



Measuring Maturity (Giving)

By Robertson McQuilkin

Spiritual maturity. We all think we have it, or at least aspire to it. But who actually has it? It may startle us to discover that the Lord Jesus measures spiritual maturity by one's relationship to material things.

Lest we take a jaundiced view of anyone talking about money, remember that Jesus made it a major theme of his teaching. John MacArthur notes that 16 of Christ's 38 parables deal with money; that the New Testament talks more about money than about heaven and hell combined, and five times more about money than prayer. While 500+ verses mention prayer and faith, over 2,000 deal with money and possessions. So the Lord must think our relationship to money is an important indicator of our level of maturity.

Infancy: Non-Giving

Infants are basically self-centered non-givers. Some time ago, I hazarded watching a nursery full of two-year-olds. After all, my grandson was one of them. One small male person seemed to take a fancy to me, repeatedly bringing me toys. I said to myself, "Kid, if you don't quit this, you'll ruin my sermon point about infants being takers and not givers." So I tracked the little fellow cruising among the others. An unsuspecting little girl sat alone in a corner with her doll. My generous little friend slipped up behind her, bonked her on the head and snatched her dolly to bring as a gift. "Thank you," I breathed, "for restoring my faith in original sin." An infant is basically a non-giver. Every church seems to have its share of infants—getters, not givers, needing a platoon of the faithful to quell their squabbles, entertain and clean up their messes. Jesus told us about this stage:

The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops. This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" (Lk. 12:16-18)

God's response? "Fool! Dead man! Tonight your soul will be required of you."

Actually, the self-centered getter is already dead, spiritually. A sign of genuine spiritual life is often the desire to give.

Kindergarten: Impulse Giving

Luke introduces us to a kindergartner who began to get his kicks out of giving. The wealthy little, big-time chiseler, the despised head honcho of the local Roman tax unit, wanted to see Jesus, but couldn't because of the throngs of people. So Zacchaeus—imported brocade robe tucked up under his sash—climbed a tree to glimpse this famed itinerant preacher passing by. Jesus stopped and invited himself to a meal. We know there was birth from above because of the host's announcement:

"I give half my goods to the poor. And if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I will restore it four-fold." (Lk. 19:8)

Quite a surge of generosity for an ex-getter! Impulsively he risked bankrupting himself. Most Christians give by impulse. While I was a student, my wife and I attended an event sponsored by a premier fund-raiser. Following his appeal, it was as if a giant vacuum cleaner swept through the audience, cleaning out every purse. We, too, emptied our pockets—right down to bus fare home. Impulse giving.

Elementary: Legalistic Giving

When a Christian moves from sporadic impulse giving to giving as a way of life, he often becomes a tither. "Will a man rob God? But you have robbed me." "How do we rob you?" "In tithes and offerings." (Mal. 3:8)

The kindergarten Christian hears that and says, "That's Old Testament legalism." Jesus, too, had problems with the legalists of his day, the Pharisees. They were so careful to obey the Law—measuring even the harvest of tiny herbal seeds to give God his tenth. But they were not so devoted to the heavy concerns of God.

"Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect the justice and the love of God." (Lk. 11:42)

Surprisingly, Jesus did not tell them to stop tithing. "What you should do," he remonstrated, "is concentrate on the big ones—justice and the love of God and don't stop tithing." It's better to give legalistically, apparently, than not to give

illegalistically! Tithing is the elementary, basic level of giving, but the majority of faithful church members do not even reach this stage of giving.

After I had spoken on giving at a large influential church, the church business manager called me aside. The church had every sign of dynamic vitality, including a budget of over \$3,000,000, a third of which was for missions—a sure sign of clear biblical priorities. “We did a demographic study of our congregation,” he said, “and discovered that if every member quit their job, went on unemployment, and began to tithe, we could double our budget!” Tithing moves the Christian from impulse, kindergarten level giving to giving as a way of life.

Secondary: Honest Managership

One of the clearest passages on managership is the story Christ told about the cheating manager. (Lk. 16) The story is straightforward: an owner discovered his manager was a cheat. When the owner announced his intention to fire him, the shrewd fellow used his boss’s assets to win friends for himself—officially canceling large portions of others’ debts. Jesus made a single point: even worldlings are smart enough to use available resources to prepare for their future. So why are the “people of the light”—who should know better—acting so stupidly?

“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” (Lk. 16:9)

Jesus contrasted temporal and eternal wealth: the temporal is very little at best, sort of a test; the eternal, great wealth (v. 10); the temporal, fake, like play money; the eternal, the real thing (v. 11). The punch line: Even that small amount of play money you have isn’t yours! You are just a manager of some of God’s property (v. 12). It’s impossible to live for both, to work with equal fervor for temporal and eternal payoffs—you cannot serve both God and money (v. 13). The audience, having a love affair with money, scoffed at his teaching (v. 14). So he told those cheating managers using God’s property for their own benefit what their final payoff would be: an eternity in hell (vs. 19-23).

This teaching rocked my life. As a young adult, I continued my childhood pattern of tithing. God got his ten percent first. Always. It was like paying taxes. But when it became clear to me that I was not the owner at all, just a manager of another’s property, I stood convicted as an embezzler. I was avidly getting, saving and spending 90% of God’s property on myself without a qualm. I shrank from managership, fearing to lose the good life. Finally I concluded that the cost of disobedience was too high and yielded to God’s will. Suddenly it was as if my cage door swung open, setting me free! If the corporation is his property, it’s his responsibility. And so am I! I no longer needed to worry about finances—that was his concern. My responsibility is simply to be an honest manager.

The manager looks at the King’s business differently from a tither. Tithers look at their paycheck, calculate the 10% and ask, “where should I invest this?” The manager looks at the needs of the business and asks, “How can I rearrange my resources to meet this great need?”

The angels from their realm on high Look down on us with wondering eye That where we are but passing guests, We build such strong and solid nests; And where we hope to live for aye, We scarce take thought one stone to lay.

Jesus says, “That’s dumb, really dumb. You should use whatever I have put under your control now to build your eternal estate. Don’t squander my possessions building your own petty kingdom here on earth. At least be an honest manager.”

Higher: Love Giving

Jesus did something few pastors would dare do. During the offering he followed the ushers down the aisle, so to speak, and examined each contribution put in the plate!

Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasure. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. “I tell you the truth,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on!” (Lk. 21:1-4)

As God observes our giving today, how does he measure love, calibrate its intensity, or sound its depth? Jesus answers: love is measured by the sacrifice it makes.

Bob, a Bible College student, asked for help with a difficult passage found in Luke 18. I guessed, “You’ve got problems with the story of the wealthy young aristocrat, right?”

“Yes,” he responded. “Why did Jesus tell him to sell what he had and give it away?”

“Well,” I said, “the way to life for that young man was blocked by things, his sin of covetousness. For the woman at the well it was men, not money. Self-righteous Nicodemus needed to hear about a second birth. Jesus identified the key issue, the roadblock, for each.”

"I see," said my young friend. "If possessions were his sticking point, would you say there are those today with a similar problem?"

I wondered where Bob's questioning was headed. "Yes," I chuckled a little nervously, "Just about everyone, I suppose."

"Why then," he asked, "have I never heard a sermon on the subject?" "That is a very good question, Bob, because Christ gave exactly the same teaching to anyone who wanted to be his disciple:

"Sell what you have and give alms, provide for yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys." (Lk. 12:33)

Does anyone actually do this? Some years ago I wanted to personally thank two of our graduates for their many generous gifts. When we had special needs, a gift of one or two thousand dollars would come from this couple. I wondered how they could do this, being school teachers in a poor district of Appalachia. One day I called to see if a visit would be convenient. They were delighted—said they had something to tell me. Meeting me at the highway, they escorted me on foot through the muddy ruts that snaked around the hillside. There, nestled in the little mountain cove was their home, a small log cabin. That's the reason they could give so generously! Or so I thought.

The husband was so excited. "Robertson, isn't the Lord good?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, He is," I replied. "And how has He been good to you?"

"You won't believe how good He has been. This week has been fantastic!"

"Tell me about it," I said.

"North of Atlanta, we have had a farm in the family for many years. It has begun to be a headache for us. The whole city has grown up all around our farm."

I thought, "I wouldn't mind that kind of problem!"

Continuing, he said they had just signed the property over to Wycliffe Bible Translators. "Isn't that fantastic!"

"Yes!" I responded enthusiastically.

He continued, "That's not all. We had another small acreage out in the clay country that was not worth much and we couldn't sell it. Tried for years. But at last—this week—we were able to sell it to a government agent who will buy it over 10 years and give us \$1,500 a year. So we've decided to take early retirement, go to the mission field, take care of MK's and live on what we get from the sale of this property! What do you think about that?"

"I think you're crazy. What are you going to do when that money runs out?" I asked.

"Oh," he answered, "We'll be in heaven by then!"

There may be some question about their sanity, but there can be no question about whom they love and how much they love Him. Love graduates a person from the secondary level of honest managership to the higher level of sacrificial love giving.

While watching a television interview with Mother Theresa, I, along with the young woman interviewing her, swelled with pride as Mother Theresa told us how wonderful Americans are. She said, "I don't know if there has ever been a nation that has been so generous. You are such a generous people." Mother Theresa continued, "Of course, you give out of your 'muchness.'" She chuckled, "'Muchness' is a word, isn't it?" She paused, then added, "You don't really give until it hurts."

The young woman's eyes grew large, astonished. "Must it hurt?"

The angel of Calcutta responded, "Love, to be genuine, must hurt."

Love is proved by the sacrifice it makes.

Graduate: Faith Giving

Paul speaks of the gift of faith (Rom. 12:3-8). There are those George Muellers of the world who trust God for miracle provision—finances far above that which could be provided even by sacrificial giving. I call this the graduate level of giving, because this gift of faith is not given to all equally.

But in another sense, faith is essential for any level of giving. "Without faith it is impossible to please him." The Pharisees were not the only ones who had problems with Jesus' radical teaching about managership and sacrificial giving. The disciples did, too. Jesus' teaching cut across the grain of everything they believed about money and things. So he said: "If, then, God so clothes the grass which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Lk. 12:28)

Faith must validate every level of giving. An impoverished widow living on Social Security must have faith to give 10 percent. Furthermore, when she does so, it is certainly sacrificial love. But if I am unwilling to move up from my present level of giving, is it not because I don't trust God to meet my needs—a lack of faith? Or love? The person who trusts and loves God will be willing to move from kindergarten impulse giving to elementary, lawful tithing; if already a faithful tither, to go on to honest managership; if an honest manager, to graduate to a sacrificial way of life. My relationship to my possessions is, according to Jesus Christ, a clear indication of my faith and love, my level of spiritual maturity.

God Himself models this standard. He created me, so he is owner. I stole his property—took possession of myself. But in love, at terrible cost, he purchased me just as if he had no prior claim on me, making me twice his. If I will only respond with love in obedient giving, He guarantees my livelihood (Lk. 12:31); rewards me lavishly in this life as if I were giving what is my own property; and in heaven He rewards me all over again! (Lk. 18:28-30) That is God's level of giving—love giving. What is mine?

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