

Spiritual Renewal – Step Six – Pledging to Give

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church

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Text: Nehemiah 10:32-39

Purpose: Our giving reflects our commitment to God. It must be a priority in our life. Our giving should follow a plan. It should be proportionate to how God has blessed us. The gifts should have an intended purpose. We should have a designated place to present our offerings.

I don't know if you have ever watched an episode of Swamp People before. It is one of those reality television programs that give the rest of the world a glimpse of some people that live in the swampy bayou regions of Louisiana. After I watched it a few times, I gave up. All the programs began to look the same. Since I am from North Carolina, I would describe the program as "Rednecks hunting alligators." I came across this story that I wanted to share with you this morning.



A Cajun was stopped by a game warden in Southern Louisiana recently with two ice chests of fish, leaving a bayou well known for its fishing.

The game warden asked the man, "Do you have a license to catch those fish?"

"Naw, ma fren, I ain't got none of dem, no. Dese here are my pet fish."

"Pet fish?"

"Ya. Avery night I take dese here fish down to de bayou and let dem swim 'round for a while. Den I whistle and dey jump rat back inta dis here ice chest and I take dem home."

"That's a bunch of hooey! Fish can't do that!"

The Cajun looked at the game warden for a moment and then said, "It's de truth ma' fren. I'll show you. It really works."

"Okay, I've GOT to see this!"

The Cajun poured the fish into the bayou and stood and waited.

After several minutes, the game warden turned to him and said, "Well?"

"Well, what?" Said the Cajun.

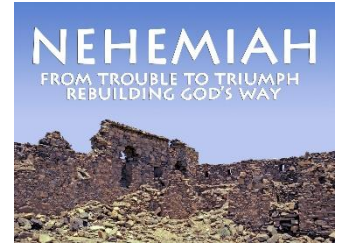
"When are you going to call them back?"

"Call who back?"

"The FISH!"

"What fish?"¹

Over the past few weeks, we have been examining a time in Israel's life where they set about to do things right before the Lord. They didn't plead ignorant of their past. They didn't pretend they didn't know what God required of them. They didn't pass the buck and blame someone else. They took deliberate steps in their life towards Spiritual Renewal. Apparently, they knew from their experience in Babylon, that their ancestors plan for their life did not work out and they intended to turn back to God as their source of blessing- their source of life-their source of renewal- their source of eternal blessings by being obedient to God.



When they returned to Jerusalem, they set about rebuilding the walls, streets, and temple. It took them 52 days to complete the task of rebuilding the walls. Once that was done, they came and listened to the Word of God read to them. That is the first step in anyone's spiritual renewal – going back to the source of God's wisdom and blessing – God's Word.

Spiritual Renewal

Secondly, they realized they had not been obedient to what was taught and they determined to do as it taught. They reinstated the Feast of Tabernacles. They held a week-long campout to remind them of their time in the desert. Everyday they came and learned more about God's Word.

At the end of the week, they wanted more, and they came and listened for a quarter of the day, then they repented of their sins. This is the third step in Spiritual Renewal –

repenting of their sin. The outcome of their repentance was worship and praise of God.

The fourth step in renewal involved worshipping God. Once our sin condition has been acknowledged before God, and we repent – or turn from our sin – then we can genuinely worship God.

The fifth step in Spiritual Renewal involves becoming connected to a community of faith. Living our faith alone and isolated from community is difficult, and usually not very productive. We need to live accountable to others in community for our conduct so we can live as holy as we can. We will never obtain perfection, but we do need to do the best we can.

Step Six – Pledging to Give

Today’s passage of scripture illustrates for us how one community came together and “*made ordinances for themselves*” to share in their wealth to accomplish a common purpose. You may be thinking to yourself, “What do spiritual renewal and money have to do with each other?”



If you were to look inside a person’s checkbook, credit card statement, or list of expenses, you will find out what is important to that person. The Bible says, “*where our treasure is, your heart will be also.*” If there is little money being

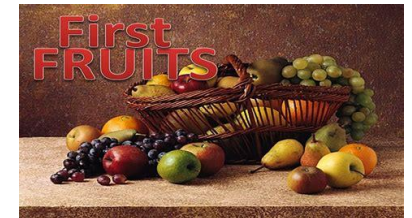
directed towards God or the things of God, then you can be assured that that person will place a low priority on church

attendance, church participation, or church involvement. How we spend our money indicates what we treasure most. If we spend it on pampering ourselves, buying the latest fashions, accentuating our looks or indulging in our wants, then that demonstrates what is important to us. If we spend our money on our children, then that demonstrates their importance. If we make tithing a part of our life, supporting ministries that promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then that demonstrates its importance. Spilman members have faithfully supported this church for almost 70 years.

When the Jews returned and rebuilt Jerusalem, they covenanted together to support the work of the temple with their wealth. They were operating under the Old Testament law and were required to give of their wealth. Although we do not operate under the law, there are principles that can help us in our spiritual renewal if we are to be good stewards of the resources God has given us.

A Priority

Reading verses 35 to 37, you see the word “*first fruits*” used over and over again. The Lord required the first fruits of their harvest to be shared with the priest and those that ministered in the house of God. They made an ordinance to give the first portion of their crops, their grain, their cattle, their flocks, their wine, and their oil, to the service of the Lord. They made giving of everything they had a priority. God got the first of everything.



The same is true for us. God should be the priority when it comes to how we use what He



has given us. Today, Christians have become so burdened with debt and monthly financial obligations that God often gets put at the bottom of the stack. But when God ceases to be a priority, the burdens become even greater. To neglect giving back to God is like cutting off the hand that feeds you. God must get the first of everything – our time, our talents, our treasure.

When I was meeting with some pastors a few years ago, a pastor there made the comment that we should give the Lord the first of everything – even the first of our day. We should start out our day with the Lord. There will always be pressure in your life to make God wait. But establish in your heart to put Him first in everything.

A Plan

Not only did Israel make giving back to God a priority, they also developed a plan. In verses 32-35 you notice they set their gift aside “*yearly*.” Israel worked on an agricultural cycle and they made plans to give accordingly. Today, too many Christians don’t have a plan. They give based on an emotional appeal for funds or on the basis of available funds.

That is what I like about the weekly offering envelopes that we have used here at Spilman. Each member of the church is given offering envelopes in which they could, if they determined in their heart, to give as the Lord had blessed. Over the years, I have talked with individuals about this and they have said they use them even when they are away on vacation. Every



week, we have members come by and drop off their weekly offering. It is a healthy habit of stewardship.

In the New Testament, in I Corinthians 16:1-2 it contains instructions from Paul to the church at Corinth to set aside money “*on the first day of the week*” so they would not have to scramble to support the work of the ministry when Paul arrived.

We give to the Lord’s work by grace not by the law. We are not under the burden of the law but we are still instructed to give. Giving systematically is the best way to honor God because He gives to us daily – week in and week out.

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.
2 Corinthians 9:7



2 Corinthians 9:7 instructs us to give as we “*purpose*” in our heart. It means we are to plan ahead and give as God leads. We should develop a plan – an annual plan – and stick to it. Many churches use October as the month to pledge the budget. All of the members of the congregation are asked to “pledge” to give and support the work and ministry of the church. Then, based on those pledges, the budget committee sets about the task of determining how those funds will be used throughout the year. If church members strongly support the work being done, then new ministries can be initiated. But if the financial support is cut back, then the church will go through difficult financial times, and ministries may need to be cut back.

Spilman currently does not go through the process of pledging the budget. They may have done that years ago. From what I can see, the current practice is to trust the

members to give and by faith our finance committee projects a budget based upon past giving trends.

Just as the people of Israel set for themselves a plan to support the work of ministry, Spilman also budgets its financial support and together plans its use.

A Portion

In verse 32, they gave a “one-third of a shekel” as a temple tax. This enabled bread and grain to be offered daily in the temple. In verse 38 they gave a tithe (one-tenth) to the Levites. They also gave a tithe of the tithe (one-one hundredth) to the temple services. They gave precise gifts for specific purposes.



Sometimes we want to grumble about giving a tithe but in the Old Testament, the tithe is only one of three tithes mentioned in the Old Testament. There was the temple tithe, the festival tithe to support the annual feasts of Israel, and a benevolence tithe collected every three years. This adds up to around 23.3% in offerings.

But that is not all. They gave one-third shekel to the temple annually, they promised to let their land rest every seven years and did not harvest it, and they forgave outstanding debts every seven years, and set slaves free every seven years.

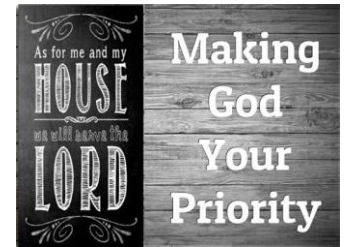
If the Israelites were required to give this much back to the community, how much should Christians give today? So many



people think, “How much can I give in order to “get by?” Our giving should be out of gratitude, not out of obligation.

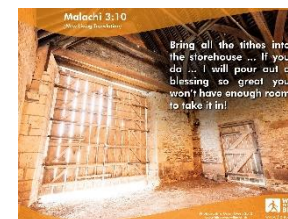
A Purpose

The people of Israel had just come out of captivity for 70 years. They were initially taken into captivity because they had not been obedient to what was taught in the law. Now the people had a heart of obedience because they did not want to repeat what happened to their forefathers. So, they became steadfastly committed to God’s Law and God’s Temple. They made God their renewed priority in life.



A Place

Another phrase that we find in this passage of scripture is the “*house of God.*” For the people of Israel, this was the temple there on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. God had always had a place for the people of God to bring their sacrifices, gifts, and offerings. The temple was the place for those in the Old Testament.



In the New Testament, the church is now the location where our gifts are collected. Some insist that our tithes and offerings should only go to the local church. Malachi tells us to bring all of our offerings into the “*storehouse.*” A storehouse is a place where you are nourished. If our church is nourishing you, then you need to support the ministry here. If another

program or ministry is helping you grow, then you should help them.

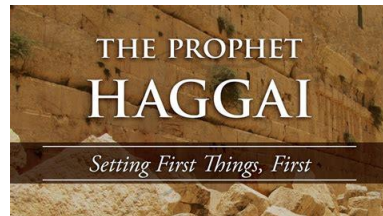
I believe your first commitment should be to the local church. This is the living, breathing, group of people that pray with you when you are sick, that celebrate with you in good times like weddings and the birth of a child, and walk with you during times of death and grief. The local ministry can only carry out its ministry as God's people give faithfully to it. That television evangelist will not come see you in the hospital and he will not stand with your family beside the graveside.

Conclusion

One of the prophets during Ezra and Nehemiah's day was Haggai. His message to the Jews was at a time when they had lost the vision and motivation to complete the work on the walls of the city and especially the tabernacle. In Haggai 1:3-15 it says this:

³ Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ⁴“*Is it* time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple *to lie* in ruins?” ⁵ Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider your ways!

⁶ “ You have sown much, and bring in little;
You eat, but do not have enough;
You drink, but you are not filled with drink;
You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm;
And he who earns wages,
Earns wages *to put* into a bag with holes.”



⁷ Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider your ways! ⁸ Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified,” says the LORD. ⁹ “*You* looked for much, but indeed *it came to* little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?” says the LORD of hosts. “Because of My house that *is in* ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house. ¹⁰ Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, and the earth withholds its fruit. ¹¹ For I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine and the oil, on whatever the ground brings forth, on men and livestock, and on all the labor of *your* hands.”



¹² Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him; and the people feared the presence of the LORD. ¹³ Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, spoke the LORD's message to the people, saying, “*I am* with you, says the LORD.” ¹⁴ So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month, in the second year of King Darius.

The Jews had taken care of their own needs first. They built their own homes first before considering the need to



rebuild the temple. They were keeping everything for themselves out of fear of running out. I remember meeting a woman in a nursing home many years ago that didn't support the work of her church out of fear of "running out." The people of Israel feared running out of money or resources and kept back from God that which belongs to Him anyway. It is God that gave to them, and it is God that can take it away.

Over the years, I have seen people who have put God first by tithing their income live better on the remaining 90 percent that is left than those that tried to live on the 100 percent they kept for themselves. David Jeremiah said this about giving to God: "Giving to God is like having children. If you wait until you think you can afford it, you'll never do it. But when we put God first financially out of obedience to Scripture, we find that God blesses that obedience, and we have what we need."

We never know what our faithfulness to God with our finances might accomplish. David Jeremiah shared a story of a young soldier during World War II who faithfully sent a tithe of his wages home to his mother in America, asking her to give it to the church to fund a new Sunday school building for the young boys in his class. When he returned home from the war, he found a beautiful building had been built and named in his honor. The congregation had been so convicted by his faithfulness in putting God first that they began to do the same, and funds for the new building were quickly gathered.²



Our faithfulness in putting God first might be what God uses to spark a renewal in the lives of others.

We can hope for the living of these days because of what God has done for us in Christ. Christ has given us forgiveness for our sins. He has given us a peace that passes all understanding. He has promised to take us to be with Him when we take our last breath. Giving and living go hand in hand. It is trusting God in the midst of uncertain days.



May you find ways to inspire others to be more faithful to God.

LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹ Mikey's Funnies, Aug. 23, 2009 – A Cajun Funny

² Outline and Illustration taken from David Jeremiah's book on Nehemiah