

STEWARDSHIP FUNDAMENTALS

by Fr. Tim Church

One of the biggest mistakes about any enterprise is to approach the task haphazardly. A building, an education, a trip - all require planning. So it is the case with the formation of our Christian Life.

27 Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 28 Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? 29 Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlookers should laugh at him 30 and say, 'This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish.' 31 Or what king marching into battle would not first sit down and decide whether with ten thousand troops he can successfully oppose another king advancing upon him with twenty thousand troops? 32 But if not, while he is still far away, he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms. (Luke 14:27-32)

Now, I think it would be helpful here to notice that Jesus' use of the metaphors of the tower and the size of an army are related to the cross, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." Jesus is helping those who are listening to his teachings to make a clear and calculated decision about being a disciple.

The miracles of Jesus and his promise of care and protection make him an attractive leader, but his intention is to lead us to the holiness of self-sacrificial love represented in the cross. This is the cross we are to carry and, while it comes in many forms, our own willingness to give is undoubtedly at the center of what it means for us.

For many Christians, the first step in the stewardship journey is the recognition that it is a necessary part of our life and faith. We cannot imagine that we can eliminate this. Our substantial and faithful participation in giving to the church is essential to the church, but it is also essential to our peace of soul. We need always to be striving to do the right thing.

41 He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. 43 Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, "Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. 44 For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood. (Mark 12:41-44)

Jesus' praise of this widow establishes the holiness of our support of the church, but even more it demonstrates the depth of giving to which God calls us. The Old Testament standard of giving is the tithe, which is ten percent of one's income. The New Testament standard is this widow, the cross, the lives of the saints and martyrs. There is no limit to what God might call us to give.

To prepare us for whatever God might call us to give, we need to be regular and disciplined about our giving. Starting somewhere is important, and then by growing into our giving by adding a percentage point each year we will reach the goal of responsible giving. The satisfaction of knowing that we have been given the opportunity to share in the work of the church is an astonishing gift.

Even though we may never be aware in this life of the good God has accomplished through us, perhaps someday God will let us see the future fruit of our giving. Imagine a young person, a traveler, a single mom, a grief stricken grandfather sitting alone in the church. They feel the weight of the sorrow of the cross bearing down on them. Then, as they look at the beauty and peace that surrounds them, they sense the presence of God. The prayers of those that have gone before them are holding them up, making their burden a little lighter.

The gift someone shared has made it possible for them to kneel in this church, and to know that God loves them, no matter how hard life has become. Perhaps this is the fruit of your gift.

Give until it hurts and then continue to give until it does not hurt any more.