

“I Will If You Will”
I Will Give to You
November 20, 2016

**PRELUDE – Alleluia, He Has Loved Us
Worship Songs - Alleluia, He Has Loved
Us / Promises**

Ministry Moment – Video

**Feature – Bills / Offering
Drama – Coin of the Realm**

Good morning everyone.

In The Gospel According to Mark we read that, one day, as Jesus was teaching in the Temple at Jerusalem, He said to the crowds:

“Watch out for the teachers of the law [of Moses, the religious rule-book of Israel].

They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.

Yet, the truth about them, He continued, is that ...

“They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers.

“[I tell you the truth,] These men will be punished most severely.”

Then, Mark tells us that ...

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were

put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts.

But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.” Mark 12:39-44 (NIV)

One of the things that people loved – and hated – about Jesus was His willingness to be blunt with the truth when it was called for. And one of the issues about which Jesus was bluntest (which is actually a word) is

the issue of money and what we do with it. You simply cannot read even a little of what Jesus said without quickly coming to the conclusion that He consistently emphasized the connection between how people handle money and their faith.

We saw a great example of that in the drama we just saw. The hidden question – the real question – that Todd was wrestling with was whether or not God would provide if he took the lesser-paying job that better matched the way God had designed him; a job that better matched up with how God wanted to use him to impact the world.

And that's not just a make-believe story. A lot of us have been in that same situation and we've discovered the same thing: money and faith are connected.

In the story of the poor widow and her offering which Jesus compared to the offering of those who were wealthy, the same thing is true. What *she* did and what *they* did with their money said something about their faith.

By the way, in that same story the money-faith connection is even more pronounced in Jesus' condemnation of the religious leaders of His day; leaders who, out of a *perverted love of money (greed)*, were taking advantage of widows – “devouring (or stealing) their very houses from them” He said – leaving them so poor and destitute that even the smallest offering they could give to God took everything they had.

“Something is wrong with that kind of

spirituality; something is wrong with that kind of (supposed) faith,” Jesus was saying.

Faith and what we do with money – how we spend it, how we save it, how we give it, even how we feel about it – are always linked, which is why Jesus talked about it so much.

And it’s why we, from time to time, need to talk about it, too.

Of course, that’s never an easy thing to do because whenever the subject comes up in church (like it has this morning), it typically increases tension.

- Pastors get nervous about being misperceived –“there he goes again, begging for money.”

- And the people often feel pressured (at best) or guilty (at worst) ...

... which, really, is quite sad because God never intended us to experience that kind of tension.

In fact, God's intention is that how we use our money would be, among other things, a great source of joy.

For example, when it comes to generosity, the Apostle Paul writes:

*Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.*² Corinthians 9:7 (NLT)

Instead of tension when it comes to money

and faith and spirituality, God intended that relationship to be motivated by a *promise* – the final promise which we’re looking at in this “I Will If You Will” series.

Promise & Condition

So, what is that promise?

Well, here it is ... straight from the mouth of Jesus.

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Luke
6:38 (NIV)

“Give ... and it will be given to you.”

Now, when Jesus said this it's not like He was revealing a new spiritual principle. It's not like He was telling his followers something they had not heard before. Instead, He was repeating something that had been promised by the Heavenly Father from the very first days of the nation of Israel's existence.

For instance, if you read through the book of Deuteronomy (which is sort of like Ancient Israel's founding documents representing their covenant with God), again and again you see that God had committed himself to bless the land with full harvests, enough to meet everyone's needs. As a result, the majority of Israelites would be well fed as a result of their prosperity.

However, the promise was conditioned on their *giving* (specifically “tithing” which is 10% of what they grew or earned) ... the promise was conditioned on their giving in support of those who were *told* to not work the land: the priests and religious leaders – and those who *could* not work the land: the disabled, the widows, the orphans and even the immigrants.ⁱ

And as long as they did that; as long as they gave, God promised there would be an abundance.

In other words, “give ... and it will be given to you.”

Centuries later, that same promise was repeated through the prophet Malachi but

in the negative. Instead of abundance, there was scarcity and famine. And God explained why.

Speaking to the nation, He asked:

“Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated me!

“But you ask, ‘What do you mean? When did we ever cheat you?’

And God replied:

“You have cheated me of the tithes and offerings due to me. You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating me.” Malachi 3:8-9 (NLT)

That’s what I mean by the promise being stated in the negative. In other words,

“don’t give and it will be taken from you.”

But then God restates the promise in the positive.

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, “I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!” Malachi 3:10
(NLT)

“Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not fall from the vine before they are ripe,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

“Then all nations will call you

blessed, for your land will be such a delight,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

Malachi 3:11-12 (NLT)

In other words, “give ... and it will be given to you.”

So, as I said earlier, when Jesus said that to His original followers, He wasn’t introducing something new. He was affirming what had already been revealed. He was encouraging them – and us: “this really is true. Live this way. Be generous to the people and causes your Heavenly Father loves and He will be generous to you.”

By the way, the Apostle Paul would later teach this same principle to the many non-Jewish people who were becoming

Christians.

For example, in his letter to the church at Philippi, he wrote:

*My God will meet all your needs
according to the riches of his
glory in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:19 (NIV)*

Now, a lot of Christians who know the Bible love this verse – this promise – and they draw a lot of comfort from it.

However, what we often fail to notice is that this promise is conditional. It's tied to what Paul says in the preceding sentence ...

... which reads:

*I have received from
Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.
They are a fragrant offering, an*

*acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to
God. Philippians 4:18
(NIV)*

See, what's going on here is that these Christians at Philippi were tithing!

And what Paul is saying to them is “when you guys did that; when you gave to support me in my ministry, you were actually making an offering to God. And, therefore, my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”

In other words, “give ... and it will be given to you.” It's a universal principle that applies to believers of all times and in all places.

Or, to put it in terms of our “I will if you

will” template, God’s conditional promise is ...

“I will give to *you* if *you* will give to the people and causes I love” ...

... which, by the way, are people in need: the disabled, the widows, the orphans and immigrants as well as organizations like the church and other ministries of compassion that advance the Kingdom of God by proclaiming the gospel and doing good in ways that honor people and bring glory to God.

What It Isn’t

Now, if you’ve spent much time around the church in your life, I’m pretty sure you’ve heard lots of talks about giving and about generosity. In fact, last spring we spent

three whole weeks talking about generosity – what it is and what it is not.

And I'm sure you remember that generosity is not random acts of giving here and there which are often and easily motivated by guilt or sentimentality. Instead, generosity is the premeditated, calculated, designated emancipation of our personal financial assets to the people and causes God loves. A generous person has a plan.

- They've thought about it. It's *premeditated*.
- They know how much they're going to give. It's *calculated*.
- And they know where it's going. It's *designated*.

And because we talked about that so much

last spring, I almost didn't include this particular promise in this series. But I decided to do it anyway because, as I said at the beginning, I see so many Christians these days in financial distress and disarray.

Now, there are lots of reasons for that but in almost every case those who are struggling financially are also not following this principle. They're not giving anything to the people and causes God loves or, if they are, it's random. It's hit and miss, here and there.

And to be clear, as I said so many times last spring, random acts of giving are not bad or wrong or without value. It's certainly helpful when people contribute to our ministry on the spur of the moment. But

that's not the kind of giving – it's not the kind of generosity – of which God says, “I will give to you.”

So, my purpose this morning is very simple. I want to challenge everyone here, even if those who are not-Christians, and especially those who are in financial distress – to take advantage of this principle and to try out the promise. Of all the promises we've talked about, this one is the most “testable” so to speak.

In fact, as we read earlier, God himself even said that through Malachi.

“Put Me to the test. See if I won't open the windows of heaven for you. See if I won't pour out a great blessing: pressed down, shaken together and

running over. See if what you give doesn't come back to you – and then some.”

Now, before I talk about how you can test this promise, I think it's necessary to say that it has often been grossly misinterpreted and misapplied and has therefore become the reason for a lot of discouragement and disillusionment with God. And that typically happens in three ways.

On the one hand, there are some pastors and Christians who make this *more* than it is. They *overpromise* for God by using this principle to teach what is known as “the prosperity gospel” which says, “Good news! If you give to God – if you support the people and causes He loves – then He will

make you *wealthy*.”

So, let me be clear:

This is not a promise to make you *rich*.

Now, God might allow you to be wealthy (and, quite frankly, with respect to the standard of living of the majority of the other humans on earth right now, *He already has*) ... God might allow you to be wealthy but, if so, that will be more a product of His Divine Providence in your life (like where you're born and when and what opportunities you have) and your own personal discipline (like hard work and thriftiness and saving) than it will be your giving.

God's promise to give to you if you give to the people and causes He loves is not a

promise to make you rich. That's not His purpose in making this promise. And anyone who tells you that it is, that person is overpromising. They're making it more than it is.

On the other hand, there are some pastors and Christians who make this *less* than it is. They *under-promise* for God by teaching that it is not intended to be taken literally. In other words, "God will bless you if you give but that blessing probably won't be in financial terms. It'll be the good feeling you have in your heart that comes from knowing you did something good."

So, let me be clear:

This is not a promise of “intangible benefits” (though there *are* intangible benefits to generosity).

For one, Jesus elsewhere says that giving to the people and causes that He loves is a way of storing up treasure in Heaven.

Of course, since we know that Heaven is ultimately not floating on a cloud strumming a harp in an eternal church service but an existence on a newly recreated earth in a new body that never gets sick or dies, that treasure at some point and in some way will be tangible.

And giving *can* make you feel good inside but, truthfully, getting that “good feeling” is pretty much limited to random acts of giving. If you’re a person who regularly and systematically emancipates some of your

financial assets in a premeditated, calculated, designated manner, you probably won't feel that so much. You probably won't feel good each time the recurring donation you set up with your bank or the church or whatever organization happens. After a while you won't even notice it.

That's not to discount the fact that Jesus *does* promise that you *will* be happier overall – “it's more blessed to give than to receive” is how He put it – but *that* promise is not *this* promise that we're talking about today.

God's promise to give to you if you give to the people and causes He loves is not a promise of intangible benefits. And anyone who tells you that it is, that person is

under-promising. They're making it less than it is.

Finally, I should also add that another way this promise gets distorted is when we apply it to something other than money; for example, “if I volunteer my time or if I pray or contribute in some other way that isn't financial, then God will bless me.”

And it is true that God *will* bless you when you do that (and we certainly do appreciate it when people volunteer in our ministries and pray for us) but, again, *that* promise is not *this* promise.

This promise – “I will give to you if you give to the people and causes I love” – has to do

with our financial assets.

It's not about other kinds of contributions.

So ... just to be clear:

- This particular promise is not a promise to make us rich.
- And it's not a promise of intangible benefits.
- And it's not about contributing in non-financial ways.

What It Is

So, with all that said, what exactly *is* God promising if we give to the people and causes He loves?

Well, let's go back and look at what Jesus said.

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Luke 6:38 (NIV)

That last sentence is the key. “With the measure that you use it will be measured to you.”

Now, let's try to visualize that.

<pic> Jesus is saying if I give of my financial assets – my income and whatever I've stored up – to the people and causes that God loves using a teeny, tiny spoon, that's how God will give to me.

Of course, since it will be pressed down, shaken together and running over it will be just a little bit more.

<pic> On the other hand, if I use a shovel to measure out what I give and I do that in a regular and systematic way, God will use a heaping shovelful to give to me in a regular and systematic way.

<pic> And if I use a front-loader to measure out my giving, God will treat me in the same way. He will give back to me with a heaping overflowing front-loader.

That's the imagery that Jesus is employing here.

Now, two things that we need to understand about this analogy before we move on.

First of all “the measure that you use” is to be thought of relative to the size of the financial resource pile you have.

For example, in that story we read earlier about the poor widow and the rich people and their offerings, Jesus was saying (in essence), “that woman is using a front-loader. Even though she gave only a very small amount in absolute terms, it is a huge part of her financial resource pile. And even though the rich people gave a lot more in absolute terms, because their pile is gigantic, relatively speaking, they’re only using teeny, tiny spoons.”

The measure you use is relative to the size of your financial resource pile. Keep that in mind.

Now, here's the second thing to understand: if God's promise is to give back to me with the same measure that I use to give to Him, what's the net?

This isn't a trick question. If I give you \$100 and eventually you give me \$100 back, then what's my net? It's zero, right? That's why I say *this isn't a promise to make you rich.*

Oh, Jesus *does* say that what you give will be returned to you "pressed down, shaken together and running over," so you could argue there's a small net gain. But that's certainly not the same thing as the "prosperity gospel." You're not going to get rich financially just because you give to those in need and you give to the church.

Instead, what's going to happen is – and

this is what the promise is really all about: because the net is zero, what's going to happen is that ...

What you give will not cause you to have less than what you need.

In fact, when Paul talks about generosity, that's exactly what he says. In 2 Corinthians chapter 9 verse 6 he writes:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

He's talking about the measure that you use. Then he goes on to say ...

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under

compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

We read that earlier.

Then he writes – and this describes how the promise actually works out in real life:

And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work ... You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion ... 2 Corinthians 9:6-8,10 (NIV)

Paul is saying that “God will see to it that you have enough to cover both what you need and what you give. You will not be lacking because of your premeditated, calculated, designated emancipation of

personal financial assets. That's not going to happen because the promise of God promise is ...”

“If you will give to the people and causes that I love, then I will give to you the sum of what you need plus what you give.”

“I will ensure that you have enough to live *on* and to give *out*.”

This is why I said at the very beginning, instead of tension when it comes to money and faith, God intended this whole thing to be motivated by a promise – *His* promise that you and I will have what we need plus what we give. And when you understand that and believe that, then you really can be a cheerful giver.

And you can take some wild, crazy, daring risks in faith. You can start out giving with a teeny, tiny spoon and move up to shovel and then even a front-loader and know for sure that it will be OK. That's been my personal experience more times than I can count.

In fact, just this year, Jetta and I have taken the risk to go beyond our shovel-sized giving which, over the years has grown to about 14% of our income. We give roughly 11% to NHCC and 3% to other ministries and in random acts of giving to people in need.

But this year, in addition to that, we've felt led to give about \$5,000 to people in need. We may not be using a front-loader, but it's a pretty big shovel. But you know what?

God's shovel has gotten bigger, too. In ways we could have never predicted, that money has come back to us and then some!

In one sense, it's remarkable because it's God at work keeping His promise. But, in another sense, it's not remarkable at all. It's happened that way again and again and again.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking, especially if you have a really big pile. You make \$200K/yr and you have a couple million in the bank. You're thinking, "So, Rick, are you saying that if I have a million dollars and I give half of it away, God will somehow give me back \$500K?"

Maybe. I can take you to people I know with huge piles, for whom that's happened.

But *maybe not* because maybe you don't need a million dollars. Maybe all you really need to live on is \$500K. Maybe God has *already through your lifetime* given back to you. Maybe that's why you have as big of a pile as you do.

Of course, all of that is speculative. So let's move to the known as we draw this to a close.

A Practical Test

Earlier I said that I would talk about how you could actually test out this promise which, again, isn't *my* invitation but God's. I've got two ideas.

1. Next year, in 2017, give a recurring donation at a higher percentage to the Lord's work (whether here or somewhere else) than you are currently giving and evaluate after six months.

If you're currently doing random gifts to NHCC – like when you show up at church, we really do appreciate that but in order to really test this promise, you need to do something on a regular basis. So, go online to our website or our app or stop out at one of the kiosks and set up a recurring donation. Pick the “Ministry and Operations” fund and set it up for weekly, or monthly or whatever fits your lifestyle.

And then, increase what you're giving. If you're currently giving nothing, set it up to give 2% or 3% of your income. If you're giving 10%, give 11%. Or be bold and get

out your front-loader and give 20% or more. Pick a percentage that allows you to test, “what if this really is true?”

And then stick with it for six months. And if at that point, you feel like God isn't giving back to you with the same measure that you have used, or if you no longer have what you need to live on, then stop because you're giving too much. And do so with a clear conscience.

Ok, that's one way to test it out. Here's another.

2. Before the end of this year, make a significant one-time donation to the “Christmas Blessing Project.”

I don't know what that looks like for you in terms of dollars but several years ago, the

light came on for me. Christmas is Jesus' birthday not mine, so I should be giving at least as much to the people and causes He loves as we do to myself and my own little circle of family and friends.

So we cut our Christmas budget in half – half goes to the Christmas Blessing here at NHCC and half we spend on simply having a wonderful Christmastime. Maybe you should do something like that, too.

Now, what is the Christmas Blessing Project? It's an opportunity to bless others in need this Christmas. We're talking about people who are part of this congregation as well those who are in our relational circles that we ourselves can't help out with.

There's info in the program on how to

nominate people you know.

As far as the giving, our goal this year is to raise \$15K although we would easily give away \$20K if we had it.

And if you want to be involved in that, stop by any giving kiosk, the website or app and select Christmas Blessing Project or simply write a check or place cash in an envelope with Christmas Blessing on it. You can do it anytime from now until December 31 and we'll see that 100% of it goes to help the people who were nominated and selected.

Over and above.

So, those are my two suggestions on how to test out this promise. And I hope you will!

Let's pray.

<Prayer>

Feature – Motion of Mercy

CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick

1. Next Sunday we kick off the Christmas season with a very creative service, sort of a “welcome to Advent” that, if you're in town, you don't want to miss.
2. And if you are out of town, safe travels, remember to be thankful not only for the material and family blessings but also for the Amazing Grace that is yours because of Christ.

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.apuritansmind.com/stewardship/smithgeoffreywidowsmite/>