with them, I think God would provide all the money we previously worked for. God wants to be our economic partner. He says all throughout the Scriptures, “Trust me!”

Over forty percent of Rochester’s residents have no relationship with the Christian church. At the national level two thirds of these people would describe themselves as believers in Jesus. I imagine then the vast majority of these Rochester residents have some attraction to Jesus. Among the top five reasons given by this group for not associating with Christ’s body are: *worship is boring, the sermons are irrelevant, and all the church wants is money.*

I don’t like that, do you? I don’t want to lead worship that bores these folk. I don’t want to preach things that don’t relate to them. I certainly don’t want to make them think that I want their money. Each week in the bulletin, there is a note to visitors. In it I tell them not to feel obligated to put anything in the offering plate. Whenever I see a sizeable group of visitors in worship, I make that statement out loud. I want visitors to feel comfortable, and I want to put their hearts to rest that we are not after their money.

I don’t think God ever will ask me, “Wes, when you led the church, why didn’t you raise more money for me?” Instead, I think I could be asked, “Why did you manipulate my people, pull their strings, push their buttons, to give money?” I think I have to fear that far more than being judged for not raising money. Did you know that Jesus in Luke 20:47 condemned religious teachers for cheating widows out of their property? One respected scholar believes that Jesus was condemning their manipulative, emotion-ridden fundraising.

I don't want to be a manipulative fundraiser. I want to help you embrace your call as God's partner. I want you to take steps to live in partnership with your heavenly father. One of those steps Jacob took long ago.

In the 28th chapter of Genesis, Jacob was running for his life. His brother Esau was ready to kill him. Jacob was getting as much distance between his brother and him as he could. Finally, he found a good place to rest. As he slept, he dreamed of a ladder or stairway where angels came down to earth to work and left earth to go back to heaven. At that gate of heaven, God appeared to him and gave him a promise. God would give the land he slept on to his descendants. Before Jacob left that place, he made an agreement. "If you will protect and provide for me, I'll *return a tenth* of whatever you give me." In the Hebrew language, Jacob said that he would *tithe* whatever God gave him. Right there, Jacob established an economic partnership with God.

Later, when God instructed Jacob's descendants how to live as his people, he called them to "tithe" their income. All were to live as economic partners with God. Therefore, tithing, returning a tenth of your income, (returning not giving) was included in the law that Moses gave the Israelites. Two out of three years, the tithe was taken to the temple in Jerusalem. Every third year it stayed in their own communities to serve the poor, the aliens and local ministry leaders. The people did not have the right to designate their tithe. It was returned to God in the manner prescribed by Moses. Beyond this, people gave offerings to God and alms to anyone in need.

Many found tithing a test. They fudged. They cut the percentage or offered the weakest, sickest animals they had. They weren't giving the first fruits. They were giving leftovers. The prophet Malachi confronted them. He asked, "Would you give a blind lamb to the governor? Would he be impressed?" Malachi's point is that the governor would be impressed. The

impression, however, would not be favorable. Malachi prophesied that God felt the same way. Malachi told his hearers that God was waiting to provide and unleash a flood of blessing.

Jesus did not talk about tithing. He talked about a life vision. His vision for you is to seek first the kingdom and use your resources for its advance. His message was: *Make the mission your focus, not your provision.* He promised that our Father would provide.

Seeking first the kingdom of God goes way beyond tithing, doesn't it? The usefulness of tithing is that it is a way to begin a financial partnership with God. It is a practical step in helping you seek first God's kingdom and it helps you taste God's provision.

For those of you who tithe, I encourage you to return the tithe, like the Jews did, without designating it. Do it as an act of partnership with God. Then with the 90% that remains, save it, spend it, or give it as God shows you how to bless and advance his work. Make the kingdom of God your life business. A huge part of that might be in your vocation or with your family. Depend upon God to show you how to use all your resources for his kingdom. For you are his partner to do his bidding in the circumstances you face. He will supply your needs.

The Giving Covenant (enclosed in your bulletin) is a tool to help you embrace this part of your life vision. By making a commitment, you plan the use of your resources for God's kingdom. Also you help our leaders in planning our common ministries. (If you are visiting and belong to another church, use the Giving Covenant with them.)

My father died when I was sixteen years old. Life often wasn't easy for him; but as his son I never worried about food, clothing or shelter. I didn't get my every whim or wish, but he supplied every need. He would have sacrificed everything he had to supply my need. He would have even died for me. Christ did die for you. Why don't you trust your heavenly father? As a child and youth, I did not give my provision a second thought. Yet my father's commitment to

me and his ability to provide aren't even close to the pure love and amazing ability of our heavenly father. That's why Jesus had such trouble with our doubt. He found our anxiety about money incredulous and irrational.

Do you believe in God the father almighty? Do you? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord? Do you? Then embrace your life vision.