

“The Means And End”

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

Psalm 127

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

Jesus says, “Beware of those who appear to be religious and seek places of honor.” Ron Sider, an incredible human, Christian and one who writes and teaches on “loving others” as an expression of “loving God,” writes this about the charitable giving of American Christians:

If just the “committed Christians” (defined as those who attend church at least a few times a month or profess to be “strong” or “very strong” Christians) would tithe, there would be an *extra* 46 billion dollars a year available for kingdom work. To make that figure more concrete, the authors of [*Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*] suggest dozens of different things that \$46 billion would fund each year: for example, 150,000 new indigenous missionaries; 50,000 additional theological students in the developing world; 5 million more micro loans to poor entrepreneurs; the food, clothing and shelter for all 6,500,000 current refugees in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East; all the money for a global campaign to prevent and treat malaria; resources to sponsor 20 million needy children worldwide. [The conclusion of the authors] is surely right: “Reasonably generous financial giving of ordinary American Christians would generate staggering amounts of money that could literally change the world.” Twenty percent of American Christians (19 percent of Protestants; 28 percent of Catholics) give nothing to the church. Among Protestants, 10 percent of evangelicals, 28 percent of mainliners, 33 percent of fundamentalists, and 40 percent of liberal Protestants give nothing. The vast majority of American Christians give very little—the mean average is 2.9 percent. Only 12 percent of Protestants and 4 percent of Catholics tithe. A small minority of American Christians give most of the total donated. Twenty percent of all Christians give 86.4 percent of the total. The most generous five percent give well over half (59.6 percent) of all contributions. But higher-income American Christians give less as a percentage of household income than poorer American Christians. In the course of the 20th century, as our personal disposable income quadrupled, the percentage donated by American Christians actually declined.¹

¹Ron Sider, “A Lot of Lattes,” *Books & Culture* (November/December 2008).

What is the relationship between twenty percent of American Christians giving nothing, yet appearing to be religious?

Jesus says, “Beware of those who appear to be religious and seek places of honor. It is my conjecture that some of that twenty percent who give nothing to the church live below the poverty level, others don’t think the church needs their money, but most of the twenty percent of American Christians who give nothing to the church do so because they are leveraged financially to give them “standing” in society and in their spheres of influence. In this regard, T. D. Jakes in *Planted with a Purpose* writes, “We all suffer the dislocation of our dreams.... When our dreams are deferred again and again and again.... We are all crushed by the same blows of life. But not everyone allows the crushing to destroy them.”² Many of us use our financial status to influence our behavior. But when it comes to behaving biblically when it comes to money, tithing is the principle. Here’s an insight I offer to all of us. If I do not embrace the future of Geneva with faith, but instead rely on my abilities, I can easily become ineffective and immobilized. Janet and I tithe each year with faith. Tithing is the means to the end of transformation.

The Old Testament, Psalter, Epistle and Gospel Readings remind us that an individual’s faith in God is best used to embrace the future, because God is painting a picture of participating in God’s mission that requires faith to move forward. Ruth 3:1, 5 reads, “Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.’.... She [Ruth] said to her, ‘All that you tell me I will do.’” Psalm 127:1 reads, “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” Hebrews 9:28 reads, “.... So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of

²T. D. Jakes, *Planted with a Purpose* (New York City, New York: Faith Words, 2020), 43.

many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” In Mark 12:43-44 Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” It required faith for Ruth to believe Naomi. It required faith for the people of God to build the house of the LORD. It requires faith for Christians to wait eagerly for the second coming. And it requires faith to give out of our poverty as opposed to abundance.

Jesus’ teaching about being religious and giving financially in Mark 12:38-44 focuses on appropriate Christian discipleship. Both Ruth and the widow in Mark, are validated for their actions because they had faith to fully participate in God’s mission. They did not see themselves as objects of charity. The widow chooses to give and be faithful to a vision of something bigger than herself. The vision invited her into the future and its unfolding of living in God’s provision and mission. Ruth and the widow embraced the future with faith.³

Where is Geneva Presbyterian Church going as approved by the Session, the board who governs our church? As you’ve read in the November-December Geneva News, **Our Logo Tagline** is Loving God. Loving Others. Making Disciples. **Our Vision** is “All are welcome here. Really, we mean that! All are welcome! Just as God receives all who believe in Jesus Christ, Geneva aspires to be an inclusive congregation

³In the two paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Patricia K. Tull, Jared E. Alcantara, Leigh Campbell Taylor, Oliver Larry Yarbrough, Pablo A. Jimenez, Gilberto A. Ruiz, and Theodore J. Wardlaw in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 456-449, 459-460, 461-463, 464-465, 465-467, 468-470, and 470-471.

worshipping, learning, connecting, giving, and serving together.” **Our Mission** is “to remember, tell, and live the way of Jesus by being just, kind, and humble.”

What does it mean for you to give from your “Life Wallet” in giving and serving? Tithe your monies because you experience Geneva being God’s presence in our communities. Serve because you are committed to the ministries of Village of Hope, South County Outreach, Orange County Rescue Mission, PathLight International in Belize, and Devir Perez in Tijuana. When you’re participating in God’s mission, examine all that you do and see how much of it requires faith? Again, T. D. Jakes in *Planted with a Purpose* writes, “Too many of us rush to get to the end of the process, trying to tell God that we are ready for what God has for us.... God’s timing may not reflect our expectations.”⁴ The process of transformation begins with each one of us. God will accomplish all that God has invited us to participate in.

Faith is the means to the end of transformation. Ruth became Boaz’s wife. The people of God built the house of the LORD. Christians eagerly wait for the second coming of Jesus. The widow tithed sacrificially. Do not remember the former things or consider the ways Geneva Presbyterian Church succeeded in the past. God is doing a new thing. Embrace the future for Geneva Presbyterian Church with faith. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (for the In-Person, Online, and Village TV 6 congregations)
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Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

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⁴T. D. Jakes, *Planted with a Purpose*, 67.