



## 2018 Q1 Stewardship Lesson 9

### Offerings of Gratitude

presented by Lori Atkins

We are studying Lesson 9 in our quarterly about Stewardship and Motives of the Heart, and the title of this week's lesson is "Offerings of Gratitude", and I found a lot to like and be positive about in this lesson! You can see why by looking at the first two paragraphs in Saturday's lesson. Our God is a giving God; this great truth is seen most powerfully in the sacrifice of Jesus. " 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life' " (John 3:16, NKJV). Or in this verse: " 'If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!' " (Luke 11:13, NKJV). God gives and gives; it's His character. Thus, we who seek to reflect that character need to give, as well. It's hard to imagine more of a contradiction in terms than that of "a selfish Christian."

So what is an offering? Is it the same as tithe? Is it only money or financial?

What else can we give as an offering? Just as the blessings that come from the open windows of heaven are not strictly financial, neither are our offerings! We may have means, we may have special talents or skills, we all have different spiritual gifts, we are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. I believe the blessings we are designed to receive by cheerful giving...as well as the blessings we can be to others... should involve more than just putting a check in the plate each week, then watching a mission spotlight video, and simply hoping the money went to good use.

That same idea is what made me pause when reading the last sentence in the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph:

"On the day that Jesus welcomes the redeemed into heaven, we will see those who accepted His grace, and realize that those acceptances were made possible by our sacrificial offerings."

Presumptuous? a bit selfish? not convinced that will be our first thought?

### SUNDAY

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#### Where Your Treasure Is

Matthew 6:19-21 is a familiar text associating the devotion and attachment of our hearts with where and what we store up as treasure. Today, maybe more than at any other time in my lifetime, there is so much focus on piling up earthly treasures. And look at the words used to describe these earthly treasure chests: thieves can steal, moths and vermin can destroy – anyone had a sweater or clothes packed away and a moth literally destroyed it?

Or, what about inflation? If you stuff your money in a mattress or keep it in an account that earns no interest or return, what happens to it...what does inflation do to the value of your money?

Even if you do invest your treasure in securities or instruments that do provide a return, there are folks here old enough to remember the .com crash, the real estate bubble, the most recent recession.



So, what is this pull...this powerful hold that the quest for earthly treasure can have on us?

Obviously, the roots are found in fear, insecurity, maybe a lack of trust or desire to control our outcomes.

Does anyone else wrestle with this or is it just me?

This tension between trust, treasure-hoarding-avoidance, and a desire to hold on loosely – juxtaposed with the need to provide for family, send kids to college, keep up with Jones', fund your retirement, etc.? It is a real dichotomy for me, and part of that comes from seeing it play out up close and personal in my own family.

My father was a dedicated provider, he worked incredibly hard and sacrificed so we had everything we needed and even some of our wants...we experienced a modest, conscientious, tithing, debt-free upbringing. But don't forget, everything is relative...my dad was born in the early 1920's and grew up in the great depression, so today's modest and middle-class I'm sure looked like excess and abundance to him. Now my dad was \*convinced\* that Jesus was going to come back in his lifetime, so he had no retirement to speak of, no pension, no life insurance...and no urging or advice from the rest of us could shake his belief that God would take care of them no matter what. Well, in their later retirement years, mom and dad sold the only thing they owned of value - their house - and those proceeds were going to have to last them the rest of their lives, and fund all their living expenses and care for what turned out to be another 10+ years...but they continued to operate on a "you can't outgive God" philosophy, even on a fixed income. I took care of their finances, so I witnessed the details of this phenomenon, and what I saw was – despite living many months at a deficit, where more money went out than came in – over 10 years later, my mom passed away with the same amount of money in the bank as the day they sold their house...akin to the woman in Elijah's day whose jug of oil would not run dry. The results were so striking that it caught our financial advisor's attention and gave me the opportunity to tell him their story as a witness.

Of course, we were brought up in an entirely different era...and told to save, contribute as much to my 401k as I could as early as possible, etc. So, there is definitely tension between these two approaches for me – how much is enough, how much is too much...or does the actual amount not matter, and it's more about the heart motive, and the ability to hold on loosely, and the degree to which we trust God with how things turn out. I mean, we have read the end of the book...spoiler alert...we know what is going to happen in this country and on this planet that will make all our earthly treasures worthless.

I think the third paragraph in Sunday's lesson maybe sums it up. Matthew 6:19-21 contains one of the most important concepts on stewardship. Your treasure pulls, tugs, coerces, draws, demands, allures, and desires to control your heart. In the material world your heart follows your treasure; so where your treasure is remains vitally important. The more we focus on earthly gains, the harder it is to think on heavenly matters.



## MONDAY

### Stewards of the Grace of God

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Several times in this quarterly we have talked about our responsibility of being good stewards and what we are stewards of - we are to be “stewards of the gospel” and now “stewards of the grace of God”

Is anyone else struck by the enormity and weightiness of that responsibility?

The lesson points us to a familiar text in Ephesians 2:8

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”,

then goes down the path that this is a gift we do not deserve...which kind of made me bristle this week just as much as it did when it was mentioned in last week’s lesson. Dr. Jennings talked a bit about this concept of what we “deserve” last week, and I think it is worth re-visiting here.

Undeserving—if we mean by this word that we did not create the remedy that saves us, did not work to earn the cure to our sin condition then this is correct. However, if we mean we are so worthless, and of such little value that we don’t deserve God’s love and intervention to save us—then this is false. “For God so loved the world...” “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”

It is true we don’t deserve salvation as something we earned, but we do deserve salvation as the object of God’s love. For instance, if your child disobeyed you and drank some poison—what would your child deserve from you? Would they deserve you to punish and kill them, or would they deserve you to intervene and save them? Why would they deserve your intervention, not based on their behavior being so good that they earned your saving interventions, but because of who they are to you and because of your love for them!

Take a look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph in Monday’s lesson:

“Without grace, we would be without hope. Sin’s doleful impact on humanity is too great for humans ever to free themselves from it (or cure themselves). Even obedience to God’s law couldn’t bring life to us...after all, if any law could save us, it would be God’s law.”

Which law do you think is being referenced here and at what moral development level do you think the author is operating?

The Bible says, “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.” (Psalm 19:7) It also says, “He who finds me (love) finds life.”

Ms. White says,

“the law of self-renouncing love is the law of life for earth and heaven...” (DOA 19.2)



“I seek not Mine own glory,’ but the glory of Him that sent Me. In these words is set forth the great principle which is the law of life for the universe. All things Christ received from God, but He took to give. So in the heavenly courts, in His ministry for all created beings: through the beloved Son, the Father’s life flows out to all; through the Son it returns, in praise and joyous service, a tide of love, to the great Source of all. And thus through Christ the circuit of beneficence is complete, representing the character of the great Giver, the law of life.” (DOA 21.2)

“Jesus was “the Word of God”—God’s thought made audible. Not alone for His earthborn children was this revelation given. Our little world is the lesson book of the universe. Both redeemed and unfallen beings will find in the cross of Christ their science and their song. They will see that the glory shining in the face of Jesus is the glory of self-sacrificing love. **They will see that the law of life for earth and heaven is the law of self-renouncing love.** That love which “seeketh not her own” has its source in the heart of God and is manifested in Jesus, the meek and lowly One.” (HLv 11.2)

## TUESDAY

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### Our Best Offering

This lesson points us to another familiar story from Luke 7:37 about the woman with the alabaster box of expensive perfume who anointed Jesus’ feet just before his crucifixion.

Here is that story from the Remedy NT Paraphrase:

“One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to his home for dinner, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A local woman who had been living an immoral life learned that Jesus was at the Pharisee's home and she brought an alabaster jar of perfume. She stood by Jesus' feet weeping, and began washing his feet with tears. Then she dried his feet with her hair, kissed them, and poured the perfume on them. When the Pharisee in whose home they were dining saw this, he thought to himself, "If this man was really from God, he would know what a vile and sinful woman was touching him." Jesus, knowing his thoughts, turned to him and said, "Simon, I want to tell you something." "Please, Doctor, tell me," he replied. "There were two people, and both owed a banker money. One owed him five thousand dollars, the other only fifty; but neither had any money to pay him back, so the banker canceled both debts and absorbed the loss. Which of the two do you think will love him more?" Hesitantly, Simon replied, "I would think the one who had the larger debt canceled." "You are absolutely right," Jesus confirmed. Then Jesus looked toward the woman, but spoke to Simon: "Do you see this woman? Even though I am in your house, you did not provide water to wash my feet; but she has washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You did not welcome me with a kiss, but this woman, from the moment I arrived, hasn't stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with inexpensive olive oil, but she has anointed my feet with the most expensive ointment. Understand how reality works: She has been forgiven much, and having



received this forgiveness, she loves much. But he who accepts only a little forgiveness, loves only a little." Then Jesus reassured her, "You are forgiven; your sinfulness has been removed."

What made this gift her best offering?

Ellen White writes about this event in the Desire of Ages:

"She had sought to avoid observation, and her movements might have passed unnoticed, but the ointment filled the room with its fragrance, and published her act to all present...Mary heard the words of criticism. Her heart trembled within her. She feared that her sister would reproach her for extravagance. The Master, too, might think her improvident. Without apology or excuse she was about to shrink away, when the voice of her Lord was heard, 'Let her alone; why trouble ye her?' He saw that she was embarrassed and distressed. He knew that in this act of service she had expressed her gratitude for the forgiveness of her sins, and He brought relief to her mind...The fragrant gift which Mary had thought to lavish upon the dead body of the Saviour she poured upon His living form...Mary knew not the full significance of her deed of love. She could not answer her accusers. She could not explain why she had chosen that occasion for anointing Jesus. The Holy Spirit had planned for her, and she had obeyed His promptings. Inspiration stoops to give no reason. An unseen presence, it speaks to mind and soul, and moves the heart to action. It is its own justification. "Christ told Mary the meaning of her act, and in this He gave her more than He had received. . . . As the alabaster box was broken, and filled the whole house with its fragrance, so Christ was to die, His body was to be broken; but He was to rise from the tomb, and the fragrance of His life was to fill the earth."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 558–563.

The 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph in Tuesday's lesson says, "Giving God the best shows that we put Him first in our lives."

Does it really? Is this similar to the concept in last week's lesson that when rightly understood, our tithing "serves as a spiritual measurement of our relationship with God."

What actually shows that we put God first in our lives...what actually IS a spiritual measurement of our relationship with God?

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Jn 13:34,35

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 1 John 4:7-8

"Entire devotion and benevolence, prompted by grateful love, will impart to the smallest offering, the willing sacrifice, a divine fragrance, making the gift of priceless value. But, after willingly yielding to our Redeemer all that we can bestow, be it ever so valuable to us, if we



view our debt of gratitude to God as it really is, all that we may have offered will seem to us very insufficient and meager. But angels take these offerings, which to us seem poor, and present them as a fragrant offering before the throne, and they are accepted.”—Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 3, p. 397.

## WEDNESDAY

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### The Motives of the Heart

We talked about the story of the poor widow’s offering in a previous lesson, this is the story from Luke 21:1-4. So, compared to others’ donations, the amount of her offering was miniscule - two small copper coins, which thanks to Google appears to amount to somewhere between a couple of pennies and a couple of dollars...but Christ said her offering was more than all the others...why? Her offering was the most generous because it showed the true sacrificial nature of her character and her heart...she gave “all she had to live on”. This is another story that sort of stuns me and gives me pause. Have you ever given all you had to live on? I haven’t...rarely have I given what I couldn’t afford, and I am astonished and humbled by that level of generosity and trust.

Here’s a quote from one of the founders of our church that references this event:

“The act of the widow who cast two mites—all that she had—into the treasury, is placed on record for the encouragement of those who, struggling with poverty, still desire by their gifts to aid the cause of God. Christ called the attention of the disciples to this woman, who had given “all her living.” Mark 12:44. He esteemed her gift of more value than the large offerings of those whose alms did not call for self-denial. From their abundance they had given a small portion. To make her offering, the widow had deprived herself of even the necessities of life, trusting God to supply her needs for the morrow. Of her the Saviour declared, “Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury.” Verse 43. Thus He taught that the value of the gift is estimated not by the amount, but by the proportion that is given and the motive that actuates the giver.” – {AA 342.1}

“However lowly, any work done for God with a full surrender of self is as acceptable to Him as the highest service. No offering is small that is given with true-heartedness and gladness of soul.” – {COL 359.3}

“In the balances of the sanctuary the gifts of the poor, made from love to Christ, are not estimated according to the amount given, but according to the love which prompts the sacrifice. The promises of Jesus will as surely be realized by the liberal poor man, who has but little to offer, but who gives that little freely, as by the wealthy man who gives of his abundance. The poor man makes a sacrifice of his little, which he really feels. He really denies himself of some things that he needs for his own comfort, while the wealthy man gives of his abundance, and feels no want, denies himself nothing that he really needs. Therefore there is a sacredness in the poor man’s offering that is not found in the rich man’s gift, for the rich give of their abundance. God’s providence has arranged the entire plan of systematic benevolence for the benefit of man. His providence never stands still. If God’s servants follow His opening providence, all will be active workers.” – {CCh 277.2}



The 2nd paragraph says, “God alone knows our true motives. Is it possible to have the right actions with the wrong motives?”

What about the wrong actions with the right motives?

To give out of abundance does not require much faith (is that absolutely true?), but to give sacrificially for the good of others can indeed say something very powerful about our hearts.”

How important are our motives in giving?

2 Corinthians 8:8-15 lays out some principles we can apply regarding giving and stewardship. Here are those verses from the Remedy:

“This is not a command, for love cannot be commanded. I want to stretch and expand your love in response to the witness of the Macedonians, for you know the absolute generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ: Even though he was rich in all things, yet for your need he gave up everything and became empty—nothing!—so that you, through what he achieved when he emptied himself, may be restored to eternal riches. Last year you were not only the first to give, but the first to have hearts transformed from selfishness to love, so my advice is simple: Continue applying to your lives God's method of selfless giving, and finish what you started last year—giving what you are able. God knows your hearts, and it is the willingness of heart that matters. Every gift from a willing heart is pleasing to God, no matter the size; so don't be discouraged if you don't have more to give than you do. We are not trying to enrich others while impoverishing you, but trying to put God's design law of love into action and thus bring equilibrium and healthiness to all. Presently you have plenty and can relieve the suffering of those who are in need, but later, when you are in need, their abundance will provide for you. Then none will suffer. As it is written, "Those who had the most did not hoard it, and those who had the least did not go without."

What principles do you hear being described?

The rest of Wednesday's lesson is really positive and well-stated.

“Whatever your motive for giving may be, it is on a continuum that ranges from ego to altruism. The fight on this continuum between selfishness and giving is fought more frequently than any other spiritual fight. Selfishness will chill a heart that was once on fire for God. The problem comes when we let selfishness into our Christian experience. That is, we find ways to justify our selfishness and do it in the name of Christ. The bottom line comes down to one word: love. And love cannot be manifested without self-denial, a willingness to give of oneself, even sacrificially, for the good of others. Unless God's love is reflected in our lives, our giving will not reflect God's love. A selfish heart tends to love only itself. We must ask the Lord to “circumcise our hearts” (Deut. 10:16, NKJV) so that we can learn to love as we have been loved. Love, the basis of all true beneficence, captures the sum of all Christian benevolence.



God's love directed toward us inspires us to love in return, and it is truly the supreme motive for giving.

From the Teacher's Quarterly:

"While it is abundantly clear that God loves cheerful givers, it is equally apparent that cheerful givers love (delight in) God. That loving relationship activates their cheerful generosity. Non-givers and grudging givers somehow have missed that loving relationship; therefore, for them giving has become financially laborious rather than spiritually adventurous. We cannot overestimate the importance of this "love factor," because the gratitude that love engenders forms the boundary between grudging attitudes and exuberant munificence."

The Greek word translated as "cheerful" appears only once in the New Testament in 2 Cor 9:7 - "So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver" (why does he love them? does he not love grudging givers?) - and this is the same word from which we get the English word "hilarious"...what should that tell us about what our attitude should be in giving? What is the problem with giving freewill offerings out of a sense of obligation rather than out of gratitude and love?

## THURSDAY

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### The Experience of Giving

Is there an experience of giving...does something \*happen\* to us when we give?

The 1st paragraph states,

"If Christ came to reveal to us the character of God, one thing should be clear by now: God loves us, and He wants only the best for us. He asks us to do only what would be for our own benefit, never to our detriment. This would include, too, His call for us to be generous and cheerful givers of what we have been given. The freewill and generous offerings we give are as much a benefit to ourselves, the giver, as they can be to those who receive them. Only those who give this way can know for themselves just how much more blessed it is to give than to receive."

This is excellent!

Ms. White says this about the experience of giving:

"Even the very poor should bring their offerings to God. They are to be sharers of the grace of Christ by denying self to help those whose need is more pressing than their own. The poor man's gift, the fruit of self-denial, comes up before God as fragrant incense. And **every act of self-sacrifice strengthens the spirit of beneficence in the giver's heart**, allying him more closely to the One who was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich." – {AA 341.3}

"The reward of whole-souled liberality is the leading of mind and heart to a closer fellowship with the Spirit." – {CCh 277.4}



This sounds like a real change in us happens through the experience of giving!

“The Lord does not need our offerings. We cannot enrich Him by our gifts. Says the psalmist: “All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee.” Yet God permits us to show our appreciation of His mercies by self-sacrificing efforts to extend the same to others. This is the only way in which it is possible for us to manifest our gratitude and love to God. He has provided no other.”—The Review and Herald, December 6, 1887

Giving a generous offering can and should be a very personal, spiritual act. It is a work of faith, an expression of gratitude for what we have been given in Christ. As we give, freely and generously, we are reflecting in our own way the character of Christ. We are learning more about what God is like by experiencing Him in our own acts. Thus, giving like this only builds trust in God and the opportunity to “taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!” (Ps. 34:8, NKJV).

This is one of the key threads of harmonized truth in our integrative evidence based approach! In what ways have you experienced the reality of how faith grows through giving freely and generously out of what you have been given?

I love this quote from Friday’s lesson.

“The spirit of liberality is the spirit of Heaven. The spirit of selfishness is the spirit of Satan. Christ’s self-sacrificing love is revealed upon the cross. He gave all that he had, and then gave himself, that man might be saved. The cross of Christ appeals to the benevolence of every follower of the blessed Saviour. The principle illustrated there is to give, give. This carried out in actual benevolence and good works is the true fruit of the Christian life. The principle of worldlings is to get, get, and thus they expect to secure happiness; but carried out in all its bearings, the fruit is misery and death.”—Ellen G. White, in Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, Oct. 17, 1882.