

What God Wants

Mark 12:28-34

Rev. Dan Schumacher

The Rev. Alvin Jackson once began his annual stewardship sermon this way:

“Have you heard that on January 16, at 70 North Bellevue, The Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, Memphis, Tennessee, around 11:30 a.m. a robbery was committed?

An undetermined amount of money was stolen. This doesn't appear to be the first time the crime was committed. The evidence strongly suggests that it was an inside job. There were no signs of forced entry. Thirty-five hundred people were present at the scene of the crime and at least three thousand are suspected of actively participating in the robbery. None of the suspects has been apprehended.

Authorities are still investigating. One of the authorities commented that in all of his years of investigating robberies, he has never seen anything like this one before. A large sum of money is missing, but no money seems to have changed hands. The money appears to have been stolen from God.

No indication of weapons used and no visible sign of struggle. It appears to have been a robbery without a weapon. I have come today on behalf of the authorities to issue the warrants for arrest. But I have also come to announce that the judge in the case — who is also God — is willing to suspend the sentences and pardon all who will vow never to commit this crime again” (“Robbery Without a Weapon,” *Out of Mighty Waters*, Chalice Press, 1994, 107-108).

Rev. Jackson is no longer at that church... but you have to admire his creativity.

Stewardship season and I have a long and difficult relationship. The truth is, I love *being* your pastor... And I love being *paid* to be your pastor. But I hate *asking* you to pay me.

That part makes it feel a bit self-serving when I get up here and say, “When you give to FBC, you give to the things you care about.” It may be completely true, but I'm also fully aware that I am the most expensive line on the budget each year.

I like to say that our budget is the most theological document we produce each year — that how we spend our money as a church is a strong indicator of what we believe. Jesus said it like this: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). When we look at our budget, we may want to stop once in awhile and ask what it says about our heart.

I think it's important to point that truth out from time to time... and yet, *I* am the most expensive part of this church's budget. The irony is not lost on me.

So stewardship season is hard on me. How do I ask for your financial support without it feeling like a self-serving endeavor? I guess, I could pull the Rev. Alvin Jackson card and just point an accusing finger at you and say, "You're not stealing from me. You're stealing from God." But we know how that story ended, and, frankly, I'm not really interested in leaving FBC yet.

So what to do, what to do?

I have an idea. How about for the next few weeks, we reach a mutually held agreement?

For my part, I will not come up here each week and tell you how it's my job to part you from your money. Instead, I will simply insist that we sing hymns like, *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come* and *Because I Have Been Given Much* and *Come, All Christians, Be Committed*. And we'll be sure to sing all the verses, even the lines about "Take my silver and my gold."

And for your part, you will promise to pick up on and appreciate how subtly I have worked in those hymns in stewardship season and you will pledge without me having to drone on like NPR fundraising season, because you appreciate me trying so hard to avoid talking about money.

Or another idea: How about I just work in a series of corny stewardship-themed jokes to my sermons each week? To save time, I'll just give you the punchline now, and maybe you can come up with the rest.

"We're not stranded," he said. "Trust me. I'm a millionaire and I tithe regularly. My pastor will find me."

"The bad news is the money is still in your pockets."

"Then the one hundred dollar bill turned to the one dollar bill and said, 'What's a church?'"

The truth is we have stewardship season because the church has bills to pay. We do all sorts of wonderful things with the money we give. We support missionaries around the world. We work to keep homeless families off the streets. We support our youth ministry and we send children and youth to camp. We pay for the upkeep and maintenance of this building which we try very deliberately to share with our community — so that it will be an instrument and not just a monument.

And yet there is still unmet need — hurting people, hungry people, cold and shivering people. There is more need than we can meet. And the truth is, we will never have enough to do *all* of the good things that we believe God wants us to do.

But stewardship isn't just about the money we give to the church, is it?

Maybe instead of telling you that First Baptist needs your *money*, we should remind each other that God needs *us* and that *we* need God.

Several thousand years ago on Mount Sinai, Moses told the people what he'd heard God say: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5).

For generations, the people of God had been in slavery — forced to give their lives completely to the whims of Pharaoh. But as they made their way out of slavery and into freedom, God offered them an alternative: "Don't give yourself to the Pharaohs of the world. Choose to give yourselves to me; to *love* me with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might." Real love can never be coerced. Real love must always be chosen freely. God doesn't want slaves. God wants people who *choose* to love God.

This verse became such a central part of the Jewish people's worship that they recited it twice a day — at dawn and at dusk — as a way of trying to inscribe it on their hearts. "Love God. Love God. Love God." Over and over and over they repeated this verse.

In fact, they wrote it on tiny pieces of parchment and they folded it up and kept them in small, cube-shaped black boxes. During morning and evening prayers, they strapped the boxes on their foreheads and tied them to their arms so that they wouldn't forget: "Love God. Love God. Love God."

After Solomon's temple was destroyed, the scrolls on which these words were written *became* their holy place. Wherever the scrolls went became their place of worship. With no more temple in Jerusalem to worship in, the people of God depended on the local synagogue. In the yeshiva, the school, scripture was the textbook for every class. In school one day, a young boy named Jesus opened the Torah scroll and read: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

As an adult, Jesus found himself in another temple in Jerusalem, Herod's temple. He had spent the morning debating theology in the public square. That's putting it mildly, it had been more like a theological "cage match," a theological "Royal Rumble." That morning, he'd debated the chief priests, the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, and a handful of others who saw themselves as defenders of orthodoxy.

It'd been a long day. Jesus was ready for a nap. But a scribe had been carefully listening to him. Scribes are usually the "bad guys" in the gospels. They're the letter-of-the-law types. They're the ones who are often trying to test Jesus and trip him up. But this one had an honest question. With Jesus, honest questions often got honest answers.

He asks his question — a favorite among the great rabbis and thinkers of the Jewish faith: "Jesus, which commandment is the most important?"

Jewish religious folk had two tendencies. For one, they were fond of extrapolating the commands of God to a nearly irrational level. For instance, there are reports of debates

about what was legal and what was not on the Sabbath. It was legal to pick up your child up on the Sabbath. But what if, unbeknownst to you, your child had a small stone in her pocket? Well, then you had lifted a stone and thus worked on the Sabbath, breaking the commandment to rest.

Their other tendency was the opposite. Rather than extrapolating the law to the nth degree, they also tried to gather up all of the law into a single sentence. When a Gentile challenged the rabbi, Hillel, saying he would convert if Hillel could teach him the whole law while he stood on one foot, Hillel, replied, "What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it" (*b. Shabbath* 31a).

That's what this scribe is asking Jesus. "Jesus, if you can gather up all of the law while I stand one foot, what would you say? If you could hang all of the law on one nail, Jesus, what would it be?"

Jesus doesn't offer a unique answer. He doesn't even have to hunt for the answer. Like this scribe, he has prayed the answer twice a day his entire life: "You shall love the Lord your God "with all of your heart" — the center of all you do. "With all your soul" — your very being, the whole of you. "With all your mind" — what you think and believe. And "with all your strength" — all your energy. "And shall love your neighbor as yourself" — anything you would seek for your own good, seek that for your neighbor, too.

Loving God and loving neighbor is the central teaching of Christianity. It is the foundation on which everything else rests. Not all scripture is equal. Jesus says so right here. Some of it is more important than other parts.

What is the most important thing you can learn and do? Mark says that Jesus said what he had read in Deuteronomy that Moses said that God said: "Love God with all your heart, soul, and might."

Patrick Willson says, "This is nothing less than the heartbeat of the Bible itself" (*"Stewardship: The Standard," Lectionary Homiletics, October 2005, 2-3*).

And if that's true — if these two verses are the heartbeat of the Bible — then they give all of scripture its life. Every verse ought to be judged by its proximity to how closely it proclaims this truth: Love God and love neighbor.

I hope that is true of our worship. I hope that in this sanctuary — above all else — what we learn is to love God and to love our neighbor.

That is how we should measure everything we do here — all of our classes, all of our ministries, all of our programs, all of our friendships; every song we sing, every prayer we pray; the shape of our leadership; and the lines of our budget. Everything we do

ought to be measured by whether it leads us into greater love of God and greater love of our neighbors... or away from it.

That, and nothing less, ought to be the measure of our stewardship — because real stewardship isn't just writing a check to cause you believe in. It's loving God with everything you've got — all of your heart and soul and mind and strength. And it's loving your neighbor.

Randy Alcorn says it like this: "God wants your heart. God isn't looking just for donors for the kingdom, those who stand outside the cause and dispassionately consider acts of philanthropy. God is looking for disciples immersed in the causes they give to. God wants people so filled with a vision for eternity that they wouldn't dream of *not* investing their money, time, and prayers where they matter most" (Brett Younger, "Loving God, Loving Neighbor, Together," *The Broadway Pulpit*, Feb. 19, 2006).

So what does that look like here at FBC?

It could look like a lot of things, but I think I caught a glimpse of it this past Tuesday when four of us from this family of faith were huddled up against the brick wall of Horizon Middle School to get out of the wind, while we waited for the Care and Share Mobile Food Pantry truck to pull up. While we waited, we noticed that down on the sidewalk, a small line of adults and children formed — many of them carrying reusable grocery bags.

Right on cue, the truck pulled up and a young woman named Taylor rolled out of the driver's seat. We were really only supposed to be there to observe how this program works and to assess whether we believed it to be the kind of ministry we wanted our church to be a part of. We were there to watch... but that didn't last long.

We couldn't help ourselves. Within seconds, we were unloading tables and setting up produce baskets and getting familiar with their process for serving food to people who might otherwise go hungry. For the next hour, the four of us helped fill grocery sacks to the brim with eggs, produce, fresh fruit, salads, yogurt — and, most importantly, chocolate. We carried cases of yogurt and bags of groceries to their cars. Even Karen Wilson, whose knees are all but shot, found herself carrying a bag of groceries to a car for a woman who, she said, walked even worse than her.

And as we served these families, we noticed some things.

We noticed that most of them were not people we would have expected to find at a Care and Share Mobile Food Pantry. They were coming from work. They were families who had taken in others' children and so were stretched thin.

I was overwhelmed by the stories they told me... and by the stories they wore. Too many of the people in that line were wearing scrubs. And too many were wearing teacher ID badges from public schools. And it occurred to me that the people we ask to

care for our homebound and our children aren't paid well enough to make an actual living in our city.

And they kept thanking me — as if I had done something extraordinary. And as they thanked us, it occurred to me that these weren't strangers. These are our neighbors.

As I left that school, my heart was full. In fact, it was overflowing. And I thought about this scribe who knew the right answer to his own question. He knew the answer to the question he asked: What's the most important law?

Love God and love neighbor.

"Yes!" he said to Jesus. "That's it! I think the same thing!"

And Jesus looked at him and said, "You're not far from the kingdom of God."

He's not far... but he's not there — because there is a difference between *knowing* the answer to the question and *living* the answer to the question.

What does God want? God wants all of you, not just your tithe check.

God wants your heart and your soul and your mind and your strength, and you give it to him by loving your neighbor.

What will that look like here at FBC?

I honestly don't know. But I know it won't happen without you.

Amen.