

## **Session G: Becoming Good Financial Stewards**

**Prayer:** *Be with us Holy Spirit.* Kindle our enthusiasm and douse our anxieties. Grant us strength and courage to love and serve you. Help us trust you always and give control of our lives and communities over to you. Help us in all things to live out of your abundance rather than our scarcity. Help us abide in you. Jesus said that if we abide in you, you will grant whatever we ask. *Let this all be to your glory and praise.*

### **Scripture Lessons: Compare Luke 19:1-10:**

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

### **With the more familiar stewardship story (from Luke 18:18-27 and Mark 10:17-27:**

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

## *Discussion*

What did you hear?

Jesus helps us become stronger Christians through our church membership. Stewardship is an important part of church membership and Christian discipleship. Jesus clearly thought stewardship was important. One sixth of his words and one third of his parables in the New Testament deal with our relationship with our material possessions or with the stewardship of other gifts God has given us.

We would like to have the Zaccheus story told of ourselves! The people grumbled, saying "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." We would like to have Jesus as a guest in our lives, to have Jesus say to us, "Hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today" and "Today salvation has come to this house." Zacchaeus tries to see Jesus and he keeps trying until he does. Then when he sees Jesus he repents, gives away half his possessions and rights the wrongs he has done to others. A thief and sinner repents and is saved!

The problem is that we often identify a lot more with this unnamed morality-focused character in the second lesson than we do with the thief and sinner. Maybe Jesus does too. He seems rather harsh with Zacchaeus. Jesus' response to this man is unusually special, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Jesus' loving response to the man is to directly invite him to become his disciple: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

The man goes away shocked and grieving, because he can't leave his possessions to follow Jesus. The kingdom of God was at hand and this man couldn't make the changes necessary to enter it. Jesus is aware how hard it is for each of us to do what we need to do to follow him. Faithful stewardship is not just giving up all of our possessions, but accepting and using our gifts to orient ourselves to God – at least in small ways to become disciples of Jesus.

Jesus' response to each of us is the same: Jesus, looking at you, loves you! And Jesus invites each of us to become his disciple. Can we do what it takes?

To become disciples, we need to repent like Zacchaeus. This repentance is not simply, as many people believe, the emotional experience of feeling bad about or confessing what I have done wrong. John the Baptist and Jesus did not say, "Feel really bad for the kingdom of heaven is near." They said, "Repent!" The word is "metanoia" from the Greek word for mind and requires changing one's mind. Even more, it is about a change of heart. Repentance is changing one's whole orientation toward reality and living in light of that change.

Stewardship helps us change our focus to what is really important: to our relationships with God and other people. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). I need to contribute my treasure to what is important to me for it to become even more important to me. Just as I need to use my gifts to find the blessing God offers me in them.

Stewardship is a way to become aware of God's presence in our lives. We recognize our relationship to God by acknowledging the gifts he has given us and using them as God would have us use them. This is not possible on our own. Jesus said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Jesus also said, "Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you" (John 16:23). We need to ask for spiritual gifts and we need to turn back and give thanks to God so that we do not walk away from Jesus grieving.

Stewardship is not just about meeting a church budget. It is about dedicating our lives, our gifts to sacred purposes. We should not begin with talking about a budgetary goal we have to meet. We should begin by asking ourselves in prayer, "What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to become more aware of God's presence in my life?" Each of us has an opportunity to consider how we can more fully orient our selves – individually and as members of this community – to the presence of God in our lives.

### **Scripture Lesson and Reflections:** Mark 10:42-52

So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again."

Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

### *Discussion*

Bartimaeus cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

This is the same prayer Jesus commends in Luke, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, when the tax collector beats his breast and prays, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

This cry is now commonly called the Jesus prayer. As Margaret Guenther points out (in *The Practice of Prayer*), "it is a complete prayer, containing adoration, petition and confession in [seven or eight words]. St. John Carpathos offered the comforting idea that after each petition for mercy God secretly answers, 'Child, your sins are forgiven.'" We can pray this prayer as the breath of our lives, inhaling as we pray "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" and exhaling our sins as we hear God answer "Child, your sins are forgiven." The prayer reminds us of our needs and the power of Jesus to respond.

Notice Jesus' response to Bartimaeus' cries. Jesus stands still and directs his full attention to this man who has interrupted his journey. Jesus, the Son of God, is bound for Jerusalem; the action of the gospel journey is fast and furious; but Jesus stops and listens. Jesus always has time for us. Each of us matters to Jesus. Imagine being Bartimaeus and hearing, "Take heart, get up, he is calling you." What comforting words! Take heart, the Lord has heard your cry. Take heart, you're no longer alone; you're not a despised beggar. You are heard and you are being summoned to Jesus to be saved and follow him "on the way," to become his disciple.

This story is also a reminder that this transformation doesn't just happen to us. We have to ask for help in the spiritual life and we have to take certain actions. We need to approach Jesus for Jesus to respond to us.

When we approach, Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" He asks each of us to express our own needs. Why? He already sees into our hearts and knows our needs. But he wants each of us to understand our needs so that we can also recognize how God is meeting them. In the story, Jesus understands that Bartimaeus is asking, in referring to Jesus as teacher, both for physical sight and spiritual insight.

Mark is showing a contrast here. Just ten verses earlier, in last week's gospel lesson, Jesus has asked James and John, "What do you want me to do for you?" They ask for power and Jesus says that is not his to give. Like many of us, the disciples are blind to their own real needs even in the presence of Jesus.

Jesus says Bartimaeus' faith makes him well. That faith is revealed by his crying out. Even more, it is expressed by his throwing off his cloak, springing up and going to Jesus. In fact, Bartimaeus leaves behind all that he has to go to Jesus. His cloak has served as the blanket that has given Bartimaeus shelter as a homeless person. His faith is that Jesus will take care of him. For if Bartimaeus were not healed, he would need that cloak; and he would not be likely to find it again in the crowd and without sight. Bartimaeus believes. He sees that Jesus is the Messiah and knows that Jesus can heal him, if he chooses.

Saying that our faith makes us well is not saying that we save ourselves. But it is saying that we must accept our dependence on Jesus and the gift of his mercy. We are only saved if we take action consistent with our recognition of our dependence on God. If we want to grow and become disciples, we need to be aware of our dependence on Jesus and think about how

we are approaching Jesus. We can support this process of discipleship both through our church community and in our individual offerings.

In this community we can approach Jesus: in worship, in mission and in ministry.

The blessing of this church community is that we find God through it and in it. This community is expressing our dependence on Jesus and going toward him. We need to continually celebrate and praise God for what is happening here. *And, we need to continually offer our time, talent and treasure to support everything we are doing as a community and to center our lives in Jesus.*

The church needs this giving of ourselves. At the same time, the actions we take in giving of ourselves to participate in and support the church may become individual actions of "throwing off the cloak," springing up and coming to Jesus like Bartimaeus. These offerings bring us personally closer to God.

We begin to "throw off the cloak" when we offer my time, talent and treasure to the church and that stewardship is an important way of approaching Jesus. It's the beginning of expressing our recognition that everything we are and have comes from God. We're each utterly dependent on God.

We best begin to pray when we recognize that all we have comes from God and when we begin to appreciate these blessings and express our gratitude.

We best begin to approach God when we realize that God has purposes for the time, talent and treasure God gives each of us and when we begin to offer a part of our lives back to God for God's use and service.

In that giving, we begin to make ourselves a little bit more vulnerable and accept and prove our real dependence on God. Our lives are completely different when we focus more on God and become more aware of God's presence. When we begin to "throw off the cloak," spring up and go toward Jesus, our lives become more meaningful because we start to use them for their real purposes.

It's important for each of us to be able to "throw off the cloak" to go to God. In the passage just thirty verses before the story of Bartimaeus, the rich man couldn't do it. And he went away grieving. He missed the joy of becoming Jesus' disciple because he couldn't "throw off his cloak." I have trouble with this too, because I'm afraid to put myself completely in God's hands. But Bartimaeus did and I can see what happened to him. His prayer was answered and he joined Jesus on the way. He found ultimate joy and meaning. But to do so, he had to put himself in God's hands.

Giving of ourselves is an important spiritual discipline that helps us to learn to live in a closer personal relationship with God and with a sense of grace, blessing and joy. If we are going to pray the Jesus prayer, we also need to approach Jesus and become his disciples by giving of ourselves within and through our church community.

We need to think about Bartimaeus when we think about how we'll be involved in our church this year and how we'll make our tithes and offerings to support it. In these activities, we need to begin to experience what it means to "throw off our cloaks," spring up and experience the full joy of Jesus' presence in our lives! In Jeremiah God says, "When you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed" (Jer. 29:13).

Hear us, we pray, Lord Jesus. Like Bartimaeus, we ask you for the wholeness we know is possible only in you. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

"Take heart, get up, he is calling you."

### **Leadership Exercise: Sharing Our Financial Stories**

*Ask each leader to share their financial story as they are comfortable.*

Questions to reflect on as you prepare your financial story:

1. What is your earliest memory of money?
2. How did your parents discuss, handle and feel about money?
3. Do you find you handle money in similar or different ways than your parents?
4. In what ways do you and your spouse or partner or agree or disagree about money?
5. When you think about things financial, how do you feel?
6. Do you or have you ever worried about money? In what ways?
7. Does money make you happy? Has it ever made you happy?
8. Does money determine in any way your self-worth or your success?
9. What is your earliest memory of God and money?
10. How does God fit into your relationship with money?
11. Do you tithe?
12. How does giving affect your life and lifestyle?

### **Goal Starters**

The church governing board needs to set detailed goals for the congregation. Some goals will come from fully answering the following questions:

What is the financial condition of the congregation?

How many of the members pledge?

What is the average pledge?

Are pledges growing or declining?

What endowment funds does the church have and what are they for?

How many members see stewardship of time, talents and resources as an important part of their personal spiritual lives?

Are the finances adequate to support its operation?

How is stewardship and how is the financial condition of the congregation?

Is there anything we're not doing because of lack of facilities, resources, leadership or active participants?

How will we deal with any shortfall?

What does God seem to be calling the congregation to do at this time? (It may be that the ministry of the past few years is affirmed and continued. It is also possible that while the former direction of ministry is affirmed, the congregation will recognize that new challenges call for new resources.)

What resources do we bring to the mission of the church in the area of financial stewardship and what resources do we need to bring?

What outside resources do we need (skills, networks for sharing, consultants, workshops, training, funding, support)?

What are the main goals of the church?

When will they be accomplished?

Who is responsible for accomplishing these goals?

Goals might look like this:

Goals and strategies	When	Whom	Benchmarks
<b>We will worship God by becoming disciples who help Jesus make new and stronger disciples</b>			
<b>Stewardship Goal: Encourage every member to experience increasing proportional giving, with the intention of moving to a tithe of time, talent and money.</b>			
Revise and implement stewardship plan		Stewardship Team	
Maintain highly visible discussion of importance of stewardship throughout the year; share statistics regularly with congregation.	Monthly	Clergy; Stewardship Team	Announcement, sermon, Sunday school timeline throughout year; ministry fair
Increase pledging units from _____ to _____ by 2008		Stewardship Team	
Increase stewardship response (including trackable 1 time gifts) to 80%		Stewardship Team	New trackable envelopes
Increase pledges by \$_____/yr.		Stewardship Team	
Revise and implement privacy policy		Governing Board	
Encourage faith sharing in small groups regarding financial stewardship		Formation Ministry Team	
Maintain nonfinancial pledge opportunity		Stewardship Team	

Ongoing support for capital campaign	Ongoing	Stewardship Team?	Appreciate current givers and encourage new gifts; prepare display to celebrate achievement of goals
Develop Major Gifts program		Foundation Board	Include clear statement of interaction with regular stewardship, direct ministry and capital campaigns, purposes and structure (governance, preservation of principal, allocation of funds, expenditure of income, grantor options and agreements, investment policies, etc.) Those leaving a legacy are concerned with knowing how the legacy will actually work and be protected, and the people who need the funds need a clear, consistent and simple process
Leaders pledge first		Governing Board	

### Resources for Further Study

Durall, Michael. Creating Congregations of Generous People. Alban, 1998.

Hotchkiss, Dan. Ministry and Money: A Guide for Clergy and Their Friends. Alban, 2002.