

Sunday, April 15, 2018 – 3rd Sunday of Easter/Full of Faith III
“Everything We Have Belongs to God”

Proverbs 3: 1-12; Mark 8: 34-38

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Text/Application

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Ahh, money. If you're here for the first time today you might be thinking all your worst suspicions are confirmed, the church is just out to get your money. No fear, this will be just an annual thing... truth be told, it's something I've been remiss in talking about more often in my four years here. If it's your first time here and you're still feeling that awkward, "Oh no" thing, let me encourage you to think of it this way – we want to teach people to be responsible to God and what He calls us to – if we can talk about this money thing with compassion and care and you hear the Gospel preached, Christ crucified and risen for you in the midst of that, it's a sign of other things going right. I don't have to tell you there are enough cautionary tales of churches with mismanagement, embezzlement and the like, so this important. If you sniffed even a hint of that stuff happening here you'd be right to show alarm and go running the other direction. After all if we were going to mismanage the resources that are material in nature, how much more would we bungle the Word of God and applying it to the care of your soul?

See stewardship is a spiritual issue, not just a financial one. Stewardship involves more than money, it's how we use our time, our abilities and gifts, even if today's focus is financial. That's for a couple of reasons. If it's true as Jesus says that the love of money is the root of all evil, and if a full quarter of all Jesus' utterances in the Gospels involve money in some form, then a proper relationship with money, rightly ordered under God must be real important. Help in being rightly ordered shows up in Solomon's words in Proverbs 3 that are all about God coming first – many of us know the words, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" – we want to embrace what God says and just four verses later that wisdom continues – "honor the Lord with your wealth and the first fruits of all your produce."

No, I'm not a financial advisor but it is my job to teach you Biblical stewardship. Go to FPU with Tim Gardner and he'll show you Dave Ramsey telling you the what and the how – I'll tell you the why. Here it is: Everything belongs to God. That's the number one principle. There isn't a thing that you have that is truly yours. That is a radical concept shift for many people, we're inclined to say there are so many things I've done, achieved, acquired, done for myself

because I deserve it rather than a heart, spirit and attitude that says everything comes from the hand of God and everything, up to and including our very lives are worth denying for the sake of the Gospel. Moses puts it this way in Deuteronomy 8: “Remember the Lord your God, it is he who gives you the ability to create your wealth.”

And if it's all really His, if we're really just the kids living in Dad's house, that means it's Dad's stuff and I'm accountable to God for the stuff that is His that He gives me to use. And make no mistake – God has given us a lot to use. If you look at our assets and liabilities as a congregation there's 7.5 million dollars worth of resources – building, land, capital – given by our Father to carry out ministry for the sake of sharing the Good News of Jesus crucified, risen, living and coming again here in northwest Las Vegas. Thanks be to God. And we're accountable for it. If someone comes to you and says they need \$100 for a specific thing and then they don't spend it on that specific thing, they go and blow it on something to treat themselves, how are you going to feel? God says, “here you go, here's everything, it's yours, use it for your joy, your pleasure, to advance my kingdom... but you're accountable for it.” How are we going to use it?

One of the key things we've been heavily focusing on as a church the past few years in our strategic plan are our finances. That includes our policies, or procedures, our spending and use, carefully evaluating what we do and why and counting the cost over and against our mission, why we're here – “Connecting, Caring and Sharing through Christ.” That's just got to be because good stewardship demands it. It's God's stuff, after all, and we're accountable for it.

This is a good a time as any to set before you some things God's mission is leading us into. Most of you know we started a call process for a new associate pastor of discipleship. We're finally at the point for that desperately needed position to be added because we've seen a major upswing in congregational giving over the past five or so years, combined with a deep intentionality on how we steward what we have. While our exactly budgeted number for regular Sunday offerings is still yet to be approved for fiscal year 2018-19, our projections for how we're end 2017-18 in July puts next year somewhere right around 55% higher than it was five fiscal years ago. Wow! Thanks be to God.

So too we've received some generous large gifts aside from our regular giving and, after our tithes to our mission partners, we have \$117,000 set aside by the Board of Directors specifically as seed money, a bridge if you will, to help us grow into supporting that associate pastor position fully from our regular budget after three years. And by the way a quick aside, our Business Administrator, Julie Atencio, is on hand to talk with and resource you in planned giving or special bequests, that have enabled some recent things like the AV upgrades in our sanctuary and the ability to move now on calling an associate pastor. When people receive a financial windfall through success in business, or when people go to meet the Lord, they often like to leave a legacy for the sake of Jesus crucified, risen, living and coming again to be shared. She can help you with things like bequests of land, stock, money, remembering Mountain View in your will, things that help the mission go forward in the future so that God's people and this community would be blessed through you to ongoing effect.

But when we talk of our regular giving, we talk of our first fruits. You heard that in Proverbs 3, first fruit giving is giving where we give our best, not our leftovers. For years this is how it was for me, tell me if you can relate – it's so easy on Sunday morning or Saturday night to look at your bank account and see the account balance or pull out your wallet to see what's there and say this is what I can afford today... but God calls us to a different approach. First fruit giving is a term that goes to an agrarian culture. The first fruits are the very first things in your harvest, before you know what else is going to come in, before a heatwave or an untimely frost or storm or pestilence or drop in market prices hits your crop, **before** you're secure in the yield of your harvest, you give to God. There's a "healthy recklessness" inherent in that – to say God, you come first in all areas of my life, including my finances.

This, of course, is exactly what God first did for us. He gave up His only Son who denied Himself and took up His cross. God gave that which was most precious and valuable, with no sign whatsoever of our readiness to follow or our commitment to love. At the moment when the harvest yield looked most miserable, God gave sacrificially and it is the reason we have the guarantee of our forgiveness or eternal life. God's model really works for a life full of faith in resurrection living. Alleluia, Christ is risen!

It's taken me a long time to grow into a healthy recklessness, and I can relate to that, "What can I afford today." The last couple of years this is what it has looked like for me. Each month I make a budget – there are many ways you can do it, I like the free Everydollar app that comes through Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University because I can track my expenses right on my phone while I'm standing at the checkout counter when I'm buying stuff, and the money that I have for that budget is based on the pay that I receive the month before. The first thing I do when my last paycheck each month arrives is go on EasyTithe for my Mountain View offering – so when my last March paycheck arrived, which is my April living and saving money, before I've received any cent of pay in April I've already given of my firstfruits for May. Then, the end of next week comes my last April paycheck, and I'm ready to give my firstfruits for June before I've received a cent of the May pay that I'll live on for June. You can even automate it to pull on a regular schedule like any autobill pay feature, that's even easier still.

How much? This is different for everyone. We give proportionally – this gives some wonderful freedom because we can plan for it, set it aside, in keeping with your income. One suggestion that shows up in Malachi 3 and in other places is what's called tithing – we keep 90% of it to live and we give God back 10% – that's a pretty good deal – it's a proportion. Now for many people maybe this is new, and no way can you jump into giving 10% but let's say maybe you can give 2 or 3% this year and then add another percentage next year and the next year maybe 2 but the goal is to work up to be at that place where God would invite me to be, of proportionate giving because whatever it is that I receive, that's in my life, God gets whatever that percentage is and you always know what that budget item will be as you make your plans moving forward.

Another principle here is that I give where I'm fed – we bring the whole tithe into the storehouse – there's a spiritual storehouse where God will keep us fed spiritually and grow – that's Mountain View Lutheran. This is our home where we do life together around Word and Sacrament so it's the first place of priority where I give my tithe. Now we give offerings to other ministries important to us but the tithe belongs in the storehouse where God would have me to be fed.

Those kinds of principles are good but there's a heart piece that comes into place here too – He calls us to give willingly, sacrificially and cheerfully – 2 Corinthians 9:7 – “each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver.” If you feel squeezed, pushed under pressure, heart isn't in it here or this point in time, then don't. God wants you. Give willingly, sacrificially, cheerful. In 2 Corinthians 8 Paul describes a special offering made by churches on account of a famine in Jerusalem – the churches in Asia Minor, Greece, Turkey gave an offering for Christians in Jerusalem who were struggling – and Paul said, “for I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability and entirely on their own urgently pleaded with us in sharing.” There was joy in giving for them.

So let me introduce the idea of a pledge. Now, make sure that what you can commit to is what you can give, as we use that for budgeting for ministry. If you're giving as much as you're able and even beyond your ability, we want to be able to use it wisely for the sake of God's mission that is “Connecting, Caring and Sharing through Christ.” Remember, we give willingly, sacrificially, cheerfully.

Take the pledge card out of your bulletin, let me walk you through this – this is an annual commitment card that we're asking everyone at Mountain View to complete in some way, whether here or online. If you only check, “I'm going to pray” then awesome – but fill it out. Please take it home with you, fill it out, pray over it... we'll be collecting it now through April 29th. Our team will take a look at it. I won't see it, and I won't know what box you've checked. We'll invite you to say I'm going to pray for the ministry of Mountain View. I'm going to pray for my personal development as a disciple. I'm going to pray that we can serve others in the name of Jesus that impacts our community. Or, I want to give out of these resources. I want to invest in eternal things for the kingdom of God. Some have never committed to follow those principles – I'm going to begin to give regularly, like Paul wrote to the Corinthians, set aside, do the offering, etc. Others will say I'm going to increase my giving, or continue giving and it's this amount, or I'm going to try tithing – 10%. If your finances are a catastrophe – please don't do that! Get it fixed and ask God to help you to grow in your giving.

Malachi 3 God says something interesting – test me in this (tithe in storehouse) it's the only place in the entire Bible where God says to test Him. It has to do with our giving. See if I won't pour out so much blessing (now, this is not finances and wealth, we're not a Health and Wealth Prosperity church) then you can't imagine the joy and blessing you'll receive. We believe so strongly that for the next 90 days you're going to try tithing and you have a financial crisis because of it, Mountain View will refund all this money back to you because of your tithe. Then we can help you walk through the issue. The Good News today is this – we give out of what God first gives us. God's gift to you was never conditioned on what you give back, any more than a parent would expect their baby to pay them back for the care and love they provide in raising them. Through Jesus' death, resurrection, living and promise to come again God gives us a new life, to live full of faith, with freedom in resurrection living to steward the Father's things – man, we've got it real good! In Jesus' name, Amen.