



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

October 28, 2018

How Much Is Enough?

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 3, 2018

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Lots of people come to worship at a church like Westminster every Sunday, and they come from so many places – emotionally and spiritually, as well as socially, economically, and politically, and in their ages and stations in life. It's hard to frame a message that's meaningful to so many different people at once, trying to comfort those who need to be comforted and challenge those who need to be challenged.

In forty years of ministry, one thing I've seen is how the most conscientious and generous people are typically the ones who worry most about wanting to do more, while the least conscientious and generous are quick to tell themselves that they're already doing quite enough. That's to be expected, I suppose. People act according to their character; or as Jesus put it more colorfully, you can tell a tree by its fruit.

The church at its best has always wanted to be a community where the Holy Spirit can cultivate a more Christ-like character in everyone who gathers here. That takes time. A long time. A lifetime, in fact, for most of us. Each of us is like a great spiritual reclamation project, where over time the image of God grows gradually brighter until it shines through the egocentric, impulse-driven thicket of our lower nature. The church has never been an assembly of perfected saints so much as an asylum for sin-sick souls.

A question that always comes up in church is “How much is enough?” People ask that question in all sorts of ways. Sometimes it means “How much do I have to do to be right with God? What do I need to do for God to think I’m a good person – even good enough to get into heaven?” Other times, especially in this season when church members are asked to estimate their giving for the coming year, the question for many becomes “How much is enough for me to give? How much should I give financially, and if I contribute in other ways, isn’t that enough?”

For some thoughtful Christians, the question “How much is enough?” goes far deeper. It has to do not with a sense of obligation but with a kind of freedom. The question for them is more along the lines of “How much is enough for me to take care of the basic needs of myself and my family, so that we can live more fully for God, more joyfully and generously? How much is enough for us to be satisfied, and to break free from our culture’s pervasive materialism that is so vain and fearful and grasping at the same time?”

This morning I want to look briefly at the question in all three forms, starting with the version that asks “How good do I have to be, to be good enough for God?”

The short answer, according to Christianity, is that however good that is, you and I can’t get there by ourselves. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” the scripture says, and that’s not hyperbole. It’s a simple statement of fact.

The way of the world is to grade on a moral curve, and to make the test as easy as possible. Worldly people compare themselves to, say, serial killers and Hitler, or at least to the nastiest person they know, and decide that, all

things considered, they really are pretty good. They recall the little acts of kindness and charity they've done as testimony to their generosity, and they even try to conjure up the appearance of humility. "I know I'm not perfect," they say, invoking everyone's favorite pseudo-confession. But to admit that we're not perfect is to confess nothing at all, of course, since everybody knows that no one is perfect, and nobody ever suspected that we were perfect either.

Worldly people set the bar of goodness low enough that they can easily step over it. But Christians, as they grow in faith, know that God sets the bar much higher, and God's standard is the only one that matters in the end. Jesus' Great Commandment is that we are to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and love our neighbors – all our neighbors, including our enemies – as we love ourselves. According to that measure, how are you doing? I know I'm not doing very well; and at the risk of being presumptuous, I'm guessing you're not doing so well either.

God's expectations of what we should ultimately become are so high that our first impulse is to run back to the comfort of the world's more congenial criteria. But mature Christians also know that every divine expectation of goodness comes with a liberating and empowering measure of grace to sustain it and see it through.

"By grace you are saved through faith, and not by your works, lest anyone should boast" the scripture says again. God's goals for us are so high that only God can attain them, but the good news of the gospel is that what we cannot do for ourselves, God can do for us. God will make us into the people we were meant to be, if only we ask God to do it. God's grace is so powerful that it lets us confront our

sin and shortcomings fearlessly, and confess them honestly, because we know that all our sin is covered by God's amazing grace.

If the first form of our question is "How good do I have to be, to be good enough for God?" the answer is that God will make us good enough eventually. We don't have to worry about that, if we're willing to rely on God's grace. And that's an enormously powerful, liberating insight. It means we don't need to carry around a burden of guilt, as so many people do, because God in Christ takes our guilt away. Whenever we feel pangs of conscience, then, it's not in the form of some chronic debilitating condition, but rather as a kind of acute moral pain – sharp enough to tell us when we need to right some wrong, or make amends, but never strong enough to crush our spirit.

Which brings us, in a roundabout way, to the second form of our question: "How much is enough for me to give?" In a sense, it's like the first version of the question: "How good is good enough?" And the answer is similar in some ways too. The answer for most of us is that, truth be told, we're probably not doing all we can, and we have strong incentives to settle for less.

The mere fact that we ask the question suggests that we may not have broken through to a glad and generous sense of God's grace and goodness to us. Just think about it. What would it mean to say, "Yes, I think I actually am giving enough to God"? Really? How could we, who owe God everything, ever decide that we've done enough for God? If we're still asking, "How much is enough for me to give to God?" we're probably asking the wrong question.

There are several reasons why we might be asking the wrong question here. For one thing, it sounds like we're still trying to justify ourselves. Old habits die hard. But when we realize that every good thing we have, and life itself, is already a gift from God, then giving becomes a matter of gratitude for God's grace, not a burden of obligation or trying to measure up. We stop asking "How much is enough?" and start to ask "What more can I do?"

As long as we're still thinking in worldly terms, we have powerful incentives to settle for less. It's as if we all have little moral courtrooms in our heads, where from time to time our conscience rises up and acts as a prosecutor. In a real courtroom, of course, the prosecutor, defendant, and judge are different people, and if the judge had a personal interest in the outcome of the case, she would need to recuse herself. But in the courtroom of our mind, the judge and defendant are the same person, so not surprisingly the judge is inclined to rule in favor of the defense. We call that "rationalizing," and we're tempted to do it all the time.

You know some of those rationalizations. One of them says, "If I gave away all that I have, then I'd be destitute and other people would have to take care of me." That would be true, of course, but the reality is, there's no chance whatsoever that the one who invokes that argument would do any such thing.

Another rationalization comes from people who have a great deal of wealth or income, who may give more in absolute terms than someone who has less, but in proportional terms they might not be nearly as generous. Jesus says, "From those to whom much has been given, much will be expected." In the economics of God's kingdom, it's proportionality that counts, which is why Jesus says that

the poor widow who gives her couple of coins does more than the rich man who contributes more money, but a much smaller portion of his wealth.

Some people look for reasons to give less because they want to know what's the minimum they need to do to get by. They're like children sitting at the dinner table asking how many peas they have to eat in order to get dessert. But other people want to know how much is enough when it comes to giving for a different reason altogether. They ask because they're afraid. They're afraid that if they give any more they might not have enough left for themselves and their families.

One of the problems with money is that you can count it, which means that in principle it's always possible to have more. And in our culture, more is generally taken to be better. There are all sorts of legitimate reasons why people might be anxious about having enough money. Beyond the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter, there are big things to save for: things like college for the children and grandchildren, and having enough for our own retirement.

When we focus on those things, what Shel Silverstein called the Whatifs creep inside our heads, and sing their familiar Whatif song. "What if inflation goes up, or my portfolio goes down? What if I get sick? What if something unexpected happens?" The Whatif song has lots of verses, and once we start singing it, the fear it conjures up can freeze us in our reluctance to give any more, even if part of us wants to do more for God.

And that brings us to the third form of our question: How much do I really need? How much is enough, so that I

can live a life of joy and generosity in gratitude to God, rather than a life of captivity to guilt or avarice or fear?

The answer to this third form of the question, for most of us, is probably “Much less than you think.”

My own experience, and the testimony of countless others who ventured out in faith concerning their material resources, has invariably been that God is good and God is faithful. But the only way we come to trust God is by stepping out in faith. Small steps at first can begin to allay our fears, just as a toddler learns to stake small steps, haltingly and awkwardly in the beginning, until before long he discovers the joy of being free to run around and explore new things.

The life of faith is about taking new steps, even if they're small steps at first. When you think about it, you know that no one would ever trust God – or anyone else, for that matter – unless they stepped out to test whether that person was trustworthy. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as people say, and it's true in matters of faith as well.

But when we do step out in faith, we find that God is faithful. And in the end, God alone is great, so ultimately there is no place safer or more secure to put our trust than in the God who is always there and makes all things new, including us. That's why, in Jesus' little parable, the man who seeks security by building bigger barns turns out to be so foolish. In the end, neither our barns nor whatever we have stashed in them will be able to save us and make us secure. Only God is big enough to be God, and only God can save.

The proverbial bottom line is that each of us has to decide for ourselves what we want to do. If we really want to do little or nothing more, we won't have any trouble persuading ourselves that we're already doing all we can. We human beings are very good at rationalizing whatever we want to believe.

But if we want our spirits to grow stronger, the way to do that is to step out in faith. When we do, the testimony of faithful people through the ages is that God will meet us there and provide everything we need. And then, eventually, our fears will fall away, and our lives will come to be filled with far greater joy and gratitude and peace than we ever knew before.



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