



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“Don’t Give?” Matthew 5:21-26

This is the third in our series on “acts of worship”. The first week, we heard from God about “Sabbath”, and how we ignore or have lost its purpose. Last week, we explored music and singing in worship. Today we focus on another action we do every week in worship – we give.

Giving. We usually think of “money” when we think of “giving”. Turn to your neighbor and say, “Uh-oh. Is this going to be a stewardship sermon?” (Is he going to ask us for money for the church? Didn’t we just go through that?)

Stewardship, of course, is about much more than money. I see it as about decision-making. We are stewards every moment of every day, every time we decide that one thing is more important than another thing. We are looking at a choice, and we make that choice based on our values. Every time we make such a decision over something that is ours, or given to us, we have performed an act of stewardship.

Let’s take our stewardship of time. He is my calendar. I had the same number of hours in my yesterday as you did. Yesterday starting at 9 a.m. in Sacramento, there was a meeting of Sacramento Presbytery—that’s our “district of churches”, for those of you who don’t speak “Presbyterian”. Now, Saturday is often my day off – my Sabbath. I usually mow the lawn on Friday evening so I don’t have to do it on Saturday. But Friday was a required meeting I had to attend in Sacramento. Saturday is my fall-back day. The lawn is really high—almost machete-length. One of my choices was to ditch the Saturday meeting – or at least part of it – and mow my lawn and repair some household items, which I like to do. I chose the Presbytery meeting. That was stewardship.

I left the meeting early (since it was running late), hit the grocery store, came home, put away the groceries, flopped on the bed for 20 minutes, and then Sharon arrived home. I got up, helped her unload the cats we are trying to adopt out, and got ready for an evening fund-raising dinner. You may have noticed that yesterday was a very popular day for community activities. Last night, there was a Rotary dinner at the Fairgrounds to raise money for fire victims; there was a concert at the Library Amphitheater; there were other public events during the day. That’s in addition to the choices of family camping or hiking or gardening or movies or all the zillions of other things we can do in a day. I chose to go to a Young Life Fund-Raiser.

That was an act of stewardship; it was my choice of how to use my precious resource of time. Choices like that are acts of stewardship. We bring our values to bear especially on choices of time and money.

So when I read the words of Jesus in the passage we’re going to pop open, they really grabbed me. At first, I thought I had mis-read the words. Well, you’ll see. Open your Bibles with me to Matthew’s gospel, the first book of the New Testament, and get to chapter 5. I will

point out a couple of things about the context of these verses, so your own open Bible will be helpful. Listen with me for God's Voice, in these words from Matthew chapter 5, verses 21-26.
[text]

This is part of the Sermon on the Mount—Matthew's most dense collection of Jesus' teaching for the crowds. Let's take this first part. It's vintage Jesus. "You have heard that it was said to the ancients," – that's Jesus' way of referring to the Torah, the Law of Moses. He's about to quote from the Hebrew Bible. "Do not murder". Does that sound familiar? It's the 6th Commandment from Exodus 20, the sixth of the "Big Ten". Everyone in this mostly-Jewish crowd listening to Jesus would perk up at this reference. Of course, they knew it by heart, since they were children. So Jesus has set the context.

Then he goes on, "But I say to you," or "Now I tell you," "anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." There's two parts to this, and both are pretty radical. First, when Jesus says, "But I say to you," he is not making a suggestion or imparting an idea. He is giving a command, and interpretation of what the original word of God to Moses means. He is putting his own words equal to God's words. That had to rock a number of people listening to him – who does he think he is??

The second radical part is the point of it – Jesus sharpens this Word from God. He makes the commandment tougher. God is not just telling us just not to strangle someone intentionally. We can kill people in lots of ways—killing their reputation, for example. In a small town, reputation was everything (which springs from the same root as prejudice). Kill someone's reputation within a tight community, and they might as well be dead. No one will trust them, trade with them, hire them. God wants much more from us than just not killing. We cannot speak ill of others. We cannot call someone an "idiot" (which comes from the Greek word, "moron"). We cannot call someone "Raca" (which was an expression of the time, meaning "empty-headed"). Remember the childhood slogan, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me." That's a lie. Words hurt. Critical words from a father to a child can beat down the child's soul – "soul murder", author Alice Miller called it. Jesus says, So don't think you're right with God just because you've never taken a gun and shot someone, or violently beaten someone to death. God doesn't go around killing people or caustically maiming people's souls – anyone who thinks of God that way is lying about God. Maybe many more of us are in trouble than we thought.

This last part of Jesus words here is just good advice, in this section that lifts up the importance of good, healthy relationships among us. Jesus gives advice here that is used every day in the legal world. When there is a lawsuit, it can be a game of Russian Roulette—do you really want to take your chances with your case in front of a judge or jury? It's better to settle it – compromise, make a bargain – because you may regret how the judge or jury rule. Good advice. Make your relationships right.

And in the middle part of Jesus' word, he gives an illustration of how important relationships are to God. Imagine you're at worship, Jesus says. You're about to put your offering envelope in the offering basket. But even as it's coming down your row, you remember that someone has something against you, put your offering away. Make things right with your brother or sister – be reconciled – and then come and offer your gift.

Another radical re-orientation! Stop! Don't give! FIRST, fix the relationship. THEN, give your gift to God.

What is Jesus saying about the relative value of relationships and religion? Our relationships with each other are more important to God than is our money. Think about that.

One more thing to see here. Jesus does not say, "Remember who has messed you over". No, he says, "Remember someone who thinks you've messed them over." Most of us can easily think of people who we think have done us wrong. We don't so easily think of people out there who bear a grudge against us. And sometimes, we have never known, either because we were insensitive at some time, or the other person never said "ouch". We can't read minds. So part of what Jesus tells us here is, "We have to say 'ouch' when we are hurt." We have to be honest about our hurts, even if that's difficult. Our brother deserves to know the consequences of his behavior; otherwise, he can't act on it. That doesn't mean we always get our way if we whine. "Man up," as we say. Tell the one who has hurt you that you are hurt emotionally, disappointed, or injured by what he or she has done.

FOR, our relationships with each other affect our relationship with God. "Religion" is not in a separate compartment from "relationships". Religion is about a relationship with God. Jesus blows up the wall we tend to build between "religion" and "the rest of life".

Got it?

Jesus' illustration about not even giving to the church is the kind of thing that might drive finance committee leaders crazy. What, we've put together this elaborate campaign to motivate people to give to God's work, and here is Jesus telling us, it's not important? No, Jesus is saying our relationships are more important, among important things. Our relationships with each other are more important than building our relationship with God.

There are some people who use their relationship with God to hide from the burden of relationships with others. But that's another topic for another time.

OK, now, you knew this was coming: who 'out there' or 'in here' has some bone to pick with you? God knows. We may not.

Now that you think about it, has someone pulled away from you, but there was a time when you were close? There could be many reasons, of course. Have you asked them about it? Is there some unresolved hurt there, which still festers underneath the months or years of distance?

Here's how to have that conversation. Call them up. "Sandy, I remember we used to hang out together a lot; we played golf [or whatever], and now I don't see you much. Is there something between us that made you pull away?"

"Oh," she says, "remember when you told me you thought we should have universal health care and a single-payer plan like Medicare? I was really shocked. I just thought we had nothing in common."

"Really? I had no idea!"

"Yeah, I totally disagree with that."

"OK, so we can't disagree and still be friends?"

“Well, I just don't like to fight. It was easier to get involved with other things.”

“Wow. Thank you, Sandy, for letting me know. I don't want that to stand between us. We probably will not agree with each other on everything, but I would still like a friendship with you. I would even enjoy hearing more about what you think, and why my beliefs seem wrong-headed to you. There may be something in what you say that I will have to consider, and have to change some or all of my position. I'm willing to risk that. Your friendship is more important. And if talking about this is a problem, well, I can steer away from that, though I would miss the freedom to talk about anything with you. Give it some thought [or, if they are a Christian, invite them to talk it over with God], and I'll give you a call next week and we can decide about golf together. Thanks for letting me know. I'll call you next week. I miss you, Sandy. Have a good weekend.”

Do your best to make it right between you and “Sandy”, “Fred”, “Justin”, “Jennifer”, or whoever. THEN, with even greater gratitude, bring your gift to God.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on September 20, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]