

A HAPPY FELLOWSHIP WITH JESUS

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Joseph Heer, 89, had the utility company turn off the gas to his Washington, Pennsylvania, home two years ago to save money. He died the other day—alone in a house that was freezing.

Another heart-wrenching example of the suffering endured in silence by the poverty-stricken elderly? Hardly.

Near the body, in an unlocked safe and a box, the coroner found \$188,545.99 in cash as well as a bank book showing a \$400,000 balance. What can explain such a modern Scrooge's fatal fascination with money?

Scrooge, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, learned to conquer his compulsive love of money by the hair-raising intervention of a nightmare specter—Marley's ghost. A U.S. citizen involved in Hong Kong smuggling of high-tech components to the People's Republic of China had a similar nightmare. He saw a nuclear missile launched from China and headed for the United States. As it was about to detonate, he saw his name written on it. Scroogelike, he woke in horror and resolved to come clean about his smuggling.

Is there a better way to learn to handle money than suffering agonizing nightmares about what will happen to us after we have misused it selfishly? It is true, as Jesus said, that God's final judgment will probe deeply into how we have used money. Everybody who loves money (and who doesn't, by

nature?) realizes that a potential Scrooge lurks in his or her soul. But fear of retribution alone cannot solve the problem. Dickens entertains us, but does not convert us. The good news of the gospel alone can do that.

Jesus doesn't condemn us for being born with a natural love for money; it's as endemic to human nature as the desire to live. He knew the temptation just as much as we do, even more. The devil offered Him more than any lottery could, bidding higher for His talents than for ours, because He had so much more to be bargained for. We read that Satan took Him "up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, 'All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.'" Matthew 4:8, 9, NKJV. In other words, join the human crowd in greed. In wrestling with that real temptation, the Son of God learned by firsthand experience how subtle and deep is this human yearning for money, power, and things. He was "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." Hebrews 4:15.

Jesus' solution to our selfishness is not to create a handful of Mother Therasas to shame everybody else, but to share with all of us the good news that we can enjoy a dynamic, practical victory over the love of money.

How? The answer is simple, yet permanently effective. And it brings to an end our nightmares about future judgment.

The secret is a fundamental truth that underlies all human existence: No human being anywhere can

claim rightful title to even one dollar as being his or hers. This principle is taught in a well-known verse: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish.” John 3:16, NKJV. Obviously, this means that “the world” was doomed to “perish” unless God gave that Gift. It’s a blunt, straightforward recognition that “the world,” (everyone, not just believers) owes everything to that divine Gift. No one can believe the gospel without recognizing immediately that he now relates to money and things in a new way.

Another text states the same principle even more clearly: “The love of Christ constrains us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.” 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15, NKJV. The original language implies that a new compulsion now grips the heart, stronger than the old compulsion of selfishness.

This powerful truth lays an ax at the root of our love affair with money. If we believe that Christ “died for all,” that is the same as saying that we died along with Him and that if He had *not* died for all, we would all be dead and would therefore have nothing.

Everything else that you possess is only lent to you by the grace of the One who died for all. This means you are His steward, or His employee. It makes no difference whether you believe this or not—the fact remains the same. We are all, even atheists, eternally and infinitely in debt to that One.

Not only did Christ’s sacrifice purchase for us the prospect of life after death, even the good things of this life come to us the same way. “To the death of Christ we owe even this earthly life. The bread we eat is the purchase of His broken body. The water we drink is bought by His spilled blood. Never one, saint or sinner, eats his daily food, but he is nourished by the body and the blood of Christ. The cross of Calvary is stamped on every loaf. It is reflected in every water spring.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 660.

You can see this point, there is release from the compulsive tyranny of coveting. It becomes easier to say No to things you don’t need and which would only give you a sense of guilt for possessing them. It becomes easier to say Yes to giving and you actually began to see light in that famous word, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Acts 20:35. Relieving someone else’s need begins to be fun once you realized that you aren’t actually giving anything; you are just passing on what has been lent to you. During those occasional moments when you are in your right mind, you realize that you can’t take anything with you when you go. No one holds title to anything beyond his precarious next breath.

To save us from any painful vestige of Scroogism, God has instituted a plan of managing money that perpetually reminds us that we do not own “our” assets. In the early days of our world, even before there were any Jews, He instituted the tithing system—returning one tenth of all we get to Him. “Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give

me bread to eat and clothing to put on, . . . of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.” Genesis 28:20, 22, NKJV.

The idea is not that God is poor and needs a dole from us. And it’s not a taxation system. To return a tenth of our income to God is an acknowledgement that “if One died for all, then all died.” 2 Corinthians 5:14, NKJV. It’s an acknowledgement that we are handling Someone else’s property. The tenth we return to Him says that we see ourselves as thankful stewards of life itself. Tithe is a tangible hallelujah, a lifeline that helps connect our alienated souls to reality, a reminder of our tenuous grasp on life and on all we have.

When you think about it, you marvel: whenever Jesus worked a miracle to give people food or drink, He always needed the willing cooperation of some human beings. At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, He needed the help of the servants to go get the wine jars and fill them with water. Then He chose not to wave His hand and suddenly fill all the guests’ glasses with supernatural wine. Instead, working behind the scenes with the servants, He gave the party wine.

In the two miracles of feeding the thousands, it’s interesting that in each instance He waited for the cooperation of the disciples before He could feed the multitudes. In the case of the “four thousand” (Matt. 15:32-39), when He expressed His compassion on the people being so hungry that they might collapse on their journeys home, He first asked the disciples, “How many loaves do you have?” Apparently they scurried off to inquire and

came back, “Seven, and a few little fish.” Very well, now He can do something; “He took the seven loaves and the fish and gave thanks, broke them, and gave them to the disciples [He needs them to be the waiters!] and the disciples gave to the multitude.”

In feeding the five thousand (Mark 6:30-44; John 6:5-14), again He was dependent on the little boy’s gift of his “five barley loaves and two fishes” (obviously the lunch his mother had made for him. He was so enthralled listening to Jesus, He forgot to eat it). The lesson seems clear: although Jesus could “create” bread from nothing as He created the world in the beginning, now the rules in the great controversy require that He be dependent on willing human cooperation for something to begin with!

Astounding as the truth may be, the Savior actually needs you! Perk up, lift up your drooping head; you are important in His great plan for the world.

The principle of giving is the antithesis of getting. Everyone is born with the spirit of getting; no baby ever cries because another one is hungry. The “cheerful giver” whom God loves is not that way by nature. No one has any natural-born righteousness. The “cheerful giver” is a selfish person (we all are by nature) who has been renewed by a heart appreciation of the “unspeakable gift” of God’s grace in Christ. His cheerful giving is the fruit of a faith that works by love. See 2 Corinthians 9:15; Galatians 5:6.

Although God so loved the whole world that He gave His Son for it, those who appreciate the Gift

are stockholders in His grand enterprise of telling the world the good news. All who believe are members of His family, with a vested interest in the plan of salvation. The tithes and offerings that are acceptable to God are those that are given as freely as He gave His offering in our behalf. God has directed that they be used in His worldwide program of proclaiming the good news: “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. . . . Bring all the tithes into the storehouse.” Malachi 3:8-10, NKJV.

The “storehouse,” or God’s “house,” symbolizes His temple or organization on earth the church. We don’t *pay* tithes to God, nor *give* them; we *return* them to Him. They are His. He does not keep a cent for Himself, but uses all of it in support of His world network of agencies proclaiming the pure gospel His church on earth.

Does God intend for even poor people to return to Him a tenth of their meager income? The answer is that *everyone* is invited to share in the blessing of being shareholders in God’s enterprise. Never in the history of the world has anyone suffered because of returning the tithe to the Lord. He has made Himself personally responsible to fulfill an ironclad promise: “‘Prove Me now in this [tithe-paying],’ says the Lord of hosts, If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes.” Malachi 3:10, 11, NKJV.

The tyranny of materialism is cruel bondage, a constant oppression of spirit. It is the pressure of keeping up with the neighbors or the relatives, excessive concern for clothes, houses, furniture, cars, vacations, anything to bolster our sagging self-esteem. In loving concern for our happiness, the Lord pleads with us, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” Luke 12:15, NIV.

Could Jesus have been speaking especially to us today? Yes, most surely. Never in world history has any people had more “good things laid up” than we have. Jesus’ point is that these material baubles are neither true wealth nor permanent. “The pagan world runs after all such things.” Verse 30, NIV. But God has already given us wealth infinitely better! “Your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. . . . Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near. . . . Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Verses 32-34.

Is there a better word than “stewardship” in describing our relationship to Jesus in His work of proclaiming the gospel “to every creature”?

Jesus said, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

That command of Jesus requires that we support those who “go.”

That means, first of all, the giving of tithe—one tenth of our “increase” that the Lord gives us.

It's not a legalistic assessment upon us; it's fellowship with Jesus in His work. It's working together with the Lord Jesus in His work of proclaiming the gospel "to every creature" "in all the world."

That's the work that the Lord Jesus loves. A "steward" is someone who cares for property; the word "stewardship" can be understood to imply a legalistic connection with the Lord Jesus in His work of proclaiming the gospel to "every creature."

But it's almost infinitely beyond that; you never get to really know someone until you get down working with him in digging the ditch; "stewardship" rightly understood is getting down in the ditch digging with the Lord Jesus; sharing His heart burden for the world.

Jesus said "Go ye . . ." and that requires that we support those who give their lives to "go."

Your "going" may not be to a far off land or any such romantic place overseas, but it may mean next door; or it may mean, teaching "the everlasting gospel" instead of legalism to children or youth in your local Sabbath School.

If our hearts can be "enlarged" to comprehend the "breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of the love [*agape*] of Christ in the true gospel (cf. Ephesians 3:14-21; Psalm 119:32), the Holy Spirit will take over our ministry and our teaching; and everything we do for the Lord Jesus will bear eternal fruit.

That will be a happy "stewardship," both for now and for eternity.

In the latter part of the 17th century, German preacher August H. Francke founded an orphanage to care for the homeless children of Halle. One day when Francke desperately needed funds to carry on his work, a destitute Christian widow came to his door begging for a ducat—a gold coin. Because of his financial situation, he politely but regretfully told her he couldn't help her.

Disheartened, the woman began to weep. Moved by her tears, Francke asked her to wait while he went to his room to pray. After seeking God's guidance, he felt that the Holy Spirit wanted him to change his mind. So, trusting the Lord to meet his own needs, he gave her the money. Two mornings later, he received a letter of thanks from the widow. She explained that because of his generosity she had asked the Lord to shower the orphanage with gifts. That same day Francke received 12 ducats from a wealthy lady and 2 more from a friend in Sweden. He thought he had been amply rewarded for helping the widow, but he was soon informed that the orphanage was to receive 500 gold pieces from the estate of Prince Lodewyk Van Wurtenburg.

When he heard this, Francke wept in gratitude. In sacrificially providing for that needy widow, he had been enriched, not impoverished.