

Isaiah 43:18-25
2 Corinthians 1:18-22
Mark 2:1-12

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¹When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ²So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, **“Son, your sins are forgiven.”** ⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷“Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, **“Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”**—he said to the paralytic—¹¹**“I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.”** ¹²And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Our congregation is emphasizing stewardship and it has been for a long time. This church would not be here and we would not be gathered in this place if people did not think about using God’s gifts for his ministry over the years. More recently: there was a Bible study on Thursday; it will be repeated this afternoon at 1:30. (The Bible tells us about the source of our faith. If we study the Bible on the subject of stewardship – it must be important.) Members of this congregation have been praying for God to bless our stewardship. We are planning to meet as a congregation next week for lunch and fellowship around the theme of our life together.

If we’ve done all that, it would probably be a good idea to be clear on what we mean by “stewardship”. I hope it will not come as a surprise to know that stewardship does *not* mean “please give the church enough money to pay the bills,”

Stewardship is serious. The office of “steward” is as old as the scriptures. The steward takes care of things that belong to someone else. It is natural for us to take things more seriously when we realize we are stewards instead of owners. We are more alert when we drive a borrowed car. Safety rules may be a little stricter when someone else’s children are visiting. It is serious to take care of things for someone else.

On the other hand, I’ve seen a lot of irresponsible behavior begin with the notion of *owning* things. “What’s mine is mine and I’ll do as I please.” That statement almost always leads to no good. We hold private property in high regard in this society, but people often claim ownership of things that are God’s.

God has entrusted us with many wonderful things – more than we could ever really know. We sometimes start the list with our property, things we own, the money we have. These are all from God. God has also given us our ways of serving. We all have different things to do in our community, our jobs, the things we do at church. We don’t own our abilities and talents to do with as we please. Our talents and energies and our time are all gifts from God.

This church is God's. We don't own it. It is not here to serve us. This is a place where we can gather and God will give us the opportunity to serve.

Our lives. From the moment you were born until the day you die, your life is God's. There is a self-centered optimism that human beings begin to cultivate about the same time they learn to walk. They say, "I can do it by myself". Because humans are generally not yet two years old when they begin to say that, they can often convince themselves that they *can* do it by themselves. The remarkable thing is that many people grow up and are still able to convince themselves that they are in complete ownership of their lives and expect to control every thing around them.

That is why church so often goes against the grain. Because church is the community that calls you back. Church is the voice of God that reminds you that you are not on your own. In society, in business, you can say, "I can do what I want if I'm not hurting anybody but myself." Church, the body of Christ, calls that heresy. You are not your own. You are part of the body of Christ.

When a person makes himself the center of his life he will do with his life what he wants. When a person sees God as the center of his life, he will know he is a steward. He will know he is responsible for taking care of something that belongs to someone else. He is taking care of his life because it belongs to God.

God has given us our lives and all we have so that we can live as the body of Christ. We are called to serve.

In this morning Gospel lesson a paralyzed man was brought to Jesus. The house where Jesus was preaching was very crowded and handicap accessibility laws were not what they are today. The four people who were carrying their friend couldn't get in. So they took him up on the roof and made a hole in it and lowered their friend on his mat down to Jesus. Jesus saw their faith. He told the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." There were some scribes there. They thought it was wrong that Jesus should forgive sins – that's God's area. Jesus saw what they were angry about. He said, "You don't think I have authority to forgive sins? I have all kinds of authority." Then he said to the man, "Pick up your mat and go home."

The physical healing, the "take up your mat and go home", occurs only at the end of the story. It almost seems tacked on like an after-thought. Jesus is giving an example to the slow-learning scribes in the story so they will understand what is really going on. We might think the point of bringing the paralyzed man to Jesus is to get the fellow healed – but that doesn't seem to be Jesus' view of the situation.

We first see the life-changing power of Christ before any healing takes place. When they bring the paralyzed man to Jesus, Jesus says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." What the man needed was a relationship with God and that was what Jesus gave him.

Jesus knew what the paralytic needed more than the paralytic did. Jesus forgave his sin.

We have something to learn from the paralyzed man. We should all know what it is to have our sins forgiven. But, what I would like to emphasize today is how much we can learn from his four friends who carried the pallet.

They knew their friend needed something. He was paralyzed. They didn't know what could be done. In fact, as we see in the story, they didn't understand how much the man really needed. Their friend needed more than they knew. They took him to Jesus.

You friends may need more than they know. (We all may need more than we know.) You encounter people everyday who are paralyzed. They see nothing in their lives more profound than trying to get some approval, or their retirement plan, or straightening out their kids. Those sorts of things are the limit of what they think about – and trying to be more than that is as impossible for them as a paralyzed man getting up and walking.

We know people who are paralyzed by pettiness, paralyzed by loneliness. There are people who are paralyzed by their failures.

They need someone to carry them to Jesus.

That's stewardship. That's why we must pray, and study, and plan. We have a ministry entrusted to us to help the world know the love of God.

Let's plan how we will join with our friends in the coming year and come up with innovative ways to help people into the presence of Jesus.

First, as you plan how you will serve God, plan to **pray**. Decide to make time every day for the next year to listen to God, to put yourself in his presence. Decide to pray and then follow that decision.

Plan to **worship**. Every Sunday morning come to church and worship God. If you have guests, bring them. (Let them know what your priorities are.) Make a plan for the year and follow it and have that plan include worshipping God every Sunday.

Plan to **study**. Attend Sunday School; read your Bible; there are classes offered during the week. You know about your business; you learn your assignments at school; you may attend workshops and continuing education. That's what you chose to learn. What does God call you to learn? To serve – you should understand the church – where we pray to be faithful instead of successful.

Plan to **give money**. That is also a part of stewardship. Money is a sensitive issues and the church has a bad reputation for talking about it – but it is an old topic. Jesus talked a lot about money. Jesus told thirty-eight parables that are recorded in the Gospels; of those thirty-eight, sixteen refer to faithful management of finances. Money is a serious part of life and Jesus takes you seriously.

Our church does its work with the money you give it. We think the work of the Body of Christ is important. We must think about it; we have to plan.

Of course, I cannot tell anyone else how much money to give to the church. But I can talk about ways to think about giving. Let's consider some ways to give money to the church.

Two important ways to give are #1) REGULARLY and #2) PROPORTIONATELY. First, regularly. If the church could have your entire annual offering on Consecration Sunday next week or it could have one fifty-second of it every week...I would recommend giving it a week at a time. When you give money regularly you make that offering part of your weekly worship. The money you give is much more than "doing your share to pay the bills". It is your worship of God. It is bringing your life and your faith together every week.

We all hear about taking your faith out of the church and putting it into everyday life. But what about taking your everyday life and bringing into this place of faith? As we put our faith and our lives together, let's remember that one of the most vital parts of our everyday lives is the money we earn there. Use that money to serve your faith in God. Bring your life into church to serve your faith. The money you make, a part of what you have to live on, becomes a part of your faith.

The first point is to give regularly; the second is to give proportionately. That means give a percentage of your money rather than deciding on a specific amount. What that does is connect how much you give with how much you have. The Bible calls us to give as the Lord has blessed us. So, when we determine to give a percentage of our money, it will change according to how much money comes to us.

I know a story: There was a young man who was desperately in need of a job. He asked God to help him find employment, and when he got a job that paid \$10 a week he was so overjoyed that he promised God he would always tithe – he would give ten percent of his income to the church. He began giving \$1 a week from his salary. As time passed the young man moved to a higher paying job. Now he was making \$100 a week, and he cheerfully put \$10 in the plate each Sunday. Eventually, he earned \$1,000 a week, and while he still put \$100 in the offering plate, it had become a grudging duty. Finally, he hit the big time – earning \$10,000 a week. He could not bear the thought of putting \$1,000 into the offering plate each Sunday, so

he sought out the pastor. “When I made that promise I only earned \$10 a week. My promise made sense back then, but now things are different. Would you please release me from my promise to give 10% of my income to the church?” The pastor thought about it and replied, “My son, a promise made to God is a weighty matter and beyond my power to release. However, it grieves me to see you in such pain. I will be happy to pray that your income be reduced to the original \$10 a week so your tithe will make sense to you again.”

Proportionate giving is the principle we find throughout the Bible. When we offer our gifts to God, they are based on what we are giving from. The place to start is...how much do we have? If God has not given us very much, the amount will be lower. If God has given us a lot, the amount will be higher.

This is a very old principle. Way back in Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, Jacob says, “and of all that you give me I will give the tenth to you.” (Genesis 28:22) He doesn’t know how much that will be. But it will be a percentage, a tenth of everything that comes to him. This is where we get the principle of a tithe, one tenth of a family’s income. We are often reluctant to talk about tithing as a church for fear of legalism. We are free and giving is a voluntary matter from a free and open heart. We don’t want to be associated with churches that emphasize tithing in a legalistic way that educes our relationship with God to a bunch of rules.

If we recognize the danger of legalism, I think we can avoid it. And then we can use tithing the gracious way God intended it. To give us a guideline to determine what portion of our money we will give to serve God.

We have this guideline as a source of joy. We can use what we give as a way to take ourselves seriously. We can plan how we want to be and plan what we want to do and know that God has give us the opportunity to be that kind of person and do those things in his service. Our church takes us seriously. Our church gives us the opportunity to take ourselves seriously as we serve God.

Of all these considerations; of all these things that are so important to think about and make plans with, here is the most important. More important than trying to figure a proportion (or percentage), more important that trying to figure out what our money is spent for, simply consider this: The amount of money you give should make a difference.

Christianity should make a difference in your life. That is true in every way. Your relationship with God through Christ should make a difference in the way you think, the way you treat other people, and it should make a difference in how you live. So the amount of money you give should make a difference. There should be things you would like to do, but can’t because you give the money.

That means it is not enough to give the money that is “left over” when you are through with everything else. As a matter of fact, I think we all know there really is no such thing as “left over” money. I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never seen any. All the money I’ve ever seen is important money, and I can think of five or six things to do with every dollar you can show me and they’re all important.

If we give God the part of our lives that doesn’t make any difference, the leftovers, the place God has in our lives won’t make any difference, either. Whether it is our money, our time, our creativity, our imagination...whatever God has put in our possession. We use it to serve him.

Please consider yourself carefully. God has given this congregation a lot. He has a lot to offer this community. He has a lot to offer the world. As we carefully plan our futures and set our directions, let’s consider how we will live in God’s world with these lives he has entrusted to us.

God has made us his church. The church is the Body of Christ. Consider carefully how the Body of Christ will do the work it has always done since he was born – bringing God’s love into the world. Listen for God to tell you how he will use you to love the world.