

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, October 26, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"WHEN YOU GIVE..."

Matthew 6:19-24

Charlie has spoken to you about stewardship today, and so will I. It's good to do so as we thank all who took part in the large fund-raising event of our Women's Group yesterday. So let me jump right in by asking, "What happens when you give to the church?"

First of all, when you give, you enable the work of God.

Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and money." No, but you sure can serve God through money. Now I suppose God could do his work in the world without us, but he has chosen to do it through us. The Holy Spirit is not constrained by our giving or lack thereof, but it's funny how the Holy Spirit does move mightily when God's people give generously. When you and I give we enable God's work in the world. When we give we are providing for the preaching and the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the making of Christian disciples, the Christian education of youth and adults, the comfort and relief of needy people near and far, including those who arrive at our church door weekly for benevolent help. We are enabling the church's witness and mission in the community and around the world. And the work you and I enable through our giving has eternal value.

When Steve Jobs the founder of Apple Computers was looking for a new President for his company, he interviewed several people, including the then President of Pepsi-Cola. Jobs was convinced this was the right person but couldn't get him to commit. Finally, he took him up to the top of a skyscraper in New York City and as they looked out on the Manhattan skyline, Jobs said to him bluntly, "Look, do you want to spend the rest of your life selling people sugared water, or do you want to do something that's going to change the world?" And when he put it that way Jobs had his man.

Now there are many worthy earthly causes that we can give to. And we shouldn't stop. But let's not forget that when we give for God's work we are supporting work which has already changed the world and can change people's lives now and for eternity. God's work is bigger than either Pepsi-Cola or Apple computers! The Gospel is the story of God's love for this gone wrong world. It proclaims how God in Christ reconciled the world to himself and opened a way

for all to come home to God now and for eternity. The church does many good works in the world and in the community. For God cares passionately about this world and the well-being of every person. God showed that when his Son came in human flesh to share our life. The church has its critics and the church has sometimes gotten off track, no doubt about it, but the church's record is second to none in relieving human suffering and promoting justice on earth. Furthermore, the church's work has an extra dimension to it. It points to a world beyond this one and reminds people that life here is preparation for life there.

When we give we enable God's work in the world, and it is the most important work in the world. Sometimes people ask why should we sink so much money into the church building. But the church building is an important part of the way God's work is expressed and carried out. People have always needed a special place, a sacred place, for the worship of God, from a pile of rocks in a field, to the tabernacle which the people of Israel carried in the wilderness and erected for worship and sacrifice, to the Jerusalem temple, to the synagogues in each town and village of Jesus' day, to the churches of the Christian era. This church building is part of the spiritual inheritance we have received from previous generations and it's our responsibility to preserve it, maintain it improve it, and pass it on for future generations. And on a very basic level, would you want your house to be a mess when people come to visit? Of course not. It shouldn't be any different with the church. Our landscaping project has brought many positive comments from both our members and community members. One person said to one of our members, "Sometimes I wondered if that church was still open. But now I see that there's really life in that church."

The church building itself is an enduring witness to God in the community. I read of a old downtown church in a prime commercial area of the city. High office towers were built up all around it, people moved away, and finally, after a great struggle, the few remaining members finally decided to close the church. The property was sold for the so yet another office tower could be erected. And when the church was torn down, the outline of the church could be clearly seen on the office tower beside it. For years the church had sheltered the building from the sun. A church building in a community always leaves its mark, even for those who never attend. It reminds people of the everlasting God and the things that make for their peace. It provides a resting place, a refuge, a shelter in the storm. How much poorer our community would be without the witness of the churches. When you give you enable the work of God's Kingdom in the world and the community. And we all need to do our part, according to the blessing the Lord our God has provided us.

Secondly, when you give you are building up treasure in heaven.

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in to steal." (Matthew 6:19,20)

Now laying up treasures in heaven does not mean that we earn our way into heaven by our works and our giving. The Gospel says that the only way any of us gets into heaven is through personal faith in the suffering servant who opened the door by His own death and resurrection. However, by our works and our giving for God's Kingdom we do store up treasures in heaven.

Now what are these treasures? Well, Jesus gives us a clue in Luke 16, where he says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations." Money is temporary and will one day fail us, but before that, we can use it to lay up treasures in heaven. Now most of us would say that one of our greatest treasures on earth are family and friends. So Jesus is saying that the treasures we are laying up in heaven are people - people whom we have helped by our faithful use of money here on earth. The people whom we help by our giving are mostly unknown to us, just as people whose earthly giving made it possible for us hear the Gospel and enjoy the fellowship of the church are often unknown to us. But when we get to heaven we will know and see the people whom God served and helped through our giving. We will be met by a great cheering throng of people whose early days were blessed because we were faithful in giving. What a homecoming it will be! It will be a chance for them to say "thank you" to us in a way that they can't now. And we will be able thank those whose gifts helped to bring us God's love and God's blessings on earth. When you give you are storing up treasures in heaven, a great throng of heavenly friends.

Finally, when you give you are showing that God is Master of your life. Jesus said, "You cannot serve two masters; you will either hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

Money is a great servant, but a poor Master, for it will let you down in the end. I read a story of a man who found a magic lamp on the beach one day. He rubbed the lamp and the genie appeared, inviting him to make a wish. The man thought for a while then had a great idea. He requested a stock page from the newspaper, exactly one year in the future. The genie granted his wish and there the man was, stock market page in hand. Now he could invest with confidence,

knowing which stocks would rise. But then he happened to glance at the back of the stock page. It was the obituary column and his name was at the top. Suddenly stock market gains seemed less important. It reminds me of Jesus' parable about a rich man who only thought about his own ease and comfort. But one night his life was suddenly demanded of him, and God said to him, "Fool."

Who is the Master of your life? Let me tell you that if you let money be your master, you wind up in slavery of one kind or another, slavery to false security, slavery to fear over losing what you have, slavery to huge and overwhelming debt.

Serve God through money, yes. But serve God instead of money. Serve God first. God doesn't ask for all of our money; he knows our needs, but he does ask for the first fruits as a sign that we recognize Him as the provider of all we have and all we are. Now I will not say that when you give God will bless you with riches, but it's Biblical to say that God faithfully provides for those who provide for his work. God is faithful. One of my favourite Bible stories has to do with the poor widow who provided for the needs of Elisha the prophet. And through Elisha the Lord said to her. "The jar of meal shall not be spent, and the cruse of oil shall not fail, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth." And so it happened according to the word of the Lord. God promises that even in difficult times we can provide for God's work, and trust that God will faithfully provide for our needs. You do not have to worry about what you give, saying, "I can't part with this, for I might need it in the future." God knows your needs, and is at work to meet all your present and future needs, just as he has already made provision for your deepest needs in Jesus Christ. When you give, you are showing that God is Master of your life, that He can be trusted.

I end today with some still relevant words from a stewardship sermon by Rev. Stanford Lucyk, preached thirty years ago in Toronto's Timothy Eaton Church, words which have influenced my own thinking and giving. He said, 'The church is not after your money as some people put it. That's too light a touch. The Christ is after your life, and when that's straight as a priority, the funds to support the ministry of Christ in the world will take care of themselves. Paul said about the Macedonians - "For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will...but first they gave themselves to the Lord." Note the order - "First, they gave themselves to the Lord.'"

