

13 November 2016

**As If We Had Nothing**  
Matthew 6:1-4; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

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We're in the trailing end of the year and working on our 2017 budget. Our pledge cards have been sent out, and spare copies are available in the fellowship pads in the pews. We are seeking pledges to give us some idea what to expect in the coming year, and it is time again for me to preach about giving money to the church.

I can't begin to tell you how much I dislike doing this. It isn't that I mind talking about money. Jesus talked about money as much as anything. The fact is, we live most of our lives by means of money – jobs, bills, food, home, transportation, college, health care, retirement – so unless our faith is just a hobby, separate from our real lives, then we should talk regularly about living that faith in the world of earning and paying, buying and selling. But when I preach about money at this time of year, you all know perfectly well that I have an ulterior motive: I'm asking for money to keep the church going. And, after you've recognized that much, you may also remember that I'm one of the primary beneficiaries of the money you give to the church. I'm paid a decent salary, with pension and benefits, and that salary package constitutes about a quarter of the church budget. In fact, this year the church approved a 2% raise for me, before we had any idea where that money would come from. So when I preach about how you should give to the church, even if everything I say is true and biblical and reasonable, I still feel phony and self-serving.

Why should I feel phony? Well, maybe because American Christianity specializes in just that sort of phony – from the megachurch pastor who issued a special appeal to his congregation because he needed an upgrade on his private jet to the televangelists who had gold plated fixtures in their home bathrooms. And no, I didn't make either of those up. By their greed, people like that have tainted the whole project of preaching about money and have contributed to an exodus from the church, which has in turn led to tighter budgets, which has only made us beg more urgently and more transparently for more money.

Yeah, it's not my favorite sermon of the year. Let me see if I can do it with integrity.

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So just one more question. Why give to the church? You should give to the church if, and only if, the church expresses love for God and others. Do not give just to keep the church's doors open. It is not the purpose of the church to survive. That isn't enough. There are churches all over the world for whom that's all they have left and who ask for donations basically so that they can limp through another year without shutting their doors, churches who could disappear tomorrow and whose absence would not be noticed by anyone in their community for months. If you conclude that we are one of those churches, then for God's sake give your money to someone else, someone with promise. If all a church cares about is surviving, then it's time for that church to die.

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