

Mark Allan Powell tells the story of an early experience in the congregation he served, where he made an attempt to visit the INACTIVE MEMBERS and see if he might be able to get some of them to come back to church! He came up with a list of 50 families and decided to visit one family each week for a year. He heard some very interesting stories.

He heard lots of reasons why people had stopped coming to worship. Some of the inactive members had complaints about the liturgy, or church politics, or personal conflicts within the congregation. Some of them thought the church was too liberal, or that it wasn't contemporary enough or that the worship services were boring or that the ministry programs offered didn't meet the needs of their family.

He tried to find a common denominator and eventually did. All of the people he visited told him in one way or another, that they had stopped coming to church because they weren't “*getting out of it*” whatever it was that they thought they should get out of it.

People had different ideas with regard to what they thought the church should do for them, but all of the inactive members agreed that, whatever that was . . . the church had failed to do what they thought it should do for them!

This came as a big surprise to him, because growing up as a child, his parents had taught him that on Sunday mornings, when the family went to church, “*We were going to worship God.*” It never occurred to him that he was supposed to get anything out of it!

“I didn't know very much about church or about what it all meant, but even at a very young age I knew that it wasn't about ME – at least it wasn't ALL about me. These people didn't come from all over town Sunday after Sunday just to get together and meet my needs. NO. They came to worship God. ‘Six days a week God blesses us,’ my mother would say, ‘and on Sundays we give thanks.’”

Here is the great mystery . . . When we come to church for the sole purpose of worshiping God, something special happens to us. **Invariably, we are much more likely to get something out of the experience, than when we come for any other reason.** When we stop focusing on ourselves and our own needs and what we think we want to get out of worship, an amazing transformation occurs . . . within us. What happens truly becomes AN ACT OF WORSHIP!

SLIDE ONE

There are a couple of basic principles at work here:

- Worship is essential to faith.
- And sacrifice is essential to worship!

When we worship God, we are making God (rather than ourselves) the center of our devotion. And making God the focus, always involves some element of self-denial or sacrifice. It always means giving up something that we value. It always involves giving up attention to our wants and needs in order to focus on God alone!

One of the intangible elements of worshipping God is the act of sacrifice. That is why, in our worship services there is always an offering. The giving of an offering represents our sacrifices and our thanks to the God who has given us everything.

This message is evident throughout the Scriptures.

- In the Old Testament, after Noah leaves the ark, what is the first thing he does? He builds an altar and makes a sacrifice to God. (*Genesis 8:20*)
- When Jacob experiences God's presence in a dream and when he wrestles with an angel, he awakens and not knowing what else to do, he sets up a stone, pours oil over the top of it, symbolic of his sacrifice to God. (*Genesis 28:16-18*)

Consistently, when people are touched by God's grace and goodness and blessings in their lives, they want to somehow give something back to God! They don't always know what to do or how to do it, so they take something that belongs to them and give it back to God in the only way they knew how!

In the New Testament, remember the story of the 3 Wise Men, bringing their gifts to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus (*Matthew 2:1-12*). These mysterious visitors from the east travel a great distance for a single purpose . . . to worship and pay homage, to the baby who was born, "*King of the Jews*."

You may have heard the slight revision from the little Baptist church down in Georgia, where a little 6-year old boy told his Sunday School teacher that he thought the wise men were actually firemen. His teacher replied, "*Why do they say that?*" And he said, "Because they came from "*a faaar!*"

The Bible doesn't say what Mary and Joseph did with the gold, frankincense and myrrh. It doesn't say anything about the practical value of these gifts or what they are worth. What the Scriptures say is that these wise men make their offerings, give their treasures as **a pure act of worship, expressing their devotion to this newborn King!**

Remember the story of the woman who pours expensive ointment on the feet of Jesus and then wipes his feet with her hair (*Mark 14:3-9*). The disciples think this is a waste, that the woman should have used that expensive oil in a more practical way, selling it, giving the money to the poor. But for Jesus, that was not the point. Her gift was an act of worship, an expression of love and adoration. And Jesus says, "*Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.*"

There is a story about a priest who was on a flight from New York to Chicago. While *en route*, the plane developed engine trouble. There was no airport close at hand and so the pilot got on the PA and told the passengers that they were going to crash. One of the flight attendants noticed the priest seated near the exit doors and said to him. “*Father, the captain has told us that we are going to crash. Please do something religious.*” And the priest promptly took up an offering!

The offering that we give is an act of worship. Our giving to the church is an act of worship. Our pledges to the ministry of the church are an act of worship.

We know that people give money for all sorts of reasons. There is no lack of people and organizations seeking money for their cause. But in terms of Biblical stewardship, when we give, we are encouraged to give out of glad and generous hearts, motivated by a sincere love for God.

The problem is that, if we give out of compulsion, from a feeling of guilt or shame, we will end up feeling USED. If we give out of self-interest, to win praise or gain influence, we will end up feeling USED. If we give but then have questions about whether our money is being used properly, or whether our gift is really appreciated, we will end up feeling USED.

But giving that is grounded in the Good News of Biblical Stewardship never leaves us with these hollow emotions. Giving cheerfully, as an ACT OF WORSHIP, changes us. It keeps us from focusing on ourselves and our own biases and prejudices, and enables us to devote ourselves primarily to God.

So often in our giving, we like to compare ourselves with others . . . not necessarily in a blatant kind of way, but in a quiet, smug way. In our lesson today from Romans 14, the apostle Paul makes a very strong point about passing judgment on others. He reminds us of this simple fact, in vs. 10, “*why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God . . . so each of us shall give account of himself to God.*”

You see, when we focus our giving on ourselves and our own feelings, and not God, when our giving is not an ACT OF WORSHIP but rather an act with alternative motivations, then it is very easy to pass judgment on the motives of others, while we ignore our own.

Isn't it true that the people who are the most critical of others are most often, trying to divert the attention away from their own situation! I have heard these conversations before:

- We need to get the low givers to give more.
- We need to get the younger members to step up and support the church
- If everyone would give as much as I do, the church wouldn't be in such a bad situation!

- We need to motivate those who don't do very much to get more involved and give more.
- We need to focus on those individuals who are not good stewards so they can improve.

Well, as long as we're looking at those who aren't doing what we think they should, that takes the pressure off of ourselves. We can ignore what we should be doing in our own giving. As long as we can focus on the faults and improper motives of others in an aggressive way, we can defer or divert attention from our own lack of response.

Stop evaluating what other people do or don't do, and take a look at your own gift. When you're concerned about what others do or don't do, your giving for your purposes, not for God's

The bottom line in stewardship is always this . . . what you decide to do is ultimately a personal decision between you and the Lord. St. Paul said it: *"Each of us shall give account of himself to God."*

So go rationalize away! Whatever convoluted reason you want to come up with, for NOT giving to the church, is up to you. But I'm certainly not the person you need to convince! I'm not the person you need to talk to about this! Your decision is between you and God!

I have always asked people **to pray** about their decision of what to give. I don't say that lightly or flippantly. I say it with all sincerity and from a faith perspective. Because if you don't consult God in your decision . . . if you don't take this decision to God in prayer, I can guarantee that you will not be making the right decision. You will be making a decision based on your own feelings, on what you want to do . . . not on what God wants you to do.

I truly believe exactly what St. Paul says that each one of us will be accountable as to our generosity or lack of it. I don't know what your theology says to you about giving, about what you will give, about how much you will give, about what you support or don't support. But I believe that we will all be asked to account for our stewardship. My bottom line is simply this . . . I am not particularly interested in having a conversation with the Lord, and try to tell Him why I didn't support this church's attempt to grow and expand His ministry, back in the year 2008.

And so my giving will always be AN ACT OF WORSHIP. It will be a way for me to give thanks to a God who has blessed me, far beyond anything I could ever have imagined. My ACT OF WORSHIP, is simply to respond in joy and thanksgiving with my gifts, my pledge and my stewardship for this ministry we have been called to share in together!