

WHAT GAVE GIVING A BAD NAME

Sermons on
STEWARDSHIP



DAVID SHIREY

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CSS Publishing Company
Lima, Ohio

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“Who then is that faithful and wise steward?” (Luke 2:42, KJV) To be faithful stewards of the eight congregations I served over four decades of ministry and to Jennie who, every Sunday morning for forty years, has written the check for our offering at the breakfast table.

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Preface

A poll was taken among preachers. The question was, “What is your least favorite part of ministry?” The top response was the annual stewardship campaign. And I can’t help but believe that if a similar poll were taken among churchgoers, the response would be the same. Like preacher, like congregation.

Christian stewardship is not my least favorite part of ministry. Far from it. I actually enjoy the challenge of crafting sermons that invite joyful generosity.

What gave giving a bad name, anyway? How did give become a four-letter word?

A decade ago, Dean Snyder, senior pastor of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC, wrote about how some pastors, in order to avoid saying the word money in church, resort to all kinds of verbal gymnastics that invite giving everything but money¹ — such as, “our time and talent,” “our hearts, minds, and souls,” “our best thoughts by day and by night,” etc. As if money and its proper and improper use is of no concern to God. It is. As if scripture says nothing about giving money. It does. As if the church could do just fine if everybody gave generously of their time and talent but nothing of their treasure. It wouldn’t.

I know some folks have been in churches where they have been badgered, cajoled, guilt-tripped, and arm-twisted into giving. That’s distasteful to be sure. But I for one have found that in structuring my budget around God’s invitation to give my first 10% through the church, save 10%, and live on the rest, my wife and I have managed to make it through forty years pretty well. So I have no problem inviting my brothers and sisters in Christ to return thanks by giving generously so as to partner with God and our risen Lord in redeeming and blessing all creation.

Twenty-five years ago or so, Psychology Today published a piece about the correlation between giving and “ethical living.”²

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The magazine did a reader survey on ethics and morals, seeking to determine what factors influence morality. For example, if the reader slightly scratched someone's car and no one saw, would the reader drive away? Would the reader ever take sick leave when they weren't sick? Would they take liberties on their tax return? Would they tell a lie?

Some 24,000 people returned the questionnaire. Seventy-one percent claimed to be at least slightly religious while twenty-nine percent claimed to be not religious at all. Was one group more moral than others? Older respondents seemed to be more ethical than younger ones, but only slightly. Income level made no difference, nor did education, marital status, or occupation.

The factor the survey found to be the most accurate predictor of a person having a moral/ethical compass was whether they were generous or not. Apparently, the more tightly people hold to their money, the less willing they are to give generously to others, and the less likely they are to make decent and honorable decisions in the scores of ethical dilemmas in which they find themselves daily. Somebody told me to be wary of two kinds of people: those who do not like animals and those who do not have a sense of humor. I'm adding a third category: those who lack generosity. There's good reason the word miser is at the root of the word miserable.

By contrast, generosity born of gratitude is good for us. Researchers did a study with several hundred people measuring how gratitude contributes to well-being. One group was asked to keep a journal noting all the events that happened in their day. A second group was instructed to note only the unpleasant things. A third group was told to list the things that happened each day for which they were grateful. After three weeks, those in the group who kept gratitude lists showed "higher levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, and less stress. They also felt more loved and were more inclined toward acts of kindness."³ Which goes to show that an attitude of gratitude that manifests itself in generosity is good for the soul, while clutching, grasping, and hoarding is not good for anybody.

Christians don't need "Psychology Today" and a cadre of researchers to tell us that. The Bible tells us so. Giving is a good thing — for my own good, for the good of others, and for the healing of all creation.

Here are a collection of sermons culled from forty years of preaching and teaching financial stewardship that strive to give giving a good name. Knowing full well how my preaching on giving has been inspired by others' stewardship sermons, I hope these sermons will pay forward a debt of gratitude. Even more, I hope they bear faithful witness to the men and women, pastors and lay members, who lived lives seasoned with joyful generosity. The spirit in which they lived their lives, much more than the words they preached, taught, or spoke, kindled within me the desire to be a good and faithful steward. I am merely passing on to you what I first received.

A word about how these sermons are ordered follows this preface. Allow me to provide a few introductory remarks about them.

All were preached as part of annual stewardship campaigns inviting pledges of financial support for the coming year's ministry and mission. The language associated with such efforts varies from church to church (pledges, estimates of giving, commitment cards, annual fund, stewardship emphasis). Adapt the language to your setting.

Likewise, though I made the transition from the language and practices of in person worship (offering plates, pledge cards, and snail mail) to the post-COVID language and practices of hybrid in person and online worship (web sites, giving portals, QR codes, and direct deposit), the sermons are not uniform in their vocabulary for the means of giving. Adapt the language to your emerging practices.

The language in these sermons is conversational in style. Preaching is an aural enterprise; to be heard, not read. As such, my personal practice has always been to write for my voice. So don't take a red pen to my grammar or incomplete sentences. These sermons were written to be spoken aloud with

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accompanying facial and hand gestures, pauses, emphasis on certain words and phrases, the occasional singing of verses of hymns and popular music (likely off key), and numerous smirks, chuckles, and rolls of the eyes. Translate my language into your voice and make the message come alive in your own inimitable way.

Emily Dickinson said, “Tell the truth but tell it slant,” brilliant advice that counsels communicating important truths in creative, indirect ways. Jesus’ parables are a case in point. The Master comes alongside his hearers and tells what at first blush is a simple story but at tale’s end, a door opens wide and a plethora of meaning beckons the listener’s attention. Preaching on financial stewardship calls for the same strategy. So, though there is plenty of straightforward rhetoric in these sermons, there are many examples of telling the truth “slant” — segments preached with tongue firmly in cheek or facetiously, with feigned disbelief or downright silliness. I’ll stoop or rise to any level, whatever it takes to tell the truth slant, the truth that we have been blessed beyond measure by a gracious God who welcomes our partnership heart, mind, soul, and wallet.

Last and not least, it is my firm belief that sermonic content born of exegetical and theological acumen and rhetorical craftsmanship, creativity, and cleverness must be accompanied by preachers’ and church leaders’ personal practice of faithful stewardship. We can’t ask others to do what we don’t do ourselves. I intentionally bear witness in these sermons to my own journey toward being a good and faithful steward. I wasn’t always a good steward and I duly acknowledge that. But thanks to the example, teaching, and inspiration of others, many of whom are acknowledged in these pages, I have grown and matured across the years to where I can honestly, sincerely, even gleefully bear witness to the quiet joy and deep down satisfaction that accrues with giving of myself more and more fully to God’s purposes. Bear witness in your own words to your growth in and practice of financial stewardship.

Grace and peace to you in your preaching, teaching, and being a good steward of God's manifold graces.

A Word About The Order Of The Sermons

The first four sermons ("What Gave Giving A Bad Name?" "Things My Father Never Taught Me," "Giving By The Book," and "Pointers From Paul's Playbook") address the problem and offer encouragement to proceed with gospel-grounded courage. The problem is congregations chafing against hearing sermons on financial stewardship (They're always talking about money!) and preachers fretting over preaching them ("Do I have to preach about money again?"). The encouragement comes from sermons crafted to penetrate those defenses by a strategy that leavens solid biblical teaching dished out in fresh ways with self-deprecating humor and enthusiasm.

The next three sermons ("A Most Delicate Issue," "The Macedonian Miracle," and "Something Beautiful For God") mine three iconic stewardship scriptures for their riches. The stories of the widow's mite, the unnamed woman's anointing of Jesus' feet, and the Macedonian Christians' offering to the first stewardship campaign are motivational gems, examples of joyful generosity par excellence. These stories and the sermons they give voice to make giving gladly invitational, even aspirational: I want to give like that when I grow up!

There is no getting around the fact that annual stewardship campaigns include an ask. We're blessed to be a blessing, invited as people of faith to give of our time, talent, and treasure to God's redeeming purposes in this world. We have a choice whether to give, to whom, and how much. The next two sermons ("Holy Choices" and "Where Treasure, There Heart") explore the consequences of our decisions. They are followed by two sermons ("Pass The Plates" and "All God's Chil'ren Got Talent") that surface surprising new insights into two specific asks: our tithe and our talent.

The penultimate sermons ("A Great Commandment Congregation" and "The Master's Math") link giving to

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partnering with God in the redeeming of all creation. Spare us from stewardship sermons that try to motivate giving by drear obligation clothed in shoulds and oughts. Though there may have been a time when people responded to stewardship campaigns out of a sense of duty and commitment, that time and those generations are no more. Rising generations must be confident that the people inviting their gifts are authentic, sincere, and trustworthy and the organizations and institutions they give to are making a transforming difference in the world. People give to people. Money follows mission.

The final sermon (“The Indescribable Gift”) grounds stewardship in God’s “indescribable gift” of Jesus Christ. The gospel he came preaching, teaching, and living was, by definition, good news. So must our preaching about stewardship be good news. May your proclamation give giving a good name. If these sermons in any way contribute to that end by glorifying God and serving others in the name of Jesus Christ, that will be good news to me.

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2 Corinthians 8:1-7

A poll was taken among preachers. The question was, “What is your least favorite part of the ministry?” What do you think the top response was? The most-mentioned least favorite was the annual stewardship campaign. I can’t help but believe that if a similar poll were to be taken among the laity, the response would be the same. I suspect that one of the least-anticipated events on the church calendar is the annual stewardship campaign. Like preacher, like congregation. Think of that: inviting people to give to the cause of Jesus Christ by pledging a portion of their money to his church is one of the least favorite things that preachers and members of their congregations do in a year. All of which raises this simple question, “What gave giving a bad name?”

Well, I’ve given that question some thought and I’m prepared to put forth what I think gave giving such a bad name.

For starters, it strikes me that giving doesn’t come naturally to us. There is something deep down inside us that makes us against giving from the start. I say that because I can’t help but to notice that when I put my finger in an infant’s open palm, he or she will grasp it and hold on to it and will not let go, as if maybe we’re born with the inclination to grasp and hold on to things. And I can’t help but notice that as kids acquire speech they become quite adept at calling out the names of the holy trinity at the top of their lungs. Not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, mind you, but rather “Me! My! Mine!” as if they’re born with those words in their vocabulary. I can’t help but to remember the exchange that my wife and I engaged in prior to our move from St. Louis years ago, the exact same exchange we had a few years before that when moving from Nashville.

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Looking out over our belongings, I said, "Where on earth did we get all this stuff?"

She replied, "Well, what do you want to get rid of?"

I replied, "Well, some of your stuff. I need all my stuff."

In that moment, I felt like an old magnet I found one day in a desk drawer, coated with paper clips, pins, and every metal do-dad imaginable. Is there something within me that attracts, accumulates, and holds on to, but never lets go of, anything that comes within my sphere of influence? It seems as if grasping, "me! my! mine-ing!", hoarding, and never letting go are what come naturally to human beings. It's giving, sharing, and letting go that go against the grain. That would explain why the annual stewardship campaign is a perennial least-favorite thing, why it's greeted with such groans ("Here they go again!"), why it's tolerated with such grudging spirits, and why pen is put to pledge card with such painful reluctance. It seems giving is contrary to human nature. It rubs us the wrong way. Maybe it's human nature that gave giving a bad name.

But there's more to it than that. There's also the notion, deep-seated in all of us, that we don't have a whole lot to give. We've convinced ourselves that we really don't have much. How can we give when we're barely getting by on what we have? This brings to mind a poll that was done a few years back. The question was asked, "How much more would you need to make in order to be more secure?" The answer was, "About 20% more than I make now." Regardless of whether the person interviewed made \$30,000 or \$130,000, the answer was the same — I need 20 % more. This tells me that if we've convinced ourselves that we simply don't have anything to give (given the little we have), then no wonder the annual stewardship campaign is among our least-favorite things. It's asking us to do what we really can't do. How can we be expected to give away something when we don't have enough in the first place? So, maybe that's what gave giving a bad name.

On the other hand, maybe giving got its bad name from some of the abuses we've seen in past years. You know what

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I mean — the TV evangelists and their incessant asks for donations. It has come to the point that when I stand up in the pulpit and mention money, you probably envision a toll-free number parading across the screen right under my chin. You hear me mention giving and you subconsciously push the mute button -“Oh boy, here he goes again. Where there’s a preacher, there’s an offering plate not far behind.” Maybe that’s why the stewardship campaign is listed as least favorite on so many ballots. “All they talk about is money and then look how they use what they get!” Maybe that’s what gave giving a bad name.

Or maybe it’s a combination of all of the above that gave giving a bad name. In the first place, it’s against our nature to give, so it rubs us the wrong way when we’re asked. What’s more, we don’t have enough as it is, and even if we did, “Who are you going to trust these days to give it to?”

Having said all that, what do you make of this? I know some folks who gave giving a good name. I have discovered in my research a pastor and a congregation for whom the annual stewardship campaign was not something to be dreaded and endured, but rather something to be done with a spirit of expectation and joy: “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia, for during a severe ordeal of affliction their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the favor of [giving]” (2 Corinthians 8:1-14).

You heard me right: a congregation that actually begged for the favor of giving! I have it all right here in black and white in a letter from their preacher, a fellow by the name of Paul. What do you make of this? In all my years in the church, I’ve never seen anything like it before. Contrary to human nature, they begged for the favor of being invited to give. Contrary to the reluctance you and I are familiar with, their giving was accompanied by an abundance of joy — they were downright cheerful givers.

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If that were not enough, these folks really didn't have enough. They were truly poor. But surprise, surprise — “out of their extreme poverty there overflowed a wealth of liberality.” They gave according to their means and beyond. Beats anything I've ever seen. These folks gave giving a good name.

Which got me to wondering. I asked myself, “How did they do it?” I mean, with all there is to give giving a bad name and with the way most churches and preachers enter into the annual stewardship campaign kicking and screaming, what did they do differently?

According to their preacher, Paul, there was a turning point all right. There was a point when, for those people and for that preacher, give ceased being a four-letter word and became something they took great pleasure in doing. What was the turning point? “First, they gave themselves to the Lord...” (2 Corinthians 8:5). They took Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and pledged to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, might, and mind. Having done that, all their treasure followed, and joyfully at that! Which is to say that when a congregation and pastor give themselves first to the Lord, it makes all the difference in the world. Hearts are warmed, attitudes are changed, and human nature is transformed. In other words, giving is given a good name. When people truly give themselves to the Lord, hands that before held, grasped, and hoarded, find themselves finally able to open up, let go, and give. Voices that before growled, “Mine!” find themselves finally able to say “Thine!” When people truly give themselves to the Lord first, hearts are filled to overflowing with the unspeakable riches of God's grace to the point that I know I am rich and so I want to give to the one from whom all blessings flow.

Do you know that it still happens today? When people give themselves first to the Lord, heart, might, mind, and soul, giving is given a good name. Extraordinary things happen. Spirits soar. Pledges are made with reverent pleasure.

Yes, it still happens today. I went to a church one day last year, went into worship, and wouldn't you know, I happened to

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be there on the very Sunday they were doing their stewardship campaign. I must admit, I rolled my eyes and said, “Oh boy.” They had a preacher there who launched into some stewardship thing, and then they passed out pledge cards and I took one just because everybody else did and I sat there all uncomfortable. (You see, giving had been given such a bad name in my book.) But then something happened I’ll never forget.

As I sat in this church, pledge card in hand — I’m speaking about our church — I lifted my eyes and saw you give what I could tell was prayerful attention to your cards. Then, as I watched, you stepped out of the pews, came down the aisle, and put your cards in the silver bowl in front of the communion table. As you did, I noticed a look of worshipful reverence in your eyes — you looked like I thought you must have looked when you first came down the aisle to make your confession of faith those many years ago. Then it dawned on me, that’s exactly what you folks in this church were doing. Sure enough, you were giving yourselves first to the Lord, giving yourselves again, giving yourselves gladly, and your giving gladly followed. Then I watched as the people in this church made their way back to the fellowship hall for dinner. When the report was finally read and so many had given out of their own means and even beyond with an overflowing of liberality, one of our long-time members came up to me and with wide-eyed amazement said, “Well, that beats anything I’ve ever seen!” I didn’t ask her to explain. I understood. She was experiencing the same thrill Paul had experienced. It is the thrill that comes when people give of themselves first to the Lord, the thrill that comes when Christians give giving a good name.

Let all God’s people say AMEN.

Things My Father Never Taught Me

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

These verses are at the very heart of the Bible. They are often referred to as the Shema, from the Hebrew word for hear or listen that begins them: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Deuteronomy says these words are so important they are to be taught to the children. “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.”

You know something is important if an entire community is commanded to teach it to their children. The important things in life we teach our children. Or at least, we should. Beginning with how to use the potty. How to use a spoon. How to get dressed. How to write your name. The three Rs: Readin’, Writin’ and ‘Rithmetic. Then came things like how to bathe yourself and how to make your bed. Things like how to swim and common courtesies: “Please” and “Thank you.” Then came the advanced lessons: Skills, crafts, home repair, sports, and values. You know something is important if rising generations take the time and effort to teach it to their children.

That having been said, this week I’ve been pondering the things my father didn’t teach me. Don’t get me wrong; there were plenty of things Keith Shirey taught his eldest son. For instance, how to give a firm handshake. “Don’t give someone a dead fish,” he’d say. How to tie a necktie — a double Windsor knot and how to polish shoes and wax a car (How many times did I wax his car?). Among other things, he also taught me to treat everyone, no matter their station in life, with respect, to always do my best, to persevere through adversity, and to root

for the Cleveland Browns (an exercise in persevering through adversity). Those are things he taught me.

There were things, however, about which my dad never taught me. To name three: religion, sex, and money. I dare say those are important things, things about which a child ought be taught, but none of them were in my father's curriculum.

As for religion, Dad simply didn't give the things of God much thought during his lifetime, at least as far as I could tell. When I got interested in faith issues, he asked my mother to ask me not to talk about religion around him. He was uncomfortable with it. Just didn't want to talk about it. So, I didn't.

I guess he didn't want to talk with me about sex, either. When I was about ten years old or so, Dad and I were waiting in the car for my mother, sister, and brother. I was in the back seat minding my own business when Dad, without even turning around, said, "David, there are some books in my closet on the shelf above where I hang my ties. Read them and if you have any questions ask me."

"What kind of books?" I asked.

"Well, they're red books," he responded.

"What are they about?"

He said, "You'll see. Just read 'em."

End of conversation.

It wasn't until I went upstairs later that week, got the books down, and began leafing through them that I saw what they were about. But I'll be doggoned if I was going to ask Dad any questions about that. If he couldn't even look me in the eye and say the word, why would I think he'd openly discuss any of the intimate details?

Dad was closed-lipped on religion, sex, and on money, too. I can't recall a single conversation having anything to do with money: what he made, his plans for the use of it, or the strategies he employed to save or invest it. There was not a word on how to write a check, balance a budget, read a financial report or make a wise investment. Certainly nothing was said about giving money away — how much, to whom, and why.

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That is all to say that I learned a lot from my father, but I wanted to do better than he did teaching my children about at least three things: religion, sex, and money.

That's why this morning and next week I'd like to do my part by providing accurate information on two important subjects. I'm not going to talk about sex today or next week (though I do have some red books you can borrow). I am going to talk about religion and money, though. Not just because we have an opportunity this month to think about those two things as they converge at the point of making an estimate of giving to God to support the ministries of our church, but because in the absence of my father's teaching me anything about the whys and wherefores of giving to God, I've had to disabuse myself of a whole lot of notions about the intersection of religion and money — giving — that are at best misleading and at worst simply false. I don't want my children or my church family to labor under some of the misinformation I've heard out there in the neighborhood.

In one of his sermons years ago, Dr. Ron Allen, professor emeritus of preaching at Christian Theological Seminary, named a few of these misguided myths⁴. I'll name them for you and add a few of my own.

For instance, I was led to believe for a while that giving to the church was something you had to do to earn God's favor. That if I gave, God would love me — and if I gave more, God would love me more. And if I didn't give, well we won't go there. I'm glad I've learned that is blatantly false.

God's love for us is unconditional. God's love for us doesn't rise or fall one iota based on how much we do or do not give. Fundamental to the Christian faith is that God loves us period. "He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). I'm glad I learned that God's love for me is unconditional and has nothing to do with what I do or do not give.

For a while, too, I was led to believe that the biblical practice of making a pledge — setting aside a certain percentage of

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my income as a weekly offering to God — was the religious equivalent of paying a bill. I learned that, I think, from a woman in my first church who would come by periodically, stick her head in my office, show me her offering envelope, and say, “I just came by to pay my dues.” What? Like her membership would be cancelled if she didn’t pay them?

Dear Mrs. So-and-so, our records show that your church payments are past due. Please send your check in the amount noted at the bottom of the pink invoice and return it to our billing office at your earliest convenience so that we won't have to cancel your subscription to "Salvation, Inc". Return your offering now and you won't miss a single exciting issue.

I don’t like paying bills or dues, so I was glad when I learned that the biblical tithe has nothing to do with paying dues and everything to do with giving gifts. Once I got past the dues paying and into the gift giving mentality, not only did I give more, but I did so with delight. My check wrapped in an offering envelope says From: David, Jennie, Will, Betsy, and Laura To: God. I love giving gifts to the one who has so richly gifted me.

Another thing I’m glad I unlearned is the notion that suggests tithing or giving is some kind of quid pro quo business transaction with God. Tithing as investment strategy. Do you know this one? Here’s the deal: you give God 10% and God will give you a return on your investment like you wouldn’t believe.

TV evangelists parlay this one to great effect complete with testimonies like, “I gave to God the little bit I had and that very week I received some cash in the mail that was ten times what I had given! And you, too, can be blessed if you call 1-800-SEND-CASH.” That’s a caricature, of course. But it’s out there and with it, the motivation for giving becomes greed: giving so you’ll get more back.

Thank God a man named Bill taught me the lie in that.

“David,” said that lifelong tither and benefactor of so many

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worthy organizations, “the notion of ‘Give and get rich off God’ is nothing but sanctified selfishness.”

He said, “I can testify to having been blessed as a result of my tithing. Setting aside the first 10% for God required me to budget the remaining 90% well and spend it wisely. This lifelong discipline I have no doubt has led to the financial health I enjoy today, but I didn’t give to get back. I gave and have experienced how God gives back the inestimable satisfaction that comes with partnering with God in making a difference in people’s lives near and far.”

Bill didn’t give in order to get. But in giving, he got. I’m glad he taught me that because Jennie and I can testify to the fact that in our years of tithing we have received kingdom dividends year in and year out that have outperformed every other investment we’ve ever made.

I’m glad, too, I was liberated from the notion I had picked up along the way from certain folks that money and religion — giving an offering to God — is somehow something dirty and therefore not to spoken of in mixed company. That’s what it seemed like to me, anyway. I’ve witnessed the contortions Christian people go through to downplay the Bible’s invitation to give generously to God’s redeeming work in this world. As if the words freewill offering are some form of profanity. As if give is a four-letter word.

I remember as a young, wet-behind-the-ears pastor in my mid-twenties making a visit to new members of the church I served. A member of the congregation and I took to their home all kinds of things that would help them become acquainted with and involved in the life of our congregation. We handed out a pictorial directory, a constitution and by-laws (whoopee!), a Sunday school schedule, a budget, and explained the opportunities for worship, education, and service that were available for that new brother and sister’s growth in faith.

At the end of the night, as we were standing on the doorstep saying good-bye, my partner reached into his pocket and slyly sat something down on a shelf to the side of the door.

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He whispered to the new members, "I'll just set these down over here and if you want to use them, you can. If you have questions, call."

By the guarded tone of his voice, I wondered what kind of contraband he had brought with him. I expected to see my dad's red books! You know what it was? Offering envelopes.

I'm glad I've met people over the years of my life who talk openly, humbly, and joyfully about what they give to God and why and the satisfaction they've found in doing so. Far from sounding like they're ashamed or embarrassed, far from sounding like they're whispering some sordid stuff not fit for mixed company, their talking about giving is a reveling in the privilege and pleasure of returning thanks to God.

What I'm saying is that in the absence of my father's teaching me openly about such things as religion and money, I'm grateful for having unlearned some of the misinformation and falsehoods that are out there.

I'm glad I've learned to see giving to God in its proper, biblical light: as a gift given in gratitude for all God has given me, shared with my church family and with people near and far.

Where did I learn the right attitude toward giving? Well, from the Bible. And I learned through the cadre of faithful stewards I've met in congregations I've served. But most all through something that happened to me in June of 1984. That's when I married Jennie Taylor.

When we were engaged and were sharing our values, hopes, and dreams, she said, "It's important to me that we tithe — set aside at least the first 10% of our income to God, the greatest portion of that going to whatever church we belong to and the rest to organizations we feel make a difference for good in our world."

I said, "Tithe? 10%? That's not something my parents ever taught me."

I had just received my letter of call to my first church. It was May 1985. My salary and housing allowance added up to

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\$19,000. I did the math—a tithe would be \$1,900. Divided by 52 equaled \$36.52 a week. My Dad did teach me math. I thought to myself: \$36.52 a week! Yikes! Everything in me constricted.

To which my fiancée said, “That’s a tithe and it’s important to me that we do that in our marriage. God is good. We’ll have enough.”

My father never taught me that.

The most important things in life we teach our children. “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” It was clear to me in my talking with Jennie those years ago that as a child she had learned truths about giving I hadn’t learned at all.

I asked her, “Where did you get your perspective on giving?”

She said, “It’s something my father taught me.”

What he taught her, I’ll teach you next week.