

15. STEWARDSHIP OF TREASURE

Not sharing resources is sin

Wealth enables us to live better material lives. By itself, the possession of wealth is neither right nor wrong. What makes money good or evil depends on how legitimately we acquire money, and how we prioritize and use it. One important aspect of Christian ethics is precisely the right way of acquisition and use of money.

Greed and Theft

Greed is an erroneous attitude towards wealth. It is a desire to possess more than what is necessary. Often, it involves using unethical means to obtain money. Greed is also associated with another sinful attitude – laziness. This sluggish attitude weakens our will and leads us to hope for success through easy but dishonest means such as gambling.

Greed can often cause the wealthy to become narcissistic, proud, arrogant, and callous to the needs of the poor. When we place our trust in money, we gain a false sense of security. In the parable of the rich man storing up his crops, Jesus described him as someone who was full of ideas on how to get rich; he wanted to build a bigger barn to continue increasing his assets. However, he suddenly passed away and was unable to bring any of his material possessions along. Thus, Jesus reminds us not to have a deceptive sense of security. “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Lk 12:15-22).

A greedy person may sometimes cheat and steal. He may resort to unscrupulous means to acquire money. The act of stealing is not limited to theft and robbery. It also includes corruption, fraud, smuggling, tax evasion, and other dishonest conduct. All the above are sinful ways to obtain wealth.

There are many different forms of theft. In business dealings, passing off a fake as a genuine product is as good as stealing. Not giving the rightful remuneration to workers is theft. Vandalism of public or private property is also a form of stealing. Bribery and corruption are thefts and so are smuggling of goods and tax evasion. Discarding excess products to control the price of goods is also theft. The resources of the earth belong to God, and it is He who has given them to all humanity to share. Thus, everyone has a responsibility towards an equal distribution and use of resources. It is a form of theft when we monopolise resources and use them as if they belong to us alone.

Sins of Negligence

The Gospel parable of the rich man and Lazarus vividly explains the sin of negligence. In this analogy, Jesus described how the rich man enjoyed lavish meals and a comfortable life while Lazarus, a beggar, sat outside his house day in and day out. Lazarus did not even have the chance to taste the food of the rich man's dog. Yet, the rich man simply ignored Lazarus' needs. God has given him material wealth so that he could share them with those in need but he failed to carry out his responsibilities. Jesus commented that someone like him could not

experience the joy of being in the Heavenly kingdom (Luke 16:19-31).

We should not pay lip service to the welfare of the poor. St. James said, "Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (Jm 2:15-17).

In principle, God is the owner and master of all things; civil servants and wealthy men are God's stewards of public goods and private properties. Civil servants must manage public affairs and taxpayers' money with a selfless spirit. As for the rich, although they have the rights to their personal wealth, they should know that they do not have absolute ownership over their properties. They have a duty to share their wealth with the less fortunate. Should they choose to keep all they have for themselves and not care for the poor, they commit the sin of negligence.

The Joy of Sharing

"It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). When we understand that all man belongs to one humanity, we must share our blessings and endure our woes together. This understanding is based on the belief that we are all sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father. When we share with others, the values of being "one family" come alive, and we experience the joy of communion.

When we give, we focus on the needs of others, not what we can gain out of it. “So, when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matt 6:2-3). Giving is not to seek compliments or to expect a return, but to empathise with the poor out with love and care.

Giving to the needy is really giving to Jesus because Jesus has placed himself in the shoes of the poor and needy. He said, “‘For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” (Mt 25:35-40).

About Tithing

A “tithe” is a tenth of something. The requirement for offering a “tithe” in ancient Israel originated from the Leviticus law. It was written in the book, “A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord” (Lev 27:30). In those days, a “tithe” was not just a

Jewish religious duty to the Priests and Levites; the collection was used also for “community welfare” in aiding the poor such as orphans and widows and supporting other public services.

Many Protestant churches explicitly stipulate that their members must offer a tenth of their income to the church, known as “tithing”. They quote Old Testament verses to justify the legitimacy and necessity of tithing. This application of Old Testament practices in today’s context is inappropriate, as there is a huge difference between the social contexts of the Old Testament era and our society today. There is nothing wrong if the believers choose to offer “tithe” to the church. However, it would be a misuse of the Bible for income collection.

Two main reasons account for why Christians need not offer “tithe”. Firstly, the laws in the Old Testaments were laid down for the ancient Israelites and not meant for today’s Christians. The Gospel of Christ is the source of understanding and practice of our morals and faith. If we study the book of Leviticus, we realise that besides the law on tithing, there are many other laws such as those concerning revenge and slavery (Lv 24:1-7; 25:1-17) that Christians today do not abide. The reason is simple: Old Testament laws are meant only for ancient Israelites!

Secondly, in more developed countries, the government or NGO charities take care of public projects and community services. Christians, just like any other citizens, pay taxes to the government and donate to charities. If a church uses a “tithe” mentioned in the Old Testament as a criterion for church offering, then it should also follow the example of the ancients – using a fixed

proportion of the collection for public projects and welfare related purposes instead of keeping all for church use.

Giving to the church should not be an obligation. Instead, donors should give out of a spirit of gratitude and sharing and not expect rewards in return. As Christians, we should pay our taxes, donate to charities regularly, contribute to disaster relief, extend timely help to our neighbors, and support the church's expenses for evangelisation and pastoral care. We give because we believe everything is a gift from God, and we are His stewards. What God has freely given; we share freely.