

August 2015 – (dot)Stewardship

Ladders, Torches, and Blue Lagoons

By Dr. Mark Lail

Our family's commute to church this summer has included driving through a significant road construction project. While I adapted to shifting lanes and an ever changing orange-cone obstacle course, my eight year old grandson became curious about a ladder hanging from a crane, suspended several stories in the air. "Papa, why is there a ladder hanging from that big crane?" he asked. A good papa, of course, is supposed to have answers for questions like this. I took a guess and said that they probably need a bit of weight on the end of the cable to keep it from blowing around in the wind or to balance the crane's weight. Newton I am not. Even at eight, my grandson was able to develop several compelling reasons why an aluminum extension ladder



would not counterbalance a giant crane. And, by its very design, a crane is weighted at the bottom, so adding weight to the top would make its balance worse, not better. I couldn't argue with the logic, so for several weeks I chose to defer the conversation to the hanging object themselves, "look there's a cutting torch hanging from that crane this time." Driving to church became a game of guessing what would be hanging next, a trailer, a welder, a tool box, a blue lagoon (apparently, that's construction lingo for a porta-potty.) It was a great game, but did not provide the reason why random objects decorate the sky every weekend or the purpose behind taking the time to dangle tools from a crane on Friday night.

Curiosity got the best of us, so we investigated. To our surprise, we discovered that hanging tools and construction site items from a crane at night or on the weekend is a deterrent to theft and vandalism. Now that makes sense! Construction site loss is expensive, and hanging tools high in the sky presents would-be thieves with a challenge.

Sometimes we, as Christians, do things with our money that outsiders – or those within the church – may not understand. Why do we do the things we do? Christians, why do we give away our money? Why do we take our income, move the decimal point one space to the left, and give a tithe to the Lord? Perhaps an outsider would have some guesses about our behavior that would be as off-track as my extension ladder guess.

Do we tithe out of obedience? That's not a bad reason, and it certainly works for me! However, we have to recognize that there are some Christians who do not believe the practice is commanded. Many even practice tithing but do not agree on the nature of the commandment through both Testaments. Some are quick to point out that the best tithers in the New Testament, the Pharisees, were seldom in tune with Jesus. They proved that one can obey with a lousy attitude and miss the point entirely.

Maybe we tithe for the tax deduction? I hope not. I believe in my country and enjoy its benefits. We have some nice roads, and somebody has to be paid to drive the crane that hangs the tools. But if there is a legitimate way to give the Lord a little more and the government a little less, I'm anxious to engage. Still, I'm pretty sure that anyone who gives their tithe primarily to reduce taxes has already received their reward: fewer taxes. I expect that in my lifetime Christian churches in my country will not receive (or see significantly reduced) exemption from taxes and charitable benefit for donors. If tax deductions are driving our offering plates, then we have missed the point of tithing completely.

Is tithing practiced to bring prosperity? The Bible does seem to indicate that the Lord is passionate about prospering his people. I'm not completely convinced that the Lord measures prosperity like we measure our bank accounts, though. I believe the Lord is looking for any opportunity He can find to open us up and fill us to overflowing. However, God does not function like a magic money multiplier. It is quite possible that God's route to prosperity in our lives will involve the road of sacrifice and loss. If we're tithing in order to get back more than we gave, then we'll find ourselves selfishly disappointed someday.

Avoiding punishment is a strong motivator. I drive the speed limit even though I would much rather be traveling faster. Safety, of course, is important, and speed limits are determined specifically to keep us safe. But I drive the speed limit primarily because I do not want to pay a fine. I would very much like to avoid eternal punishment too. But I'm going to have to count on God's grace to take care of that. I'm never going to have enough money to pay that price.

Perhaps giving is based on human need? The word "philanthropy" is based on the concept of love for humanity. And Christians love people! That's why we give to the World Evangelism Fund and sponsor children through Nazarene Compassionate ministries. We love people enough to introduce them to Jesus and care for their needs. Every Christian is a philanthropist, but not every philanthropist is a Christian. There are lots of people who don't believe in Jesus who give much more than ten percent of their income to improve the lives of fellow humans.

So, why tithe? There could be a bit of truth in any of the above answers. Though, it seems to me that the best reason to tithe is to give in gratitude to God for creating and sustaining us. Tithing is a way that Christians recognize the authority of God, as Creator and as Provider of all life. Simply put, we give generously because the Lord has given so much to us. In 1 Chronicles chapter 29, we find King David in one of his happiest moments. It was in the context of giving; God was giving, and God's people were giving. Here's his prayer:

¹⁰ David praised the LORD in the presence of the whole assembly, saying,

Praise be to you, LORD,
the God of our father Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
¹¹Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
Yours, LORD, is the kingdom;
you are exalted as head over all.
¹²Wealth and honor come from you;
you are the ruler of all things.
In your hands are strength and power
to exalt and give strength to all.
¹³Now, our God, we give you thanks,
and praise your glorious name.

(I Chronicles 29:10-13)

The Church of the Nazarene is made up of generous people who tithe on purpose and often give beyond that. We have decided that we will be a church of people who tithe. It is who we are. The Church of the Nazarene's Code of Christian Conduct isn't scripture, but it is good! Paragraph 21 reads, "To be identified with the visible Church is the blessed privilege and sacred duty of all who are saved from their sins...They shall evidence their commitment to God... [by] contributing to the support of the ministry and the church and its work in tithes and offerings." Our commitment and decision to tithe is simply a grateful response to the Lord's goodness to us.

I didn't have such a great answer to my grandson when he asked, "Why do they hang tools from their cranes?" But I want to live in such a way that my grandson knows exactly why I'm dividing my income by ten and giving it to the church as a tithe. It is because the Lord is my Savior!

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10 Biblical Principles for Stewardship and Fundraising

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR STEWARDSHIP & FUNDRAISING
from the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability®

- 1 God is a God of **infinite abundance** and grace.
- 2 Christians are **managers** of what God has entrusted to them.
- 3 A Christian's **attitude** toward possessions on Earth is important to God.
- 4 God holds Christians **accountable** for how they use possessions.
- 5 A Christian's giving shows **gratitude** to God.
- 6 Giving is important to the **spiritual maturation** of believers.
- 7 Fundraisers primarily exist to encourage **faith in and worship of God**.
- 8 The **Holy Spirit prompts** people to give; we don't need to manipulate.
- 9 The giver's **relationship** to God is always above the ministry's agenda.
- 10 God's **Kingdom perspective** on possessions seems like foolish nonsense to those who follow the world.

<http://bit.ly/10BiblicalPrinciples>

Quotes:

William Arthur Ward



“Giving is more than a responsibility – it is a privilege; more than an act of obedience – it is evidence of our faith.”