

So, you didn't miss the memo. We are not starting a new stewardship campaign today. But as we talk about spiritual practices shaping our walk with God, we must face the topic of the connection between money and the spiritual life.

It may seem odd to fit the topic of money alongside things like prayer, worship, reading the bible and serving. These feel like spiritual activities. But money?

Yet when we read what Jesus talked about in the gospels, you may be in for a surprise. Jesus talks more about the topics of money and material possessions than about the topics of worship, prayer, and studying the bible combined. And Jesus wants us to be clear about the fact that our relationship with money can either make or break our spiritual life. (no pun intended)

We're coming up on our tax deadline. And it's interesting to note what an accountant had to say about a person's tax return. "You can tell a lot about a person" he said, "by their tax returns. A tax return is kind of a "selfie".

Want to know more about that? This accountant was researching to write a book about the tax returns of public officials. Many public officials make their tax returns publicly available online.

One public official's return revealed the following. He had an adjusted gross income of \$200,000 for his entire family. Rather modest. There's more. This public official had a fairly high mortgage interest deduction, which means they were on the edge of what they could actually afford. What about his charitable contributions? He gave a whopping \$300 a year to charities.

This accountant used tax returns to measure a person's ability to repay a loan. Typically, we think of a FICO score as a measure of that. But here's what this accountant found. There were two things that were better indicators. A person's ratio of mortgage interest to income and their charitable giving. In fact, 90% of his "Tax Return Credit Score" was based on charitable giving.

People who were generous in their charitable giving were more likely to live below their means and more interested in others because of that generosity. Generous people were a significantly better credit risk.

Jesus understood this too. What we do with our money says a lot about the condition of our hearts. As he said in Matthew 6:21, “Where you treasure is, there your heart will be also”. We could also argue that our bank account and credit card statements are kind of a selfie. What do these things say about us. In Luke 12:15 Jesus says. “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” But society sure seems to try to steer us in the opposite direction. Society would tell us that life does indeed revolve around the abundance of stuff we own. It teases us with the idea that if we have bigger, better, nicer, cooler stuff, we’ll be happy and fulfilled.

A Yale theologian by the name of Miroslav Volf has been working on the theology of joy and the “good life”. The good life. Sitcoms, films, novels and songs. They all talk about the good life.

The idea that the good life means having ample money, material possession and leisure time comes from the ancient Greek philosophy known as hedonism. Hedonism comes from the Greek word pleasure. It teaches that the highest good is pleasure and the chief end of humanity is maximizing pleasure while minimizing pain. Sounds like a recipe for dissatisfaction and an elusive spiritual life, doesn’t it?

Practicing hedonism can lead to what is called hedonic adaptation. It begins with desire. Our hearts get set on something we just know will bring us pleasure, satisfaction, fulfilment. We can’t take it anymore we have to buy that thing. But guess what happens after that? The joy of owning that thing quickly dissipates and then we’re on to wanting the next thing.

Ecclesiastes gives us a perfect view into the mind of someone caught up in hedonic adaptation. We have a very old King Solomon, a man who dedicated his life to acquiring pleasure and

avoiding pain. In chapter 2 he goes through a litany of all the pleasures he has experienced or acquired. Pleasures that should have brought Solomon complete happiness. But over and over again he calls these things vanity or “chasing after the wind”.

So, what are the real keys to the good life? There are three things that can truly help us experience “the good life”. It is from the Greek philosophy of Stoicism that we find our first key. Stoics believed that the good life was found by learning to want what you already have.

How do we cultivate a desire for what we already have? Would you believe it’s as simple as giving thanks for the things you already possess? As we learn to give thanks for what we have, we find contentment, we find freedom. We possess our possessions; they don’t possess us. Not only does this spirit of gratitude apply to things, it strengthens relationships with others.

The second key is living purposefully. Finding the things that add meaning to our lives. Things that give us fulfillment and a sense of purpose. For Christians, this starts with following the way, the truth, and the life. In following Jesus, we find more meaning in loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength AND loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Victor Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist. He wrote a book entitled, “Man’s Search for Meaning”. Victor and his family were arrested by Nazis and sent to concentration camps because they were Jews. Victor spent time in 4 different camps, including Auschwitz. All but one other member of his family were killed.

In these camps, Victor noticed that some prisoners, in spite of the horrid conditions, carried an attitude that said they still had something to live for. These prisoners also were more inclined to serve others. This led him to develop a new area of psychotherapy called logotherapy. Victor found that if a person could find a sense of meaning even in the bleakest of situations, they coped better with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

Victor recalled a particularly cold morning when he and other prisoners were forced to march to a work site. Out of the blue he began thinking about his wife and how much he loved her. He wasn't even sure if she was alive. But this love kept him going on that difficult march.

In John 15:13 Jesus says, "No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends." The Greek word used here is agape. Agape is a kind of love that selflessly cares for another. It's the kind of loving and living we are called to.

Our final key to true happiness is generosity. We were created for generosity. And as with the other practices we've discussed so far there is both individual and corporate generosity. We give corporately to make sure the work of our church can take place both within our walls and also through the global church.

We give individually as an expression of worship and gratitude to God, individually we make it possible for St. Johns to have a collective impact on our community and the world in a way that we could not do by ourselves.

Can generosity bring joy? Winston Churchill had this to say. "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." And Arthur Brooks, author of the book *Gross National Happiness: Why Happiness Matters for America – and How We can Get More of It* added this. "To the extent that happiness can be "bought", it is with charity: giving of effort, time, and money makes people much happier.

Maybe that's why Jesus said in Luke 6:38 "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." Dear hearts, don't be misled, this isn't a prosperity gospel message. What Jesus is saying is that there is something about giving that blesses the giver. Things like joy, fulfillment, and meaning.

Think about what brings you more joy? Opening a gift or watching someone open a special gift you got for them?

We say we are created in the image of God. We say God is generous. The cross clearly proves that. But if we're created in the image of a generous God, we have to acknowledge that we were created to be generous through out all the rhythms of our lives.

As with everything else we've discussed in this series, generosity is something that can be cultivated. Cultivating generosity. How do we do that? Could you be more generous when tipping your server? Could you settle for a fair price in a negotiation (like a new car purchase) instead of seeking to make the salesperson bleed?

What is your reaction when someone asks you to give? Is it resentment or enthusiasm at the opportunity.

Let's once again look at our hands. Today, your five fingers represent the five acts of special generosity you will practice each month. And friends 5 is only a suggested total, you are more than welcome to do more.

Finally, we come to the question you may have been dreading. How much should we give to God? The Old Testament gives us guidance on that. It's called a tithe or 10 percent of what you've earned.

Believe me, this concept floored me too. Let me tell my tithing story. About 10 years ago as I began my journey as a divorced woman, I realized that I could do something I'd never really been able to do in married life. Give to the church. So I started out with small set amounts. After all, I now only had a small stipend from my ex-husband, a small hourly wage from my new job, and a lot of debt. Gradually I increased my giving. Then God did it. God really laid on my heart that I needed to start tithing. This was scary. How could I give that much and still pay all my bills. But I did it. It was always one of my largest expenses each month. But you know what

else...I managed to pay all my bills. Again, and again, and again. My bank account never went into the negative.

Generosity is something that anyone of any age can learn. In fact, let me show you a video of what happened in an experiment with a group of elementary school-aged children.

..... (Play Video Here)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnZfRh_7tzw

Once again, let's look at our hands. The clenched dominant hand is your giving to God through the church. Your generosity, combined with others makes our ministries and our witness more than possible! The unclenched hand represents your five acts of extraordinary generosity towards others each month.

When we practice generosity, it will become a rhythm of our lives, our hearts will become attuned to God's desire for us and we will walk more closely with our Lord.

Let us pray:

Lord: Let us remember to be thankful for all that we have. Life is a gift from you. Help us to be more generous and more willing to share with others. Give us the desire to live below our means so we are more able to help others. We can be generous because of your generosity to us. Amen.