

Will We Receive God's Spirit

Joel 2:28-32; Luke 18:9-14
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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Stewardship is ultimately about cultivating a life of humility and generosity towards God and towards the world. The practice of stewardship in our lives is not simply about providing the resources to sustain the ministry of a local congregation, though every congregation has to have some necessary fundraising mechanisms to sustain its mission. But the practice of stewardship intends to deepen our awareness of several core biblical concepts, all of which lead us towards lives of humility and generosity.

One primary biblical concept that grounds the practice of stewardship is from Psalm 24:1 - "The earth is the Lord's and all that is therein." Our possessions do not ultimately belong to us. Our children do not ultimately belong to us. Our bodies do not even ultimately belong to us. Our faith teaches us that God has given all of these things to us – our bodies, our children, our resources and possessions – has loaned them to us, as it were, to enjoy, to love, and to help them flourish, and we are responsible for how we help them flourish.

This is part of why the Luke 18 reading today is so very interesting. A Pharisee and a tax collector go up to the temple to pray, and while the tax collector acknowledges his shortcomings, the Pharisee congratulates himself and thanks the Lord for the ways that his spiritual life is so exemplary. What we can observe is that the things which this particular Pharisee says that he is doing – fasting and tithing – *are actually good and beneficial things*.

Fasting is a time-honored practice for orienting our bodies towards God, rather than being oriented towards the world's economies of consumption and craving. When we fast, we refrain or abstain from something that is taking up space in our lives and in our bodies, in order that we may devote that space to God.

Tithing is the practice of giving 1/10 of one's income and resources towards the Lord's work in the world. It is the practice of returning 10% to God, who – as Psalm 24 teaches us – has actually given us 100% of what we have, and then God invites us to keep and enjoy 90%, returning 10% to God as an acknowledgement of the Lord's generosity to us, and so that we hold on less tightly to the rest. Tithing is a time-honored practice and goal for our giving and our stewardship. My wife Laura and I are not yet at the tithing level with our giving to our congregations and other charitable

organizations whose work we support – we’re still working at it - but that is what we are aiming for and working towards.

The goal with both fasting and tithing is for us to place God at the center of our lives, living less out of fear and anxiety and control, and more out of grace and open-hearted love.

What the Pharisee is doing are not bad things. The problem is that the Pharisee has fallen into one of the traps that surround the spiritual life.

One trap, which our Pharisee has found, is the trap of thinking that our giving...or our leading...or our serving...or our working hard *earns us a special place in God's eyes and in God's kingdom*. This has been a trap from time immemorial. The trap of spiritual superiority is always waiting around the corner in the spiritual life. We put a lot of effort into something, and then we think we ought to get some kind of reward for it, ought to get some kind of special seat at Jesus' table. The apostles James and John are thinking like this when they approach Jesus and ask if they can have seats at his right hand and at his left in glory. Spiritual superiority has snagged our dear Pharisee in Luke 18, where he assumed that his great behavior had made himself righteous. He was, literally, *self-righteous*. Luke tells us in verse 9 that Jesus told this parable to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” That’s the problem with the first trap. When we place our trust in ourselves, we are saying that we do not actually need God, we have fooled ourselves into thinking that we do not actually need grace. Which is a lonely place to be.

The other thing that Luke tells us about those who fall into this first trap is that they “regarded others with contempt.” This phrase lands with a special force in our contemporary society, for we live in a society where contempt for other people is running wild. People all over the political spectrum, all over the social spectrum, all over the religious spectrum, all over the economic spectrum, are tempted and encouraged to view those who are different from them as worthy of contempt. We sneer at each other and view others with disdain, and we often feel entirely justified in doing so. Whenever we do this, we typically lose sight of two things. One is that the person whom we are holding in contempt is a beloved child of God for whom Jesus died. And the other is that, while it is true that the other person is a sinner, it is also true that we are a sinner just as they are. Romans 3 teaches us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Our Pharisee forgot this. Our Pharisee thought that he and the tax collector were in entirely different categories from each other. And the parable ends up telling us that it was the tax collector who went home justified.

If the first trap of righteousness is the trap of spiritual superiority, the second trap that can attend to our giving and our serving and our engaging in the mission work of the Lord is the trap of doing these things from a place of guilt and resentment. We may think, “I don’t really want to do this, but I’m going to feel guilty if I don’t, so I

guess I'll do it, or at least do enough of it to check the box." This is the spiritual trap of feeling coerced into giving or serving. We are not serving or giving out of gratitude, or out of joy, but out of a spirit of compulsion. To this trap, the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9 that "each of you must give as you have made up your own mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." God does not want us giving or serving or loving through clenched teeth. If you have ever received a gift from someone and you could tell that they really did not want to give you the gift, it sort of spoils the gift. As followers of Jesus, we give and we love, because when we were in no shape at all, when we were down and out, when we were broken and kicked to the side of the road, God loved us, and came alongside us, and brought us back home.

Stewardship is about cultivating a life of humility and generosity towards God and towards the world. This is what happens when we receive God's Holy Spirit into our lives. It changes us. The Spirit sets us free from everything that would draw us into the first trap or the second trap. The Spirit delivers us from the trap of spiritual superiority and from the trap of spiritual resentment.

And Joel 2 teaches us that God does not only give the Holy Spirit to a few lucky people. God is not stingy with the Spirit. "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; your old men shall dream, and your young men shall see visions (Joel clearly meant to include women in his proclamation)." Everyone is being given the Spirit. The Spirit which justifies, the Spirit which forgives, the Spirit which convicts and reassures, the Spirit which energizes and liberates, the Spirit which summons forth our courageous acts of discipleship and generosity and abundant stewardship. You have been given the Spirit. I have been given the Spirit.

The question is, "Will we receive it?" The question is what is keeping us from receiving God's Holy Spirit into each of our lives? What is keeping us from allowing God's grace to flow into our lives, to heal us and to change us, from the inside out? This past week, a song came up in my Spotify list by the contemporary Christian band, Casting Crowns, called "Come to the Well." The song is about how Jesus and his grace have given us what we need, how Jesus is a deep well of living water for us, but we keep on trying to earn and to secure that which we have already been given. At the conclusion of the song, the singer names a few of the idols that get in our way, things that can prevent us from receiving God's grace and God's Spirit into our lives: "your pursuit of perfection, your fear of rejection, your temporary pleasure, all your earthly treasure, dried up empty religion, rusty chains of addiction, all the guilt that weighs you down." And then the song implores us, "leave it all behind, leave it all behind, leave it all behind, and come to the well."

Stewardship is about cultivating lives of humility and generosity and joy towards the world, because we have been given what we need. To God and to God alone be all the glory. Amen.