

The Gifts Are In Our Hands

Anthony Campolo, sociology professor at Eastern Baptist College, told of his experience one year at a Women's Conference where he was making a major address. At the point in the program when the women were being challenged with a several thousand dollar goal for their mission projects, the chairperson for the day turned to Dr. Campolo and asked him if he would pray for God's blessing upon the women as they considered what they might do to achieve the goal. To her utter surprise, Dr. Campolo came to the podium and graciously declined her invitation. "You already have the resources necessary to complete this mission project right here within this room," he continued. "It would be inappropriate to ask for God's blessing, when God has already blessed you with abundance and the means to achieve the goal. The necessary gifts are in your hands. As soon as we take the offering and underwrite this mission project, we will thank God for freeing us to be the generous responsible and accountable stewards that we are called to be as Christian disciples." When the offering was taken, the mission challenge was oversubscribed, and Dr. Campolo led a joyous prayer of thanksgiving for God's abundant blessings and for the faithful stewardship of God's people.

Giving is an Expression of Faith

When Jesus was confronted with the unbelief of the Jewish rulers, he saw an opportunity with a poor widow to teach true faithfulness. Jesus sat down and watched as people made offerings upon entering the temple. St. Mark records the incident in this way. "And Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and was beholding how the crowd cast money into the treasury. And many who were rich were casting in much. And one poor widow came and cast in two copper coins. . . And He called to Himself His disciples, and said to them, "Verily I say to you that this poor widow has cast in more than all of those who cast into the treasury; "for all cast in out of that which is superfluous to them, but she, out of her need, cast in as much as she had, her whole means of living." (Mk. 12:41-44) Jesus noted some were rich and others poor. He did not make class distinctions based upon appearances. As the all-knowing One, He knew each individual and the content of their faith based upon what He saw in the heart. The heart of the widow was indeed extraordinary. The rich gave out of their abundance while the widow gave out of a need to do so. What need? She gave because her faith dictated to her heart nothing other than to give as a natural expression of her personal devotion and faith. In this sense, Jesus declares that her "two copper coins" meant more than all the rest. Her offering was a response to what God meant to her. By giving "all she had" it was as if she placed herself in the basket. The rich were giving not in response to God but because their wealth was so great, its loss meant nothing to them. The offering of the poor widow on the other hand, meant everything to her.

Jesus Taught that Giving is a Form of Piety

Piety is how one expressly demonstrates faith in actions. Pious actions occur during church services when making the sign of the cross, venerating icons, lighting candles, kneeling or bowing. Through the example of the widow, Jesus adds the act of making an offering as an expression of piety. Archbishop Demetrios in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark speaks about how Jesus demonstrates a pure piety. "The Messiah recommends the example of this poor widow to His disciples, for she shows the essence of true faith in God in a tangible way. After showing his disapproval and condemnation of the attitude of the religious leaders and teachers, Jesus dynamically points out the fundamental characteristic of the true people of God: generosity and the fully confident relegation of everything at their disposal to God (Archbishop Demetrios, *Authority & Passion*, p.82)." Her example was a demonstration of faithfulness to God as something that flows from a heart giving for the right reasons. In the same way, we ask God during the Liturgy to accept our offering of worship as something that is "well-pleasing" to Him. This means that unless our offerings and worship flow from a response to God, as an expression of our devotion and love for Him, they will not be found well-pleasing.

All Giving is Related to Discipleship and Taking Up our Cross

Jesus identifies the widow's faith and sacrifice with His own that He was to make upon the Cross. Christ taught that for those who would be His disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is seen as using the example of the widow's offering as an implicit reference to His own voluntary sacrifice. "This form of piety...has as its core the offering of "whole living," something that can also mean sacrificing one's own life for God's sake. (Archbishop Demetrios, *Authority & Passion*, p.82)." Consequently, disciples of Christ give and make sacrifices not because they are asked to give or feel coerced, but their entire life is one of offering and service to Christ.

What can Free us to be Generous, Responsible and Accountable?

Anthony Compolo was teaching the fundamental truth that faithful Christians cannot be possessed by their possessions but are caretakers or stewards of them. St. Paul also taught that true freedom was the fruit of a piety that was in its own reward - this is the greatest means of gain. He said, "But piety with sufficiency is a great means of gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and it is manifest that neither are we able to carry anything out; but having sustenance and coverings, we shall be satisfied with these. Now they who wish to be rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires... (1 Tim. 6:6-10)." When financial woes plague Christian communities, the desire for riches has rendered its members stingy and unwilling to give, irresponsible and borrowing more than they can afford, and unaccountable because the conscience is darkened by greed.

We have the means to accomplish anything God sets before us. God does not want our money; he wants our hearts to be alive with a faith that is put into action. As we allow faith to grow and deepen, a freedom follows that enables a person to give as a response to an inner need. Over the past two decades, many humble, unassuming parishioners have been giving of their time, talent and treasure to the ministries of Assumption in God glorifying ways.

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