

**“I’ve Got Issues: ‘The Church is always asking for money.’”**

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Matthew 6:19-21, Luke 21:1-4, 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

There are all kinds of reasons, of course, why people steer clear of Christianity and the Church. Here is one such reason that has been so often repeated it has become something of a cliché: *“The Church is always asking for money.”* *“Money, money, money – that’s all the churches care about. They are always passing the plate.”*

You can understand where some of these people are coming from. Many are no doubt reacting to some of those TV evangelists who are constantly making pitches for more funds to keep their ministry going – pleading poverty. And, come to find out, many of those same preachers are living high-on-the-hog, living in a mansion with his and hers Bentleys parked in the driveway and always taking off in their Lear Jet to some exclusive vacation hideaway. People hear about this and they are rightfully turned off. Sadly, for some of these folks this is the only exposure to “Christianity” and the “Church” they will ever receive.

People hear stories of how churches have misused and abused the funds people give them – stories that in many cases are no doubt true - and that has only stiffened their resolve to have nothing to do with the Christian church. All churches are alike; in their eyes the Church is nothing more than a money-grubbing institution that uses the money selfishly for its own purposes... It’s all a big scam.

Then, too, there is the thinking that if the Church is truly a spiritual institution, it shouldn’t talk about money at all. The Church should be concerned with the spiritual relationship between an individual and God. Why should it concern itself with something so worldly and materialistic?

How do you respond to someone who says to you, *“the Church is always asking for money?”*

This statement, of course, presupposes that the folks who say this have been around church enough to make a fair assessment of the church and its operations. I remember one fellow in the church who would rarely come to worship services, but when he did, he almost always happened to come by chance on Stewardship Sunday. *“The church is always asking for money,”* he complained. Coming to church once a year hardly qualified him to pass judgment. The same could be said about a lot of other critics; they know not of what they speak.

To be sure, the Church passes the offering plate once a week and it makes occasional appeals for some sort of mission or other. And yes, churches do engage in capital campaigns for the purpose of building buildings and retiring debt. And yes, pastors do preach “the sermon on the amount” from time to time. But is that all the Church really cares about, milking the members of its hard-earned money and lining its own coffers?

At the most basic level you could challenge the statement that *“the Church is always asking for money”* by saying it is simply not true. These words were published in a church newsletter, and I think they are right to the point:

It is the world which is always asking for money, not the Church. When did you last go to the grocery store and the checker failed to ask you for money? Your mortgage company asks for money with unfailing regularity. If you are like most people, each month brings a new collection of bills. Are any of them from the Church? Who withholds a percentage of every dollar YOU earn? Your Uncle does that (Uncle Sam). Your Father does not!

There is no free lunch except at the Church. You can attend worship every week – there is no admission charge. You can attend breakfasts and luncheons and never pay a dime. Where else can you get free counseling when you need it?

What do you do when your loved one dies? What will it cost? The funeral home will certainly charge for its services. Your church will not. The Church building will always be there when you need it – clean, heated or cooled with nursery provided. You make full use of it and never pay a nickel. No one will even know whether you contribute or not.

You have to pay taxes to provide your children “free” public education, but your Church operates a Sunday School which will give quality Christian education with absolutely no cost or obligation. The Church has wonderful ministries for youth. And yet the Church requires no membership fee, no annual dues. It never sends its members a bill. Is there any other organization in the world that functions that way? I don’t know of any. You see, the truth is the Church “asks for money” LESS than anything else you can think of. [Adapted from St. Paul’s Church, Kansas City, MO]

It’s true, isn’t it?

Secondly, when people say, *“the Church is always asking for money,”* it would be appropriate to respond by saying, *“If the Church is always talking about money and asking people to give, it is only because it is such an important issue to God and God wants us to give because it brings such blessing.”*

Contrary to the views of many, money is very much a spiritual issue. Jesus tackled the subject of money and possessions more often than any other topic save that of the kingdom of God. As a matter of fact, there are 1,565 references to the proper use of money within the pages of scripture. In the Gospels alone one out of every ten verses speaks to this issue. Read the book of Acts and you’ll find story after story of the early church struggling with, and talking about, the place of money in their Christian lives.

The Apostle Paul is very direct in talking about money. He, himself, led a campaign to collect funds for the mother church in Jerusalem. If I, as a pastor, could not talk about money and giving from the pulpit, I would ignore huge chunks of the New Testament and I would be unfaithful by not preaching the whole counsel of God. So it’s no wonder that church talks a lot about money – money matters to God, God knows its power for good or ill, and he wants everyone to learn the grace of giving.

Let’s take a few moments to review this lesson. Why does God encourage us all to give?

Because it’s good for one’s spiritual health. If we are not careful, money can begin to exert control over our lives, to the extent that it occupies all our time and attention and energy. Greed can consume us. Hoarding can give us a false sense of security. The love of money can lead to all kinds of stress and worry. Learning to give instead of to hoard helps to break the stranglehold of money and greed over our lives, and we learn to put our trust in God and in God’s ability to provide for our needs. We remember that our money is not so much ours, as God’s – indeed, the world and everything in it belongs to God.

We are reminded that life is more than the size of our bank account. Learning to give is healthy and life-giving.

I once gave a children's sermon involving a sponge. You can find thin, dry sponges in boutiques or cooking stores. They are very slender but when you put them in water they swell up to large sponge size. So with the kids around me we did just that. We watched that slender sponge grow fat in the water. *"Sometimes we can be like sponges,"* I said. *"We just kind of sit there and keep taking and taking and taking, soaking things up.....not giving anything until we are squeezed. We weren't meant to be a sponge,"* I said. *"That's no way to live."* Then I quoted the apostle Paul who said, *"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give,"* says Paul, *"not reluctantly or under compulsion [not feeling squeezed!], for God loves a cheerful giver."* (2 Cor. 9:7)

I read the story of a man who was in church one day, and was feeling somewhat uncomfortable and embarrassed as the ushers approached his pew with the offering plates. He had no coins in his pocket, and really didn't want to be so generous as to give one of the bills from his wallet. At the last moment the solution to his problem came to him. As the usher arrived and the plate was extended, he (to use his own words) *"closed his eyes and felt sorry for humankind until the danger had passed."*....

That fellow obviously missed what the Apostle Paul had to say about giving.

Learning to give is good for our spiritual health; it brings cheer to our lives. It makes us feel good. It stifles the deadly sin of greed in us. We learn to control our money instead of allowing our money to control us.

Giving is not only good for us – that is, good for our spiritual health - but good for others in an extraordinary way. Giving to the church brings blessings to so many lives. Money enables the church to carry on its mission to share God's love in word and deed and to make disciples of Jesus Christ. There is no more important mission in all the world! The church brings hope and healing and love to so many, and lives are forever changed. Is there any other investment that is so important and that pays such eternal dividends?

This is what Jesus means when he calls us to lay up "treasure in heaven." Jesus explains:

*"Do not lay for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. "*

Most of what we spend our money on doesn't last. It wears out, it winds up in the Great Mukilteo Garage Sale, and in the end, when we die, someone else is just going to get end up with it. We can't take it with us. As the scripture reminds us: *"We bring nothing into this world, and we will take nothing out."* But some things do last – namely, the investments we make in the lives of others and the contributions we make to the extension of God's loving rule over human hearts. These are the "treasures in heaven" that Jesus talks about - things that count eternally.

Those who give so cheerfully and generously to the church understand that they are not just giving to an “institution” and or to a “budget” to enhance the bottom line; they are giving to people – impacting lives in dramatic and everlasting ways.

I was so touched by the number of church folks who came out to support Friday’s golf tournament/dinner/auction sponsored by MPC student ministry. What a great event! Never was giving so much fun! People were very generous. It was especially beautiful to see so many people willing to underwrite some of the expenses for kid’s to go to camp this summer with nothing expected in return. In five minutes during the live auction, something like \$2200 was collected for this specific purpose. Folks cheerfully gave, for they knew this was an investment that mattered. They know how important Christian camps and retreats can be in a young person’s life and in their decision to follow Jesus Christ. Many of you, no doubt, can look back to a camp experience in your youth, that impacted the future course of your life in Christ.

So too, with every dollar you put in the plate – it blesses others. It enables the preaching of the Word of God. It provides for the Christian education of children, youth and adults. It provides emergency funds for people in our community who have need. It makes possible a Food Bank. It reaches out to people with disabilities. It shares the gospel with Arabic speaking people right here in our surrounding community. It goes to disaster relief all over the world, be it Haiti or right here in the USA. Our money goes where we cannot, supporting mission workers around the world. The money we put in the plate, of course, goes to support our church staff – I am privileged to work with the finest team any pastor could hope to work with – Jim and Tom and Sandy and Valynn and Lee Ann, and Jan and Beth and Scott – all of whom labor diligently on our behalf to equip us all for ministry. They are worth their weight in gold! And yes, some of your money goes to the building, which is an important tool to support our ministry in reaching out to our community. Our buildings, too, have a people, kingdom focus.

As your pastor, I want to thank you for your cheerful and generous support of this ministry. You do not give merely under a sense of obligation – you don’t need to be squeezed - you give because you are so pleased to do so and you know it makes a difference. Most people love to give to causes that matter. You don’t mind it when the church asks for money, because you know the work of the church matters eternally.

Those who say, “*The Church is always asking for money,*” just don’t understand the mission of the church. They just don’t get it . . .

To those outside the Christian Church who say, “*The Church cares only about itself and its own self-preservation,*” and we can say it is just not so. The Christian Church has done more good for humanity with its material resources than any other organization on earth. It has cared for the sick, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and welcomed the stranger. It is the Church that established hospitals and schools and all sorts of ministries that serve humanity. Has there been some abuse? Yes, of course. Has the Christian Church been self-focused at times? Sure. But on balance, the Church has proved to be a worthy steward of God’s resources and will continue to do so. Certainly this church will constantly strive to be a good steward of your money. We realize that the church does not have a dime to its name that

has not been donated to the church in by somebody in good faith. So we take our responsibility very seriously.

Why does God everywhere encourage us to give to the Church? Because it's good for us, it's good for others. And finally, because it's good for God. The Lord smiles when people give to his Church, and do so freely and cheerfully. *"God loves a cheerful giver."*

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of the time when Jesus was sitting in the courtyard of the temple, watching people making their contributions to the the temple treasury. Some rich people approached the metal receptacles of the treasury, and threw in their coins with some force, making sure the coins made a loud clang as if to emphasize the size of the gift to all around. For them, it was all a show. Then a poor widow came along, and who proceeded to put in her two small, copper coins, barely making a sound. That woman brought great joy to the Lord. The Lord smiled, saying *"this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."*

It's not the amount of the gift that pleases the Lord so much as the spirit in which it is given. That woman gave joyfully and freely and indeed, sacrificially, because she loved God and trusted God to take care of her, and she felt privileged to give to the Lord's work. There was a woman whose heart was in the right place. *"For where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also."*

If the church asks for money, it is only because money matters to G<sup>1</sup>od and God want us all to learn to be givers, not just takers. Such giving brings great blessings. People are introduced to Jesus Christ. Disciples are made. People are fed and cared for body and soul. To do so is to lay up treasures in heaven. What could be more wonderful than that?

God loves a cheerful giver. Let's make God smile. Amen.