

NOVEMBER 6, 2016

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

“GIVING TO GOD”

In the early years of Nazi rule in Germany, there were times when the S.S., Hitler’s elite corps, didn’t have enough money. Hitler and the head of the S.S., Heinrich Himmler, gave permission to the local S.S. units to be creative in how they brought in money to support themselves.

One evening in the city of Breslau, in 1935, a movie theater was packed out for a film. Part way through the movie, the film stopped and the lights came on. The moviegoers looked around to see that each exit door had an armed S.S. man guarding it to make sure no one left. An S.S. officer told the surprised crowd, “Good evening! We have received word that there are some traitors to Adolf Hitler in the theater tonight. But we don’t know who they are. So.....we are going to collect money for the good work of the S.S. here tonight. If you don’t give, we will know you are one of the traitors. And if you give only a little, we will be suspicious of you.....And after the collection, we will continue the film.”

More S.S. men, each one carrying a big basket, came in and passed the baskets up and down the rows to collect cash. Apparently, it was a very successful “offering”----everyone gave generously and the “traitors” were never found. (The 3rd Reich In Power, Richard J. Evans, Penguin, 2005, p. 486)

Don’t worry---we have very nice ushers here at St. Matthew’s, and they won’t guard the doors during our offerings to make sure no one leaves!

The offering is a very important part, though, of our worship of God. It is the moment in our worship when we give back to God in thanks to Him for all He has given us.

It’s important enough for us to think some about what we do in the offering, and why. So that is what I am preaching about today.

Our annual fall stewardship campaign begins this morning. It’s the time of year when financial planning is done here for the year coming up. Part of that process is for each of us to fill out a membership pledge giving form. Those forms, along with a few pages of information, will be handed out to you after liturgy this morning. So today is a good day for a sermon on giving to God....

I would like to share three important principles about giving to God. (These principles, in shorter form, are also in the information that you will receive today.)

First principle----We should give to God primarily out of gratitude, not obligation. Our giving should not be because we “have to”, but because we “want to.” That’s why we don’t have membership dues here. Dues are for clubs and bowling teams. We are not a club or a bowling team, but a family in Christ. So no dues. Instead, each of us through our pledged giving gives what we believe God wants us to give.

Out of gratitude, not out of obligation, we give to God. Again, not because we have to, but because we want to, because we are thankful to Him. We are grateful and so we give back to him.

Second principle---We should give to God primarily out of gratitude, not because of parish financial needs. Of course, churches need money to function. But that should not be the main reason we give to God. Gratitude and thankfulness should be the main reasons.

Let me give you an extreme example. Let's imagine one of you invents a new kind of shoe polish. It's far superior to any shoe polish ever made before and you get rich as the whole world turns to your polish to shine its shoes. You become a billionaire in a year. And you decide to give millions and millions to your church. The parish is set financially for many years to come. We can build a huge and wonderful church. We can have a huge budget without a worry. Really, no one else ever has to give to the church again. So would we then throw away the offering plates? I hope not. We would all just keep right on giving to God through the church. Why? Because we should be giving not because the church needs it, but because we want to show our gratitude to God.. And I'm sure God would guide us as to how, as a church, to help people with all that money!

Yes, parishes certainly need money! But even if we didn't, we should keep right on giving to God, because we should give primarily out of gratitude, not because of the parish's need for money. And when we give generously out of gratitude, the parish's needs will be met.

Third principle. This principle was taught to us by Bishop MARK on a visit here years back when he was our bishop. He said that when it came to money a parish should have its hand stretched out to those outside of the parish. Stretched out to see if we can *get* money from people outside? No, stretched out to *give* help to the needy outside our parish.

We should avoid looking at people not part of our church as a source of income for us--- can we sell things to them, get them to come to money-making events, etc.? Can we fund our parish with non-parishioners' money? Of course, when people want to give us money, we'll gladly take it! But that should certainly not be the focus, or even a significant part, of a parish's financial workings.

Look at it this way---imagine your family goes through a tough financial situation for a while. You are having a hard time paying the electric bill. Would you go door to door in the neighborhood asking for money to pay it? I doubt it. You would take care of it somehow yourself---working some extra hours, dipping into the old cookie jar, or whatever it takes. You would say to yourself---"It's my electric bill for my house. I can't expect my neighbors to pay it. I'll pay it somehow."

It's the same with a church. This is our home, our church---and the bills are our bills. So we should pay them ourselves and not rely on outsiders to cover our expenses.

Our hand should be stretched out to those outside our parish. But not to take. It should be stretched out to give help to those who need it. And God is faithful---as we help the needy, He will help us. And that electric bill will get paid!

To quickly summarize these three principles---1. Give to God out of gratitude, not because of obligation. Give because you want to, not because you have to. 2. Give to God out of gratitude, not because the parish needs the money. 3. Let us stretch out our parish hand to those outside of our church family--- not to get money, but to help them.

And, in addition to those three principles---three goals for us.

First goal---That more of us tithe, give 10% of our income to God. We don't require tithing, but we encourage it and teach it. And, as a parish, we tithe, give 10%, of

our membership's giving to the archdiocese for our church's ministry on a national level.

Tithing, taught in the Bible and part of our Orthodox tradition, is the normal way for Christians to give to God. God asks us to show our gratitude to Him by giving Him 10%. It's how we say "thank you!"

Many think it's unrealistic, just not possible. But those of you that tithe know it's not unrealistic and it's very possible. It's not always easy (what is?), but it's certainly doable. Those of you who tithe haven't starved and you still have clothes to wear!

But if it does seem unrealistic and impossible for you to give 10%, please still consider using the same principle of giving to God in proportion as He gives to you---but do it at a lower percentage number to try it out some. God asks for 10%. If you can't do it, chop it in half and try it next year at 5%. If that still seems unreal, well, try just 4. Try that lower number for a year and then evaluate at the end of 2017 as to how you are doing. Did giving God 5% all year destroy you financially? Are you now living in a tent? Have you become emaciated? If you made it through the year in one piece while giving God 5%, thank Him for providing you.....and then why not do another experiment and give 6% the next year?.....You get the drift! In a few years, you may very well end up a full-fledged tither and know the joy and peace of giving to God in the way He asks us to give.

The basic idea behind tithing and proportionate giving is to give to God in proportion as He gives to you. So, let's say you have a very good year, God blesses you well financially-----your income is \$200,000. Then, in gratitude you give God \$20,000. But if God sees fit to allow you to really struggle financially one year and you have to survive on an income of only \$10,000----then, in gratitude that He still is getting you through even if it's tough, you give God just \$1000.

Give to God in proportion as He gives to you. God will bless you for so doing. And, boy, if we all did that, we would sure have fun financial reports at parish council meetings! **Second goal**---That we become a totally self-reliant parish, that we pay our own way all the way. That we not have to rely on funds coming to us from outsiders to fund our own expenses. We're actually pretty close to that now, but we still have a little ways to go..... **Third goal**---That we more and more reach out our hand to those outside our church-----not to get, but to give. We do actually carry out quite a lot of ministry of that sort. We do a lot, and we give a fair amount to the needy, mission work, etc.

But there is always more that needs to be done. And so it's a good goal to always increase each year how much we give to the needy. For as we help them, God will help us. Hopefully, when we go through our budget for 2017 next month we will see an increase in it for this, like we did in this year's budget.

Today, after the liturgy, you will be given materials for our stewardship campaign. Please read it carefully, consider it well, and pray about it. What can you give? Can you step out in faith and perhaps give more to God this next year?

Giving to God is not a depressing thing or a frightening thing. It is a blessed thing to do. As our Lord Jesus Christ said, quoted by St. Paul in Acts 20:35---"It is more blessed to give than to receive." May God bless us as we give.

