

Giving and Tithing

TOO BUSY TO SERVE

Nothing interferes more with our ability to serve God than our need to earn a living. An observer from one hundred years ago would be awestruck by the "improvement" in our living standard and by the amount of leisure time our technology now provides us. Few North Americans regularly work more than a fifty-hour week; most work forty-four hours or less. In addition, we now live an average of eighteen years longer than we did one hundred years ago and have at least one-third more disposable income per family. When all of those factors are weighed, together with the fact that in America alone there are perhaps twenty million Christians, it seems clear that we ought to be getting out the message of Jesus Christ much better than we are.

The simple truth is that most Americans are too busy to serve God. We have grown complacent and comfortable in God's blessing and have forgotten the first commandment. In the meantime, immorality and cults have grown to alarming proportions because their advocates are more zealous

in their support than we are. Since God *asks* for obedience rather than demands it, many Christians simply ignore the very reason for their existence: to glorify God. Without exception, God has a unique and meaningful plan for every believer that does not depend on age, income, or ability.

It is also clear that God calls each of us to fill this gap. Like Esther, every believer must decide either to be used by God or to be bypassed and allow another to be chosen instead. What a loss that we allow temporary comforts and laziness to rob us of true riches, both immediate and eternal!

"Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness" (2 Peter 3:11).

Most Christians would never refuse to do God's will; it's just that the timing is not right. When God calls us, He wants obedience first and worldly wisdom last. We allow the urgent things of our society to overshadow the important things, but that is not unique to our generation. In fact, Christ experienced it in His walk on Earth and predicted it. He told a parable about God calling men to follow Him. They were invited to a dinner, but most were too busy to attend. They wanted to be part of what was happening but had too many responsibilities.

CONSIDER THE COST

Service to Jesus Christ is demanding. It may

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actually mean that we have to work as hard for God's kingdom as we do for earthly riches. Few salespeople consider it a great imposition on their time to talk about their product line. Being a success at anything requires dedication, training, and perseverance. It would be a hungry company that trained its salespeople to expect perfect success on every call. Just one turndown and they would all give up, considering themselves failures. Instead, the key to successful sales starts long before the product is seen; in fact, it starts at the job interview. A good sales manager knows that not everybody can be a good salesperson, and many don't even want to be. Christ knew that not everybody would serve God and most might not even want to.

Some want to have a foot in both worlds. They are willing to be called Christians, provided they can pick the times and places to serve. *"Jesus said to him, 'No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God'"* (Luke 9:62).

These people are actually worse off as Christians than they were as nonbelievers. They are content to know about God but are fruitless fakers who generate false blessings. They are poorly nourished spiritually and quickly waste away until there is real doubt in their minds about their salvation. *"Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture"* (Luke 8:6). They truly fall prey to

every wind of doctrine because they are too busy to grow firm roots.

THORNS OF LIFE

“The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (Luke 8:14).

In the parable of the sower, Christ defines the thorns as worries, riches, and pleasures of this world. At first glance, one could assume that committed service to God would yield peace, but judging from the way Christians avoid total service to God, the peace is bland.

Yet Jesus Christ said that total service to God yields peace and blessings within His will: *“For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things. But seek for His kingdom, and these things shall be added to you” (Luke 12:30-31).*

Each of us has experienced the thorns of this world. Everything around us is moving at a frantic pace. A family can hardly get one car paid off before another is needed. Only twenty-five years ago our goal was a high school education to get a good job; now it's a college degree. Family life is degraded because it now takes both spouses working to hang on to the “good life.”

GOOD WORKS

Just as misguided are Christians who apply themselves to fruitless effort in the name of the Lord. They busy themselves to the point of exhaustion, going to conferences and countless church activities and serving on committees. They rarely, if ever, quiet themselves enough for the Lord to direct them. They are irritable and often envious of others. They are working *at* God's work but not *in* it. Even those who walked with Christ suffered from this busy malady from time to time.

Once when Jesus was visiting Martha's home, she complained that she was stuck doing all the work while Mary just sat and listened to Jesus. Jesus told Martha, "*You are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her*" (Luke 10:41-42).

Many Christians have taken on a life of meaningless works to avoid the reality of serving God according to His will. The fruits of true service (see Galatians 5:22-23) cannot be denied, whereas the effects of human work cannot be hidden.

If you wonder how to determine if one's service was truly being blessed by the Lord, you might ask that person's pastor or close friends. However, the best and by far the most enlightening is to ask his or her family.

SOWING AND REAPING

Most Christians are familiar with the principle of sowing and reaping as it applies to giving—though few really believe it. That principle applies to sharing time in the Lord's work. Just as God can multiply the fruits of our labor, He also can multiply the use of our time. Any good administrator knows that ten minutes spent in productive effort is more valuable than two hours of confusion and frustration. Therefore one of the first things a busy, frustrated, overworked Christian needs to do is to dedicate the best part of the day, week, month, and year to the Lord. To do so will mean reordering priorities at work and at home and establishing sound goals, but before you do that read Luke 6:38.

GOAL-SETTING

PERSONAL

No other goals are going to be meaningful until the first and most important one is settled—one's relationship with God. In Psalm 51:10-13 David tells us of some prerequisites to teaching others God's way: assurance of salvation, a steadfast spirit, the Holy Spirit's control, and a clean heart. If any of those is missing, utter frustration will result. If a Christian's first priority is God, then an understanding of God's way is mandatory.

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That means personal Bible study. It also means a personal prayer life dedicated to the needs of others as well as to personal needs.

FAMILY

Most families drift for lack of a rudder: the father's leadership. A family's most important need is a godly father; that is far more important than all the material possessions a parent can provide.

WORK

There is nothing wrong with being successful, even by worldly standards, unless one becomes a failure by godly standards. The rate of divorce and bankruptcy among Christians is an undeniable indicator that Christians have been duped into using the world's yardstick as their measuring stick. Every Christian must ask, "Am I certain my priorities are in line with God's?" If not, a change is in order, no matter what the cost is in dollars and cents.

Usually those at the highest end of the material scale are the biggest violators of priorities (executives, doctors, attorneys, and so on). But equally guilty are many in full-time Christian service, with pastors leading the group. *"It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved even in his sleep"* (Psalm 127:2).

PUTTING GOD FIRST

To some degree, we all suffer from being too busy to serve God. Some are so busy doing things *for* God that they fail to do the things *of* God. Some have already been called by God to go into full-time Christian service, but they weigh the call against the cost and decide they can serve God better where they are. Others clutter their lives with so much materialism that they never have time to listen to God. The urgent things crowd out the important things, and Christian service is shelved until "a better time."

We can all give thanks to those committed saints, from the apostles on down, who did not think that fame and success in the eyes of men were as important as God's blessings. One day each of us will evaluate success on the basis of Christ's evaluation and none other. I trust that each of us will hear Him say, "Well done, My good and faithful servant" (see Matthew 25:21).

SEEK THE KINGDOM

"Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). The Lord admonishes us to seek first His kingdom instead of worrying about material possessions. There has never been a generation of Christians so caught up in worry about possessions as we are. We have a greater abundance

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available on a daily basis than any previous generation. Most of us have machines that reduce our daily household labor, our children are well-clothed and well-educated, and life expectancy is beyond God's promise of three-score and ten. We have insurance plans, retirement plans, disability plans, and unemployment plans. Yet we are so caught up in making more money and buying bigger and better things that we have lost our focus on the unsaved world. God's Word keeps asking us the same question: Are we seeking first the kingdom of God?

WHAT DO YOU STAND FOR?

It seems evident that since we will spend eternity in the presence of God and live only seventy years or so on this earth, we should be more concerned about what we will receive then than what we are getting now. But when we review our priorities, it is apparent that most Christians live without real hope, as Paul describes it in Romans 8:24-25. We're willing to settle for what we can see, rather than what is unseen. That is exactly the principle that Christ is teaching in Matthew 6:19-33.

Material things are not what cause our difficulties. God says that He will give us the things that the world cherishes so much. But are we more dedicated to accumulating material things than to serving God? The evidence shows that we

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are serving money—not God. “*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Matthew 6:21).

The question is often asked, “What do Christians stand for?” The answer the world would give is, “Not much other than what we do.” The sad part is that most people really want to know a personal God. We have the only hope for a world without hope; yet we spend our time pursuing vain things.

ONLY TWO CHOICES

Christ says that we have only two choices: to follow God or to follow money.

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24).

The scriptural warning is clear: We will be judged on the evidence of our material lives. The attraction of materialism is so great that Christ devoted two-thirds of His parables to warning His disciples about it. The writers of the Epistles amplified that teaching as they observed the destructive force of materialism in the lives of believers.

“The love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang” (1 Timothy 6:10).

Again, it's not material things that are the

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problem; it is materialism. What is alarming about our generation is that we have found a way to scripturally rationalize our excesses. Many Christians actually believe that we can attract the unsaved by having the best. Let me assure you that those who are seriously seeking God are not attracted by luxuries. They are attracted by an uncompromising commitment to God. If that commitment also yields material blessings, it's just an added benefit.

GIVE, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU

“Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return” (Luke 6:38). Few Scripture verses are quoted more often than that verse regarding the principle of giving and receiving. When I first read the verse, shortly after committing my life to Christ, I pondered it for many weeks. Did God really mean what that verse says? Do God's promises depend on our giving first? I read the previous and subsequent verses to see if perhaps it could be interpreted in another context. I then studied parallel and contrasting verses. After dedicating many hours to God's Word, I concluded that I really didn't understand the meaning of Luke 6:38. There were some obvious difficulties