

“Yes, All We Want Is Your Money”

1 John 4:7-12 and John 15:1-8

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There may be only one or two more commonly cited reasons for the departure of a person from their church than a variation on, “All they want from me at that church is my money.” Actually, that statement is not so far from the truth. In fact, all you need to do is rearrange the words in that sentence to be completely accurate: “At that church, they want from me all my money.” So let’s get this out of the way right now: yes, it is true, ECF *wants* all your money. But we’ll settle for ten percent.

Now you have to admit that this is a pretty good deal. Who else will let you off for ten cents on the dollar? Not the Internal Revenue Service. Not your credit card company. Not your student loan provider. No, only the church is willing to cut you some slack on what you owe them. All your other creditors are ready to unleash the threatening letters, and the collection agencies, and the credit scoring companies to get what is coming to them, but the church, oh the church, the church never prevents you from the communion table or the Sunday School or the choir not even if you never offer a dime, or a colon, or a shekel. Yes, the church will settle for ten percent, but we’ll give it away for free if we have to. What was it that we just heard from First John? “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.” And if love is from God, how can we charge for it? You can’t put a

price on love. So we'll just have to give it away for free. So how can anyone say, "All the church wants from me is my money?" when we give it away for free?

Yes, the church's position with respect to your money is complicated, or to be more precise, the church's position with respect to God's money, which you are managing for a while, is complicated. And so it is that we can talk about giving one hundred percent, or ten percent, or even zero percent, and still be on firm ground Biblically speaking. You see, we take it as an irrefutable truth that all we have is actually God's. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it," proclaims the Psalmist. God created the heavens and the earth. What did you create? We may have earned a paycheck, but we have earned it only through God's gifts of intellect or bodily strength or creativity, or through God's gift of natural resources. We may have exerted ourselves for forty hours a week, but were it not for the God-given ability to work, we would have earned nothing. And so it is that we can legitimately speak about owing everything to God, and of giving it all to God's agent on earth, the church.

But God is merciful, and recognizes that in human community, most things have a price. And things with a price need to be paid for, and so we are off the hook for giving everything to God, so that we might pay for food and shelter and medicine, among all of our other expenses. And that we might remember this gift of grace, and not be utterly self-absorbed, and so that we might care for those whose expenses outstrip their resources, we have been instructed to give a mere ten

percent back to God. The call to give a tithe, or ten percent, is found in numerous places in the Old Testament, and was the operative standard in Jesus' time, although he didn't expound any words on it. Personally, I think that is because he was subtly promoting the one hundred percent plan, starting with himself. What was it we heard from First John? "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." That sounds a lot like a hundred percent to me, a hundred percent of Jesus' own flesh and blood. And yet, all God asks from us is ten percent.

Now, ten percent sounds like a lot, I know. Ten percent is one out of every ten. Ten percent of say, thirty thousand dollars, is like three thousand dollars. I could do a lot with three thousand extra dollars in *my* bank account instead of ECF's. That would be a nice opening contribution to a "Julian's Education Fund," a noble cause to be sure. With interest, by the time he is eighteen, that could be worth quite a bit of money. But hey, if I have to give it, at least three thousand dollars should buy a little influence around here, shouldn't it? I mean, especially if there are others who don't give ten percent, or even two percent. What's that you say? It doesn't work that way? You mean, by playing by the Biblical rules, I don't gain any advantages? No special benefits? What's that it says in First John? "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another?" But

what if the other hasn't paid their dues like I have? Do I still have to love them?

Does the church still have to love them?

You will not be surprised to hear that the answer to that question is, of course, that I and the church still need to love people, no matter how much they contribute to the church's ministries. We love without knowing how much anyone earns, or gives, or even how much they love anyone else. You see, we don't love to feel good about ourselves, but for a higher purpose. What does it say in First John? "If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." We love to have God's love come to completion in us, that God's love may be shared fully with the world. We love not to pay back a debt, nor give to purchase God's love, but to respond to the love so eloquently described in First John. We can't receive God's grace simply by giving ten percent, or even a hundred percent. We'll have God's grace even if we give nothing. And the church will offer its love to all, no matter how much they give. Yes, the church's position with respect to God's money, which you are managing for a while, is complicated.

You don't have to read carefully through our passage from First John to see that it makes no mention of money, or the giving of money to the church, or even to the poor. So how is it that a perfectly good passage on love gets used by the preacher to talk about money? "All that church wants from me is my money," right? But it just so happens that it is pretty near impossible to separate matters of money from matters of love, at least in the Kingdom that Jesus preached about.

You can no more separate love and money than you can peanut butter and jelly once you put the two pieces of bread together. You see, every passage of Scripture can speak to the relationship between God, the believer, and the money the believer believes is his or hers, because every passage of Scripture is about stewardship, or the responsible use of what God has entrusted to us. “Stewardship” is one of those fancy church words that, frankly, gets used most often to try to take the emotional edge off of the annual effort to raise money for the church’s budget. The church doesn’t do “fundraising.” It does stewardship. But that is not fair to the ideas of stewardship, which encompasses a whole lot more than the financial aspect of our discipleship.

The English word “steward” appears in my translation of the New Testament in only two places, and neither of them is about money. Nevertheless, both of them shed light on the way we should be thinking about the stewardship of our financial resources. In First Corinthians, chapter four, Paul writes to the church “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ, and stewards of God’s mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.” In First Peter 4, it says, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift you have received.” In both of these uses of the word, the stewardship described is not of money, but of something of far greater value, serving a far nobler purpose. And if we are called to stewardship, entrusted with something so divine as God’s mysteries, and so sublime as the grace of God, does

it not seem appropriate to exercise the right use and administration of something so mundane as our money?

The Greek word used in these two passages is used elsewhere in the Gospels to talk about that right use of resources that have been entrusted to someone. In those passages, that Greek word, *oikonómos*, gets translated to describe the manager of a household, or a business, someone who has been deemed worthy, or at least capable, of the honor of managing the wealth of someone else. And that's the thing about our stewardship, isn't it? It's the very honor of managing the unimaginable treasures of Heaven itself. That God has entrusted us with not only money, but also of God's mysteries and God's grace, and even God's love: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." Maybe you've never thought about how much of God's mystery and grace and love you are called to give to others, or the church, or the world, but doesn't it seem easy to think about giving a hundred percent of those things? I mean, how mean-spirited would we be if we held back even one percent of God's grace or twenty percent of God's love. Doesn't it seem easier to think about giving a hundred percent of those things than a hundred percent of our money? And yet, there is no real difference between them. It's all God's, and we are stewards of it all.

Let me end by saying what I always like to say about the relationship between money and the church, and that is this: That you should be frightened of a

church that does *not* talk about money. You should run screaming from a church that does not strongly encourage you to give of your financial resources both as a response to God's grace, and as a spiritual discipline. A church that does not ask for your money is a church that understands even less about the stewardship of the mysteries of God, and God's grace than it does about the stewardship of God's money. A church that does not ask for your money is derelict in its duties of strengthening the sense of its members of the overwhelming responsibility granted to them in their loving, in all the ways that is expressed. Next Sunday, as we gather to individually and collectively respond to the question, "How much of my income is God calling me to give to Christ's work through ECF?" may we do so mindful of all that God has given us, grateful for being entrusted with so great a wealth as God's love and grace, and reflective on our stewardship of it. Amen.