

*Josanan Alves*



# FIRST THE KINGDOM



**How a poor widow teaches us  
the principles of true worship.**



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How a poor widow teaches us  
the principles of true worship.



**GOD FIRST**  
ADVENTIST STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES

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Published by Review and Herald® Publishing Association

Published in the USA

**FIRST THE KINGDOM**

Stewardship Ministries Department  
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists  
12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring, MD 20604-6600

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ISBN: 978-1-7331817-3-0

This book was Translated by Delmar F. Freire  
Edited by Megan Mason  
Graphic Design and Cover by Fabio Fernandes  
Cover Image: Adobe Stock  
Artwork by Thiago Lobo  
English Layout by Tonya Ball and Johnetta B. Flomo

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# FOREWORD



One of the most Adventist texts in the Bible is found in Revelation 14:6–12, known as the three angels’ messages. This text is the foundation of the message of God’s remnant people on this earth. However, it does not only present the message, but also the territorial extension that this message must reach. By stating that the everlasting gospel is to be preached “to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (verse 6), God is reminding His people that we do not have a work that is just local, limited to a country, city, or neighborhood, but that we must be united around a worldwide work.

This is possible through the faithfulness and integrated action of God’s people. Ellen G. White states: “The great work for the salvation of souls must be carried forward. In the tithe, with gifts and offerings, He has made provision for this work. Thus He intends that the ministry of the gospel shall be sustained.”<sup>1</sup> Tithes and offerings were God’s appointed means to finance the preaching of the everlasting gospel and the way the church distributes resources has allowed the message of salvation to be taken to all the nations of the world. So the strong sense of urgency that has always guided us as a people moves us in proclaiming the gospel to every person on the planet.

The book you have in your hands presents the biblical principles of faithfulness. Through the story of the widow who gave two coins at the temple, we will learn the values that move the life of a genuine Christian. A life whose trust is in money is a life of selfishness, where there is no room for generosity, altruism, or desire for reaching people. By and large, a person who trusts in money alone is not able to nurture the desire of following the gospel of Christ. Money should be a blessing in our life. And this will only be possible when Christ is first in our minds and hearts. Central to this book is the experience of genuine freedom in Christ.

This book is also part of a movement that will involve the eight countries that make up the South American Division. This program, named “Holy Convocation,” is designed for pastors and leaders to be engaged in visiting

each family in our territory, and aims to provide our church with the experience of becoming a tight-knit and more welcoming community, particularly in these challenging times of isolation.

May God provide you with an inspiring reading, and may you let Him guide your life and your future.

Maranatha!

Erton Köhler  
General Conference Secretary

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<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900), 300.



# 1 • ESSENCE VS. APPEARANCE



*"Its value was estimated, not by the worth of the coin,  
but by the love to God and the interest in His work  
that had prompted the deed."*

*Ellen G. White*

*"In a world where money is more valued than feelings,  
appearance also ends up being more important than essence."*

*Roberto Shinyashiki*

For a moment, picture yourself in Jesus' time. Imagine you are bringing your offering to the temple. The sumptuous construction, with all its beauty and history, amazes each worshiper, even those who have made this journey several times. Before gaining access to the temple, you have to stop at the purification tanks outside the temple and wash in them. Only then are you allowed to cross the entire Court of the Gentiles and pass through the gate called "Beautiful," which gives access to the Jewish women's court. The Court of Women is the place where women and men can stay. On that site, there are also 13 bronze receptacles, each one a kind of coffer or offering box in the shape of a trumpet where worshipers can place their contribution to the functioning of the temple. Each receptacle is marked with letters of the Hebrew alphabet so that people can be aware of the destination given to their money. The worshiper can deposit his coins in the storehouse destined either for temple tributes or for the purchase of wood, incense, or temple sacrifices.<sup>1</sup>

The temple courtyard was a place of great circulation, ideal for giving speeches. It was right there that Jesus delivered His teaching, recorded in John 8:12-20, in which He claimed to be the light of the world. It was in that courtyard that the story that will accompany us over the next 30 days takes place. Mark 12:41 says that on that day Jesus was not giving a speech; He just

“saw how the people put money into the treasury.”

At first glance, this story seems to be just about money, as Jesus sat in front of the box where the offerings were placed and watched people dropping their coins. However, one word in the text altogether changes the meaning of the story – the word “how.” This single word helps us understand that it was not just the appearance that Jesus was observing at that particular moment. What He observed instead was the essence of a genuine Christian.

You see, the text says that Jesus observed “how” rather than “how much” was dropped in the treasury of the temple. He was much more interested in “how,” which reflects the essence of the heart, than in “how much,” which reveals the guise of self-effort. The “how much” reveals only what we do, but it is the “how” that reveals who we are. When this is understood, the Christian life takes on a new meaning.

Many of us have been taught to live and to think of the Christian life only as an accumulation of ancient rules that must be obeyed if we are to reach a higher stage. This kind of thinking leads us to see God as a “superintendent” who is watching how much we do and, particularly, how much we do not do so that He can give us either the reward or the punishment we deserve. This is why I am so in love with the story of the widow, for it shows us that God is far more interested in the “how” than in the “how much.”

In the type of Christianity that Jesus presented, doing and being are equally important, even though in Christian life, being a Christian precedes doing things; doing is the inevitable result of being. With a given degree of human effort, we may even be able to “do” things that Christians are supposed to do. But Jesus has a more significant proposal: He wants to lead you to “be” a genuine Christian, that is, a Christian who has the essence and not just the appearance.

We need to understand a major truth: The enemy never wanted you to be a Christian at all, but since you are one, he tries to get you focused on how much you do or how much you are supposed to do. One of the goals of this book is to make you think that Christ’s ideal for your life is to transform what you are so that you can change what you do.

For Satan, what matters is that you take into consideration how many Sabbaths you keep, how much money you give as tithes and offerings, or how much you help others. On the other hand, Christ’s purpose is to get you thinking about how you keep the Sabbath, how you return your tithes and

give your offerings, and how you help others. He wants to see what kind of feelings drive your acts of faithfulness.

Let me explain this with a personal story. My dad learned to experience the love of Christ in his life. He still has some struggles in his Christian life, but he has such a contagious love for Jesus that if you ask him why he keeps the Sabbath, he certainly will not tell you that the reason he keeps the Sabbath is that it is a church rule. He will tell you that the Sabbath is the best day of the week. It is the day when he has the opportunity to have closer communion with the Person he loves the most. His anticipation for the arrival of this special day is so intense that, several times, I have seen him wishing people “happy Sabbath” as early as Thursday!

The same thing is true with tithes and offerings. The real purpose of faithfulness is to get you to recognize who God is in your life and to respond through obedience based on your love for Him and His church. Ellen G. White states: “The eye of God takes cognizance of every farthing devoted to His cause and of the willingness or reluctance of the giver. The motive in giving is also chronicled.”<sup>2</sup>

Do you get it? God wants to know what kind of feelings drive us to action. Are we willing to obey, or are we reluctant? Are the motives noble or selfish? That is why Paul said, “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). What Paul is stating is that God loves not how much I give, but the feeling that moves me to give. This adds flavor to the Christian life. Someone once said that there is a flavor in being Christian—and it tastes so good!

During His ministry, Jesus uttered hard words against outward religious appearance when He said that the religious folks of His day were like whitewashed tombs on the outside, but full of rotteness on the inside (see Matthew 23:27). He also said to those who proclaimed themselves saved by their good works: “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you” (Matthew 21:31). Can you imagine what it meant for the religious leaders of the time to hear that? They preached that anyone who would become a Jew could be saved, except prostitutes and tax collectors. And those were exactly the types of people that Jesus sought for salvation. Sinners who were aware of how much they needed the transforming grace would come sooner than the ones who lived only on religious appearances. For me, though, the strongest statement is found in Matthew 7:21, where Jesus states that “not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord!’ shall

enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” And He goes on with the accusations until He ends with the decisive one: “Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matthews 7:23).

This text is quite impressive. It makes me think that nowhere in the Bible is it reported that the wicked will question why they will be destroyed. The former inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah will not question it; those who perished in the Flood will not question it. Only the Christians who lived primarily by appearances will question, saying: “But, Lord, I have done so much, contributed so much, saved so many . . .” And Jesus will say, “It’s true, you had the appearance, but not the essence. I wasn’t looking at ‘how much.’ I was looking at ‘how’ you lived your Christian life.”

Don’t you think you can finish this first step of our walk with a request to God? In the lines below, ask the Lord to forgive you for living more concerned with appearance than with the essence of Christianity.

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Scan the QR Code and find out what a full submission means.

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<sup>1</sup> William Hendriksen, *Comentario al Nuevo Testamento: El Evangelio según San Marcos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1983), p. 509.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1952), p. 292.

## 2 • WHERE DOES THE ESSENCE COME FROM?



*“For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.”*

*Apostle Paul*

*“The preaching that this world needs most is the sermons in shoes that are walking with Jesus Christ.”*

*Dwight L. Moody*

One day I went to a perfume store that came up with a totally new sales concept. It was called “self-service perfumes.” They sell aromatic essences from all over the world, and it is the client who is supposed to “create” the perfume. First, I chose one particular essence from hundreds of different scents, then decided how many milliliters of perfume I would buy. There were hundreds of bottles in all shapes and sizes to choose from. It was not an easy choice. The bottles were beautiful and the aromas very inviting. Finally, I picked one bottle, the quantity, and the particular aromatic essence that I had chosen.

But the most interesting part, in my opinion, was watching the salesperson working on the composition of my perfume in real time. He took the essence I had chosen, as well as the container, and filled it almost to the brim with a mix of water, alcohol, and some sort of fixing oil. Then he added just a few drops of the chosen essence, stirred the liquid a little, and handed me the bottle with my brand-new perfume. Immediately, I felt I was being cheated. My feeling was that I was buying just water and alcohol rather than perfume. I wanted the essence rather than water. Jokingly, I expressed my indignation to the salesperson. “Sir, I’m here to buy perfume, not water. You just put a few drops of essence into the bottle. I’d like to have more essence, please.” He smiled and said that this is the

composition of all the perfumes in the world: oil, alcohol, water, fixing agent, and a few drops of aromatic essence.

I left the store reflecting on what had just happened and started making some parallels with the Christian life. We indeed want to possess the essence of Christianity, but we must recognize that we are just like a “handsome” bottle filled only with water, alcohol, and a fixer. Because we do not produce the essence of Christianity by ourselves, we do not naturally exude the good perfume of Christ. We need to realize it right now if we want to move forward in our Christian lives. We want to be Christians in essence, but often our works prove that we lack that essence. Whatever we do ends up being just an appearance of a Christian.

Paul says in Romans 3:23 that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The expression “to fall short” means to “fail to attain something.”<sup>1</sup> In the beginning, human beings used to live permanently in the presence of God, and all the time He was radiating the sweet fragrance of His holiness. Throughout the universe, there was perfection and peace. Men and women reflected the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:26). After sin, however, we lost that personal contact with the sacred and were cut off from the glory and the character of God. Sadly, we have lost the essence with which we were created. It was no longer natural for human beings to have the “fragrance” of God's holiness around them.

This is where the miracle of daily fellowship with Christ comes in. He is the very essence of Christianity. And when we get into His presence daily, He “drips” a few drops of His essence into our lives, and we go out there to share the good perfume of Christ with everyone we come in contact with. Jesus taught it in a beautiful sermon recorded in my favorite chapter of the Bible—chapter 15 of the Gospel of John. He said: “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). This text is extremely simple and straightforward. Jesus is teaching that we are just branches, and, as such, we depend 24/7 on the sap that we receive from the plant. Separated from the plant and without the sap, we are just a withered and lifeless branch. This is the basis of true Christianity: being connected to Christ and continually receiving essence from him.

As we think of the widow (see Mark 12:41–44), we should ask ourselves: How can someone give all she has for a cause? How is someone able to put their own subsistence at risk? The best answer is: no one can. No one! By ourselves, we cannot be selfless, true, and pure. Being an authentic Christian is totally

impossible for a human being. But it will be possible if, each day, the wonderful essence of Christ is poured into our lives. Only then will we be able to mirror Christ's will and deeds. Yes, we can spread the good perfume of Christ. Can you grasp that? We spread His good perfume and not ours because, by ourselves, we lack the perfume. All we have is water and alcohol.

It is at this point that many Christians fumble. They begin their Christian life with big dreams of living a life of holiness, purity, surrender, and power. Along the way, however, they realize that there is a chasm between what they intended to be when they became Christians and what they practice daily. In a situation like that, our questions are often: "What can I do to be a true Christian?" or "How do I quit living a phony Christian life?" But those are the wrong questions. Because we lack the essence, we cannot do anything. We must allow Christ to work in us and pour His essence into us. Only then will we be able to share His fragrance. Therefore, the right questions would be: "What can Christ do in me?" or "How can I allow Christ to work within me so He can make me a genuine Christian?"

Read this quote from Ellen G. White in *Steps to Christ*:

You feel that sin has separated you from God, that you are in bondage to the power of evil. The more you struggle to escape, the more you realize your helplessness. Your motives are impure; your heart is unclean. You see that your life has been filled with selfishness and sin. You long to be forgiven, to be cleansed, to be set free. Harmony with God, likeness to Him—what can you do to obtain it?<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever heard a Christian talking about feelings of frustration with words similar to these? How would you advise them? Or how would you answer? How do you reach a life in harmony and likeness with God—a life of essence rather than mere appearance? Some would reply, "You must try harder," "You must do your part," or "You must try again to live a victorious Christian life."

The continuation of the quote gives the answers:

It is peace that you need—Heaven's forgiveness and peace and love in the soul. Money cannot buy it, intellect cannot procure it, wisdom cannot attain to it; you can never hope, by your own efforts, to secure it. But God offers it to you as a gift, "without money and without

price” (Isaiah 55:1). It is yours if you will but reach out your hand and grasp it. The Lord says, . . . “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you” (Ezekiel 36:26).<sup>3</sup>

Hallelujah!

God is telling you today, “You do not have the essence of true Christianity, but I do; you are not what I expect from you, but ‘I Am’ can help you; you cannot be authentic, but I can give you the authenticity you need.” We all need peace, security, and the assurance that we are loved and accepted in Christ. He has what we lack, and by His love and grace, He can make us what we were created and called to be.

Only now does the widow’s story begin to make sense. She was not some kind of super-Christian—she did not belong to a higher caste, she was not made of another kind of substance. She just allowed God to act in her life, and He did! Do you know what the great news is today? The God of the widow is also your God. The power that transformed that poor woman’s life is available to transform your life and my life too. When, through daily communion with Him, we let the wonderful sap of Christ feed our lives, we will do extraordinary things that we never thought we could do. And when someone asks us how we were able to do such a great thing for and because of Christ, our natural response will be, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20)!

Praise God for known and unknown Christians who, throughout history, have come into the presence of God so intensely, dedicating the best of their lives to the cause of the Lord.

I praise God because, throughout history, many Christians have come into the presence of God and dedicated the best of their lives to serve the Lord. We know some of them by name, but there are many whose names are unknown to us.

On October 3, 1895, a group of missionaries landed in the Gold Coast, a British colony on the African continent known today as Ghana. They came in response to several requests made in letters sent to the General Conference by Francis Dolphijn, a Seventh-day Adventist who lived in Africa. He was the leader of a group of believers who lived on the Gold Coast, and he needed help.

Four missionaries responded to Dolphijn’s request. Dudley Hale was the leader of the team. He was accompanied by a colporteur named G. P. Riggs and a couple of nurses—George and Eva Kerr. The Kerr couple came along with their two children. At that time, the African continent was being severely attacked



by several diseases, particularly diphtheria and a vicious complication of malaria. Within two years, all but Dudley Hale had died from these diseases. In 1897, Hale had to travel back to England to recover from a severe bout of malaria. As soon as he got better, he was sent as a missionary to the Caribbean. In 1903, however, feeling that his work in Africa was unfinished, he asked to return to Ghana, to the same place where his friends had died a few years back. Until the end of his life, he continued the work started by his friends.<sup>4</sup>

What moves someone to give himself like that for a cause? What prompted a poor widow to turn in everything she had? The answer is the essence of Christ in life. Only that can enable us to act like these people.

Today, I would like to invite you to set apart a few minutes three times each day for you to come into God's presence. At that time, you may want to recognize that you need Him to pour out the essence of true Christianity into your life so that you will be able to live in the likeness of those self-denying missionaries. These moments will be spent in personal devotion.

Suggestion: Choose three moments—at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the day. For the first few days, you might need the aid of an alarm clock. Please stop all activities and prioritize these moments so that you can enjoy them in God's presence.

As you write down your daily schedule, say a prayer and ask God to help you keep your commitment. May God bless you on this journey.

Personal Devotion Time #1: \_\_\_/\_\_\_

Personal Devotion Time #2: \_\_\_/\_\_\_

Personal Devotion Time #3: \_\_\_/\_\_\_



Access the QR Code and check what a life of essence can do for the cause of the Master.

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, s.v. "fall short," accessed December 8, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fall%20short>.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1892), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> David J. B. Trim, *A Living Sacrifice: Unsung Heroes of Adventist Missions* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2019), 31.

# 3•TOTAL DEDICATION



*“Every earthly interest must be made subordinate  
to the great work of redemption.”  
Ellen G. White*

*“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep  
to gain that which he cannot lose.”  
Jim Elliot, missionary and martyr*

**W**e have unveiled some important truths in the first two chapters, and these truths will help us to lay another brick in the building of our knowledge about how to live a victorious Christian life. We have found that God's biggest interest is not to make me look like a Christian, but to make me a genuine Christian. We also learned that, without Christ, we cannot attain true Christianity. Now we are ready to think about the next point in the story of the widow's offering: If Jesus looked at the *how* and not the *how much*, it means that God's interest is not in what I have, but in what I do with what I have.

If God was interested only in what we have, the story of the widow's offering would probably not be recorded in the Bible, since her offering was insignificant, money wise. The poor widow's story shows us that what really caught Christ's attention was what she did with what she had. In a world where we are measured, evaluated, and valued for what we have, this is an amazing breakthrough. God presents us a story in which someone was valued and perceived, not for what that person had, but for how she acted with what she had.

This is one of the central points of the story. The important thing was not how much the widow owned, but how she used what she owned. Jesus' gaze was on the attitude rather than the monetary value that the offering represented. As such, we need to understand that, from heaven's perspective, we all

have something significant that can make a huge difference in the kingdom of God. The question to be answered today is: What are we doing with what we have? Taking into consideration the widow's story, you cannot simply answer: "I have so little, it won't make a difference; my offering won't change anything."

Let's be practical here: We need to understand that God is not interested in what the brand of our car is; His interest is to know who we give a ride to. He will never ask how much we spend in the supermarket each month, but who we share our food with. He will never ask how many square feet our house has, but who we give shelter to. This needs to be very clear in our minds: It is not what I have that matters, but what I do with what I have.

Remember the story of Queen Esther? At a certain point in the narrative, God's people were about to be destroyed. A decree was issued ordering the complete extermination of the Jewish people. Upon reading the decree, Mordecai, Esther's adoptive father, decided to ask the queen to act not only in favor of the people, but the cause of God as well. In response to his request, Esther replied that it would not be possible to help because, to do so, she would have to go to the king without being invited, and such an attitude, in that context, could cost her life. Mordecai tried a strong argument: "And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14, NIV).

Do you get the point of Mordecai's argument? It was something like, "Esther, don't think that God brought you to the king's palace just for you to have all the clothes, the latest hairstyle, or even the status of a queen. God gave you all this so that you could use it in His cause, wherever and whenever it was needed, and this is the time that God and His people expect you to use what you have for a worthy cause."

Dear reader, this is the time for you to understand the purpose for which God has given you everything you have. The story of Esther can be considered as a miniature of the upcoming closure of the great controversy. A decree, persecution, a union of earthly powers, and, above all, a great deliverance are events featured in both Esther's story and the story of the outcome of the showdown between good and evil.

We need to understand what Esther and Mordecai understood. The more decisive and prophetic the moment, the more we need to serve God's cause with altruism and faithfulness. Note the following quote from *Counsels on Stewardship*: "Did they but realize how near is the end of all work for the salvation of souls, they would sacrifice their possessions as freely as did the members

of the early church. They would work for the advancement of God's cause as earnestly as worldly men labor to acquire riches."<sup>1</sup>

We need to comprehend the prophetic time in which we are living. That comprehension will determine the type of commitment we will make to God's cause. I'm sure that, at some point in time, God has impressed you to become more involved in the cause of the cross and to give more for it. And as you read this chapter, He is sending you another reminder!

One day, a man named William Carey began to feel a strong desire to serve as a missionary overseas. Carey was a simple shoemaker, but his desire was so intense that he decided to hang a world map over a wall in his shoe shop and pinpoint the place where he wanted to serve God's cause. He was driven by such an intense desire to serve that it became his main topic of conversation—much to the annoyance of some of the folks close to him. One day, one of his friends could not take any more of that missionary talk and said, "Carey, would you stop all this missionary talk? You are just a shoemaker. That is your job." And Carey replied, "I am a shoemaker just to pay my expenses. My real job is to serve God's cause."<sup>2</sup>

Imagine if today we had more teachers, bricklayers, psychologists, businessmen, entrepreneurs, farmers, and so on in the church who could say: I am a teacher, bricklayer, psychologist, businessman, entrepreneur, or farmer just to pay my expenses, but my real job is to serve the cause of God. We need to recognize that it's our involvement in God's work that reveals whether we care about it. We need to act rather than just advocate views on what true surrender and faithfulness to God are about.

One day, Jesus told a parable that addresses this subject. The story is recorded in Matthew 25. To understand that parable, it is important to keep in mind that the context of the chapter is Christ's prophetic sermon. He was teaching about the kind of attitude we should have regarding the end time. He spoke of a man who trusted some resources to three of his servants. One received five talents, another received two talents, and the other received one talent (see Matthew 25:14, 15). After a while, the man came back and asked each of the servants to report on what they had done with the resources he had trusted to them.

The first and second servants were able to duplicate what they had received, and because of their attitude, they heard the master say: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler

over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matthew 25:21, 23). The servant who had received a single talent just returned it to the master, only to hear the following rebuke: “You wicked and lazy servant!” (Matthew 25:26). Why was this servant scolded like that? He did not steal anything from his master, nor did he destroy what he was given; he just returned, and in perfect condition, whatever he had gotten from his master. The real issue here is: that servant decided to do absolutely nothing with the talent his master had trusted him!

The danger we might face at the end time is to choose to do nothing with the resources we have. We may do this for several reasons: negligence, lack of time, the feeling that we will not make a difference, etc. Nevertheless, we need to understand that any of these attitudes will cause our Lord to react just like the master in the parable. We will be called wicked and lazy servants. We need to faithfully use the resources we have for God's cause, and we will be assured that faithfulness over the little leads to the ability to manage the many things God has prepared for us in eternity.

One day, in Bombay, an important city in India, there was a symposium on hunger. Hundreds of people from all over the world showed up to discuss how the world could produce enough food for everyone on the planet in the next 15 years. Among the guest speakers was Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Upon arriving at the building where the meetings were taking place, she saw a man who was starving to death right in front of the door of the building where the event was taking place. With no hesitation, she took him to her house—and would take care of him until the last day of his life. In her speech that day, she said: “You were two steps away from a man who was dying of hunger and you are discussing how to end hunger in 15 years? I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can love only one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. Just one, one, one. That's how you can start. . . . I started picking up a person who was dying on the street. Perhaps, if I hadn't given shelter to that one person, I would never have done the same to another 42 thousand. All you have to do is to start . . . one, one, one.”<sup>3</sup>

What about starting right now? An attitude of surrender and faithfulness begets more attitudes of surrender and faithfulness because faithfulness begets faithfulness. And this attitude enables us to receive more and more here and in eternal life. The principle is the following: If I am not able to honor God by wisely using the limited time of 24 hours He offers me each day, how can I take care of the eternity that awaits me? If I am not able to be faithful to God with the

limited financial resources I have here, how will I be able to honor Him in a city where the streets will be of gold and the walls of precious stones? Thus, He says that my way of using the little I have here prepares me to use the riches that will be made available in heaven.

Today, your activity is to write three points in your life that you need to dedicate to the cause of God—it could be a talent that you have failed to use, a resource that must be returned to the Lord, an attitude of forgiveness that God has called you to exercise. I am quite sure that if you pray to God right now, He will help you realize what you need to surrender.

Lord, by Your grace I decide to surrender:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_



Access the QR Code and see the tragic consequence of not surrendering completely.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy George, *Fiel Testemunha: Vida e Obra de William Carey* (São Paulo, SP: Editora Vida Nova, 2016), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Roberta Bellinzagho, *Cinco Minutos com Deus e Madre Teresa* (São Paulo, SP: Edições Paulinas, 2017), 60.

# 4 • CHRIST'S LOVING EYES



*"For Jesus, giving was not a private matter."*

*Richard J. Foster*

*"Holy is the way God is. To be holy, He does not conform to a standard. He is that standard."*

*A. W. Tozer*

The temple in Jerusalem was constantly packed with people. Dozens of worshipers roamed the courtyards of the place to worship God, the Creator of the universe. Before heading to the place where sacrifices were offered, people stopped in the women's courtyard to drop their offerings in one of the 13 offering boxes available in the area. This was an effective way to draw the attention of the folks to the generosity of the gifts, as the clattering of the coins falling into the coffers loudly announced the amount offered and attracted admiring eyes to the generous giver. Furthermore, beside each box, there was a priest on duty, and the giver was supposed to tell him the value of the offering for it to be recorded in the books of the temple. Those who stayed nearby could follow the process and even eavesdrop what the amount of the offering was.<sup>1</sup>

In the culture of that time, things such as long robes, extravagant greetings in the plazas, best seats in the synagogues, places of honor at banquets, and long public prayers (see Luke 20:46, 47) were used to draw attention. However, hardly anyone on that day realized that the Creator of the universe, the One they came to worship, was in the temple watching and assessing the worshipers. The scripture says that Jesus "watched" (Mark 12:41, NIV). Those who wanted to draw admiring eyes to themselves did not realize that the only eyes that really mattered were the ones watching them intently.

Today, as in those days, when our interest is to draw people's attention, we run the risk of failing to notice Christ's attentive eyes. One of the great truths of

the widow's story is that the only eyes that matters is Christ's. Unfortunately, we are so dependent on approval and praise that we assume that it is the eyes of human beings that matter. We think that human assessment is the criterion that truly measures us. This thought leads us to the negative attitude of comparing ourselves to others, thus creating unattainable standards.

In his book *When God Interrupts*, M. Craig Barnes tells that one day he went to visit a woman from his church who had had a baby. He found her crying in her hospital bed. When asked what had happened, she replied that her little girl was born with one finger turned slightly outward, and as a result, the baby had only gotten a nine on a scale of one to ten at the hospital. In tears, she said, "I don't know what bothers me more: that they have this stupid test, or that my kid only made a nine." Pastor Barnes left the hospital thinking that on the very first day of that child's life, she was already in trouble for not getting a high enough score, according to a human evaluation.<sup>2</sup>

That is what human judgment is like. We are always setting scores, measuring, and judging everyone all the time. The widow's story, however, shows us that Jesus was watching everything—and we can be sure that He is watching us today too. There are three reasons for us to be sure that the observer who really matters is Christ:

1. *He is the only Evaluator who never fails.*

One day a young man who had many riches approached Jesus and asked an important question: "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16). He claimed that he obeyed all the commandments from his youth (see verse 20). Any other observer might have said: "You don't need to do anything else; what you are already doing is more than enough. Don't worry." But Jesus, the only Evaluator who never fails, said, "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Luke 18:22). The young man had quite a positive, however misleading, assessment of himself. And his friends probably rated him on the same level. But Christ's assessment was perfect and accurate.

Nowhere in the Bible do we find such a clear case of misleading self-assessment as in the Laodicean church's view of itself. According to Revelation 3:17, this is how Laodicea saw itself: "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing." On the other hand, Jesus introduces Himself to that church as "the Faithful and True Witness" (verse 14). Any witness can be mistaken or even lie, but Christ is the Witness who does not make mistakes nor lies. Everyone might



look at the church in Laodicea and agree with her self-assessment, but Jesus knows the truth about her and says: “[You] do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (verse 17).

We need to go to Christ with the assurance that He watches us with a criterion that never fails because He never makes mistakes. He knows who we truly are and can help us change not what we might appear to be, but who we truly are.

*2. His evaluation criteria are perfect and based on love.*

Christ's evaluation criteria do not follow external standards valued by human beings. He is capable of seeing what goes on deep in our hearts. He said: “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15).

One day Jesus was sitting beside a well that was dug in the territory of the Samaritans. It was another scorching day in the East, and Jesus was thirsty and hungry. In a situation like that, any of us would focus on our own needs, but Jesus didn't do that. A woman approached the well, and Jesus watched her. It's worth noting that an ordinary Jew would make the following assessment of her:

*It's a woman:*

At that time and culture, a woman was nothing but the property of her parents or husband.

*She is Samaritan:*

She is not worthy of salvation. She doesn't deserve even to be greeted.

*She is poor:*

Otherwise, she would have a servant fetch her water from the well.

*She is sinful:*

Anyone who knew her more closely would say that she was nothing but a discredited sinner.

The good news is that Jesus noticed her. Perhaps a long time had passed before someone got to notice her. Christ's gaze did not fail to see her errors. Nevertheless, He offered her hope and salvation. Just imagine Jesus sitting right by your side, looking at you with sincere love, a love capable of forgiving and making you overcome mistakes. What an awesome experience that would be!

*3. He is the only standard to be met, and that is why He is capable of a perfect assessment.*

That standard is Christ, the perfect standard of justice, goodness, purity,

and faithfulness. When we evaluate ourselves against the standard of our own judgment or the judgment of others, we often tend to lower the standard of purity and holiness set by God. But when we realize that it is Christ's gaze that sets the pattern, we begin to see what is really expected of us.

Martin Luther expressed this idea in the following words: "Man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ."<sup>3</sup> We are talking about salvation, but we need to understand that the process of salvation is not limited to deliverance from condemnation; it also involves character transformation.

Leonard Ravenhill made the following inquiry in one of his sermons:

"If I ask you tonight: Are you saved?  
"You say: 'Yes, I am saved.'  
"When were you saved? I ask.  
"Oh, that guy preached, and I was baptized and...'  
"But are you saved? What are you saved from?  
"Are you saved from bitterness?  
"Are you saved from lust?  
"Are you saved from cheating?  
"Are you saved from lying?  
"Are you saved from bad habits?  
"Are you saved from rebellion against your parents?  
"Come on, what are you saved from?"<sup>4</sup>

Today, we need to respond to Jesus' gaze with what we are saved from. Look at your acts of kindness in the light of Christ's kindness; look at your faithfulness in the eyes of Christ's faithfulness; look at your honesty in the eyes of Christ's honesty, because in all of these things, He is the standard.

This perspective should lead you not to discouragement, but to Christ, the only One who can transform you and make you be like Him. See what an extraordinary promise the apostle Paul presents to us: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Only Jesus Christ is the standard to be attained, and by His grace, which works in us, we will be able to live a life of holiness and Christlikeness.

In 1518, the Catholic Church filed a case of heresy against Martin Luther. Everyone knew that, at some point, he would be brought before the church cardinals, and his fate could be the same as so many others who had previously been considered heretics. Someone is said to have asked him if he was afraid of the inquisition and the wrath of the cardinals and Pope Leo X, to which Luther replied: “I am more afraid of my own heart than of the pope and all his cardinals. I have within me the great pope Self.”<sup>5</sup>

We all have battles to fight so that we can say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Remember the commitment you made on the first day—to seek God three times a day? To be faithful to this commitment will take you to the presence of the One who not only assesses but transforms us. At this time, write a short prayer asking that Christ’s gaze shows you who you truly are. Ask Jesus to encourage you to seek Him each day so that you can be more like Him.

Dear Jesus,

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Acesse o QR Code e aprenda como fazer as melhores escolhas com Deus.

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Earle, A. Elwood Sanner, and Charles L. Childers, *Comentario Bíblico Beacon: Mateo hasta Lucas*, tomo 6 (Lenexa, KS: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 2010), 384.

<sup>2</sup> M. Craig Barnes, *When God Interrupts: Finding New Life Through Unwanted Change* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 70.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, quoted by Rev. Christopher Maronde, “The Heidelberg Disputation,” accessed December 3, 2021. <https://lutheranreformation.org/history/the-heidelberg-disputation/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Quotes—Leonard Ravenhill,” Casa de Oração CDA, accessed December 16, 2020, [clamordosadoradores.com.br/new/citacoes-leonard-ravenhill/](http://clamordosadoradores.com.br/new/citacoes-leonard-ravenhill/).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, quoted by Ruth Paxson, *Life on the Highest Plane: God’s Plan for Spiritual Maturity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 208.

# 5 • LEARNING TO RIDE A BIKE



*"'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home."*

*John Newton*

*"Don't trust to hold God's hand; let Him hold yours.*

*Let Him do the holding, and you the trusting."*

*Hanmer William Webb-Beploe*

I have two siblings, and I am the middle child. There is a gap of three years between us, which means that when my younger brother was born, I was three and my sister was six. Is there any advantage to this? I'm not so sure. What I do know is that, when it comes to bikes, being the middle child is a major downside! The problem is, a bike for a three-year-old is not suitable for a six-year-old, and a bike for a six-year-old is not suitable for a nine-year-old. Now, my parents could not afford to buy one bike for the size and age of each child. Therefore, in my house, the rule was, none of the kids would have one. And so I spent my happy childhood without a bicycle.

When I was about seven years old, a friend of mine got a brand-new bike as a gift, and since we were very close, I thought to myself, *My problems are over! Now I will learn to ride a bike.* I don't know if you have ever tried to learn to ride a bike on a friend's bike. If not, I will explain how it works. It goes like this: He rides it for minutes on end, and eventually, when he gets tired and you want to ride a little, he has a sudden, uncontrollable desire to ride it again. And when you finally manage to ride that bike, he goes after you saying, "Be careful! You may fall and scratch my bike because, you know, you haven't learned yet how to ride it." As you are still learning, you will inevitably fall, and when you fall, he snatches his

brand-new, shining bike from you and even scolds you for a supposed scratch that only he sees!

This is my story with bicycles, but it also represents the experience of many people in terms of their Christian life. Many begin it with a genuine desire to obey, just like the desire I had to learn to ride that bike. They accept baptism to start the adventure of the Christian life, just like when I first started the adventure of riding a bike. How exciting the first “rides” are in the Christian life, full of colorful discoveries!

Inevitably, though, the first falls begin to happen. That is when, tragically, many imagine God saying, “You just can’t do it. Look at you: you fell again! You don’t do anything right. You said you wouldn’t fall, but you just did it again.” Angrily, He eventually says, “Give me that ‘bike.’ You will never be able to stand alone in your Christian life.”

How tragic this vision of God is for the Christian walk. It does not reveal the true character of God nor the reality of His reaction to our failures. Only a proper view of God can make us walk victoriously in our Christian life. Our faithfulness and obedience must be the result of accepting the love that God shows us every day. If we are to live biblical faithfulness, we need to accept some truths.

### **Faithfulness is a Human Response to Divine Love**

The apostle John tells us, “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). In other words, I don’t love God so God can love me back. I first receive God’s love and then I start acting like someone who loves Him.

Ellen G. White, in her book *Steps to Christ*, reaffirms it with the following words: “Obedience is not a mere outward compliance, but the service of love.”<sup>1</sup>

God’s love for us is never based on our ability, performance, or obedience. If so, God’s love would be as erratic as our performance. The Bible affirms that in God “there is no variation or shadow of turning” (James 1:17). This solid understanding of God’s love for me is not a mere inspiring thought or just a sweet idea. This conviction will invariably determine how I react to grievances, how I treat those who hurt me, how I take care of my body, how I use the resources entrusted to me, what I access on the internet, what I watch on TV, and so on.

## Even When We Fall, God Keeps Loving Us

When we sin and fail to meet the standard set by God, we need to run into the loving arms of a God who never ceases loving us. Nothing can harm us more than having a misconception of God's love for us. George Hume used to say that Christians find it easier to believe that God exists than to believe that He loves them.

Remember the bike illustration? I praise God that I have learned to love and trust in a God who, when I am riding the bike of my Christian life, and for some circumstance, I fall, He approaches me with love, lifts me, gives me a big hug, wipes my tears, places me back on the bike and says, "Shall we try again? I'm here and I'm going to help you." You cannot imagine how many times this mental image brings me peace when I happen to fall. I envision this scene and accept that God loves me so much. And, believe me, accepting that God loves me is simply liberating!

I learned to feel pain and shame for my sins, but it is at Jesus' feet—not afar—that I feel that way. But I can guarantee that whenever I go to Christ to confess my sins, I feel His touch of love forgiving me and giving me the strength to continue on the walk. I can hear Him say, "I do not condemn you either" and "Go and sin no more," both phrases wrapped in heavenly love.

How many times have we read the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 and failed to fully understand it? The prodigal son decided to go back home after experiencing the filthy world of sin. Having decided to return to his father, he rehearsed in his head the speech he wanted to say when he eventually met his dad. As a matter of fact, that speech was supposed to be a proposal of reconciliation. Here's what he wanted to say: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:19). In that young man's mind (and the minds of many of us), it was just impossible to keep a relationship with the father because he, the son, had gone too far. He thought that drawing closer to him at that juncture wasn't an option. That relationship was over for good! The point that the boy was missing, though, is that his father was truly longing to embrace his son again, precisely to reestablish the lost relationship. And that was what he did! He hugged his son, kissed him, and put the family ring back on his finger (Luke 15:20, 22).

At this point, the boy tries to say the speech previously rehearsed. Notice in verse 21 that he couldn't even finish it though. The only thing he was able to say was: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no

longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:21). As he was about to say, “treat me like one of your workers,” as planned, his father cuts him off and gives him a big hug.

It is necessary to understand that the speech previously rehearsed would not work with the boy’s father—neither would it work with our heavenly Father. So, I’ve learned that whenever I fall, I need to go to a Father who behaves like that boy’s father—a Father who refuses to accept my allegation of not being worthy to be called a son or to be treated as someone inferior. I have learned to accept the Father’s love and rest on it. I must confess that I am shedding some tears as I write these words, as I realize that many of my prodigal brothers and sisters have not yet found such an incredible love: the love of their heavenly Father.

### **Those with a Better Understanding of God’s Love are the Ones Who Live and Share Their Faithfulness**

Note this quote from *Steps to Christ*: “The heart that rests most fully upon Christ will be most earnest and active in labor for Him.”<sup>2</sup>

This seems to be obvious, but many times we fumble exactly on the obvious. Resting fully in the security of God’s love is directly related to doing active work for Him. It is one thing to try to obey just to be accepted; it is quite another to obey because you have already been accepted. It is one thing to be faithful waiting for God’s approval and blessings; it is another to be faithful because you have already been approved and are fully enjoying His abundant blessings.

Thus, the life of obedience and faithfulness should be a natural response to the understanding we have of God’s love for us. God’s love will transform our nature, and we will be like Christ. In the fifth century, Augustine expressed this idea in the following words: “By loving me, you made me lovable. Who can be good if not for love?” Only as a result of God’s love in us can we be good, loving, and faithful.

In an inspiring quote, Ellen G. White states: “The children of God never forget to do good. . . . Good works are spontaneous with them, for God has transformed their natures by His grace.”<sup>3</sup>

True biblical faithfulness is the result of understanding God’s love for me and the inevitable response to that love. The more we understand the love that we are offered, the more we will respond to it in attitudes of faithfulness

and commitment to God and His cause. True obedience comes from a heart transformed by grace; it is not the result of pretense or self-effort, but God's acting in us. And this action is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

King David learned to practice faithfulness and obedience as a result of a loving relationship with God. Through the Psalms, he expressed it in the following words:

“The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide” (Psalms 37:31).

“I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart” (Psalms 40:8).

Keeping God's law in the heart and being pleased to do His will is only possible if we learn and experience the greatness of divine love and mercy.

Note: Maybe you got curious. After a few years and many falls, I finally learned to ride a bike. But I'm still learning to “ride” in terms of my Christian life. Each day I can feel my heavenly Father's love helping me on my journey. Today, I want to invite you to write a prayer of gratitude for the goodness and mercy that God offers you each day.

Dear Lord, thank You for . . .

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Access the QR Code to watch the video “The Power That God Has,” and marvel at how God's love moves us to act.

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1892), 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *My Life Today* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1952), 193.



## 6 • MY ALL



*“For they all contributed out of their abundance,  
but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had,  
all she had to live on.”*

*Mark 12:44, ESV*

*“If the unsearchable riches of Christ are not worth suffering for,  
we should know it now and cease to play at religion.”*

*A. W. Tozer*

**T**oday, I want to invite you to go back to the temple in Jerusalem and once again imagine the scene experienced by the poor widow. Jesus is intently watching as the people bring their offerings to the temple. He can't help noticing that the rich are handing over large sums of money. The text says that He makes a brief comment on the offering of the rich. He says they were giving “out of their abundance” (Mark 12:44, ESV).

The word Jesus used to mean that the rich donated “out of their abundance” is the Greek word *perisseuō*. It occurs 39 times in the New Testament and can have either a positive or negative connotation. In the positive sense, *perisseuō* is used to convey the idea of “fullness,” whereas, in the negative sense, it is used to mean “excess.” In a positive sense, the term is used, for instance, in the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. Seven baskets of food were left after everyone was satisfied (Mark 8:8). The same word is used to convey the idea of the abundance and richness of God's grace, which is sufficient to save Jews and Greeks with no distinction (Romans 10:12). In the negative sense, the word is applied to something so abundant that it becomes superfluous, insignificant, or even dangerous. For example, in Luke 12:15 the same word is used to speak of the danger of relying on the abundance of possessions, and in Acts 26:11, to speak of the excessive fury Saul used to persecute Christians.<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus used *perisseuō* to speak of the offerings of the rich in the temple, He did it in a negative sense. This is clear because He rebukes the rich people's offerings and compliments the widow's offering. The gift of the rich was the fruit of surplus, whereas the widow's gift was the fruit of her complete surrender. The contrast between the two offerings is also made explicit by the word that Jesus used to refer to the poor widow's gift. Jesus states that the rich gave from the leftovers, but she gave "everything she had, all she had to live on" (verse 44).

It's worth noticing that in verse 44, the word "everything" is expanded in the apposition that follows—"all she had to live on." The term "live" is a translation of the Greek word *bios*, which occurs 11 times in the New Testament. That Greek term is instrumental for us to understand the nuances of the whole story. It is interesting to note that *bios* can also be translated as "life" (that is where the English word "biology" comes from). Of course, biology means "study of life." Over time, the word *bios* took on a more concrete meaning, namely, "material goods," and it is in this sense that the term was used in the story of the widow (Mark 12). Another example of the use of this word is found in the story of the prodigal son, where it is said that he spent all his possessions [*bios*] with prostitutes (Luke 15:30).<sup>2</sup>

This is truly fascinating! When someone reads the story of the widow or the prodigal son in Greek and comes across the word *bios*, the reader can conclude that the widow was offering not just coins, but her own life! In the case of the prodigal son, he wasted not only his inheritance but his life, as life and riches are merged in the meaning of the word *bios*.

Can you grasp how deep this thought is? When someone leaves the Father's house, the great tragedy is not that that person is wasting the Sabbath hours, or the money of tithes and offerings, or his or her talents. The real tragedy is that this individual is wasting his or her life, and, with it, all the resources that God has bestowed. On the other hand, when someone is faithful to God regarding time, body, resources, and talents, he or she will be able to live life with the abundance that God offers.

Another important lesson that is crucial for us to understand has to do with the dimension of the widow's offering. Jesus claimed that she gave everything. However, could it be that "everything" meant everything she had at that particular moment and place? Perhaps she had so much more left at home! Now, when the Bible says that she gave everything, it also means that she had absolutely

nothing left. As she dropped that offering, she was placing her future into the hands of the God she had come to worship.

You see, Jesus was not saying that she had given up everything she had *at the time*; He was saying that she was giving away everything she had *in her life*. Jesus said she was “poor”. The Greek word used in this verse is *ptōch*, which portrays someone in need of alms to survive. She probably didn’t have the money even for her next meal.<sup>3</sup>

Let’s be honest here. All that sounds absurd, does it not? Is this what God really expects of us, that we give *absolutely* everything? The Bible can help us answer these questions with several examples: One day God appeared to Abraham and asked him to give an offering. God did not ask for Abraham’s material goods, nor his servants. God’s request was clear and specific. He said, I want you to offer “your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love” in sacrifice (Genesis 22:2). What do you think God was asking Abraham? I’ll tell you: God was asking for everything.

One day, a young man who had great possessions came to Jesus and asked what to do to gain eternal life. He heard the following reply: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matthew 19:21). What was Jesus asking that young man? Everything! Interestingly, when the young man “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Matt 19:22), Jesus did not run after him saying: “Hey, come back! Take it easy! That was just a metaphor! You just need to return your tithes, give your offerings, and everything will be fine!” No way! Money had become a god in the young man’s life, and only a complete surrender would be acceptable.

If we read the Bible honestly, we will understand that God does want everything. That is why He praised the widow—she gave everything she had. She set the standard of surrender that God expects from each of us.

There was a mother of five children who, after hearing a sermon, decided to give everything she had as a sacrifice for the cause of God. Upon returning home, she searched among her belongings for something she could donate, only to realize that, in her extreme poverty, there was nothing useful or valuable that she could give away. Then, she looked at her five children—three girls and two boys—and had an idea. She went to her room and said the following prayer: “Lord, I have no material wealth that can be used for Your cause, but I do have five children. So, right now, I dedicate each one of them to the mission. Use them

as missionaries at Your service.” A few years later, all of her children were serving God as missionaries.

What a touching story! It is this kind of complete surrender that the widow’s story compels us to make. It is not just a matter of how much you give in tithes and offerings, or how many Sabbaths you keep, or what kind of food you eat (or don’t). It is rather a matter of complete surrender. Everything we have and are must be in the Lord’s hands. We need to understand that God wants everything, and if we don’t give *everything* away, we are actually not giving *anything* away.

The enemy wants to deceive us into thinking that handing over just a part of what we have is enough. Sometimes we deceive ourselves into thinking that giving away just a part of what we have or are is enough. When I was a kid, we used to sing a song about the Sabbath that said, “One, two, three, four, five, six [days] for us, but the seventh [day] is for Jesus.” I grew up singing this song and thinking that God “fitted” only on Sabbath and the other days were mine. The Sabbath was the day of “not doing this and that.” But since the other six days were mine, I could do anything I wanted.

I cannot agree with the concept displayed in that song. Biblically, it’s wrong to convey the idea that God only wants one day out of the seven, and the other days are entirely mine. God wants me to learn to walk with Him every day, not just on Sabbath. I need to seek God, enjoy his presence, have personal and family worship on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sabbath. The seventh day is an exclusive day to be in God’s presence, but it is not the only day for us to be in God’s presence.

One day I was talking with a friend who is an experienced and seasoned pastor about my concerns with the small number of worshipers that showed up at the Wednesday prayer services. His words were food for thought: “My concern is not an empty church on Wednesday services. My biggest concern is with the people that fill the church on Sabbath morning, but spend all the other days of the week away from God.”

That is the reason for God to use harsh words such as “I cannot endure,” “I am weary,” “Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear” (Isaiah 1:13–15) as He refers to Sabbath keeping and the solemn meetings that took place in the time of the prophet Isaiah. In fact, He is accusing people who used to come to the temple on the Sabbath with their hearts full of iniquity—people who thought the Sabbath was a requirement to be fulfilled rather than a day to be celebrated.

The true biblical Sabbath is a celebration of the presence of a God who is

near us each day of the week. God wants you, not just what you have. God wants you, not just four hours a week on Sabbath morning. Only when we surrender everything completely, will we be truly happy.

This is also true with our financial resources. God wants everything we have. Whatever we give to the church through tithes and offerings is just a declaration of understanding that everything that has been left in our hands belongs to God. We'll study more about this in the next chapter.

Ellen G. White helps us understand this concept:

To Matthew in his wealth, and to Andrew and Peter in their poverty, the same test was brought; the same consecration was made by each. At the moment of success, when the nets were filled with fish, and the impulses of the old life were strongest, Jesus asked the disciples at the sea to leave all for the work of the gospel. So every soul is tested as to whether the desire for temporal good or for fellowship with Christ is strongest.

Principle is always exacting. No man can succeed in the service of God unless his whole heart is in the work and he counts all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ.

This is the time to decide the kind of surrender you will offer to God. On the following lines, write a short prayer and tell God about the complete surrender you need to make.

Dear Lord,

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Access the QR Code and get to know someone's experience who decided to live the principle of giving everything to God, even in the subject of dating.

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<sup>1</sup> Lothar Coenen and Colin Brown, *Dicionário Internacional de Teologia - Novo Testamento* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 2000), p. 1667, 1668.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2641, 2642.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1686, 1687

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 273.

# 7 • IT IS NOT FAIR!



*“My true good is in another world,  
and my only real treasure is Christ.”*

*C. S. Lewis*

*“The more a slave of Christ I am,  
the freer I feel.”*

*Augustine of Hippo*

Just realized that I failed to discuss a point in the last chapter. We saw that by handing over the two coins, the widow was giving everything she owned—“all she had to live on” (Mark 12:44, ESV)—and that doesn't seem fair to me. Considering the widow's condition, Jesus could have said: “She gave everything she had, but there was no need for that; half would be more than enough.” But Jesus didn't praise her for giving only half, but everything. The question we need to answer is: Why does God want everything?

In the opening chapters, we saw that everything is intertwined with our spiritual life. Anything that is not in God's hands has the potential to become destructive. The Greeks and Romans were well acquainted with this mentality because, for them, everything could become a god. That is why they created Hephaestus, the god of workers; Mammon, the god of money; Himeros, the god of sexual desire; Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, and so on.

When something is not entirely in God's hands, it has great potential to become a false god. We must admit that, as human beings, we tend to be addicted to false gods. For example, work is a blessing, but when it becomes the only top priority, it becomes like the god Hephaestus in our lives. Sex was designed by God before sin, but when we fail to follow the pattern set by God for our sexuality, it becomes a false god like Himeros. Christianity has nothing against beauty,

as God is the designer of all the beauty that exists in the universe. But when the pursuit of beauty becomes the priority and main goal of life, it becomes like the false goddess Aphrodite. Any of those false gods has the potential of destroying our spiritual life. In Romans 1:25 Paul speaks of the human attempt to replace the worship of the one true God with the worship of creations and creatures: “[They] exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.”

Paul claims that this type of worship is based on a lie that will never let human beings be happy. He says that people with this kind of attitude are fools (Romans 1:22). You see, we are fools when we look for true happiness in things and people. It is foolish to want peace by seeking self-gratification and addictions, or true happiness in financial resources, power, or social status. Only in God are we truly happy.

Unfortunately, most of the time we take the opposite path to the happiness offered by God. As C. S. Lewis said, human history is “the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.<sup>1</sup> The Bible presents several stories that show us how false gods are destructive. If you want to understand how the false god of sex is destructive, just take a look at the story of Samson. If you want to understand how the false god of pride is destructive, just read the story of Solomon. If you want to understand how terrible the false god of envy is, check the story of Annas and Caiaphas.

The Bible has extraordinary stories of people who, with God's help, defeated false gods. Joseph defeated the god of sex; Zacchaeus, the god of greed; David, the god of vengeance. My mother used to say that there are two ways to learn in life—one is with your own mistakes, and the other is observing where someone has gone wrong and avoiding that path. There are several biblical examples of people who struggled with false gods, and others who defeated them. We need to decide which path we are going to take and how we are going to learn.

Surrendering to false gods can even bring momentary pleasures, but only a full surrender to the true God can bring us true happiness. The problem is that humans take pleasure as happiness. People look for pleasure thinking they will find happiness. That is impossible. Happiness is what we get when we give ourselves completely to God. Pleasure, on the other hand, is the fleeting result of the interruption of emptiness.

Let's take a deeper look at the idea of pleasure and happiness. A person is feeling very empty, and to fill that void, he or she seeks pleasure in a given

addiction. For a short time, that feeling of emptiness is gone, and the person takes that as happiness. But as soon as that “trip” wears off, he or she comes to terms with that same old feeling of emptiness. So, that person pursues the addiction again to dispel the feeling of emptiness that has returned. In reality, the void was never fulfilled there; it was only discontinued for a few moments. For the same reason, people seek promiscuity, entertainment, gluttony, and consumerism, among other pleasures, and with each new search for momentary pleasures, dissatisfaction increases, and the amount of pleasure needed to avoid it gets bigger, generating a destructive cycle.

Only God can fill that void and provide the happiness and peace that endure, even when difficulties arise. Only God can offer the peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

Some time ago, I heard a friend say that before knowing Christ, he was terrified of the sunrise. He explained that it was at that time of the day that he used to go back home from nightclubs, already anticipating the terrible emptiness that awaited him. One day, however, he decided to attend a dawn service in a church, and for the first time, he was not afraid of the sunrise. When he went back home, the happiness of Jesus' presence filled him completely.

Now, let's go back to the initial question: Why does God want everything? The answer is: Because this is the only possible way for humanity to be happy. We need to understand that God would never ask us to give up anything that would make us genuinely happy. He only asks us to surrender exactly what is preventing us from being fully happy. Check this amazing quote from *Steps to Christ*:

Man is doing the greatest injury and injustice to his own soul when he thinks and acts contrary to the will of God. No real joy can be found in the path forbidden by Him who knows what is best and who plans for the good of His creatures. The path of transgression is the path of misery and destruction.

It is a mistake to entertain the thought that God is pleased to see His children suffer. All heaven is interested in the happiness of man. Our heavenly Father does not close the avenues of joy to any of His creatures. The divine requirements call upon us to shun those indulgences that would bring suffering and disappointment, that would close to us the door of happiness and heaven.<sup>2</sup>



“All Heaven is interested in the happiness of man.” Have you ever stopped to think about this?

Only a complete surrender makes a complete Christian. The best way to eliminate false gods is to surrender entirely to God in every aspect of life. One of the most destructive false gods is the god of greed and the relentless pursuit of money. That’s why Jesus stated: “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13). Some versions translate “mammon” as “money” because that’s what it represents.

Author Richard J. Foster states: “There’s no doubt that money has many characteristics of divinity. It promises security, it can induce guilt, it offers freedom, it empowers, and it seems to be omnipresent. More sinister than anything, however, is the fact that it claims omnipotence.”<sup>3</sup>

Faithfulness and generosity are the best ways to destroy the god of greed. That’s why God doesn’t want just a part of our financial resources; He wants everything. You may be wondering: Pastor, but doesn’t the Bible say that God only wants my tithes and offerings? The answer is a big “No!” There is not a single verse in the entire Bible that says that God only wants tithes and offerings. God always wants everything. Tithes and offerings are just God’s way of teaching us that everything belongs to Him.

When we give back 10%, we are admitting that 100% belongs to God and that 10% is just a reminder that He is the owner of everything. If you have learned that, when you receive \$100, you only need to return \$10 in tithes and perhaps \$10 in offerings, and the remaining \$80 belong to you, I have bad news for you: It’s all wrong! When I get \$100, the \$100 belongs to God, and He wants the \$100. When I bring my tithes and offerings to the church, I should say, “Lord, what’s left in my hands is still Yours. How should I use it? What should I invest in?” Thus, tithes and offerings become the starting line of faithfulness rather than the finish line.

People who fail to understand that concept tend to buy what they don’t need and spend what they can’t afford. When we understand that everything belongs to God, and most importantly, when we live that reality, our finances will glorify God and we will find the necessary balance. The way we deal with our financial resources changes completely, as they are no longer “my” resources, but rather the resources that God has entrusted to me. The question to ask

is not, “How much of my money should I give to God?” but rather, “How much of God’s money should I keep?”<sup>4</sup>

One day, John Wesley heard the terrible news that his house had been destroyed by fire. People expected to see worry and despair on his face. Instead, he calmly replied, “The Lord’s house burned to the ground. That means one less responsibility for me!”

It is liberating and challenging to realize that everything belongs to God and that I must turn everything over to His care. Since everything is His, I must trust that He will guide every aspect of my financial life, even if times of scarcity, low income, or unemployment come.

At this point, I want to invite you to decide to hand everything over to God’s care and direction, without reservation. Ask Him in prayer to help you destroy the false gods that are controlling some areas of your life.



After praying, access the QR Code and strengthen what you have learned today.

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, quoted in Mark Merrill, *All Pro Dad: Seven Essentials to Be a Hero to Your Kids* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc. 2012), 189.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1892), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Money, Sex and Power: The Challenge of a Disciplined Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009), 43

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

## 8 • “I SURRENDER ALL”



*“All to Jesus I surrender,  
All to Him I freely give;  
I will ever love and trust Him,  
In His presence daily live.”  
Judson W. Van Dikenter*

*“Chief among the besetting sins of the saints is  
hearing without doing.”  
Vance Hurner*

The Bible is full of stories of people who chose to surrender all. For example, the widow's “all” were two little coins, and she surrendered both of them. Abraham's “all” was Isaac, his own son, and Abraham surrendered him. The list goes on with Enoch, Joseph, Daniel, etc. But the greatest biblical example of surrendering all is God Himself; His “all” was His only Son, Jesus Christ, and God surrendered Him.

We also have examples in the Bible of people who refused to surrender all, such as Cain, Balaam, Samson, etc. The utmost biblical example of someone who has refused a complete surrender is Lucifer.

The examples are clear, and so are the consequences that will impact those who surrendered all as well as those who surrendered just partially. Each group makes up a part of the story of humanity's redemption. Their examples are so important that they are recorded in Scripture. The book of Hebrews claims that these examples are like “so great a cloud of witnesses” that can help us achieve the following goal: to free ourselves of “every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us” so that we can “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

One of the most compelling examples of complete surrender was

registered by Paul in his second epistle to the Corinthians. Paul was trying to help the church in Corinth to be generous and free themselves from selfishness and greed. The apostle could have used elaborated theological arguments, but he chose to use an example of generosity instead because he knew that generosity breeds generosity.

Paul describes the example of the Macedonian believers and how the surrender of material resources they made was a direct result of full surrender. Macedonia is a hilly region in northern Greece. The first biblical mention of Macedonia is found in Acts 16, when a man appears in a vision to Paul and pleads with him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9).

In Acts 16:11-17:14, Luke gives a detailed account of Paul's journeys through Macedonia. Paul preached in Philippi, the main Macedonian city. In Philippi, Paul contributed to the first conversion to Christianity of Europe, namely Lydia, a woman who was a seller of purple. Several times, Paul mentions the sacrifice that the Macedonian Christians endured to meet their own needs and those of others (see Romans 15; 2 Corinthians 8; Philippians 4).

Macedonians were ostracized and persecuted for believing in Jesus Christ. Others under similar conditions would operate in a self-preserving mode, but not the Macedonians. Regardless of the deep anguish that they were going through, the church contributed to the relief of others. Despite all their struggles, Macedonian Christians are described as showing an abundance of joy amid tribulation, and this joy was manifested in their generosity.

At this point, I'd like to ask you to stop reading for a few minutes and read five Bible verses that describe the incredible generosity of the Macedonians as recorded in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. You must read that passage if you want to understand the points we will see next.

Paul highlights the fact that the Macedonians were not just poor, but extremely poor. It was wonderful for the apostle to observe that such poor people could be so generous. How could generosity be so great in such “deep poverty”? For Paul, it was a miracle that he could only ascribe to God. The example of the Macedonians submits the following challenge to Christians in different places and times: To what extent are we willing to give all we have and are to the Lord and His cause? It also prompts us to ask the following questions: How did the Macedonians become such a generous church, to the point that they needed no coercion to surrender themselves completely? What made them plead with the apostle to be given the privilege of participating in

the ministry of generosity? What was the secret? In reality, there isn't such a secret in the cause of God. We can all live a life of generosity and victory over selfishness.

Nevertheless, the biblical text shows two aspects that stand out in the willingness of the Macedonians to give generously:

### **They had received God's Grace**

By nature, we are self-centered and, consequently, we never want to give generously. And even when we do, we might be motivated by selfish intentions. If we are to give freely to the cause of God, we must first find divine grace in Jesus Christ. The comprehension of His sacrifice on the cross on our behalf will touch that invisible string of the heart and melt the selfishness and self-centeredness that reside there. Only when we behold the Son of man who was lifted for us, are we drawn closer to Him. As we think of His sacrifice, our hearts are moved to give back because love awakens love. His love will drive us to give.

### **Eles deram a si mesmos primeiro ao Senhor**

The reason many people don't give generously is that they haven't surrendered themselves completely to the Lord. That's the secret behind true giving. The reason the Macedonians gave beyond expectations and beyond their capacity had to do with that assertion. They had indeed surrendered themselves to the Lord. The truth is, whether we are rich or poor, we can only give generously as we surrender ourselves completely to the Lord!

Today, we need to reflect seriously to understand what is our "all" and why it has not yet been surrendered to God. To make a complete surrender, we must always remember that God wants everything. We are free to surrender all or not, but we sure need to know that any decision will have both momentary and eternal consequences.

See, the widow was free to keep one of her coins, or both, for herself. What she owned wasn't much, but the decision to either keep the coins or surrender them involved consequences. Prompted by God, she made the right decision. The Macedonians were at liberty not to be generous and to present their extreme poverty as a pretext for being unfaithful to God's cause. But they decided to be generous and faithful despite their poverty.

Often our tragedy is that, in some aspect of our lives, we choose not to surrender ourselves completely to Christ. Somehow, we keep to ourselves some

things that we still don't want to make fully available to God. We have not yet reached the point of making the ultimate sacrifice—the complete surrender.

C. S. Lewis expressed this idea in these words:

Give me all of you! I don't want so much of your time, so much of your talents and money, and so much of your work. I want You! All of you! I have not come to torment or frustrate the natural man or woman, but to kill it! No half measures will do. I don't want to only prune a branch here and a branch there; rather I want the whole tree out! Hand it over to me, the whole outfit, all of your desires, all of your wants and wishes and dreams. Turn them all over to me, give yourself to me and I will make of you a new self—in my image. Give me yourself and in exchange, I will give you Myself. My will, shall become your will. My heart, shall become your heart.<sup>1</sup>

That's why God wants you to surrender all. He wants to completely rebuild your “self” and give your life a new meaning. I am sure you will love the result.

One of the best-known hymns in Christianity is “I Surrender All.” It has been sung by millions of Christians over generations, but I often say this is the kind of song that should make us think twice before we sing it. We should never open our mouths to sing “I surrender all” if we have not yet reached the point of choosing to surrender all. It has to be a genuine decision of our hearts!

The author of the lyrics for this song is Judson W. Van DeVenter. Born in 1855, he was raised in a Christian home. At age 17, he accepted Jesus as his Savior. He received a Bachelor of Arts from Hillsdale College in Michigan, and had a successful academic career in his field. He traveled extensively, visiting various art galleries across Europe. With great potential as a composer and musician, he was able to play 13 instruments. He tells how his indecision would impact the lyrics of this famous hymn:

For many years I studied art. My entire life was completely dedicated to pursuing this goal, and engaging myself in active Christian service was the last thing on my list of priorities. My dream was to become an outstanding and famous artist. After graduating from college, I studied drawing and painting with a renowned German

professor. . . . It was during this period in my life that I felt God's Spirit prompting me to give up my academic career and enter the evangelistic field, but I didn't want to give in. I still had a burning desire to be a great artist. The struggle lasted for five years. Finally, the time came when I couldn't take it anymore and surrendered all—my time and my talents. That was when a new day dawned in my life. I wrote the hymn "I Surrender All" in memory of the time when, after a long struggle, I finally surrendered and dedicated my life to active Christian service for the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

So, in 1896, Van DeVenter decided to abandon everything and become a full-time evangelist. After his surrender, he worked for years in the United States and England. God used him mightily.

Do you know what your "all" is? Have you wondered why it is not yet fully surrendered to the Lord? I invite you to take a few minutes to talk to God in prayer and ask Him to make it clear to you what are the things in your life you still need to completely surrender. Make a list below of some of these things, and then ask for God's help to live this complete surrender.

Dear Lord, my "all" is \_\_\_\_\_

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Access the QR Code and understand what it means to surrender all we have to God.

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<sup>1</sup> "C. S. Lewis Quotes," Goodreads, accessed November 7, 2021, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/38322-give-me-all-of-you-i-don-t-want-so-much>.

<sup>2</sup> "Histórias de Hinos do Hinário Adventista—Nr. 295," Musica Sacra e Adoração, accessed December 24, 2020, <https://musicaeadoracao.com.br/35700/historias-de-hinos-do-hinario-adventista-295/>.

# 9 • FROM THEORY TO LIFE



*“Let the life and character be the strong argument for Christianity;  
then men will be compelled to take knowledge of you  
that you have been with Jesus and have learned of Him”*

*Ellen G. White*

*“Testimony is not a synonym for autobiography.  
To witness is to speak of Christ. Our own experience may  
illustrate, but must not dominate, or testimony.”*

*John Stott*

**J**n a certain church, a man named Carlos was baptized. His decision was not very simple or easy. He was already an experienced man, and in his entire adult life, he had steeped in all kinds of vice imaginable. One day, a neighbor decided to offer him Bible studies, hoping that the power of the gospel would free him from that life of addiction and self-destruction. Now, there is so much power available in the gospel! In the first verses of his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul states: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Romans 1:16). In Greek, the term Paul uses for “power” is *dynamis*, which is the origin of the English word “dynamite.” The gospel is God’s “dynamite” to save us.

It was that “dynamite” of power and salvation that reached Carlos. He was freed not only from a past of sin and condemnation, but also from the addictions that were chaining him in the present. He surrendered completely to Jesus and was seized by the desire to witness his new experience with Jesus Christ. His life became a solid testimony to the power of the gospel. People just couldn’t believe their eyes! How could someone who slept on the sidewalks, was constantly dirty and oblivious to what was happening in society now be wearing



clean clothes, walking with his head held high, and sporting such a contagious smile on his face?

By and large, most addictions are not solitary, so Carlos' friends, who for years had lived as he had, began to look for him to find out what had happened. Indeed, there was an explanation which Carlos was always willing to share. He would say: "I was dead, but now I'm alive; I was lost, but now I'm found." Those addicted friends began to accompany Carlos to church, where they attended the services and learned more about the path to freedom that Carlos experienced. I met Carlos at one of these services. I went to preach at the small church he attended and noticed that in one of the pews were a few men with that distinct appearance of being drunk. That immediately caught my attention. A couple of times I've seen people drunk in church, but I'd never seen so many drunks at a single service!

During the entire service, Carlos would sit next to them, trying to maintain order. At the end of the sermon, I was introduced to that extraordinary man, and he told me his story and the story of his friends. I talked with them for a while, and at one point, I asked them what exactly they were looking for when they came to church. One of them, with tears in his eyes, said: "I want to be like brother Carlos." And the others nodded in agreement. Of course they wanted to be like Carlos. I do too!

The great truth behind Carlos' story is that it's impossible to hide the results in the life of someone who has decided to surrender completely to the Lord. In this chapter, we will reflect a little on what life is like for those who decide to surrender everything to the Lord. Once again, the story of the poor widow will help us.

The literary context of the widow's story will teach us an amazing lesson. The literary context is the environment where the story is inserted in Scripture. In this case, the literary context is presented in the verses that precede the text we want to study. You probably know that the Bible was not originally written in chapters and verses. I mean, Mark did not sit down to write the gospel and say, "Now I'm going to write chapter seven, verse 12, then chapter seven, verse 13." No, the chapters and verses were inserted later, when the biblical books were already grouped. One of the purposes of this kind of sorting is to make it easier to read. Imagine finding a biblical text among more than 31,000 verses. It would be almost impossible. Therefore, to facilitate the location and division of themes, the Bible was sorted out into chapters and verses.<sup>1</sup>

Although that kind of sorting aids the reader to find the verses, it could be an obstacle when it comes to understanding the context in which the story is inserted. Therefore, when reading a biblical text, it is very important to read what comes before and after it to understand the literary context in which the passage is inserted.

As we study the context of the widow's story in Mark 12, we see that, in the previous verses, Jesus is having a series of clashes with the religious leaders of the time, namely the Pharisees and Sadducees. In one of these conflicts, which is reported in Mark 12:28–34, one of the religious leaders approaches Jesus and asks, “Which is the first commandment of all?” (verse 28). And Jesus responds:

The first of all the commandments is: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these (verses 29–31).

In His response, Jesus combined two passages from the Pentateuch. The first one was taken from the famous passage of Deuteronomy 6:4, 5, which is very familiar to the Jews, namely, the well-known *Shema Israel* (“Hear, O Israel”) followed by the most powerful expression about the Jewish monotheism, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one!”

“Every devoted Jew should recite these verses twice a day, affirming the uniqueness of God, in the face of the infinity of gods, and the love that was due to Him.”<sup>2</sup> Besides, there was the *mezuzah*, which was “a piece of parchment placed in a metal or wooden box and attached to the top of the doorposts of Jewish houses. On the parchment was the inscription of the ‘*Shema*’ in its unabridged form, with the texts of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21.”<sup>3</sup>

Then the text presents the divine requirement for complete surrender. When God said, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30), He was demanding absolute love and loyalty.

Heart, soul, mind, and strength must cooperate in our love for God. In Jewish culture, the heart represents the center of the human being's existence, where thoughts, words, and actions come from (Proverbs 4:23); the soul represents the

center of emotional life; the mind represents the center of intellectual life, dispositions, and attitudes; and strength represents the physical and labor capacity of the human being.

Human beings must love God through all the faculties God has endowed them. However, in addition to the command to use all of these capabilities to the fullest, the fourfold reiteration “all . . . all . . . all . . . all” teaches us a valuable lesson: God’s love is not to be returned in half. The kind of love that God gives us is complete, immense, and all-encompassing. He loves the whole world, and in giving His Son, He offers His “all.” The surrender He expects from us must be complete. Note that the scribe had only asked for one single commandment, but Jesus gives him two, the second being: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”—a quote of Leviticus 19:18. The intricate connection between the two commandments is explained in these words:

In Jesus’ perspective, it is not possible to love God without loving our neighbor. Love for God must lead to love for our neighbor, as love for our neighbor is evidence of our love for God. Undoubtedly, the passage has a strong Christological emphasis, because Jesus, who gave Himself without reservation until death in obedience to the divine will, for the salvation of sinners, is the best expression of love for God. In the divine perspective, the love we feel and the love that compels us to action are two inseparable aspects of true love. One is neither acceptable nor possible without the other.<sup>4</sup>

In Jesus’ response, He made a connection between loving God and loving our neighbor. This kind of love must not be limited to an emotional or interior implication. It is also practical, concrete, and visible. Those who love God manifest this love in actions toward others.

You might wonder what relationship exists between Jesus’ explanation of the essence of the commandments and the story of the widow. Notice that in the story of the widow, as described in Mark 12, Jesus uses the word “all” four times: “Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on’” (verses 43, 44, NASB).

For me, there are no coincidences in the Word of God: Everything was

perfectly planned to teach us a great lesson. Do you know what the lesson is? The widow was the practical example of what Jesus had taught the scribe. Theory met practice. The poorest among the poor made the temple rich with her example. Everyone knew those two texts from the Pentateuch. As mentioned before, they had to recite it twice a day, in addition to the reminder that was triggered every time they walked through the door of their house. However, what many knew only by theory, that poor widow displayed in practice.

True, the rich were giving away large sums of money that day, but their offerings were not an expression of the four “alls” of the law, namely, all heart, all soul, all understanding, and all strength. Whatever they donated was taken from the leftovers. The little offering that the widow gave was taken from everything she owned. The *Shema Israel* that they had memorized, she lived in practice.

A life that surrenders completely to God is a powerful force of attraction to Christ. That's why Paul so often said, “Imitate me” (see 1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonian 1:6). That's why the story of my friend Carlos is so appealing. And that's why the example of the widow is so current.

You need to make a decision. Why don't you ask the Lord that your life be a testimony of your complete surrender? May people see in you not the theory of truth, but the truth put in practice. Write a short prayer making this request to God in your own words.

Dear Lord

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Access the QR Code and get to know a family that decided to put in practice the “God First” principle.

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<sup>1</sup> For more about how the Bible was shaped, read Marcos Blanco, *Versiones de la Biblia: Pautas Para Evaluar las Diferentes Traducciones* (Buenos Aires: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2019) and Bryan Ball, *Em Defesa da Bíblia: Por Que Podemos Confiar nas Escrituras* (Tatuí, SP: Casa Publicadora Brasileira, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> José Tomás Poe, Rubén O. Zorzoli, and Mario Martínez, *Comentario Bíblico Mundo Hispano*, tomo 15, Marcos (El Paso, TX: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2012), 181.

<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *Comentario al Nuevo Testamento: El Evangelio Según San Marcos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Libros Desafío, 1998), 496.

<sup>4</sup> Poe, Zorzoli, and Martínez, 182.

# 10 • “I’LL CHERISH THE OLD RUGGED CROSS”



*“Lord Jesus, You are my righteousness, I am your sin.  
You took on you what was mine; yet set on me what was  
yours.”*

*Martin Luther*

*“At Christ’s cross [many] have found their pride broken,  
Their guilt removed, their love kindled, their hope restored,  
and their character transformed.”*

*John Stott*

There is one thing that is not explicit in the widow’s story, a single detail that has caught my attention: Why did she give everything up? She had every reason not to give such a valuable offering. If we think of what entailed to be a woman, to be poor, and, on top of all that, to be a widow in the society of the first century, perhaps we can have a glimpse of what her offering meant. Back in chapter 8 of this book, we saw that the word Jesus used to portray the widow’s poverty was the same word used to describe someone who probably depended on alms to survive. Furthermore, to say that someone was a poor widow at that time was almost a metaphor for someone who lived in dire need.<sup>1</sup>

So the question remains: Why did she do what she did? My goal here is not to speculate on the reasons that led her to make such an extreme sacrifice. Therefore, I would like to present a quote from the book *Counsels on Stewardship*, which will answer that question:

Jesus was in the court where were the treasure chests, and He watched those who came to deposit their gifts. Many of the rich brought large sums, which they presented with great ostentation.

Jesus looked upon them sadly, but made no comment on their liberal offerings. Presently His countenance lighted as He saw a poor widow approach hesitatingly, as though fearful of being observed. As the rich and haughty swept by, to deposit their offerings, she shrank back as if hardly daring to venture farther. And yet she longed to do something, little though it might be, for the cause she loved.<sup>2</sup>

Could you identify the reason that led the widow to give an offering of that magnitude? Read the quote again and note the last words: “She longed to do something, little though it might be, *for the cause she loved*” (emphasis added).

There are three significant lessons in these words:

The first lesson is that the widow was aware that she was not giving money to the temple. Instead, she was engaging herself in a cause. We must understand this once and for all. When we give Bible studies, return our tithes and offerings, accept a role in the church, do we do these things to help a church, a pastor, a church board, or to get involved in a cause? This will make all the difference in our choices and responses to the Holy Spirit’s promptings.

The second lesson is that one of the most important things in life is to have a cause worth getting involved in. Humanity was marked and changed by people who had a cause they fully gave themselves for. People gave their lives for scientific discoveries, political positions, or territorial conquests.

However, no cause is so great and noble as the cause for which the widow gave her best. Several characters in Scripture accepted the divine call to give themselves completely to the cause of God, even at the risk of their own lives. In the Old Testament, we have the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who put their lives at risk for obedience to God; Noah, who risked his reputation by building the ark; Abraham, who risked his son's life. In the New Testament we have other examples, such as Stephen, who laid down his life for the cause; Matthew, who gave up a thriving business to follow Jesus; Aquila and Priscilla, who risked their necks for the cause of God (see Romans 16:3, 4).

But one of the most striking biblical texts that deals with the decision to surrender all for the cause of God is the one that describes the decision of the apostle Paul. He was going to Jerusalem and stopped in Caesarea for a few

days. A prophet named Agabus arrived at the place where Paul was and presented a prophecy that brought much grief to the Christians gathered there. The Bible tells us that Agabus "took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, "So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles"' (Acts 21:11). Faced with the clear vision of suffering that awaited the beloved apostle, the church's reaction was immediate: "When we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem" (verse 12).

Likewise, Paul's response was immediate: "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (verse 13). And the church's reaction was: "So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, 'The will of the Lord be done'" (verse 14).

How to persuade someone who has such a noble cause in his life? Do you have a cause worth giving your life for? The apostle Paul, Queen Esther, Stephen, and the widow who owned only two pennies did!

The third lesson is that the widow understood that those two coins would go to the temple, and that the temple represented a great cause. Now you might be wondering: What cause did the temple represent? What was the cause that inspired her to make such a great sacrifice? To answer these questions, we need to understand what the temple and the rituals that took place within it meant.

The entire ritual performed in the temple was linked to the death of a lamb, and everything it represented. From the first lamb that was slain in the Garden of Eden, each sacrifice demonstrated that God would not leave the sinner to his fate. God's original plan was that all mankind would freely enjoy fellowship with their Creator, but sin undid the divine plan. After the Fall, mankind could no longer have access to the presence of God. The couple was expelled from the Garden, and God, in His infinite mercy, presented a plan that would make it possible for Him to dwell again among the humans. Since the human creatures had to leave Eden, God decided to leave with them. This is huge!

When God's people were still made up of families, it was God Himself who told the Israelites that each family was supposed to build their own altar for sacrifices. As soon as Israel became a great nation, God said, "And let them

make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). Through the sanctuary, “God is as near as sin will permit. He is ‘among’ His people.” Indeed, “God could not bear to be separated from His own.”<sup>3</sup>

The sanctuary in the wilderness was replaced by the temple that was built by Solomon and, later on, remodeled by Herod. It was to the same temple that the widow brought her offering. The purpose of everything that happened in the temple was to express God’s grace and mercy, which was freely offered to the repentant sinner. All the rituals served as a preaching of the gospel to the Jewish people. This understanding should redefine the sinner’s relationship and response to their merciful God.

Augustine of Hippo wrote the following words to describe his experience after understanding the mercy of God: “You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”<sup>4</sup>

This was the cause the widow loved so much. She had grasped what the temple represented to salvation, and that understanding led her to love and act on that love. Her surrender was the inevitable result of the comprehension of the system of sacrifices. The author of Hebrews states that the sacrifices offered at the earthly sanctuary were only “copies of the true [one]” (Hebrews 9:24). Now, if the widow, who saw nothing but the symbols, was able to make such a complete surrender, just imagine the kind of surrender we should make, considering that we have today a much clearer perception of the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

When we understand the significance of the cross, we have no choice but to surrender all, just like Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf did. Count Zinzendorf was born into a high society family in Dresden, Germany. His father was secretary of state, and the family lived in a castle. At age 15, he went to the University of Wittenberg to study law, as a preparation to serve in the government office, as was the custom among the young men who belonged to high society.

After graduation, he traveled to Germany, Holland, and France (1719–1720). In a museum in Düsseldorf, he got to see the painting *Ecce Homo* by Domínico Feti, which portrayed the Lord Jesus crowned with thorns. Although he was mightily impressed by the portrait of the suffering Christ,



what really moved him were the challenging words scribbled at the foot of the picture: “All this I did for you; now what will you do for Me?”

Upon leaving the museum, he decided to give himself completely to the cause of God. Along with some friends, he started a movement called “The Order of the Mustard Seed,” which later contributed significantly to the great missionary awakening of the 19th century. When Zinzendorf was asked about the real reason for such an impressive and sacrificial missionary movement, he responded by quoting Isaiah 53:11: “He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied.”<sup>5</sup>

I often say that one of my favorite hymns ever is “The Old Rugged Cross.” I would like to make this hymn my biography. At the end of my life, my earnest desire is to be able to sing: “So I’ll cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown.”<sup>6</sup>

I want to be able to say that I lived for a cause that is worth living and dying for. I would like to invite you to finish this chapter by singing that old song. If you can’t raise your voice right now, sing mentally and ask God to grant you the blessing of loving, living, and surrendering for the cause that saved you.



Access the QR Code, watch the video, and think of the kind of response you should give for all that was offered to us on the cross.

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Meditaciones sobre los Evangelios, tomo 2, Lucas* (Moral de Calatrava, Espanha: Editorial Peregrino, 2002), 390.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1940), 174.

<sup>3</sup> M. L. Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1947), 23.

<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York, Sheed & Ward, 1943).

<sup>5</sup> Justo L. González, *História Ilustrada do Cristianismo, tomo 2, A Era dos Dogmas e das Dúvidas* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 2011), vol. 2, 341, 354.

<sup>6</sup> George Bennard, “The Old Rugged Cross,” *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, hymn #159 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1985).

# 11 • THE KNOWLEDGE THAT LEADS TO ACTION



*"It seems a contradiction to say that there is no rest for the soul except that which is found in continuous and devoted service. But this is true."*

*Ellen G. White*

*"Millions of professed believers talk as if [Christ] were real and act as if He were not."*

*A. W. Foye*

**J**like to imagine someone asking the widow: "Why in the world did you do this? How could you make such an enormous sacrifice?" I also like to imagine her answering, "I just couldn't help it!"

In the previous chapter, we saw that the widow's offering was a response to her love for the Lord's cause. The widow's story teaches us that love for God's cause is proportional to how much we are engaged with it. We can say that we love it, but only involvement and surrender to it is the true evidence of that love.

The reformer Martin Luther had a good friend in a monastery where they both lived, in Germany. Both shared the same beliefs about the Christian faith. The two showed a strong love for the cause of truth. However, while Luther decided to wage the "war" for the sake of the Reformation, his friend chose to stay in the monastery, praying and interceding for him. One night, Martin's friend had a dream. He saw an endless field that seemed to touch the horizon. The field was ready for the harvest. He also saw a man trying to reap the entire crop by himself—an impossible task! Soon he was able to have a glimpse of the lone worker's face: Martin Luther himself! The dream taught him a great truth: He had to stop just praying for his friend and start working along with him.

Maybe you have a repertory of convincing phrases about how important the cause of God is; maybe you can deliver an excellent sermon on its importance,

or even mention several examples of what it means for the lives of many people, but believe me, all this means nothing unless you get fully involved in it. The widow's simplicity teaches us that much more important than doing something big is just doing something.

That's why the status of our surrender and sacrifice for the cause of God can be a reliable thermometer of our spiritual lives. Ellen G. White says: "Is this the language of your heart? 'I am wholly Thine, my Saviour; Thou hast paid the ransom for my soul, and all that I am or ever hope to be is Thine. Help me to acquire means, not to expend foolishly, not to indulge pride, but to use to Thine own name's glory.'"<sup>1</sup>

That should be our prayer every single day. That prayer helps us understand three important points:

1. I am Yours, not mine. I belong to You, not to me. What I have now and will have tomorrow is Yours and not mine. What I am and what I will be is Yours.

2. You are my Savior and You paid a ransom for my life. This is my primary motivation for serving. I do not serve for the applause or the support of others but as a response to God-given salvation.

3. Lord, please help me to acquire resources that will be used to glorify Your name.

Here is the practical aspect of all this: We may spend a lifetime theorizing at points one and two, but it's the third point that confirms the action that derives from a true understanding of the first two points. If there is no concrete action, it is because we don't truly understand the meaning of belonging to God and having been saved from condemnation.

So if I ask, "How much do you love God's cause," how would you respond? The best way to respond is not with words, but with a life of full dedication and involvement in the work of God. We need to understand that this is the acid test of our Christian discipleship.

Read carefully the following quote: "There is no such thing as a truly converted person living a helpless, useless life."<sup>2</sup> In other words, involvement and commitment to God's mission are evidence of true conversion. That quote, however, is not to be used to measure and evaluate the conversion of the person next to me. It should be used, instead, to assess the authenticity of my own conversion.

At this point, one thing needs to be clear: God's cause is not just what happens inside the church. God's work happens everywhere, all the time. One of

our biggest problems as Christians is thinking that all God expects from us is that we get involved in a church service four hours a week. The work of God continues to happen as we continually go to work, the bakery, the market, the park, the school, etc. As Christians, we must always be alert and willing to fulfill God's call to salvation.

In the church, there are several ministries, such as reception, music, Adventurers, Pathfinders, youth ministries, social services, preaching, etc. Everyone should be involved somehow in these ministries (among others) and help support them financially. But in addition to a ministry, we must have a mission and also get involved and invest in it. Some take over the mission of handing out missionary books, others of giving Bible studies, others of feeding the hungry, and so on. Both ministry and mission have a single goal: to save! Nothing we do should have any other purpose. Whether we sing, welcome visitors and the church members, run a Pathfinder club, deliver food baskets, or give Bible studies, everything must be done with the clear intention of getting people to know the Lord and surrender to Him.

Maybe you're involved in just one church ministry, and you're getting discouraged in your spiritual life. If that's your case, I urge you to get involved in the mission of reaching people outside the church right now! The mission to go all over the world preaching the gospel was not given to us because heaven was incapable to accomplish it. It is exactly the opposite: Heaven would do it infinitely better than us. The mission has been entrusted to us because God knows that this is the only way for us to grow in grace. Do you feel that getting involved in a mission is the only way to grow in grace? Does that sound too strong to you? So let me give you a quote inspired by God: "The only way to grow in grace is to be interestedly doing the very work Christ has enjoined upon us to do."<sup>3</sup>

Before writing this chapter, I was studying the Bible with a friend. He is a businessman whose schedule is always taken up by meetings and negotiations. Nevertheless, each week he sets aside two hours for us to study the Bible. He is very interested in knowing the Truth and what the will of God is for his life. I am currently studying the Bible with another 18 people. I love giving Bible studies, but I confess that people aren't always baptized at the end of a series of studies. It's not uncommon that someone quits the Bible studies before completing it.

What I mean by revealing this is that I don't know what will happen to the people I'm studying the Bible with, but I know exactly what happens to me after each study. I know exactly how I feel when I talk over and again about the

power of the Bible in my life. I can't explain it in words, but I do know how I feel each time I present the study on the power of prayer. I have no idea how many times I've gotten emotional when I give a Bible study that reveals what Christ means to me. Perhaps the best way to explain it would be to say that, through Christ, I am growing in grace.

Do you get it? That was what moved the widow to surrender all she had! And this is what should move your life and my life. Getting involved in a mission brings renewal to spiritual life. We can summarize this chapter by pointing out the three things that will happen when we are totally in love with the cause of the cross:

1. We will be involved in God's mission, no matter what kind of sacrifices it entails.

2. Our spiritual life will be renewed as we do it.

3. Regardless of the dimension of the sacrifice that we can make for the cause of God, if we look to the cross of Calvary and understand what was offered to us up there, our surrender will mean nothing. No one can be proud of whatever he does for the cause of God when he stands at the foot of the cross. On the other hand, no one will do any less than his or her utmost for the cause as he or she beholds the utmost God offered for us at Calvary.

In 1857, David Livingstone was invited to receive a tribute and speak to students at Cambridge University in England. He had left a prosperous life in Europe to devote himself to preaching the gospel on the African continent. As he stood in front of the students, he was just a thin, slender man who had been stricken 31 times by the deadly African fevers and had one arm resting in a sling after an encounter with a lion. Throughout England, that humble servant was welcomed as a hero. But now, in front of those attentive students, he uttered the following words:

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. . . . I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk when

we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us.<sup>4</sup>

The way we use our time, bodies, and financial resources is a clear testimony to how much we love the cause of God. The rule is simple: We need to love God's cause more than our own cause.

I invite you to pray the following prayer: "Lord, put someone in my path today with whom I can share Your love and Your truth." I believe this is the kind of prayer that God always answers. Why don't you take the test?



Access the QR Code and find out the wonders of using your gifts for the cause of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1940), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900), 280.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *Christian Service* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1925), 101.

<sup>4</sup> David Livingstone, quoted in Orlando Boyer, *Herois da Fé* (Rio de Janeiro: Casa Publicadora das Assembleias de Deus, 2002), 29.

# 12 • THE GREATEST LEGACY



*“Each morning and evening present your children to God  
as His blood-bought heritage.*

*Teach them that it is their highest duty and privilege  
to love and serve God.”*

*Ellen G. White*

*“Whatever we have to do for a man,  
let’s do it before he becomes a man.”*

*Theodore Roosevelt*

A few years ago, I received a package with an invitation to the birthday party of the daughter of a couple of friends. The content of the package immediately caught my attention. In the box, there was sort of a piggy bank decorated with girlish visual motifs. Attached to it, there was a note informing that the birthday party would be held in an orphanage and that any money put in the piggy bank would go to the kids of the orphanage rather than the birthday girl. The proceeds would be used to buy gifts for the kids of the orphanage.

After a few days, I talked to the little girl's parents, trying to better understand where they got that fantastic idea. Their response was: “Pastor, our daughter has more toys than a child needs. We want her to overcome selfishness by learning to share, and there is nothing better than visiting places where there are kids who have almost nothing.”

Bravo! Those parents were trying to rip selfishness from their daughter's heart, and they realized that the best way to do it was to share what they have and what they are with those who need it most. Actually, this is not a new practice. Back in 1890, Ellen G. White wrote the following words:

Under the Jewish economy, on the birth of children an offering was made to God, by His own appointment. Now we see parents taking special pains to present gifts to their children upon their birthdays; they make this an occasion of honoring the child, as though honor were due to the human being. . . . On birthday occasions the children should be taught that they have reason for gratitude to God for His loving-kindness in preserving their lives for another year. Precious lessons might thus be given. For life, health, food, and clothing, no less than for the hope of eternal life, we are indebted to the Giver of all mercies; and it is due to God to recognize His gifts, and to present our offerings of gratitude to our greatest benefactor. These birthday gifts are recognized of Heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Birthday offerings should be a gratitude offering brought to the Lord on the occasion of the birthday. When a child shares what she has with children who have nothing, and when she is taught to see a birthday as a date to be thankful and not just to get stuff, that child is learning two very important things: grace and service.

I have witnessed with joy the great interest that the church has taken for the new generations. There has been an increased emphasis on building a spiritually sound church, a church that firmly believes that we are saved solely by the grace of Jesus Christ. I look forward to seeing a new generation of faithful members who are prepared to meet the Lord. Nevertheless, we need to intertwine grace and service as we educate our children. Ellen G. White declares:

God's purpose for the children growing up beside our hearths is wider, deeper, higher, than our restricted vision has comprehended. . . . From every quarter of this world of ours, comes the cry of sin-stricken hearts for a knowledge of the God of love. . . . It rests with us who have received the knowledge, with our children to whom we may impart it, to answer their cry.<sup>2</sup>

As a church, we have been teaching about an amazing God who loves us with unending love and has done everything necessary to give us abundant life (see John 10:10). Parents should join the church in the ideal of teaching that this truth should lead us to serve, as well as to communicate it to the world—a world



that resembles a big hospital full of people who are suffering just because they don't know they are unconditionally loved, regardless of what they have or their appearance.

Parents should teach by precept and example what it means to be involved in God's work. We must recognize that, unfortunately, we have failed to convey values of complete and unrestricted surrender to the cause of God.

There has been a great neglect on the part of parents in not seeking to interest their children in the workings of the cause of God. In many families the children seem to be left out of the question, as if they were irresponsible beings. Some parents even rob God of His just claims in tithes and offerings that they may save wealth for their children, not thinking that in so doing they are opening to their loved ones a door of temptation which will generally prove their ruin.<sup>3</sup>

This quote by Ellen G. White makes us think of three important points:

1. Parents have failed to create interest in their children regarding the development of God's cause. This matter cannot be delegated to the church. We need to intentionally teach our children the importance of God's work.

One day I heard a teacher explaining how she put together a lesson plan for her students. A lesson plan is the script of themes that will be presented over a school term. After the teacher's explanation, I decided to make a lesson plan to teach my children how to build a noble character. During our family worship, I would teach a few points that would help build their character. Some points of my "class program" for the year are: how to honor God above all, how to say "no" to the enemy, how to pray, how to read the Bible, the definition of character, how to choose friends, how to love God's cause, what to do to never give up, how to use money, how to be faithful in tithes and offerings, the meaning of integrity, what a pure conscience and proper sexuality are, and how to take care of the body. Every six months I reinforce or change the topics covered according to their age and needs. Some books have helped me a lot in this process.<sup>4</sup>

2. This "great neglect" is often caused by parents' unfaithfulness in returning tithes and offerings. That attitude will open the door of temptation for their children and cause them to follow the path of spiritual ruin. If we want our children to take heavenly things seriously, we need to show in our lives that God's cause is our priority. This also applies to other people in our family. Often our

siblings or parents do not take seriously our decision for the truth because they don't feel that we really take what we profess seriously.

3. Children cannot be set aside in spiritual matters. Many adults act as if their children don't have any spiritual perceptions. That's a big mistake! Children have a spiritual perception that is much deeper than that of the vast majority of adults. That's why Jesus challenged us to be like children.

One day I was traveling on vacation with my family. We had left home at 8 A.M., and the trip would take between ten and twelve hours. It didn't take too long for the kids to start asking the question that brings terror to any family trip: "Daddy, are we there yet?"

My answer was always the same: "No, sweetie, not yet!" That wouldn't convince them, and every 20 minutes they would repeat the same question. After a while, and already a bit irritated, I replied: "Let's do this: Don't ask if we are there yet. When it gets dark, you will know that we are just getting there. While we have sunlight, though, it means that we are still a little far."

My daughter immediately replied, "Daddy, do you mean that when it gets dark we will be arriving?"

"You got it!" I said.

She then replied, "Then I will pray that God will make it dark right now."

During that trip, I kept asking God to give me the confidence of a child who has no doubts about God's ability to make the day dark at 10 A.M. This is the spiritual perception of children, and as adults, we must strengthen it and emulate it.

I had the privilege to grow up in a home that had a clear vision of God's amazing grace. That has made a major difference in my life and ministry. Besides the teachings on grace, my siblings and I grew up watching our mother giving Bible studies to different families several nights a week. I couldn't grasp what was happening there, but that was the kind of environment I was raised in.

For years in a row, I saw my mother being nominated missionary director of the church. I also saw that several people who studied the Bible with her were baptized. At the time, I couldn't understand why my mother would cry every time she watched someone being baptized.

As I grew older, I began to understand what happened in my mother's heart, and I began to feel God calling me to experience in my life the same thing she had felt for years. I remember the sparkle in her eyes when I told her that I felt God was calling me to be a full-time minister. I remember the hug and those familiar tears in her eyes. I had the joy of graduating in theology and receiving

my mother's advice and support for a year and a half of my ministry. Then, in March 2004, we found out that this woman so full of life had cancer, which led to her death on July 27, 2004.

On the day of her funeral, when we returned home, the doorbell rang. My father went to answer it, and at the door, there was a lady who was not yet aware of my mother's death. She'd come to visit her. My father explained to the lady that my mother had slept in the Lord and that she had been buried half an hour ago. Bursting into tears, she said: "I owe Dona Antônia a lot. I didn't have peace with my kids, and my marriage was a mess, but when she told me about Jesus and the Bible, my whole life got better."

This experience showed us that my mother's life had a purpose. I received many incredible lessons from her, but the greatest legacy she left was the example of dedication for the cause of truth as well as the burning desire she had to bring people to a personal encounter with Christ.

Today, I would like to invite you to put together a lesson plan for the development of the character of your children or other members of your family, and affirm your commitment to hold family worship daily.

Family worship time:

Morning:

Evening:

Topics to be covered:



Access the QR Code and check out practical tips to bequeath a financial education for your children.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1938), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1903), 262.

<sup>3</sup> White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, 140.

<sup>4</sup> Here is a list of books that have helped me design a lesson plan for my family: Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1954); Donna J. Habenicht, *How to Help Your Child to Really Love Jesus: Practical Suggestions for Instilling Spiritual Values* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1994); Kay Kuzma, *The First 7 Years: Parenting with Strong Values and a Gentle Touch* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2006); Meibel Mello Guedes, *Educar a los Hijos: Un Acto de Amor* (Buenos Aires: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2008).

# 13 • THE TRUE HAPPY ENDING



*“The most important thing in any relationship  
is not what you get but what you give.”*

*Eleanor Roosevelt*

*“With Christ, it is not how much we give,  
but what we do not give that is the real test.”*

*Oswald Chambers*



K, let's be honest here. Don't you think something is missing in the widow's story? Read Mark 12:41-44 again. What is it that is missing in the story? Of course! An exciting ending! A grand finale!

I don't mean to be disrespectful to God's Word, but don't you think such an awesome case of surrender deserves a more impactful ending? After all, that poor widow gave everything she owned to the temple of the God of Israel. Wouldn't the story be better off with an ending that left no doubt about the advantages of imitating her attitude? Perhaps an ending like this: “Out of her poverty, the widow gave up everything she owned, all her support, but as soon as she left the temple, she received an email informing her that a millionaire uncle had passed away and that she was his only heiress. So she lived the rest of her days in wealth and plenty.” Or perhaps it could be another ending like this one: “Out of her poverty, the widow gave up all that she had, all her livelihood. But as she was heading home, she passed by a field and noticed the glowing tip of something buried in the ground. She started to dig, and before she knew it, she hit a chest filled with gold coins. Then she lived the rest of her days in wealth and plenty.”

But the story does not end like that. As you read it, you notice that after the widow gives everything away, the narrative comes to an end quite abruptly. The next thing you see is that Jesus left the temple (Mark 13:1). The

account simply says that she gave everything she had, all her livelihood, and that's it!

Do you know why the story ends like this? Because that's how faithfulness to God works. Faithfulness is not a bargaining chip for God's blessings. I cannot think biblically and still advocate the idea that God is indebted to someone who decides to surrender entirely to Him and His cause.

You may disagree with the optional endings I suggested for the widow's story, but I would imagine that we can agree that, as human beings, we assume a trading mindset when it comes to our relationship with God. Our mind works like this: I do good things in my Christian life, I obey in whatever is expected of me, and, because of that, I deserve to be the object of all blessings and care from heaven. Because of this kind of mindset, the first thing we ask God when we suffer is, "Why, Lord?"

When the days are tough, we start looking for failures and mistakes that justify the struggles we face. And when the degree of the challenge seems out of proportion to our flaws, we say or think that God is not fair, He has failed us, He does not love us.

The Bible doesn't endorse this trading mentality. For example, Job's friends could not understand how terrible things could happen to someone righteous. So they spent most of their time trying to convince Job of his injustice and that he deserved the terrible trials that befell him. But at the end of the book of Job, God reveals Himself and speaks to one of them: "My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has" (Job 42:7).

One day, as Jesus was standing in front of a blind man, the disciples asked a question that expressed the thinking of those days, and, to a great extent, today as well. The account is recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 9: "Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" (John 9:1, 2).

There was a belief among the Jews that a man born blind was destined to be a sinner and that he would suffer now the punishment due to his future life of sin.<sup>1</sup> That thought derived from the belief that the person deserved either blessings or curses, according to his deeds. The idea was: either I am indebted to God or God is indebted to me.

In His response, Jesus did not deny that the man or his relatives were

sinners. He claimed that blindness was not linked to a sinful deed, nor was it a result of divine punishment. On the other hand, He did not try to explain the suffering and evil that befell the blind man. He just responded that the glory of God would be manifested through the suffering of that man.

Deeming faithfulness to God as a bargaining chip detaches us from the right motive for us to be faithful and obedient, namely, to respond with love to a God whom we love. We must get rid of the idea that our faithfulness must somehow be rewarded by God. When we do that, we are actually saying that we love our cause rather than God's.

The following illustration may help us understand this point:

Once upon a time there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. So he took it to his king and said, "My lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." The king was touched and discerned the man's heart, so as he turned to go the king said, "Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all." And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing. But there was a nobleman at the king's court who overheard all this. And he said, "My! If that is what you get for a carrot—what if you gave the king something better?" So the next day the nobleman came before the king and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, "My lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I have ever bred or ever will. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." But the king discerned his heart and said thank you, and took the horse and merely dismissed him. The nobleman was perplexed. So the king said, "Let me explain. That gardener was giving *me* the carrot, but you were giving *yourself* the horse." <sup>2</sup>

This is exactly what we do when we expect a reward for our loyalty—and a reward is not the right reason for us to be faithful. The true reason is expressed in 1 John 4:19: "We love Him because He first loved us." This verse should be on our minds every time we obey God or are faithful to Him. Our faithfulness is just a response to the great love and faithfulness we have received. Faithfulness

is actually a memory exercise: We need to look to the past and realize what we have received from God to respond in faithfulness.

For example, as we return tithes and offerings, we must look back and count the blessings that God has bestowed upon us. Only then are we ready to figure out what our tithes and offerings will be. Biblically, no one should return tithes and offerings by looking to the future, trying to anticipate what they will get back in exchange. We can only return what we already have. Only then the return of tithes and offerings becomes a celebration in gratitude for God's caring love.

This is one of the reasons for the seventh day of the week to be deemed holy. God has already given you six days to take care of your business, and when you welcome the Sabbath at the sunset of the sixth day of the week, you should look back and acknowledge God's care upon you throughout the week. Only then will the Sabbath be a day to celebrate what I have already received rather than a mere expectation of what God owes you just because you're keeping one more Sabbath in your life.

In Deuteronomy 8, Moses delivers a powerful speech where God exhorts the people of Israel to obey and be faithful to Him. If you read that passage carefully, you will notice an interesting detail. God begins by saying, "Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe" (verse 1). In other words, God is saying, "Obey and be faithful to My commandments!" In the next 19 verses, He uses a few terms to show how to be faithful. The terms are: "remember" (verse 2), "do not forget" (verse 11), and, again, "remember" (verse 18). Throughout the passage, God presents the facts that the people of Israel should remember to keep their faith:

Remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness. . . . Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. . . . For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs. . . . [He] fed you in the wilderness with manna. . . . It is He who gives you power to get wealth (Deuteronomy 8:2, 4, 7, 16, 18).

Every Christian should do this memory exercise before practicing faithfulness to God. I usually say that every believer has an amazing story to tell about what God is and does in his life.

In Deuteronomy 8, God also presents the consequences of forgetting the blessings and care already received:

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God. . . . Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (verses 11–14, NIV).

As we have discussed in this chapter, unfaithfulness is the result of forgetting, as it elicits short memory. Gratitude and faithfulness, on the other hand, can help me remember everything and respond accordingly. That's why it is necessary to repeat and emphasize this truth so you never forget: Faithfulness is an ongoing look to the past. It is remembering the blessings you've received and then living up to them.

Today, I want to invite you to wrap up this chapter by listing the blessings and care you have received which inspire and prompt you to respond in obedience and faithfulness.

Lord, I always want to remember that: \_\_\_\_\_, and also that \_\_\_\_\_ and, in addition, that \_\_\_\_\_.



Access the QR Code and watch for the true principles of faithfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary—John*, vol. 36 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 154, 155.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 69, 70.



# 14 • THE PURPOSE OF FAITHFULNESS



*“Jesus would have those who are engaged in His service,  
not eager for rewards, nor feel that they must  
receive compensation for all that they do.”*

*Ellen G. White*

*“Everything we have we receive as a gift, and everything we have is  
cared for by God, and everything we have is available to overs  
when it is right and good.”*

*Richard J. Foster*



On November 19, 1835, Reverend George Müller was visiting members of his community to strengthen them in their faith. He went to the house of a lady who invited him to have a seat while she fixed some tea. Müller’s mind was still impressed with the story of an orphan he had met that same week, to the point that he wanted to start an orphanage in Bristol, England. At the time, there were only three orphanages in England—none in Bristol, where he worked as a pastor. And it wasn’t for lack of orphans. These existed by the thousands, unattended and suffering. Being a man of prayer, Müller had already prayed to God on the subject and was waiting for a clear answer from heaven.

While waiting for the tea, he decided to browse through the lady’s bookshelf. Unexpectedly, he came across the biography of the German Lutheran theologian August Hermann Francke. George stared at the book, which was so familiar to him. Actually, he had read it twice, and each time he did, he was increasingly touched by the story of that eighteenth-century theologian who decided to open an orphanage and had a rule not to ask anyone for funds for the upkeep of the institution. It would depend solely on the answers to his prayers.

Müller remembered that it was Francke's story that influenced him to have the same rule of life and to begin a journey of full dependence on God. For the rest of the week, he thought of nothing else. Was this God's will for his life, to run an orphanage?

By the end of the week, he decided to share his plan with his friend Henry Craik. The plan was already in place: He would rent a low-price house in downtown Bristol, take in between 20 and 30 children in need of a home, provide food and clothing, and educate them as if they were his own family.

However, Henry felt a little nervous and decided to be frank with Müller and explain to him the reason why he should not open an orphanage. "You have no money, Müller," he said. Müller replied: "Francke didn't have any money either. He built his orphanages through prayer." A bit irritated, Henry said, "But he lived one hundred years ago. Things are different now."

After strolling back and forth for a while, George suddenly stamped his foot firmly on the floor of the house and said, "What do you mean, Henry? Has God lost His power? If God answered Francke's prayer in 1727, He can answer mine in 1835. And I'll tell you more, Henry Craik. I'm always preaching, and in my sermons, I tell people to trust God, and that if they pray, He will answer their prayers. I believe what I preach. I know it's possible to raise your hands and touch God when you pray. I've already tasted it myself. Prayer has changed my life, and I want to help others have the same experience."

"So are you going to open an orphanage to show the whole world that God answers prayer? Is that what moves you to open an orphanage?" Henry replied. "No. I'm going to open an orphanage to take care of the children. That's one of the reasons. But I also want the world to know that God can do great things using a poor man like me. I will gather 20 children in an orphanage, and I will not ask anyone for anything. I will only ask Him for the resources to run the orphanage. Then, somehow, I will prove to people that God is faithful even today!"<sup>1</sup>

That was how Müller, in April 1836, started his first orphanage, with 30 children. In 1870, he was running five orphanages, with a total of 2,000 children and 200 employees. Throughout his life, Müller remained steadfast in his decision to ask no one but God for the resources for his orphanages. At the end of his life, he reported that, in answer to prayers, he had received \$7.5 million for child care. I believe few people in the history of mankind have had such an extraordinary experience of dependence and trust in God as Müller did.

One day someone asked him, "Mr. Müller, aren't you afraid that someday

God will quit sending resources and the children will go hungry?” He promptly replied: “If God fails me I will be very surprised, as it will be the first time.”

This amazing story gives us a glimpse of what the real purpose of faithfulness to God is. It reminds us that it is not financial resources that should govern our lives, but God’s will and dependence on Him. For me, this is also the core of the widow’s story. She did not allow herself to be controlled by the uncertainty of scarce resources; she was driven by dependence on a mighty God, and Jesus applauded her attitude. The real purpose of faithfulness is not to get a reward for what we have given, but to transform our character and make us dependent on God.

In the widow’s story, Christ commended what most people would condemn. You would probably argue: “Two coins were of little importance to the church’s treasury, but of great importance to her. If she had given one of the coins and kept the other, she would have shown not just godliness but common sense.” However, in the eyes of the Lord, she did the right thing, and she was commended for it.

Indeed, two little coins wouldn’t make any difference to the temple’s finances. The text says that she gave “two mites, which make a quadrans” (Mark 12:42). The expression “two mites” refers to the *lepton*, which was a small copper coin and had the lowest monetary value in the Jewish economy. As Mark was writing for Roman readers, he chose to use the word “quadrans,” which was more familiar to the Romans, rather than *lepton*.<sup>2</sup>

To understand how much those two coins were worth, we first need to understand a few things about the economics of that time. At the end of a day’s labor, a worker would collect a denarius as a payment. The coin the widow gave to the temple was worth 64 times less than a denarius. In other words, the two coins were worth just about 15 minutes of labor.<sup>3</sup> It was indeed a negligible amount, especially if compared with the large amounts that were being handed out by the rich men at that very moment.

Mark makes sure that his readers understand the insignificance of the monetary value of the offering because he wants to show that the widow’s sacrifice would not make the slightest difference in the temple’s finances, but would make a huge difference in her life. Do you understand what faithfulness is now? Can you grasp the idea that the primary objective of giving our resources is not to support God’s work? Psalm 50 was written to remind us that God is complete, He doesn’t need what I have to support His cause. In verse 10 He says, “For every

beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills.” And in verse 12 He goes on: “If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness.”

If our primary objective is to uphold the cause of God, what then is the primary objective of faithfulness? Read this quote from Ellen G. White: “This tithing system, I saw, would develop character, and manifest the true state of the heart.”<sup>4</sup> This is the true purpose of faithfulness: To develop character and manifest what really dominates our hearts.

We need to understand that the “use” of tithes and offerings is one thing, and their “purpose” is another. You see, tithes and offerings are used to forward the cause of God, but the purpose of tithes and offerings is to develop character. When we realize this, we understand that God is not dependent on me whatsoever. He can bring in resources for the upkeep of His cause wherever He wants to. He is God, after all. However, when I am not faithful, I miss the opportunity to have my character developed in the likeness of the character of Christ.

So when we talk about faithfulness in church or for our children, we shouldn't just use the argument that God's cause needs resources or that the mission needs to move forward, and that's why we must be faithful. What we should really emphasize is how much is lost in terms of character building when we are unfaithful, and how selfishness takes hold of our hearts when we are not faithful.

Imagine, for example, a child who receives a weekly allowance of \$10 from her parents, and returns \$1 as a tithe and another \$1 as an offering. Over five years, that child will have returned \$60 in tithes and another \$60 in offerings. This amount certainly will not cause a big impact on the preaching of the gospel in the world, but it will certainly cause a huge impact on the character of this child throughout those five years.

What matters to God is not the monetary difference our offering will possibly make, but the difference it will make in revealing where our treasure is. Thus, I am faithful not because I will get something back or because God's work depends on me, but because I understand the role of faithfulness in transforming my character and also in the comprehension of the greatness of God.

Note this quote from Ellen G. White: “God planned the system of beneficence, in order that man might become like his Creator, benevolent and unselfish in character, and finally be a partaker with Christ of the eternal, glorious reward.”<sup>5</sup>

By “system of beneficence,” Ellen G. White means the return of tithes, offerings, and helping the ones in great need. God planned it with a clear and grand goal in mind. Imagine something that could make us kind, compassionate, and forgiving like our Creator. This is the ultimate goal of sanctification and transformation of character. And, make no mistake, it involves faithfulness to God and commitment to His cause.

Today, I want to invite you to write a short prayer asking God to continue the process of transforming your character through faithfulness. Ask Him to help you understand the importance of faithfulness to the Christian life. Moreover, ask Him to help you be faithful in all aspects of life, including the returning of tithes, offerings, and helping the ones in need.



Access the QR Code and watch the video to understand how faithfulness is linked to strengthening the relationship with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Faith Coxe Bailey, *George Mueller: He Dared to Trust God for the Needs of Countless Orphans* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1958), 83–85.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Earle, A. Elwood Sanner, and Charles L. Childers, *Comentario Bíblico Beacon: Mateo hasta Lucas*, tomo 6 (Lenexa, KS: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 2010), 384.

<sup>3</sup> John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, eds. *Comentario Expositivo—Nuevo Testamento, tomo 1, San Mateo, San Marcos, San Lucas* (Puebla, México: Ediciones Las Américas, 1995), 215.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1855), 237.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1940), 15.

# 15 • I HAVE LEARNED HOW TO LIVE



*“Wealth is like sea-water; the more we drink,  
the thirstier we become.”  
Arthur Schopenhauer*

*“There are two ways of becoming rich: to increase your income to the level  
of your needs or to lower your needs to the level of your income.”  
Alphonse Karr*

*A*t this point in the book, I hope you are truly impressed with the story of the widow and her offering. However, I must confess that the real purpose of this book is not to delight or impress, but to transform. The prayer I say every moment is that the widow's story will lead you to a practical change in your faithfulness. For that to happen, you need to understand one more point of this incredible story, which is that it teaches us a great lesson that can be summed up in one single word: contentment.

This is perhaps one of the most difficult and, at the same time, the most necessary lessons for learning to live faithfully. It was obvious that the widow had already learned to be content with what she had. Before giving up everything she owned, she had to deal with the possibility of living with nothing for a while. At some point, she was content to depend on and wait for the care and protection of God. For this to become a reality in her life, she had to make do with the scarcity of the moment.

Unfortunately, the word contentment has lost its original meaning. In the dictionary, contentment means “the quality or state of being contented,”<sup>1</sup> that is, to feel or show “satisfaction with one's possessions, status, or situation.”<sup>2</sup>

Contentment has nothing to do with settling down, giving up, stopping dreaming, or having no prospects in life. On the contrary, it is the lack of true

contentment that brings the feeling of defeat, insecurity, or loss. Not having contentment is to lack the capacity to impose a limit to desires and not knowing how to differentiate desires from needs. So I agree with writer Thomas Fuller, who said, "If your desires be endless, your cares and fears will be so too."<sup>3</sup>

The apostle Paul wrote an extraordinary text on contentment. Paul was someone who had the authority to speak on the subject. He faced several difficulties throughout his life, and his attitude of contentment helped him to face and overcome these moments. He says: "Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:11-13).

This is one of the best-known and most cherished passages in the New Testament. I particularly like it not for what is said but for what is not said. You see, the apostle Paul doesn't say, "I enjoy the constant challenge of having everything at one time and having nothing at another." He doesn't say either, "I don't care whether I sleep on a mattress or the floor" nor "I don't care if there is something to eat today and tomorrow there is nothing."

Had Paul written, "I like to live in this insecurity of having everything now and having nothing next," I would still admire him, but that would be it. However, when, instead of saying "I enjoy," he said "I have learned" to live in both situations, what he is really trying to say is: "I am just like you. I don't like uncertainty or insecurity. I don't like to be in need and deprived. But I have learned to live in both situations. I have learned to live both in plenty and in scarcity."

I take these verses as a piece of advice. I hear Paul telling me: "You don't have to like it, but you must learn to live in both situations." It is for failing to understand this passage that so many marriages, so many families, and so many Christian lives are falling apart. We neither like nor want to learn to live with adversity. If we are sincere, we'll have to admit that many of us took up the Christian life because we didn't want to be in need, didn't want to go through stress and depression, didn't want to face pain, and so on.

Paul's decision to follow Christ was not due to a desire to run away from these things, but to learn to live with them when necessary.

Today, unlike in apostolic times, we are the kind of Christians who want to avoid difficulties at any cost. That's why prosperity theology is so fascinating

for many. It promises a Christian life of abundance and plenty, in which one no longer suffers, period! Prosperity theology fulfills the greatest longing of fallen human nature: to avoid all kinds of suffering no matter what.

When you offer candy to a five-year-old kid, it's quite unlikely that he or she will ask, "Does this have any kind of flavoring in it?" Or, "How much sugar is there in this candy?" Or, "What is the effect of this candy on my health?" That kid just wants to enjoy the nice feeling the sugar will bring to the brain. Prosperity theology does something similar. It doesn't prompt you to ask, "Is it biblical? What consequence will the belief in avoiding suffering at any cost bring to my spiritual growth?" It just wants to put you against what Paul said in the verses you just read. It wants to make you believe that you don't have to learn how to deal with need or despondency in your life.

You might say, "Pastor, thanks for the clarification, but I'm not part of a church that preaches prosperity theology." Still, I want to alert you to one thing. Maybe you don't really know what prosperity theology is; maybe you think it's just a group of churches that exploit people financially, luring them with an approach of blessings and prosperity—and that is just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, the most demonic aspect of prosperity theology is not seen in any church, but rather in the capitalist world where we live. Even without churches, pastors, or pulpits, capitalism preaches that you are what you have; that you must have more because it is what have that will bring security in life. Because you want to get more stuff, you'll have to work on Sabbath hours, you'll have to take school exams on Sabbath, you'll have to compromise your family time, you'll have to be unfaithful in your tithes and offerings, you'll not be able to help those in need, and, above all, you'll have to forfeit your communion time with God.

When Jesus (1) compared money to a god named mammon (Luke 16:13); (2) bid His disciples feed thousands with no money whatsoever (Matthew 14:15–19); and (3) preached the Sermon on the Mount and said: "Do not worry about tomorrow" (Matthew 6:34; Luke 12:22–31), He was trying to destroy the false teachings of capitalism.

The system we live in leads us to interpret the passage in Philippians 4:11–13 negatively: "I don't know how to be content with what I have; I can't deal with stress and depression; I don't care about learning how to live happily in adverse times." The sad reality is that you will have struggles, you will have health issues, you will face family losses—and you will wonder how to cope



with all that. If you don't learn what Paul and the poor widow learned, you will fail on the first hurdle.

Do you know what is most worrying? Jesus' second coming will be preceded by a period of extreme difficulty which we are not prepared for and which we have earnestly avoided. It will be a time when we will have to face things like the ones Paul learned to live with. "The season of distress and anguish before us will require a faith that can endure weariness, delay, and hunger—a faith that will not faint though severely tried. The period of probation is granted to all to prepare for that time."<sup>4</sup>

The question is: How do I learn what Paul and the widow learned? The key to understanding a life like theirs is found in Philippians 4:11-13.

*"I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content"* (verse 11). First, you can never learn to cope with neediness and despondency if you don't learn to be content with what you have. For this, you need to avoid debt at any cost. In most cases, people get into debt because they are unhappy with having only what they can afford to buy.

One of the most powerful mechanisms to avoid debt is having a family budget and living according to it. The budget is a financial control tool that allows you to have a clear view of your income and expenses. Basically, a budget is a plan that allows you to balance your resources and expenditures. In other words, you record your income (salary, investment earnings, pensions, etc.) and all the expenses (utilities, gas, rent, taxes, etc.). The goal, of course, is to spend less than you earn. Only if you keep your finances in order will you be able to be faithful.

Second, faithfulness in tithes and offerings is a public declaration that nothing belongs to me and that I can be content with what I have in my hands.

*"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* (verse 13). I'm sure you know people who say, "With all the money and stuff I have, I can buy anything, anyone, and do whatever I want." But the biblical motto is, "Through Christ [not money and stuff], I can do all things." The key to learning contentment is knowing that, in Christ, I already have everything that truly matters. Let God lead you on the path of contentment and peace.

Today, I want to challenge you to put together a family budget. It is not complex or time-consuming, but I assure you that the results will help you achieve a life of contentment. There are several resources available on the internet for making a family budget, but I would like to suggest one that is

available below. It's simple, practical, and I hope it will be a blessing for you.



Access the QR Code and download a template for a family budget.



Access the QR Code and find out what is the danger of not being content.

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<sup>1</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Contentment," accessed December 5, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contentment>.

<sup>2</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Contented," accessed December 5, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contented>.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Andy Stanley, *How to Be Rich: It's Not What You Have. It's What You Do With What You Have* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 76.

# 16 • HAPPINESS THAT IS NEVER ACHIEVED



*“Genuine contentment is not self-sufficiency,  
but Christ-sufficiency.”  
John R.W. Stott*

*“Whatever man accumulates in his path is part of his baggage,  
not of his true personality, but something he must leave behind  
when passing the tollbooth of death.”  
E. K. Simpson*

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Mozambique. At the time, the African country was the seventh poorest in the world. I must confess that I didn't know much about that country, so I engaged in some research that would make it easier for me to get acquainted with the people I was about to have contact with.

Mozambique became independent from Portugal in 1975 but was immediately devastated by a long, bloody civil war that produced a profound social gap that still exists today. The photos I saw on the internet showed me a lot of pain and suffering, and I started to think that I would find the locals unhappy, unsatisfied, and discouraged, ready to complain about everything in life. After an 18-hour flight, I arrived at the small airport in the city of Beira and was greeted by three pastors sporting wide smiles on their faces. It was Friday, and I was supposed to preach in the evening at the Central SDA Church in town.

At 7 P.M., the church, with a capacity of 200 people, was packed. That was when my preconceived ideas toward those people started to melt. For the first time in my life, I saw 200 people singing not just with their lips, but also with their hearts. The music conveyed such a contagious excitement and joy that I was deeply moved. I had brought some plastic flutes, magazines, and a few toys for the kids. Everything was very modest, but the joy I saw in the children's faces

when they got these things is hard to describe. As they got those simple gifts, they hugged me and jumped and screamed over and again.

One day I was handing out groceries to 80 families who had been previously registered to receive the donation. Unexpectedly, dozens of unregistered people started to show up at the time of the distribution. The groceries were previously sorted out with the name of each registered family, and I had the unpleasant task of informing the unexpected visitors that we would give the groceries only to those who had been previously registered. That was when I saw a scene that taught me a valuable lesson: The families that collected the groceries began to share with those who had gotten nothing.

In my visit, I was also able to hand out hundreds of Bibles. Because of its price, a Bible in Mozambique is a luxury item for most people. Now, it was through the distribution of those Bibles that I learned the greatest lesson in that visit. When I was handing out the groceries, people hugged me and thanked me, but when I was giving away the Bibles, many people would cry. I couldn't understand why. So I asked a Mozambican friend who was with me: "I can't understand why people are happy and grateful when they get the groceries, but they cry when they get the Bibles. I thought it would be the other way around. These people are hungry, so I figured that getting the food would make them cry tears of happiness."

And he replied: "Pastor, we do appreciate the groceries, but soon it will be gone. However, the Bible shows us a place where hunger will be no more. That's why our people get so emotional when they're given Bibles."

I must admit that I never saw the despair I expected to find in that African country. Despite the pain and hunger that I witnessed, I also saw a lot of smiles, hugs, and willingness to share and appreciate whatever one owned or received. If I could summarize what I learned in Mozambique in one sentence, it would be: Happiness that is based on things is fleeting, but happiness that is based on God is eternal.

Those folks wouldn't be able to express the joy displayed on their faces if they hadn't learned to take their eyes off the things they had (or didn't have), and rejoice in eternal things. This is one of the teachings that the widow's life offers us. Only when we are content with the things we have, no matter if it's just a little, can we be faithful to God and honest with human beings.

Living happily with everything we have—or don't have—is the foundation of the last commandment of God's law: "You shall not covet your neighbor's

house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's" (Exodus 20:17).

The last commandment deals with something that happens within us. It differs from the eighth commandment, which says "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). Significantly, "You shall not steal" and "You shall not covet" are two separate commandments. Stealing is visible greed, whereas coveting is an invisible theft. "We cannot be sued for greed, as greed is not action but an attitude of the heart. Greed is to theft as hatred is to murder, and lust is to adultery."<sup>1</sup>

That is the danger of greed. Greed is like an invisible disease that inflicts many damages to the Christian life. That is why it is so dangerous. The Bible states that covetousness is idolatry (Ephesians 5:5), leads to death (Proverbs 1:19), brings affliction to the spirit (Ecclesiastes 6:9), and all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

Covetousness is a word we hardly use in everyday life, but it is perhaps one of the most recurrent sins, and the only one that has almost turned into a virtue. Unfortunately, coveting has become a demonic synonym for succeeding. God encourages us to succeed, but never to covet. With the rise of modern marketing, we are constantly longing for stuff we don't have. A while ago, purchases were made based on needs; today, they are made based on desires.

Writer Andy Stanley describes our age with the following words: "Imagine such a thing. They would replace something when it broke. How passé. Today, we don't replace things when they break. We replace things when the newer model of the thing we already own becomes available. We upgrade."<sup>2</sup>

The apostle Paul preached to a society dominated by greed in every respect; hence, several of his letters present strong admonitions to Christians regarding covetousness.

In Hebrews 13:5 he exhorts: "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" Paul is quoting two major passages from the Old Testament—Joshua 1:5 and Psalm 118:6—to show that the presence of God is greater than the absence of material things in our lives.

In 1 Timothy 6:6–8 the apostle adds: "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content."

By playing with the words, Paul teaches us a great lesson. He claims that

godliness with contentment is a great source of gains. This is the opposite of what the financial market teaches about big profits. Billionaire Warren Buffett once said, "A simple rule dictates my buying: Be fearful when others are greedy, and be greedy when others are fearful."<sup>3</sup> That is, even the richest and most greedy are aware of the destructive effect of greed. The media constantly reminds us how empty and destructive it is to make big profits and remain unhappy.

However, contentment cannot be confused with mediocrity or masochism. Contentment is not an assertion that poverty is a virtue. It is possible to find people who are rich and generous, as well as people who are poor and stingy. The apostle is teaching us that there's a risk that the greed for money will become insatiable, to the point where one can never have enough of it. Also, the anxiety to keep what one owns can take peace away.

I once heard an old fable that goes like this: A peasant did a great service to a king. The king rewarded him by giving him a large sum of money. For a time, the man was in awe, but the day came when he met with the king again. The man asked him to take his payment back because of the hitherto unfamiliar concern of losing all that he had had begun to affect his life. The man who has the least will lose the least; the man who has the most will be plagued by the fear of losing what he has.

Epicurus was an ancient Greek philosopher who lived from 341 to 271 BC. Even without full knowledge of the Truth, he wrote these words, which we can consider as true: "To whom little is not enough, nothing is enough. Give me a barley cake and a glass of water, and I am ready to rival Zeus for happiness."<sup>4</sup> And when someone asked him about the secret of happiness and contentment, his answer was, "If thou wilt make a man happy, add not unto his riches but take away from his desires."<sup>5</sup>

The surest way to avoid greed is by applying constant doses of generosity and faithfulness. This is the surest way to be freed from this soul-destroying evil. "Paul commanded us to be generous not because he wanted our money, but because he didn't want our money to have us."<sup>6</sup>

Ellen G. White, commented on the destructive power of covetousness: "Christ will not permit one selfish person to enter the courts of heaven. No covetous person can pass through the pearly gates; for all covetousness is idolatry."<sup>7</sup> She also wrote: "The drunkard is despised and is told that his sin will exclude him from heaven; while pride, selfishness, and covetousness too often go unrebuked. But these are sins that are especially offensive to God; for they are contrary to

the benevolence of His character, to that unselfish love which is the very atmosphere of the unfallen universe.”<sup>8</sup>

Those are harsh words, however true and necessary. Please don't think that someone you know should be reading this chapter; just think of yourself. As I write these words, I am asking God that these truths can reach me and change my life. Many things motivate me for this change to happen: I have the wonderful examples given by my friends in Mozambique. I have the inspiration of the Word of God to exhort me, and, above all, I have the blood of Christ, who offers me forgiveness and transformation.

The next few chapters of this book will lead you to make major decisions in your life. But before you make those decisions, you need to stop and ask God to forgive you and to cleanse you from the terrible stain of covetousness. For this to happen, you need to take the following steps: (1) acknowledge the greed in our hearts; (2) confess it to God; (3) ask for forgiveness; and (4) start to practice faithfulness and generosity.

These four steps are your activities for today. Talk to God right now, and allow Him to begin this process of transformation.



Access the QR Code to learn more about the practice of faithfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *Como Ser Cristão* (Viçosa, MG: Ultimato, 2016), 133.

<sup>2</sup> Andy Stanley, *How to be Rich: It's Not What You Have. It's What You Do With What You Have* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 123.

<sup>3</sup> "Warren Buffett's 25 Best Quotes About Business, Investing, and Life," Yahoo! Finance, accessed December 9, 2021, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/warren-buffett-25-best-quotes-120224652.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Epicurus, quoted by William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 145.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Stanley, 79.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1940), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1892), 30.

# 17 • THE STRANGE HEAVENLY MATH PART 1



*“Non-sacrificial 'giving' tends to be made as a spectacle on duty, and leaves a bad taste in our mouths as well as depression in our heart.”*

*Russell A. Champlin*

*“Jesus is standing in Pilate’s hall—  
Friendless, forsaken, betrayed by all:  
Hearken! what meaneth the sudden call?*

*What will you do with Jesus? . . .*

*Neutral you cannot be.”*

*Albert B. Simpson*

A few years ago, I read the story of a Christian businessman who was standing on a pier. He was visibly moved as he looked at a ship that sailed against the horizon. At that moment, a friend of his, who was also watching the same ship, approached the businessman and asked: “Why are you so excited looking at that boat?”

To which the businessman replied: “A few weeks ago I used part of my money to buy a machine that is now on that ship. The machine is a donation I made to a hospital in China and will be used to bring health and healing. I am thrilled to have donated a portion of my money to save lives.” And he added: “What about you? What are you doing here? Why are you looking so closely at the same ship?”

The answer was: “This is very intriguing because my only child, a 22-year-old young lady, is also on that ship. She chose to dedicate her life to serving as a missionary in China. So, the vessel that is shipping your machine is also carrying my daughter. Both your machine and my daughter will be instruments of salvation for many.”



Visibly embarrassed, the businessman replied: “Friend, now I feel as if my donation was nothing. Compared with your offering, mine completely loses its value. I was proud to donate part of my fortune to the cause of God, but you are giving away your only daughter.”

I’m not sure about the accuracy of this story, but I must acknowledge the veracity of its application. Compared with that father’s offering, the equipment given by the businessman completely lost its value. From our perspective, there’s no doubt that the widow’s offering represented a great sacrifice. Now, just assume that the widow had a clear understanding of the meaning of the slaughtering of animals that were sacrificed in the temple. Imagine her staring at those two copper coins—two ordinary coins worth next to nothing when compared with the greatness of the offering that would be given on her behalf when the waited Messiah came. This is one of the most important points that we need to understand as we choose to make a complete surrender to God. The cross of Calvary is the pattern of surrender. Until we understand the dimension of the sacrifice that was offered on the cross on our behalf, we will never be able to understand the meaning of surrendering all.

There is no human logic that can help us answer the following questions: What is it that moves someone to give up everything he or she owns for God’s cause as the widow did? What is it that moves a man to take his son to a hill to offer him in sacrifice? What is it that moves a man to step into a den full of starving lions because he wants to remain faithful to God? What moves a young lady to turn down a promotion that requires her to work on Sabbath? Human logic does not work in cases like that. However, when we look at the magnitude of the offering made on our behalf, all our offerings and sacrifices completely lose their value and dimension, no matter how valuable or self-sacrificing they might be.

To size up the magnitude of the widow’s offering, Jesus made the following comment: “This poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood” (Mark 12:43, 44). Jesus didn’t claim that she had given more than some of the other givers. Instead, He said that she gave more than all of them combined. In conventional math, this could never be true. Compared with the offerings of the rich, the widow’s offering fell short on at least three criteria: (1) the amount given was smaller; (2) the monetary value was lower, and (3) the purchasing power was lower too.

The point is that these are not God’s criteria for evaluating an offering. I

often say that when it comes to surrendering, God uses the “strange math of heaven” criterion. We can see it throughout the Bible, just read it carefully. The heavenly math challenges the human logic of valuing power and quantity. It's not that heavenly math lacks logic. There is a whole lot of logic in it, but it's only from the perspective of heavenly grace and mercy that you can see it.

I'll give you an example. One day the Lord asked prophet Samuel to look for a new king among the sons of a man named Jesse. When the young men introduced themselves, the prophet resorted to human logic and saw Eliab, the eldest son, as the best choice. It was just logical! He was tall and good-looking—everything a king needs to be from a human perspective. But God, using the heavenly math, rebuked the prophet: “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). That's the math of grace.

One day, the Israelites were fighting the Philistines, and Jonathan, King Saul's son, was with his armor-bearer. Not too far was a garrison of the Philistine army. According to human logic, two weary men pose no danger, even to a small group of the enemy army. However, Jonathan decided to adopt the logic of the heavenly math and told his young armor-bearer, “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the LORD will work for us. For nothing restrains the LORD from saving by many or by few” (1 Samuel 14:6). The logic was: To fulfill God's purposes, it doesn't matter if you are many or just a few.

When it comes to giving an offering, the criteria of the divine math are as follows: (a) the sacrifice involved in the gift, (b) the percentage that it represents over everything the giver owns, and (c) the attitude of the giver.

We'll study each one of these points in the next chapters, but we can already understand a little of God's standard for an offering. The standard is the offering we were given on the cross and the sacrifice that involves it. Everything we do for the cause of God must be done with the following motivation: “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). The irrefutable truth is that we don't do anything for God's cause; we just respond in love to what has already been done for us.

In the case of the widow, Christ said that those two little coins were greater than all the offerings of the rich because the latter's offerings were given from what was left—it did not involve any sacrifice for them—while the widow gave all she had, which meant a great personal sacrifice.

For the offering to be genuine, it must involve a sacrifice. What is important is not the sum, but the cost to the donor. It's not the size, but its sacrificial value. Therefore, we have to stop and think: "Is it possible that at some point in my life I have made a real sacrifice for God's cause?" We have to admit that we are hardly willing to give up some pleasure to give a little more to God's work.

Addressing this topic, Ellen G. White wrote: "I speak of the tithing system; yet how meager it looks to my mind! How small the estimate! How vain the endeavor to measure with mathematical rules, time, money, and love against a love and sacrifice that is measureless and incomputable! Tithes for Christ! Oh, meager pittance, shameful recompense for that which cost so much!"<sup>1</sup>

Do you understand what the criterion is? Do you understand how heavenly math works? At this point, we should ask: How do I learn to add, multiply, subtract, and divide according to divine criteria? A quote from *The Desire of Ages* can help us:

It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ. We should take it point by point, and let the imagination grasp each scene, especially the closing ones. As we thus dwell upon His great sacrifice for us, our confidence in Him will be more constant, our love will be quickened, and we shall be more deeply imbued with His spirit. If we would be saved at last, we must learn the lesson of penitence and humiliation at the foot of the cross.<sup>2</sup>

At this point, I must admit that this book has a limitation. I may teach you everything I know about the use of spiritual gifts, the returning of tithes and offerings, and the faithfulness in Sabbath keeping. However, only daily communion with God and the comprehension of the sacrifice made on the cross can motivate you to offer your best for the cause of God through the use of your gifts, to be generously and happily faithful in your tithes and offerings, and to endure with courage and determination the challenges of being faithful in Sabbath observance. Only when we understand the greatest sacrifice that was ever made will we be ready to make real sacrifices for the cause of God.

After many years of hard work and struggles in India, Scottish missionary Alexander Duff returned to his homeland to die there. During a meeting in his church, he preached and appealed to his countrymen to step forward for the

continuation of the work. No one responded to his call. He insisted with such passion that he passed out beside the pulpit. As a doctor checked his vital signs, Alexander Duff suddenly opened his eyes and said, “I must get back to the pulpit. I need to continue that call.”

“Calm down,” said the doctor, “your heart is very weak.”

But the old missionary wouldn’t listen. He returned to the pulpit and continued the call: “When Queen Victoria called for volunteers, hundreds of young people stepped forward. But when King Jesus calls, no one wants to respond. Does Scotland no longer have children to respond to India’s call?” he asked.

The missionary waited a while in silence, but still, there was no answer. Finally, he said: “Very well. If Scotland has no young men to send to India, I will go again myself, so that the people there will know that at least one Scotsman still cares about them.”

When the veteran soldier of Christ left the pulpit, the silence was broken by a crowd of young people who volunteered: “I’m going! Me too! Me too!” After Duff’s death, many of those young people went to India, dedicating their lives to missionary work.

If the story of a man’s sacrifice touches us so deeply, imagine what a daily vision of heaven’s sacrifice will do.

Today, I want to invite you to write a short prayer asking God what kind of sacrifice He expects of you in response to what He already offered to you on the cross.

Dear Jesus, \_\_\_\_\_

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Access the QR Code and see what happens when we give ourselves in a sacrificial way to the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1940), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson Cássio de Oliveira, “Alexander Duff (1806-1878)—Missão na Índia,” Chamado para as Nações, o Seu Blog de Missões, November 27, 2014, [chamadoparanacoes.wordpress.com/2014/11/27/alexander-duff-1806-1878-missao-na-india/](http://chamadoparanacoes.wordpress.com/2014/11/27/alexander-duff-1806-1878-missao-na-india/).

# 18 • THE STRANGE HEAVENLY MATH

## PART 2



*“This matter of giving is not left to impulse.  
God has given us definite instruction in regard to it.”  
Ellen G. White*

*“It is not the portion but the proportion that is important:  
the rich gave out of their abundance,  
but the poor widow gave all she had.”  
Warren W. Wiersbe*

**I**n the previous chapter, we saw that the “strange heavenly math” meets the following criteria: (1) the sacrifice that involves the offering made, (2) the percentage it represents, and (3) the giver’s attitude.

The widow’s offering involved a great sacrifice that was based on a percentage. How do we know that? Read again the following verse: “Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood” (Mark 12:43–44).

Jesus claimed that the widow offered more than the others. If the criterion is the face value of the offering, this would not be true, but if the criterion is a percentage, then the statement is true. She gave 100% of what she owned, and that was much higher than any percentage given on that day. Commenting on this passage, Ellen G. White states: “[Jesus] 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.”<sup>1</sup>

The percentage-based “divine math” criterion is clearly described in the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White. For example, when God chose the offering He would make for mankind, He too chose a percentage. Note the following

quotes: "Christ's self-sacrificing love is revealed upon the cross. That man might be saved, He gave *all* [emphasis added] that He had, and then gave Himself."<sup>2</sup> Also, "In giving up His Son, He has poured out to us *all* [emphasis added] heaven in one gift."<sup>3</sup>

The word "all" in both quotes helps us understand what percentage God chose as an offering for lost humanity. If you go to a bank to make a deposit, you hand the teller a wad of cash and say, "I want to put all this money in my account." What you are actually saying is, "I want to deposit 100% of this money."

One day in heaven, God decided how much He would give for the salvation of the fallen world. Here is the record of a portion of that meeting: "Christ determined in council with His Father to spare nothing, however costly, to withhold nothing however highly it might be estimated, that would rescue the poor sinner. He would give all heaven to this work of salvation, of restoring the moral image of God in man."<sup>4</sup>

And here is the outcome of what was discussed in the same council:

The Lord God of heaven collected *all* [emphasis added] the riches of the universe, and laid them down in order to purchase the pearl of lost humanity. The Father gave *all* [emphasis added] His divine resources into the hands of Christ in order that the richest blessings of heaven might be poured out upon a fallen race. God could not express greater love than He has expressed in giving the Son of His bosom to this world. This gift was given to man to convince him that God had left nothing undone that He could do, that there is nothing held in reserve, but that *all* [emphasis added] heaven has been poured out in one vast gift.<sup>5</sup>

The word "all" occurs three times in this quote. God offered 100% for the salvation of mankind. This is the standard for stating that tithes and offerings must be given by choosing a given percentage.

The point is: For tithing, God established a percentage. "In both the Old and New Testaments the word tithe literally means 10% of the person's income. According to Russell Champlin, the word tithe means the tenth part of something."<sup>6</sup>

As for the offerings, God gave the freedom for the worshiper to choose the percentage to be returned. Several biblical passages confirm this statement.

For instance: “Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you” (Deuteronomy 16:17, emphasis added).

Did you notice the expression “according to”?

Proportionality was practiced in the divine regulations of religious and civil life in the Old Testament. . . . When men went to the temple to worship, they were to give offerings “according to the blessing . . . given to you” (Deuteronomy 16:17). That is, the proportion is according to prosperity: more blessing, more offering. It was not a random value without any reference, but a proportion “according to the blessing.” The reference is the gain we’ve earned. The Bible is dealing with the percentage of what we earn.<sup>7</sup>

The apostle Paul confirms this principle in the New Testament when he says: “On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come ” (1 Corinthians 16:2, emphasis added).

Another biblical example is the case of the offering that Ananias and Sapphira brought to the apostles. Luke reports that Ananias, “with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 5:1, 2). They decided to take their cut first and then report 100%!

Peter’s response was categorical: “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?” (Acts 5:3).

Ellen G. White comments: “Ashamed to have their brethren know that their selfish souls grudged that which they had solemnly dedicated to God, they deliberately decided to sell their property and pretend to give all the proceeds into the general fund, but really to keep a large share for themselves.”<sup>8</sup>

Their sin was to lie about the percentage they had chosen for the offering. Ellen G. White states: “In the Bible system of tithes and offerings the amounts paid by different persons will of course vary greatly, since they are proportioned to the income.” Ellen White also adds: “How much more eager will every faithful steward be to enlarge the proportion of gifts to be placed in the Lord’s treasure house, than to decrease his offering one jot or tittle.”<sup>10</sup>

The percentage of the income applied to determine the offerings can be reevaluated according to God's blessings. I still remember the first payment I received for a job I did. It was a modest amount, but it was the fruit of God's blessing on my effort. I chose at that time to return 10% as tithe and 3% as an offering. Years later, I got my first job and realized that the 3% offerings no longer matched the blessings received, so I decided to increase the percentage to 5%. Years later, God gave me a wonderful wife; now I was complete. So I decided, as a token of gratitude, to adjust the percentage. Since then, every year I reevaluate if I should keep or increase the percentage of my income that I will give as promise offerings. At the beginning of my professional life, 3% of my income meant a sacrifice. Not anymore. That is why we need to reassess the percentage, taking into consideration the blessings received.

A good summary would be:

1. Offerings and tithes should be given on a percentage basis.
2. God determined the tithe percentage. It is up to the worshiper to choose the percentage of the offerings.
3. With this method, tithes and offerings are not given thoughtlessly or by impulse.
4. I cannot change the tithe percentage, as it has already been established by God, but I must always be willing to increase the proportion of offerings that I give to God's cause.

The question one might ask at this point is: Why is the principle of proportionality so important? Why can't I just open my wallet when they pass the offering plates in church and pick the dollar bill(s) that will be given as my offering to the Lord? The following story may help us find the answer:

A father was setting aside tithing and offering money to take to church on Sabbath. He always asked his children to help him with this activity. The intention was to create the opportunity to teach the children the values of the kingdom of God and the principles of faithfulness. On that particular month, the family was supposed to return tithes and offerings over their regular salary, the year-end bonus, and some money they had received from a close relative. That father had chosen to return 15% of the total income. After all the calculations were done and the kids saw the total amount, they realized it was a small fortune, from their perspective. They were stunned and said, "Dad, that's a lot of money. Are you sure you're going to give all this money in tithes and offerings?"



Realizing that it was a great opportunity to teach the principles of faithfulness, the father replied: “Listen, kids, you have no idea how sad I am to return so little to God. I wish we were giving ten times as much in tithes and offerings because that would mean that the Lord had blessed us ten times as much as well. When we give a lot, it means that God has given us a lot.”

Do you get the idea? Proportional return means a recognition of the proportionality of the blessings received. As I return a percentage of my income as tithes and offerings, I inevitably reckon the blessings received from God. And as we count the blessings, we are compelled to express our faithfulness to God.

Today, I want to invite you to pray and then choose what percentage of your income will be returned as offerings. If you already return your offerings based on a percentage of your income, you may choose to keep the chosen percentage or adjust it accordingly to the blessings received.

Lord, I choose to give \_\_\_\_\_ % of my income as offerings to Your cause. Please help me to be faithful.



Access the QR Code and learn more about the proportionality of the offerings principle.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 342.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1940), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1892), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *Our Father Cares* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1991), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Lift Him Up* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1988), 232.

<sup>6</sup> Demóstenes Neves da Silva, *Teologia das Ofertas e Perguntas sobre Dízimo* (Salvador, BA: Araújo Gráfica e Editora, 2013), p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> Silva, *Teologia das Ofertas e Perguntas sobre Dízimo*, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 72.

<sup>9</sup> White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 73.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

# 19 • DRIVEN BY PRINCIPLES PART 1



*"It is a very poor policy for men to seek  
to improve on God's plan."*

*Ellen G. White*

*"Truth is a strong tower and never  
requires to be buttressed with error."*

*Charles Spurgeon*

Whenever I'm traveling, I ask God to put people in my path so that I can talk about Jesus' love to them, and when the Lord gives me the opportunity, I always start to shift the conversation to some spiritual topic. At a certain point in the conversation, I normally hear the question: "Are you religious?" And I answer, "Yes, I'm a Seventh-day Adventist." Quite often, the next question is, "What is the Adventist Church like? How does it work?" I've answered this question in many different ways, but for some time now my answer has been, "The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a church driven by biblical principles. If you believe in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, you would love to become a Seventh-day Adventist."

We are driven by principles. Everything we do and believe must be based on God's Word! So we are driven by biblical principles. And do you know why these principles are so important? Because they confirm what true worship is. The only way for you to know whether or not you are worshiping properly is to make sure that your worship is founded on biblical principles. It's not about what you feel is best; it's not about what you think is easier. It is about what the biblical principle prescribes.

One of the issues in the great controversy between good and evil is who and how we are going to worship. Satan doesn't want you to worship God, but if you choose to worship Him, the enemy will try to induce you to worship the

way you want, not the way the Lord requires. Satan knows that there is no difference between not worshiping God at all and doing it in opposition to what has been revealed. That's why worship and the principles that are behind it are so important.

One of the subjects that involve worship is the practice of returning tithes and giving offerings. Biblically, tithing and offering are acts of worship. The Bible tells us, "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops" (Proverbs 3:9, NIV). Therefore, what we do and how we do it as we return our tithes and offerings must be based on clear biblical principles.

When the Seventh-day Adventist Church was taking its first steps, there were no clear principles about the subjects of tithes and offerings, nor clear guidance on how to tithe and give offerings. Early Seventh-day Adventists wondered about issues like: How should the church members worship through their finances? Should there be paid pastors? Should the churches collect tithes and offerings regularly? How should tithes be collected, and how should the proceeds be allocated?

A committee was summoned to give answers to these questions. It consisted of five pastors: James White, D. M. Canright, S. N. Haskell, J. N. Andrews, and Uriah Smith. They researched the biblical principles of financial worship. After months of study, they wrote a book with principles found in the Bible. Much of what we do to this day as a church is based on the findings of that committee. The church embraced some of those findings, but continued to study the biblical principles of faithfulness to establish the steps we would take as a church. Some of the principles we follow are:

1. The source of payment for pastors should be the tithe. "I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting" (Numbers 18:21). This passage reveals that the tithe belongs to the Lord, and He decided that it should be used for the support of the Levites. Thus, it was decided that, like the Levites, Seventh-day Adventist pastors should be supported by resources derived from the tithe. This principle is reaffirmed by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9.

Ellen G. White states: "It was to this plan for the support of the ministry that Paul referred when he said, 'Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.' And later, in writing to Timothy, the apostle said, 'The laborer is worthy of his reward.' 1 Timothy 5:18."<sup>1</sup>

2. Another principle unveiled by the pioneers is found in Numbers 18:20: “Then the LORD said to Aaron: ‘You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel.’” There is an amazing point in that passage that we need to understand. There was no problem with someone being wealthy among the people of Israel, but the way to become rich was to inherit a piece of land in which to raise livestock, plant, harvest, and thus acquire wealth. Eleven tribes had gotten their inheritance, which means that their land was secured. One tribe, however, didn’t get any land in Canaan. Do you know which tribe was it? The Levites. They could not plant large tracts of land, nor could they raise large numbers of livestock. God said to them, “I am your wealth!”

The Levites’ income was based only on the tithe, which seems to indicate that it was not intended to make them rich or without enough sustenance to live well. Theoretically, they had 10% of all produce in the country as a support fund.

Similarly, the church saw that pastors must be paid with tithe proceeds, but not to the point of making them rich. Generally and biblically speaking, the idea of multimillion-dollar evangelists who appear on *Forbs’* richest people list, own a private jet or several cattle ranches is very different from the biblical teaching.

If a pastor wants to become a millionaire, that is fine, as long as he or she doesn’t get that wealth appropriating Church funds.

3. If you study the details of the jobs performed by the Levites, you will find that the tribe of the Levites was divided into families, and that each family had a very specific activity. One family was in charge of the praise in the temple, another was responsible for watching over the tabernacle, and another had the task of setting up and dismantling the camp.

This is described in 2 Chronicles 31:12–15. The Levites Cononiah (verse 12) and Kore (verse 14) coordinated the teams that were in charge of the distribution to their brothers: “And under him were Eden, Miniamin, Jeshua, Shemaiah, Amariah, and Shecaniah, his faithful assistants in the cities of the priests, to distribute allotments to their brethren by divisions, to the great as well as the small” (verse 15). Nothing in this distribution reveals differences in their share. Thus, all the Levites who guarded the tabernacle earned on the same wage basis and were paid by the treasurers over the storehouse (Nehemiah 13:13).

Our church has adopted this principle. All Seventh-day Adventist pastors earn on the same salary basis. The church adopts a percentage factor to pay its pastors, regardless of where they serve or their function. Whether district pastor,

administrator, or department director, everyone is paid on the same salary basis, just like the Levites.

The same principle of equality applies to salaries throughout the church, although the payment model adopted may be different. In some parts of the world, in some pastoral roles, pastors serve a larger territory than in others, thus requiring reimbursement of expenses that vary from one role to another. For example, the geographic area of a district pastor with eight churches is not the same as that of a union department director who ministers to 200 churches. His salary is calculated on the same basis, but of course, the travel expenses cannot be the same. This is called reimbursement and does not cover the pastor's base salary because it is considered work-related operating expenses.

Other questions our pioneers had to answer were: How should the church collect tithes and offerings? What policy should the church apply to pay the pastors? Should each church pay its own pastor? To answer these questions, they came up with teaching number four, which was also based on a biblical principle. See what a wonderful biblical discovery:

4. When the people entered the land of Canaan, Joshua divided the land among the tribes, so each tribe got a portion of it. Only one tribe got nothing, namely, the tribe of Levi. God told Joshua to set apart 48 cities within the territory assigned to the tribes and give them to the Levites, so they could live there (see Numbers 35:7, 8). The Levites had no territory; they lived in cities scattered across the territories of the sister tribes. In modern times, those cities would be called the “pastoral districts” of the Levites.

It would be easier and more logical if each tribe collected the tithe and paid the Levites in their respective region. But God determined that it shouldn't be that way. The tithes were to be collected by all the tribes and taken to a single place—Jerusalem—and then some of the Levites in charge of the whole process would come back and pay the other Levites. Talk about complications! There was no bank, no bank transfers, no 7Me app.<sup>2</sup> Can you imagine the problems? Why would God do something like that?

Now, imagine that you were a Levite in a town near Beersheba, in the southern region of the tribe of Judah, and another well-known Levite worked in the fertile valleys of the tribe of Naphtali, up north. Imagine that there was a severe drought in the region of Beersheba, and the inhabitants did not have the resources to return their tithes and pay the Levites in their region. In the meanwhile, the inhabitants of the tribe of Naphtali had an extraordinary harvest, bringing

the figures of the tithe to heights. You would probably think, "I don't want to be a Levite here in Judah any longer. I want to move to the Naphtali region so I can support my family!"

That's the beauty of divine wisdom. Man is not capable of reasoning like that. But God, in His infinite wisdom, can think of everything. All the tithes of Israel were gathered in one place—Jerusalem. Then the Levites in charge of the "payroll" would go back to all 48 cities to pay the Levites' due salaries (cf. 2 Chronicles 31:12-15). That was God's way of preventing envy among the Levites and avoiding situations where a Levite was rich while another was in need.

This is exactly how the Seventh-day Adventist Church pays its pastors. When you return your tithe, your church treasurer does not pay the pastor directly. Instead, He sends that tithe money to the conference/mission, which collects the tithes from all the churches, and pays the pastors on the same salary basis. No Adventist pastor needs to dream about being a pastor in a bigger church with more financial resources, since, as a general rule, a pastor who ministers in a low-income district earns the same salary as the pastor in a financially stronger district of the same conference.

This principle is beautiful in its simplicity and extraordinary in its depth. As long as we follow the clear guidelines revealed by God in His Word, we will be safe.

At this time, I invite you to write a prayer of gratitude to God for His clear revelation of the principles that guide our lives as a church as well as individuals.

Dear Lord, I'm so thankful for \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



Access the QR Code and watch a video that will strengthen your understanding of the theme that we have just studied.

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 336.

<sup>2</sup> App created by the South American Division to facilitate sending offerings and tithes.

# 20 • DRIVEN BY PRINCIPLES

## PART 2



*We are to stand firm as a rock to the principles of the Word of God.”*

*Ellen G. White*

*“Any teaching which does not square with the Scriptures is to  
be rejected, even if it snows miracles every day.”*

*Martin Luther*

**J**n October 1520, Martin Luther published a theological treatise titled *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. The document is known as the reformer's strongest attack on the papacy and Catholic beliefs. In the treatise, for the first time, he called the pope anti-christ. Throughout the book, he reviews each of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. Because the book was a theological document, he wrote it in Latin—a language understood by the clergy but inaccessible to the people.

For this document to be made available to the people, something incredible happened. One of Luther's major opponents, Franciscan theologian Thomas Murner, decided to translate the entire treatise into German, allowing all the people to have contact with Luther's material. He intended to expose what he regarded as radicalism in Luther's work and make the people think that following the Reformer's ideas and teachings was something ridiculous.

Murner's idea backfired though. His translation ended up being a powerful vehicle to spread Luther's biblical ideas throughout Germany. The following year, in April 1521, Luther was taken to the city of Worms for interrogation—an attempt to force him to abandon his convictions in biblical principles. When asked whether he was ready to abandon his “heresies,” Luther replied: “Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant

anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen.”<sup>1</sup>

This is an extraordinary example of the importance of Bible principles and the greatness of someone who chose to live according to the principles of God's Word by being “captive to the Word of God.” That's what we should do in all aspects of our lives.

One of the most important of these principles is to gather the proceeds of tithes and offerings in one place and then redistribute them to assist God's people as a whole. The question is: Did the people of Israel always pool resources in one place and then pay the Levites equally? The answer is twofold: Yes, when the people walked in the ways of the Lord; and no, when they departed from Him.

Let's consider some examples. In the time of King Joash, where did the people take their offerings to? “Then at the king's command they made a chest, and set it outside at the gate of the house of the LORD” (2 Chronicles 24:8). At the time, God's people were scattered throughout the southern tribes. It was a large territory, but they took the offerings to deposit them into a chest that King Joash had crafted.

In the time of King Hezekiah, the same principle of a centralized administration in one single place was followed for tithe and offerings (2 Chronicles 31:11, 12). The same was repeated regarding the tithe in the reformation run by Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:12, 13).

In the time of the prophet Malachi, once again, the principle was followed by God's people. “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse” (Malachi 3:10). According to Willem VanGemen, “The storehouse mentioned by the prophet is a clear reference to a centralized treasury that existed in the temple.”<sup>2</sup>

In all those periods, the tithes and offerings were taken to one single place. From there, the tithes were redistributed to the Levites (Nehemiah 18:21), and the special portions were taken to the priests (Numbers 18:8–20). Under the coordination of the treasury, Levites and priests received their payment in the fields and cities where they lived (2 Chronicles 31:17–19). The offerings to the maintenance of the sanctuary (verses 10–12; Malachi 3:8–10) were kept in the treasuries.

That's why it's so dangerous when someone says, “Yes, I'm willing to return tithe, but only if it stays at the local church.” As Seventh-day Adventists, we are not one single local church, but a family spread across the globe with



a worldwide mission. God planned it this way so that the tithes and offerings could be used to assist all of God's people around the world.

However, there was a time when that God-given system was broken. It happened at the time of King Jeroboam. The story is recorded at 1 Kings 12:26–28. Do you remember that King Rehoboam and King Jeroboam divided the kingdom of Israel?

Rehoboam was David's grandson, but he had a dispute with some northern tribes who decided that David's family should no longer rule over them.

The new king was left with only the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The ten tribes of the north chose Jeroboam as their king. However, Jerusalem, where all of God's people were to take their tithes, was in the region of the southern kingdom. The people from the north had to cross the border and bring their tithes and offerings to the storehouse in Jerusalem, as they used to do before.

King Jeroboam then issued his first royal decree, which is described in 1 Kings 12:26–29:

And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah." Therefore the king asked for advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.

King Jeroboam built an altar at Bethel and another at Dan and told the people that they should decentralize worship (called "sacrifices" in 1 Kings 12:26–28). The king's first decree was not intended for the people to stop keeping the Sabbath or prevent them to worship other gods. The king intended that the people would bring the sacrifices to Jerusalem because he knew that if they centralized their worship in one single place, the tribes would have a chance to come together again.

The "sacrifice" would be sufficient to support the priests, but it was also intended to maintain the temple services, which could only be performed

by the Levites (Numbers 18:2-5)—and they depended on the tithe (Numbers 18:22, 23). Without the Levites, the temple would not function, and without tithing, there would be no Levites. Thus, to go up to sacrifice meant to go up to worship, fulfilling all the teachings and requirements of the temple, including the ones concerning tithes and offerings.

According to the law (Deuteronomy 12:6, 11), when entering the Promised Land, the people were to make "sacrifices" (*zebach*) only in the place chosen by God Himself, that is, the sanctuary. It is to this command, to take their *zebach*, that Jeroboam seems to be referring to in 1 Kings 12:27. The expression "to offer sacrifice" or "to sacrifice" refers to the requirement of God's Law not to worship—to offer their *zebach*—in different places like the idolaters did, but only in the place chosen by God Himself (Deuteronomy 12:5, 6). The Lord repeats the "command" of the *zebach* (Deuteronomy 12:11), declaring that their tithes, offerings, and vows should only be delivered in the appointed place of the *zebach* (verses 2-11). This command was reaffirmed also for Solomon's temple (2 Chronicles 7:12).

Furthermore, the service of the sanctuary in which the *zebach* was performed started its activities by the work of the Levites (Numbers 18:2-5, 22, 23), who were supported exclusively by the tithe (18:21-24). Therefore, to go up to sacrifice meant to go up to worship and obey the teachings and requirements of the temple, including tithes and offerings. In this sense, Jeroboam was withholding the *zebach* of all the northern tribes, and with it, the worship in the appointed place, not to mention the tithes and various offerings that were to be delivered there.

Therefore, as the payment of the priests and Levites was centralized and coordinated by the storehouse, the Levites expelled by Jeroboam returned to the temple in Jerusalem, where they were enrolled to receive their portions (2 Chronicles 11:13-17). In 1 Kings 12:26-28, Jeroboam rejected the Levitical plan established by God, which was supported by the tithe that flowed from all Israel into the storehouse.

The truth is, when Satan wants to split God's people, the first thing he does is decentralize their finances. When finances are decentralized and many people start to handle God's resources as they will, the unity of God's people is threatened. Never again were the people of Israel unified, for they would never bring their tithes and offerings to one single place. Do you now understand now the danger of someone saying that he or she shall return their tithe, but only if it stays in the local church?

Speaking about this divinely inspired system, Ellen G. White comments on the six goals that are achieved when God's people follow the biblical guidelines:

Great objects are accomplished by this system. If one and all would accept it, each would be made a vigilant and faithful treasurer for God, and there would be no want of means with which to carry forward the great work of sounding the last message of warning to the world. The treasury will be full if all adopt this system, and the contributors will not be left the poorer. Through every investment made they will become more wedded to the cause of present truth. They will be "laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life" (1 Timothy 6:19).<sup>3</sup>

Were you able to find the six goals? Here they are:

1. "Each would become a vigilant and faithful treasurer for God." This is the best antidote to selfishness: to live as a vigilant and faithful treasurer of the resources that God has entrusted to me.
2. "There would be no want of means with which to carry forward the great work of sounding the last message of warning to the world." According to this quote, the lack of resources to further the preaching of the gospel is directly linked to noncompliance with the biblical guidance of taking the tithes and offerings to the storehouse.
3. "The treasury will be full if all adopt this system." The resources for the local church and the churches around the world will be available, as 60% of the offerings stay in the local church and 40% are used to minister to other regions of the planet..
4. "The contributors will not be left the poorer." It's unfaithfulness, not loyalty, that drives us into poverty. When we are unfaithful, we are saying: "I don't depend on anyone, I can do it by myself." Soon we will hear a clear, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).
5. "Through every investment made they will become more wedded to the cause of present truth." This is a fascinating point. We become attached to what we invest. That's why Jesus said that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

6. They will be “laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come that they may lay hold on eternal life.” It is not salvation by works of faithfulness, but the result of salvation in works of faithfulness. We need to understand that the way we relate with the money, time, and talents entrusted to us shows the effect that salvation is producing in our lives. So it would be fair to say that your bank account and credit card statements tell who and what you love. They also tell us whether we are heading for eternal life or eternal destruction.

My sincere desire is that you understand that the way the Seventh-day Adventist Church handles resources is not based on human invention, but rather on a clear, irrefutable “thus says the Lord.” This is one of the ways for us to stay together as a people. Ellen G. White states: “Unity is the strength of the church. Satan knows this, and he employs his whole force to bring in dissension. He desires to see a lack of harmony among the members of the church of God. Greater attention should be given to the subject of unity.”<sup>4</sup>

Do you want to worship God through your tithes and offerings? If you do, choose to do it not as you wish, not as you think is best (or more logical or easier) but by being faithful to biblical principles and guidelines. God and His Word are the only reliable foundations for our worship. Talk to God at this time and reestablish your resolve to be driven by biblical principles.



Access the QR Code and learn more about principles of faithfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Graves, “Martin Luther Most Noble Words,” Christianity.com, December 2, 2021, <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1501-1600/martin-luthers-most-noble-words-11629925.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 448.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimony Treasures*, vol. 1 (Mountain View, CA, Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1949), 368.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Book 2 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), 159.

# 21 • SOMEONE IS WATCHING!



*"I testify to my brethren and sisters that the church of Christ, enfeebled and defective as it may be, is the only object on earth on which He bestows His supreme regard."*

*Ellen G. White*

*"We need to have individual willingness to make efforts to achieve and maintain church unity."*

*Ángel Manuel Rodríguez*

A man decided to get into one of the many cornfields that belonged to his neighbor to steal some corn. *If I take just a little out of each field, no one will notice*, he thought. *That way, I'm gonna have a lot of corn easily*. So, he waited for a dark, overcast night to carry out his plan. Furtively, he left his house, taking his little daughter with him.

"Sweetie," he whispered, "stay put and watch. Let me know if anyone shows up."

The man slipped into the first cornfield and began to pick up as much corn as he possibly could. He had barely started when he heard his daughter softly say, "Daddy, someone is watching you!"

The man looked around, but couldn't see anyone. He put all the corn he had picked in a bag and headed quickly to the second field.

"Daddy, someone is watching you!" the girl warned her father a second time.

The man looked all over the place, but again he didn't see anyone. Annoyed, he said to his daughter: "Why do you keep saying that someone is watching me? I've looked all over the place and I don't see anyone."

"Dad," whispered the little girl, pointing up to the dark sky, "Someone is watching you from above."<sup>1</sup>

So far, we have studied the example of the poor widow, as well the lessons we ought to put into practice. Now, the Bible verses that come before the widow's story present the same truth found in the story of the little girl and her less-than-honest father: "Someone is watching!" Mark 12:38–40 says: "Then He said to them in His teaching, 'Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation.'"

Right after this speech, we find the account of the widow's offering. This is quite intriguing, to say the least. Jesus makes it clear that He observed not only the widow's public attitude but also the scribes' private attitude.

The word "scribe" comes from the verb "to write." The scribes were Jews whose job was to copy manuscripts, teach and interpret the Torah and other Jewish literature, and perform tasks in the temple. In addition, they worked in the preparation of documents such as deeds and records. In other words, they were like notaries of the time. Many of them were members of the Sanhedrin, a kind of Jewish supreme court, some were members of the sect of the Pharisees or Sadducees, and some were also priests and Levites.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, Jesus denounces them as a proud, selfish, hypocritical, and untrustworthy bunch. Then He lists six points of their wicked attitudes.

1. *They liked to go around in long robes.* They used to wear a cloth band around their neck, to differentiate them from common people.<sup>3</sup>

2. *They enjoyed being greeted in public.* They had a penchant for public recognition of superiority.

3. *They liked to take the best seats in the synagogues.* Those who sat at the front had the double advantage of reading, praying, and seeing everyone. Furthermore, it was considered a sign of honor to be invited to take those seats.<sup>4</sup>

4. *They loved to take the places of honor at banquets.* That, too, was considered a sign of superiority in the time of Christ.

5. *They used to swindle money from widows.* Commenting on this issue, Ellen G. White states: "The Pharisees had great influence with the people, and of this they took advantage to serve their own interests. They gained the confidence of pious widows, and then represented it as a duty for them to devote their property to religious purposes. Having secured control of their money, the wily schemers used it for their own benefit."<sup>5</sup>

6. *They tried to look righteous with their long prayers.* In Matthew 6:6–8,

Jesus had already denounced the hypocritical practice of making long and audible prayers in public only to draw attention.

The practices of the religious leaders of Jesus' days were widely known to all. Regardless of their attitudes, Jesus commends the widow for bringing her offering to the temple, although He was aware that the religious leaders were the ones to manage the resources that were brought to the temple. Theologian Ralph Earle incites our imagination with the question: "Could this poor widow be one of those whose homes were devoured by the scribes?"<sup>6</sup>

From a human point of view, it would be more reasonable if Jesus discouraged the practice of returning offerings in the temple, since corruption was prevalent among the religious leaders of the time. According to Ellen G. White: "Many would have advised her to keep her pittance for her own use; given into the hands of the well-fed priests, it would be lost sight of among the many costly gifts brought to the treasury. But Jesus understood her motive. She believed the service of the temple to be of God's appointment, and she was anxious to do her utmost to sustain it."<sup>7</sup>

At this point, I need to deal with a very sensitive point. During my 20 years of ministry, I have met people who tell me they just can't return tithes and offerings because they don't agree with the way the church uses its resources, or because they don't agree with the lifestyle of some pastors and don't see transparency in the use of church money. They challenge me, maybe expecting that I claim that church leaders are infallible and unquestionable. Nevertheless, whenever I talk to people who pose that kind of questioning, my answer is that I have also had my questions throughout my ministry.

It is legitimate to have doubts and questions; the challenge here is deciding what to do and how to act when they arise. The widow's story helped me understand it. Jesus had just questioned the attitude of the religious leaders, and a moment later, He was in the temple commending the widow for having handed out her offering to questionable leaders. Jesus teaches us that if we expect the right attitudes from people, we must do right. Martin Luther King Jr. said: "The greatest danger for us is the temptation to imitate the people we oppose." We often want to teach right values through wrong attitudes. Quite often, we want to defend the truth by using social media to make accusations. We want to promote deep changes through retaliation. The troubled social environment in which we live is indeed a fertile ground for all that, but we do better if we study the Word of God and understand that the values and

principles of His kingdom are different from the values and methods of the world.

You might be asking, “I hear you, pastor, but what should I do when I don't agree with the way things are handled in the church?” This is such an important question, and I would like to answer it with a quote from Ellen G. White.

Some have been dissatisfied, and have said, “I will not longer pay my tithe; for I have no confidence in the way things are managed at the heart of the work.” But will you rob God because you think the management of the work is not right? Make your complaint, plainly and openly, in the right spirit, to the proper ones. Send in your petitions for things to be adjusted and set in order; but do not withdraw from the work of God, and prove unfaithful, because others are not doing right.<sup>8</sup>

This quote teaches us five profound lessons:

1. Being unfaithful with tithes and offerings because of alleged mishandlings of the resources entrusted to the church is considered theft by God.

2. If you have a complaint, step forward and present it. You ought not to be negligent and close your eyes to human mistakes.

3. The presentation of the complaint must be sincere. Frankness has to do with sincerity rather than concealing one's thoughts. Frankness is a virtue, but like any other virtue, Satan can turn it into a flaw. Some people seem to boast about being frank, claiming that they speak their minds to whomever and whenever they want. In that case, candor ends up being a destructive tool.

4. If you want your candor to be a Christian virtue, you must convey it “in the right spirit.” It would not be wrong to add: “in the right Christian spirit.” Thus, before you present your complaint, pray to God and ask Him to put love into your words and give you wisdom when you pose your questions. Put yourself in the position of someone who wants to help and not destroy.

5. Present your points to competent persons. And I could add: And please don't post them on social media! Don't follow the revolutionary spirit of the age, which teaches that the only way to solve problems is by exposing



them. Finally, don't view the leaders of God's work as profiteers or dishonest, but as human beings who have given the best of their lives for the cause of the cross. Keep in mind that these men and women are just human beings, subject to flaws and errors, either voluntary or involuntary. And most importantly, be willing to admit you are wrong when the evidence proves it.

The quote concludes by stating: "Do not withdraw from the work of God, and prove unfaithful, because others are not doing right." Please, do not withdraw from the work of the Lord! God has a very special work to be done in this world, and He invites you to be a part of it. The Lord is more interested in sorting out His cause than you are; therefore, please do not respond with unfaithfulness to mistakes made by just a few.

I must end this chapter by praising God. Over the years, I have found that, as a rule, God's cause has been handled sensibly and responsibly. I have no doubt whatsoever that, throughout history, God has led His church, and, once again, I want to commit myself to it until the end.

Perhaps you have lost confidence in the way God's work has been conducted so far, so I want to invite you to pray right now and ask God for wisdom so you can live according to His guidance and, most importantly, remain faithfully involved in the cause of the truth.



Access the QR Code and remember what the Bible says about the theme of this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Bennett, ed., *The Children's Book of Virtues* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 68, 69.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Barry et. al., eds., *Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 432.

<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *Comentario al Nuevo Testamento: El Evangelio según San Marcos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Libros Desafío, 1998), 506.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 614.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Earle, A. Elwood Sanner, and Charles L. Childers, *Comentario Bíblico Beacon: Mateo hasta Lucas, Tomo 6* (Lenexa, KS: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 2010), 384.

<sup>7</sup> White, *The Desire of Ages*, 615.

<sup>8</sup> White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1915), 226.





**A** poor widow, her face scarred by the years, walks anonymously through the crowd. His short, timid steps are taken in a spirit of deep humility and a sense of God's presence. Her wrinkled hands enfold everything she owns and will soon cease to have. As she approaches, the metallic clang of the rich's donations gets even louder and silences her even more. Without fanfare or any dramatic action, her two little coins fall into the temple treasury. All of a sudden, the whole scene changes altogether.

That nearly invisible figure now receives the full attention of the Savior, Owner of silver and gold. The humble act is noticed, the intentions are deciphered and the brightness of those little coins dazzles His vision. Such an example transcends time and space and advances into eternity.

Through different angles of this story, the book you are holding presents the great biblical principles of faithfulness and extracts simple, although profound, spiritual lessons from an account that takes up almost as much space as did those little coins.

Discover what Christ can do when He has the first place in your life! Experience the freedom and true fulfillment that belong to those who worship Him genuinely.



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