

# ***A Nonprofit Prophet***

John 2:13-22

Americans are notable for their charitable giving. According to the National Philanthropic Trust<sup>1</sup>, over \$335 *billion* was given to charities and other nonprofit organizations in 2013, with an annual household contribution of nearly \$3000. The largest portion went to religious organizations at 31 percent, with educational institutions coming in at a distant second at 16 percent of charitable dollars. That means, nearly \$100 billion went to support faith-based enterprises, most of which are local congregations of one type or another.

This is not to say all charitable dollars were well spent. Religious funding aside, according to Charity Navigator and similar watchdog organizations, there are good charities to support and not-so-good ones to watch out for. The main criterion is, how much of your charitable gift serves the intended purpose and what percentage fill the pockets of administrators and fundraisers? Though we might think nonprofits have low administrative costs, many CEOs actually do quite well, often comparable to what corporate CEOs make in compensation.

For instance, education and health-related nonprofits frequently have six- and seven-figure compensation packages for their top executives. Even the chief executive of United Way Worldwide reportedly received \$1.2 million in 2014,<sup>2</sup> though the one that surprised me was an even higher package given to the CEO of Goodwill Industries of Southeastern Wisconsin (that's a lot of second-hand clothing sales in Milwaukee!). Agencies like these justify the

---

<sup>1</sup> All information from [nptrust.org](http://nptrust.org).

<sup>2</sup> Data from [www.charitynavigator.org](http://www.charitynavigator.org).

high salaries on the fact that their leaders manage multimillion dollar operations and compensation has to be competitive and suitable for the responsibility. I suppose that's a credible argument to make. Besides, all they have to do is compare it to another "nonprofit," the NFL, where their CEO (Roger Goodell) makes over \$50 million a year! God only knows what Roger could get if they actually made any money in professional football!

Well, if that doesn't rile you, another stinker is how much of each charitable dollar goes into fundraising itself! Some charities spend atrocious amounts of money on solicitation. Of the 50 worst charities to support, nearly all of them are designated so because over 70% (sometimes as high as 95%) of the money received goes out to professional fundraisers doing their bidding. Some of the worst culprits claim to promote popular causes such as children's welfare, cancer research, police benevolences, firefighters, and veterans. In several cases, *less than one percent* of the monies raised goes for the cause they represent! All this is to say, before any of us hand out our hard-earned money to some good cause, check them out online to find out if it's worth it ([www.charitynavigator.org](http://www.charitynavigator.org)).

Money, of course, has a way of distorting the value of any institution or mission. Whenever business interests take control of even the best of causes, then the entire purpose begins to morph from being a service to humanity to just another way to make a buck. It's not to say that those who work in nonprofits shouldn't get a fair wage, but it is to say that the element of service has to be an integral part of it as well, simply because the money received, for the most part, is generated from the good will of the donors. To receive excessive

compensation is an insult to the benefactors and deceptive in the solicitation, since contributions are often given voluntarily with the sole intent of helping those less fortunate, not in making someone else rich.

Frankly, there's a higher moral standard and expectation that we associate with charities and nonprofits, assuming that they are raising funds to fulfill their mission, not to pad their own pockets. Accountability is important because so much is based on trust and a sincere and consistent commitment to the mission. Exposing manipulation and fraud is as much a valuable public service to potential donors as the cause might be to its intended recipients. Transparency and trust usually go hand in hand. For we know, deceptive practices will dry up the spigot faster than just about anything else. A breach in public trust usually results in an unsupportable cause.

Our concerns for fiscal integrity in charities and other nonprofit organizations today is not much different from biblical times, at least as it pertained to the management of the temple treasury (which was the only institution in ancient Judea that was in any way comparable to a charity). Our text for today is the well-known episode of when Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem and, in a rage, threw out the moneychangers and the peddlers of sacrifices in a prophetic action commonly referred to as “the cleansing of the temple.” It is one of the few stories that is included in all four of the gospels, though John places it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, whereas for Matthew, Mark, and Luke it occurred at a more likely time—a few days before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Regardless of when it occurred, the

event itself is a rare illustration of Jesus' temper, outraged as he was over the practices that routinely took place in and around the temple in Jerusalem.

What was it that provoked Jesus? Was he upset money was being exchanged in a religious setting—that the temple should function free of any solicitation, simply because of the greed and corruption that can come with finances? That's often the interpretation Christians have held down through the ages. Money is perceived to be too profane and provocative to introduce into a setting that is supposed to be holy and separate, representing the higher, more noble and harmonious spiritual values in life. Money—the very thing that people lust and fight over, that divides communities into those of means and no means, the source of a false sense of security and often of great sorrows—is frequently viewed as the root of all evil, so it must be purged, especially in a religious environment.

Then, of course, there is the “Cranky Yankee” side of us which prefers to keep money matters private and quiet—that stewardship campaigns are a necessary evil and not meant to put the squeeze on us. We compartmentalize our church life, distinguishing between property and finance and the “spiritual life.” Spiritual people are supposed to live on a level beyond the normal worldly concerns like money. We are to trust the Lord and be satisfied.

Except this is hardly realistic, nor is it historically (or biblically) sensible. Why? Over a third of Jesus' teachings addressed the use of money. Our use of money is often a moral calculator of our heart's intentions. As Jesus said, where your treasure is, there is where your

heart will be—where we invest ourselves financially bears witness of what we truly value. Money is meant to be a spiritual asset.

Besides, Jesus knew the temple itself was the main economic institution in Jerusalem. To eliminate the business side of temple life in Jesus' day would have hurt a lot of people who made their livelihood from the commerce that took place within. Commentator Ched Myers drives this point home:

Christian commentators usually give the impression that Jesus was somehow surprised to find commerce in a place of prayer and worship...In fact, commercial activity was an entirely normal aspect of any cult in antiquity. The Jerusalem temple...was fundamentally an economic institution, and indeed dominated the city's commercial life. The daily operation of the cult was a matter of employment for curtain makers, barbers, incense manufacturers, goldsmiths, trench diggers, and countless others. Economic conflicts were to be expected...Many rabbis were concerned with the fairness of temple-oriented commerce, and often worked to prevent the inevitable racketeering. Jesus' indignation could hardly be attributed to a discovery of the existence of temple trading per se. ...It is the ruling-class interests in control of the commercial enterprises in the temple market that Jesus is attacking. <sup>3</sup>

Myers is right. The truth is, the priestly families (particularly the chief priest and his relatives) controlled most of the commercial activity that took place in and around the temple. Power granted permission and with permission came a price to pay. What upset Jesus (as it did others) was that these religious rulers were getting rich off the ritual obligations they were placing upon the worshipping masses.

One particular practice magnified this institutional corruption during the festival of Passover when this episode took place. It stemmed from the fact that the ruling interests were exploiting the demand for sacrifices. Jesus knew both the moneychangers and

---

<sup>3</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, Second edition, Orbis, 2008, pg. 300.

animal peddlers had a legitimate purpose in the temple cult. The moneychangers performed the practical duty of exchanging the common Roman currency (the *denarius*, stamped with the imperial image of Caesar) with the Jewish half-shekel, all in an effort to protect the cultic purity of the temple from the “graven images” of Rome when monetary offerings were made.

The peddlers were also providing a necessary service, especially for pilgrims traveling a distance for the Passover. They sold animals that would be used for ritual sacrifice, so that worshippers wouldn't be cumbered with bringing their “sacrifices” from home. Sacrifices for every income level were available, from pristine Bethlehem lambs on the high end down to the common mourning doves purchased by the poorest among them. (As a sidenote, it's interesting that after Jesus' birth, Mary offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving when Jesus was circumcised—a sacrifice consisting of two small turtledoves (Luke 2:24) indicating that Joseph and Mary would have been among the poor.)

What drew Jesus' ire in the temple market was the exploitation that took over at festival time, i.e., with the increase in demand came the rise in cost. At Passover, peddlers and moneychangers typically gouged pilgrims coming to the temple, passing off the increase in costs that the suppliers (tied to ruling class) were exacting, with the priests getting their cut of the profit. In other words, Passover was a profit-taking time in Jerusalem, rather than a humbling time of grace and gratitude in worship of the Lord. Such crass manipulation of the marketplace, exploiting the poor, is what drew Jesus' righteous anger, reflecting the zeal of the Psalmist and Prophets.

You see, this whole story is about the common realities and complaints over selfish interests and institutional corruption taking advantage of vulnerable people, who make their offerings and contributions with the best of intentions and purpose. By the time the Gospels were written and these stories made permanent, early Christians perceived that divine judgment upon this manipulative system and practice became evidently clear, for the Romans sacked Jerusalem during the Jewish revolt, resulting in the destruction of the temple and the collapse of the entire cultic system in 70 CE.

This historical and religious crisis is what convinced the Gospel writers that the cultic system of Judaism was being replaced—that the new way of relating to God—the New Covenant as Jeremiah had prophesied—was through the Spirit in community, not through religious institutions and powerful priests, which could be easily corrupted and driven by self-interests. Jesus' resurrection and the ultimate destruction of the temple years later would be the signs that Jesus' prophetic cleansing of the temple was marking the new era of God's reign on earth.

A story like this is interesting to ponder historically, but what does it mean to us today? First, it reminds us that the true Church consists of people in spiritual communities who follow Jesus' way—that there is no specific institutional presence of God apart from that. Another takeaway is that we, like Jesus, are meant to be prophets in our own time to speak truth to power and to work to unmask corruption and selfish interests that control even the best of our institutions, small or large. We start with our own church, of course, which with our form of polity allows for a great deal of transparency

and congregational accountability (God knows we have no credible hierarchy!). Plus, there are no set dues—we each give what we think we are able to contribute. Money doesn't become a central feature of our life, which is a good thing (it makes for tight budgets, but it's not coercive).

However, we all live in the world and contribute to a variety of good causes. So as we extend this outward to any charitable cause and organization that claims a mission to serve the greater good, are we not to be prophets to these nonprofits as well? We are to be generous with our support, but also wise and circumspect to ensure that there is integrity and intentionality in serving the interests of the intended population, not just to improve the living standards of those who control the purse strings.

Trust is a precious thing, far too valuable to let go without transparency and accountability. When we contribute to a nonprofit agency or charity, it's part of our moral service to investigate it as much as we can to be certain there is no misuse of funds. If any of us serve on a board or committee that oversees an organization, we can be a nonprofit prophet like Jesus, ensuring that everything is being done properly and considerately for those who are most vulnerable, both as recipients of the charitable funds and those who trustfully donate. Again, trust is so important and so fragile. Integrity is the most valuable asset any nonprofit organization has. It takes wisdom, courage, and perseverance to help ensure that everything is done on the highest of ethical standards.

The bottom line is, charities get a tremendous amount of financial support to do their good work—maybe not all they can use,

but enough to justify their mission—nearly \$350 billion annually all told. Our best service to them and to the integrity of our own mission is to hold all things to the high standard that is deserving of trust and the goodwill of all. For we should all want to be generous, and our generosity should be able to leave the world in a better place than before.

So may we wisely choose the means and the causes and the leadership that allow us to do this with confidence. For, in the hands of God, that which is truly good will last forever.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
8 March 2015