



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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MONEY

Most of the time when we set ourselves to work on the development of our spiritual lives, we think about our prayers, our devotion at the Eucharist, a rule of life, fasting, perhaps even sacramental confession. Rarely does the subject of money occur to us. Nevertheless, money is an important part of a Christian's spiritual discipline. For all Christians are material creatures as well as spiritual. And anyone who tries to live the spiritual life without consideration for the material world is bound for trouble.

Money causes two sorts of problems in the spiritual life, depending on whether there is too much or too little. Those with a lack of money (lack is only partly determined by the amount of money) tend to be preoccupied with getting enough of it. This preoccupation interferes with prayer, as well as with caring for other people. In extreme cases, it can become the sole preoccupation in life. The person could say there is no time for prayer or any other spiritual discipline, for he must find more money or else. This is the problem of greed in its various forms.

The other problem is that of having enough not just for the necessities, but for some comforts as well. Here the problem becomes one of how much I can use for myself and how much I should give away. Like greed, this can become a preoccupation. We can be overwhelmed with the responsibility of trying to decide how much we can keep and how much we should give away. We are constantly faced with decisions: can I have a steak today or should I give \$25 to the parish food pantry? Should I try to muddle through with my old Ford for another winter or should I

give \$500 to the Organ Restoration Fund? How much should my pledge to the Church be? We are presented with myriads of opportunities to give money, many of them more than worthy. We are also presented with many of our own needs -- personal and family. The resources are finite: to satisfy one need means that another goes wanting. Left to our own devices with these decisions, we would be overwhelmed. It is too much to try to balance all these competing needs, especially when half of them are ours. We are never really in a position to step back and make an objective decision about what is most needy, because we are always one of the parties as well as the judge.

Both of these are spiritual problems, with potentially devastating effects on prayer and worship. They need to be dealt with spiritually as well as materially. The connection between material and spiritual should not surprise us. God uses material things all the time to reveal Himself, as in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, or the water of Baptism, or in the flesh of Jesus Christ. Material things are sanctified by their spiritual context. This means that we cannot divorce our material lives from our spiritual lives if we expect to get very far as Christians. The two must grow together.

The basis of a solution to the problems of wealth, whether lack or excess, is a sacrificial approach. The Old Testament tithes were sacrificial, part of the sacrificial system of the Law. The aim of the sacrifices was to maintain a relationship between God and His people. This was to be a relationship of holiness and righteousness, of man's obedience to God and God's caring for man. The first characteristic of sacrifice was the maintenance of a relationship.

In order to do this, man had to obey God. In the cases of tithes, this meant offering to God 10% off the top. Rejects and seconds didn't count: the offering was not a way to get rid of the defective sheep in the herd. This was a significant offering and no mere token. We sometimes forget this in these days of 20% (or 50%!) income taxes. But think what 10% of your take-home income represents in terms of what you buy for yourself. It is significant. So the offering is costly.

The point is that man must make his relationship with God of material importance as well as spiritual. It is a sign of his priorities. Is he willing to put his money where his soul is? It is also a sign of his trust in God. He gives the tithe with the trust that the remaining 90% will be sufficient to sustain his life. He does not keep back his tithe to the end of the month, just in case something comes up. Rather, it is his first commitment, and is paid first. It is as essential to his life as paying for food.

The Old Testament tithes give us the model for how we are to deal with our money. The point of our making offerings to the Church at all is to grow in our relationship with God. To grow spiritually we need to have our material resources sanctified within our relationship with God.

We need to offer a significant percentage of our income. The Church gives us guidance here: 10% of our income, though there are differing views as to whether this is pre- or post-tax income. This offering symbolizes our offering of everything: of all that we have and all that we are. It is an offering of ourselves. In it, we accept that what we have is God's gift, and that we owe it all to Him. Symbolically, we give it all back to Him, and then receive the 90% back for our use. That becomes our responsibility as His stewards.

All our material wealth is part of the spiritual bounty we receive from God. We receive it as His gift: not earned or deserved, but pure gift. We accept it as stewards, to care for responsibly under the authority of our Lord. That is the first step: no longer regarding our wealth as ours, as something we have by our own virtue or deserving. When we begin to treat it as God's, entrusted to our care, then we are freed of some of its burden. He has the ultimate authority. We act in obedience to Him. We need not become preoccupied with any of it, for we can always refer such things to Him. We gain the freedom of the servant who need only obey and not worry about the ultimate outcome. This is difficult to learn when it comes to money, because the world does not operate on quite the same principle. Our wages are no gift, but our due in return for work. Nevertheless, if we see our work as our calling and our duty before God, then we will be able to receive our wages from God's bounty, even as we also receive them as our earthly earnings.

Our tithe symbolizes our offering of everything. It is also a substantial sacrifice in its own right. It would be easier to give a token dollar a week (or even 5 dollars), than 10%. It would interfere a lot less with our lifestyle. But the aim is not the satisfaction of our desires but the holiness that God would give us. The spiritual life demands the sacrifice of 10%. We are called to sacrifice some of our wealth, even as we are also called to sacrifice some of our desires and pleasures. This is necessary if we are to live for God rather than self. It is an opportunity to share Jesus' sacrifice in some small but significant way.

When we accept our responsibility to tithe, we place ourselves in obedience to God. We accept His word for what is best for us. We may not feel that we really need to tithe, but we will do it simply because He told us it is necessary. That already represents great progress in the spiritual life. We are beginning to live in practical obedience to God, rather than just thinking about it. We find ourselves ready to put aside our judgments of what is needful for us in order to follow what God has told us.

Further growth follows, because of the faith necessary to persevere in tithing. It will be an act of faith that we will be able to live on the 90%. There is always the temptation to fudge a little on the tithe, just in case something comes up. Or, when it looks like a bad month, to wait until the end of the month to pay the tithe, so that it will be there if needed. That is a misunderstanding of the

tithe. The point is to give God the tithe, in order to receive the rest at His hand, to put God first. That is not paying protection money or insurance -- those could be put off in time of greater necessity. The tithe must come first. It must show that God is not an afterthought. The tithe must come off the top with the first bills paid. Otherwise something else is of first importance -- and by implication, self rather than God.

It all goes back to that difficult principle of life that Jesus taught and demonstrated: "he who would gain his life must lose it, and he who would lose his life for my sake will save it." If we are trying to look out for ourselves, we will never get very far with the tithe. If we are trying to take care of all contingencies ourselves, then we will wait for the end of the month (or year!) before making our contribution to the Church. We will try to control our lives materially, and that will interfere with our trusting God spiritually. We must learn to let go and let God take over -- materially as well as spiritually. That is the lesson of the tithe in the Old Testament: when God's people obeyed Him and trusted Him and paid their tithes, then things went well with them. But when they began to trust themselves instead of God and put off or ignore their tithes, then they got themselves into trouble, because the failed tithes were a sign of their contempt for God.

Tithing sanctifies all that we have -- all that we receive back from God -- for our use. We will be delivered from the guilt and doubt of not knowing whether we have given enough to this or that or spent too much on ourselves. We have all been confronted at one time or another with a fundraiser for the Church or some worthy cause who told us that everything we have is from God -- and made us feel thoroughly guilty about it. Because all that we have is from God, he tells us, we ought to share with X (those less fortunate, the Parish budget, the local hospital). If he was good at it, he succeeded in making us feel guilty about having anything at all. We feel that we should give it all away. Even if we give him something, we go away feeling guilty, because we have also kept something for ourselves. If we refuse to give, then we are made to feel that it is our selfishness that is hardening our hearts to God and our fellow man. Either way, we leave feeling guilty.

That guilt is itself a sign that it is all manipulation rather than an expression of the truth. The tither is delivered from this guilt. He is free to use his wealth to the glory of God. That means living a full human life. So he will joyfully spend what is necessary on his own needs, as well as on the needs of others. He does this in obedience to God, as God's steward. He gives his offerings not because he thinks God needs them, but because he knows he needs to give. There is a great freedom which comes with tithing. It is a freedom from the tyranny of money.
