

# Stewardship

Introduction

What is

Christmas

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Time

Firstfruit

Sacrificial

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## STWARDSHIP

### 1 Introducing Stewardship

Dear members of Tokyo Lutheran Church,

It's no secret that the coronavirus has had a terrible effect on the economy all over the world. I'm hearing stories of American congregations that are having trouble keeping their doors open. People are worried about money, so they give less for the support of the church; or, they'd like to give as much as they used to, but they've lost their jobs and simply can't. America is full of small and rural congregations that were already in financial trouble. This time is a real disaster for them. But it's not easy for city churches either—these cost a lot to maintain, and Americans are more afraid than ever of spending time in cities.

Thanks be to God, the economic situation in Japan is not as disastrous as in the U.S. But we are also affected by it. Donations to Tokyo Lutheran have dropped dramatically. Of course, that's perfectly natural and understandable! We were completely closed down for 15 weeks. Since we've reopened, we still have been very cautious about the possibility of infection. Many of you are staying at home to protect yourselves and others. That is the wise and considerate thing to do. But it does mean that it's just more difficult to make a contribution to the church.

So yes, as a congregation, we are facing some serious difficulties about paying our bills. If you haven't given in awhile, please think about doing so! We really need your help. (You can make an automatic bank transfer—see the information after this article.)

But what I learned from conversations with our church council is that even at the best of times, there is almost no teaching or practice of stewardship in the Japanese church. And I have to admit, as an American missionary in Japan, I was really surprised by this!

\*There's a terrible irony at work here. Pastor Matsumoto shared with us that, a hundred years ago, Japanese Christians were extremely devoted givers. They had a simple principle: if ten Christians each gave ten percent of their salaries (according to the biblical model of tithe), then they'd have enough for an eleventh salary—for a pastor. It took only ten Christians to support one single pastor! Obviously, the more people joined the congregation and gave the same percentage, the more other things they could pay for—a building, musicians, a kindergarten.

What changed? Unfortunately... missionaries. That's the irony! It's great that Christians in other countries wanted to support the Japanese church, especially during the economic hard times after the war. But it seems like missionaries never encouraged the same kind of stewardship that Japanese Christians had already figured out for themselves. Our help may have done more harm in the long run. It's hard to say for sure.

Well, I feel this is a call on my conscience to help. You know as well as I do that Christians make up a tiny minority of the Japanese population. I notice a lot of despair about the prospect of growth for the church among Japanese Christians of all kinds, not just Lutherans and not just members of Tokyo Lutheran. I think Christians here are really discouraged and hope only to survive, but not to grow.

I sure don't have the magic words to change the situation, or a secret plan. But I do know that despair is always a bad strategy. And I know that our Lord loves generosity and hope. So, starting this month, I'm going to share with you what I know about stewardship (next month I'll explain exactly what that word means!). In this way I hope to empower you, as Japanese Christians, to see clearly all the gifts that God has given you, and how you can give these gifts in turn for the upbuilding of His Church and for the care of our neighbors, both spiritually and physically.

For now, let me leave you with this beautiful passage from our Lord Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

"Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Let us as a congregation learn to seek the kingdom of God together! When we do that, all our needs will be provided for.

## 2 What Is Stewardship?

Last month I let you know that I'd be offering a monthly article in Kizuna about stewardship, but I didn't explain exactly what it is! That's my topic for this month.

A "steward" is a servant or manager who doesn't own property himself, but takes care of it for the owner. In Jesus' time, most of the wealth belonged to a very small number of people, but the wealthy people did not directly manage it themselves. They hired a steward to take care of it for them. Obviously, a steward is a person you have to trust. A steward has access to everything that the owner has access to, and if he's dishonest, he can quietly steal or mismanage the property. The owner might not find out until it's too late. On the other, a steward who takes good care of the owner's property is praised and rewarded. Such a steward proves that he is trustworthy and gets promoted. This idea has historical roots in Japan, too—the *jitō* (地頭).

Jesus liked to use the image of a steward in his parables. He used both positive and negative examples of stewards. In this parable from Matthew 25:14–29, we see both good and bad stewards handling the owner's property:

"Jesus said: For the kingdom of heaven will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.'"

A good steward accepts what has been given to him, and uses it to put more good in the world. Whether a good steward receives a lot (five talents) or a little (two talents), he does his best with it and presents the fruit of his efforts to the owner. The owner is pleased and rewards the good stewards. They get charge over even more—but better than that, they have filled the owner with joy. By contrast, a bad steward does nothing with what he's been given. He hides it away (not even in a bank where it can earn interest!) and then dares to criticize the owner. The owner is not impressed at all, and sends the bad steward to punishment.

In ordinary human life, we experience not only good and bad stewards, but also good and bad owners. There are good and bad employees, but also good and bad employers. However, we have to understand Jesus' parable correctly: he's really talking about God (the owner) and us (the stewards). We should have no doubt in this case that the owner is good! There's no question about that. The only question is whether we are good stewards of our good God.

Here's the point: God is the owner of the earth and everything in it—all the natural resources, all the land, all the people, all our lives. But God places His creation in our care. It's amazing! Despite our sinfulness, God places His confidence in our management of His creation. Whether we get five talents, two talents, or only one, God has been generous to us and only asks us to make good use of what we've been given.

God regards all human beings as His stewards, but we Christians know this truth in a powerful and special way. We know that God created each of us. We know that God gave His own life for each of us in Jesus Christ. We know that God has sent His Holy Spirit to dwell us. So the responsibility falls to us, more than to anyone else, to show with our lives, our money and property, and our time that we are God's stewards. Good, faithful, responsible stewards, ready at any time to meet God the Owner of all things and give an account of how we have used our talents.

May God find each of us ready and willing to give an account!

### 3 Stewardship in the Christmas Season

Last month I explained the word “steward”: a servant or manager who takes care of the owner’s property. God is the owner of the earth, but God has asked each of us to be a steward of the earth. Everything we have is a gift from God. The only question is: what will we do with our gifts?

Christmas is a good time to think more carefully about gifts and stewardship!

For more than half a century, Christians in America have struggled with mixed feelings about Christmas. On the one hand, ours is a “Christian country.” More people come from Christian families than from any other religion. Christmas Day is a federal holiday. Even though we have official separation of church and state, you can’t avoid the Christian heritage of the U.S.

On the other hand, it seems like most people view Christmas mainly as an occasion for spending lots of money and eating too much food! Many faithful Christians regret the “commercial” character of Christmas nowadays. Pastors try hard to remind people that Christmas is about our Lord Jesus, not the newest iPhone or video game or luxury item. But most of the time it feels like a losing battle.

It certainly has surprised me what a big deal Christmas is in Japan! (But let me assure you that *nobody* in America eats KFC on Christmas for a special treat.) Of course, most people here don’t know anything about the Jesus part of Christmas. But I’m not sure they’re so different from the average American. If there’s one thing that American and Japanese society have in common, it’s that we’re both very materialistic cultures.

What does that mean? It means that our culture tells us that success in life comes from being rich and buying things. Now anyone who’s ever been poor can tell you it’s no picnic. There’s nothing objectively great about being poor. But there’s also nothing objectively great about being rich. Social scientists have shown again and again that having money only makes us want more money. No matter what income people have, they’re convinced that just a little bit more would make them happier... but if they reach that higher level, suddenly they’re convinced they need just a little more than that! It never stops. Or maybe you’ve had the experience of buying a product that you really wanted. The excitement you feel when you buy it or take it home lasts such a short time. Next thing you know, you’re bored with it—and look for the next thing to buy.

And sadly, this whole process is at its worst at Christmas! Everyone goes into a frenzy of buying. Even gifts lose a lot of their pleasure. We get mad if we don’t get what we want, or get something we don’t want. We solve the problem by creating a gift list, but then the gift is not really a surprise or even a gift—it’s just someone else paying for what we would have bought for ourselves anyway. After awhile Christmas can start to feel like a burden. Only small children, who receive absolutely everything from the people around them, really understand what it’s about.

It’s extra sad because the whole tradition of gift-giving comes from the Christmas story itself. Jesus Christ is our heavenly Father’s gift to the whole world, freely given, to people who didn’t ask for it or deserve it. Jesus brings with him blessing, life, and salvation. In response, the three Magi—foreigners who didn’t know anything about the promises God made to His people Israel—came to the baby Jesus and offered him the best they had to show their thanks. Free gifts, freely given, gratefully received, and

inspiring the best in return. Our Christmases today, full of advertisements and consumerism, are a long way off from this.

So, during this month where the whole world is obsessed with buying more stuff, I have a challenge for all of us Christians:

*Let's examine our lives and see if we can change from being consumers of products to stewards of creation.*

A consumer is never satisfied. A consumer gets bored quick with the last purchase. A consumer is always looking for the next buy. A consumer wants to know, "What's in it for me?" A consumer is suspicious of getting ripped off. A consumer is always comparing herself to other people. A consumer is jealous of other people's stuff. A consumer can never rest content with anything.

That's how most people live. That's not how God wants us to live.

A steward knows that everything is a free gift from God. A steward is satisfied with what God has given. A steward wants to know, "How can I use this to serve God?" A steward is interested in sharing and partnering with other stewards. A steward thanks God for the gifts other people have received without becoming jealous. A steward is excited to make God's gifts grow, not to be better or look better than anyone else, but to show gratitude to God.

If you compare these two lifestyles, which one is free? Which one is joyful? Which would you rather live?

If you realize that your life is stuck in the consumer mode, then it's time to shift to the steward mode. I'll warn you now: it's not easy. Other consumers don't like it when someone stops playing the game. It exposes how shallow the consumer lifestyle is and makes them look bad. They'll try to pull you back into consumerism and away from stewardship.

But if you hear God calling you toward a life of stewardship, then answer in prayer: YES! Ask God for help. God always answers good prayers like this. If we all pray together this way as a church, God will bless us and help us support one another in new lives of stewardship.

That's the gift I'd like to get for Christmas this year!

#### 4 Stewardship in the New Year

At last, 2020 is over! It was a very hard year, for us and for the whole world. Thanks be to God that we have come through it, and now in 2021 we have a fresh start.

Yet, for all the hard things about 2020, I've heard a common theme from many people: the challenges have caused many of us to examine our lives in a new light. Have we had the right values and priorities? Have we made the best use of our time and skills? Have we been wasting our lives on second-best goals? Is it time to make a fresh start?

The new year is always a good time for a fresh start—but it's very hard to make the change stick long-term. It's not enough to make changes on the outside. We need a change to happen on the inside. This can only come as God's gift to us. We can and should pray for such a change. But only God will make it happen and make it stick.

In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul describes two ways of relating to the world, to our possessions, and to God. One is good and the other is bad. He writes:

“The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (II Corinthians 9:6–8).

Paul's first point is our attitude. If we distrust God and are protective of our possessions, then we will find that God is untrustworthy and our possessions are at risk. We will be suspicious, reluctant, and self-protective—and we will get little in return. The world will be as ungenerous to us as we are to the world.

But if we trust God, if we let go of our tight hold on our money and possessions, if we decide to take real risks of trust and hope, then everything will change. Our generosity will be blessed by the generosity of God and of other people. Instead of getting a small return, we will get great gifts in return. These gifts will be more than material—they will be spiritual. Everything will change for us from the inside out.

You can't fake this. You can't pretend to be generous when really you are calculating every coin. As St. Paul says, you just can't give reluctantly or because you've been forced into it. (You shouldn't even be forced into giving by an article written by your pastor in Kizuna!)

God has given us everything freely, because He loves us. Therefore, whatever we give back to God *also* has to be given freely—because we love Him. God is not impressed by big gifts from cold hearts. Remember the story of the old woman who put a tiny coin in the temple offering: Jesus praised her above all the rich Pharisees who put in huge amounts, because she really loved God enough to give Him everything. The Pharisees only gave to look good in front of other people.

The result of cheerful giving, Paul tells us, is the new freedom that comes from living under God's grace. God doesn't just pay us back in exact proportion to how we give to Him. Actually, God gives us *more* than we can ever donate. God gives us every grace, all the grace He has to give. Once we see and feel God's grace in our lives, suddenly we realize we have everything we need. We don't need to compete or consume to be satisfied. In this new freedom, we "abound in every good work." Instead of taking from the world, we give back to it. We become forces for good in the world.

How can we become more like St. Paul describes?

First of all, we have to pray and listen to Scripture. This is always a good principle: before you try to change your life, open yourself up to God. Real change is God's gift. God is always waiting and willing to make the change inside of you. The only problem is the closed door of the heart. Open the door through praying, reading and hearing Scripture, singing and discussing these topics with other Christians whom you trust. Let God give to you first.

Then, listen to what your transformed heart tells you. There is no "right" or "wrong" amount to give. Whatever you give should be given freely and cheerfully. If you are living on a tight budget and really don't have anything more to spare, that's fine. God won't hold it against you. On the other hand, maybe your budget is tight because you spend money on unworthy things that you quickly forget, always racing off to the next purchase. Maybe then God's work in you will be to break you from this cycle of buying. Then you will have something more to give to God and His work. Or maybe you just never knew that giving to God's work was an important thing to do. Now is the time to learn more about how you can support the church and the gospel in Japan and in other places as well.

Pray, listen to God, listen to your heart, and then give—cheerfully and freely!

## 5 Stewardship of Time

So far in my Kizuna essays about stewardship, I've emphasized money and possessions. And that makes sense: if we think about the literal meaning of the word, "stewardship" focuses on responsibly caring for the money and possessions of the owner.

But it's also good to remember that *everything* belongs to God, and every aspect of our lives is a gift from God. So that means more than money and possessions. It also means, among other things, time.

Most of us have experienced how strange and mysterious time is. An hour in a boring situation seems to last ten times as long, while a wonderful week of vacation seems to be over in just a few minutes. Childhood seems far away—or maybe it seems very close. Memories of the distant past can suddenly take over the present. Sometimes it's not the past that occupies us, but the future—to the point that we don't know how to be content in the present, but are always anxious for the next thing to happen.

The Bible calls us to be good stewards of our time. There is always a feeling of urgency in the Bible. That is because God is not far away but close to us—always calling to us, always trying to get our attention, always trying to give us more chances to repent, to believe, and to change our lives, before it is too late. The Bible won't let us forget that death is at the far end of every human life. But we never know how soon death will come.

Jesus told this warning parable against those who put their confidence in their money and possessions while wasting their limited time on earth:

"The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16–21)

The foolish rich man thought he had infinite time to enjoy his many possessions. But as it turned out, he was poor toward God and out of time. We don't want to find ourselves in the same situation!

That's why the apostles encourage Christians to pay attention to how we use our time. For instance, Paul writes in Ephesians 5:15–16, "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time." And James says in 4:14, "Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."

How do we make the best use of our time?

As always, we should begin with prayer and study of Scripture. We need to open our hearts to God so He can show us where we are stuck and unfaithful. God will show us how we have put our trust in the wrong things, so He can teach us to put our trust in Him instead.

Let me give just one example of this. One common feature I notice in both Japanese and American culture is an obsession with busyness. People are so busy all the time! We define ourselves by our work, so we work all the time. Our jobs demand it of us—or maybe we demand it of ourselves. Maybe we are afraid of being alone with our thoughts. Maybe we are afraid of being judged by other people if we're not busy all the time. Maybe we have no idea who we are apart from our work.

It's a very powerful cultural habit, and very difficult to resist. But we Christians have the resources to resist. What are these resources?

First of all, we are not defined by our work! Work is good, and God often blesses it. But it is not our identity. Our identity is: Children of God our Father. Baptized into Christ's name. Temples of the Holy Spirit. This is more important than anything we will ever do, including our work.

Second, we are not saved by keeping busy! We are saved by the grace of Christ alone. He died on the cross for everybody—including sinners, including people who didn't know or believe in him, including even lazy people! In a world that judges people by their busyness and accomplishments, this might seem shocking. But if we feel trapped by our work and the demand of busyness, then it is a huge relief to know that salvation doesn't depend on these things.

Third, we are called to be generous. Work can be a way to show generosity. But it can also be a way to compete against other people and try to get ahead of them. It can make us unwilling to take time for worship or service to people in need, since that means less time for work. But Christian people are free to give of their time to things other than work.

Every minute of our life is a gift from God. Let's open our hearts to God, so He can show us how to give every minute back to Him in faith and love!

## 6 Firstfruits Stewardship

One theme that persists throughout the whole Bible is that of the “firstfruits.” It is a central idea in stewardship, but also in Christian teaching and spirituality.

It goes back to Exodus, the second book of the Bible. The people of Israel have just escaped from Egypt. They are free at last. Camped out at the foot of Mt. Sinai, they listen as Moses teaches them the Law from God.

This Law included the Ten Commandments, but it also included special holidays that the Israelites were commanded to celebrate. One of these was a harvest festival:

“You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor.” (Exodus 23:16)

Most cultures and religions have a harvest festival. What made Israel’s harvest festival special was that God insisted that the people should bring Him the very first things they harvested—their firstfruits.

You can easily see how this requirement of the firstfruits demands faith. The Israelites don’t get to wait until the whole harvest is in, calculate the amount they grew, and then give to God whatever they felt they could do without. No, instead, the Israelites brought to God they very first things they grew—without knowing how much would come after. They had to trust in God to take care of them. They had to give their first and possibly their best to God, no matter what the cost.

The theme of firstfruits continues throughout the Old Testament, sometimes as a criticism of the people of Israel when they failed to bring God the firstfruits.

What’s really interesting, though, is how the New Testament writers took this firstfruits idea and applied it to Christian spiritual life. Let’s look at a few examples from St. Paul.

He writes in II Thessalonians 2:13: “But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.”

*We are God’s firstfruits!* Believers are the first people “harvested” by God for salvation. There is a bigger harvest waiting—but those of us who are believers now are God’s firstfruits.

St. Paul also uses this image to describe Jesus. In I Corinthians 15:20 he writes: “Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

What he means is that Jesus is the first person to rise from the dead. Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrection. There are more resurrections to come—when, on the Last Day, God raises all of us up to everlasting life. The reason we can trust this promise is because Jesus has already been raised as the firstfruits.

St. Paul also talks about our experience of the Holy Spirit this way. In Romans 8:23 he says, “We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Our spiritual life is not yet perfect or total. We are still part of this struggling, sinful world. And yet, we really do have the Holy Spirit at work in us—the firstfruits of the Spirit. Our faith right now is the first harvest of the Spirit’s work in us.

In light of this, it makes sense that St. Paul uses the same concept to talk about stewardship and giving. Paul was collecting money from his various churches around the Mediterranean Sea to donate to the very poor people living in Israel. So he writes to the church in Corinth (Greece): “On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper” (I Corinthians 16:2).

“The first day of the week” reflects how people were paid then. For us today, every two weeks or every month would probably make more sense. “The first day of the week,” however, is also the day that Jesus was raised from the dead. (Technically, Sunday is the first day of the week in the Western calendar, although many people assume it is Monday because that is the first working day!) So our saving from our income and giving it to people in need should always be connected to our worship of Jesus, the firstfruits from the dead, our savior and Lord.

Notice also that Paul says “as he may prosper.” Paul is not asking for a “flat tax” in which everyone pays the exact same amount. Instead, he asks us to give according to how much God has given us. If our salary is small, then it’s fine for our giving to be small. If our salary is huge, then it’s fitting for our giving to be huge.

But big or small, the point is that we think of God *first*. We give God our firstfruits, instead of spending first on ourselves and then, when we’ve spent all we want, seeing what is left over for God. That is putting God last in our lives. But we are called to put God first.

It’s a wonderful thing to trust in God. But trust isn’t just something we say in our hearts or with our lips. It’s also how we live. If we trust in God, we can give generously, at the beginning instead of at the end. God blesses generous firstfruits giving. After all, God chose us to be His firstfruits! If He put us first, then we should also put Him first.

## 7 Sacrificial Stewardship

In this month of April, Lent comes to an end with the drama of Holy Week, and we celebrate Easter, the joyous holiday of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

In the Bible, you never hear about Jesus' resurrection without his death on the cross, and you never hear about his death on the cross without his resurrection. From the very beginning of the church, these two facts have always gone together. Jesus is the one who was killed; Jesus is the one who rose from the dead. Without the resurrection, there is no hope; but without the cross, there is no sacrifice.

Sacrifice is a central theme of the Bible. Already in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, Abraham offers sacrifices to God. Once God calls the people of Israel to obey the law, offering sacrifices is part of what they are commanded to do. The sacrifices continued all the way until the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed (in AD 70, about forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection).

The images and practice of sacrifice helped the earliest disciples of Jesus make sense of his death. At first, they thought he was going to be a king like David, sit on a throne, and rule everybody on earth. Even though Jesus told them again and again that he would die in Jerusalem, they didn't believe him. It was only after Jesus rose from the dead and showed himself to them that the disciples began to wrestle with the tough question: why did Jesus have to die?

As they looked back at the people of Israel's whole history with God, they saw a pattern emerge. Sacrifice was always the way God and people related to each other. The first sacrifice was God's: He created a world that was not Himself, even though the world sinned and turned away from Him. God sacrificed His honor to forgive sinners. God sacrificed His glory by making the insignificant people of Israel to be His chosen people.

In turn, God taught His people to make sacrifices to Him. They were asked to sacrifice to God the firstfruits of their harvest. They were asked to sacrifice to God ten percent of everything they earned or grew or harvested over the year. They were asked to sacrifice their pride, their sins, and their unbelief. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). And of course, they made sacrifices of animals in the Jerusalem temple. (Back in those days, the only way to eat meat was to have it slaughtered at a religious temple. People then understood that they were taking the life of an animal and could only do so rightly under God's supervision.)

One of the animals that the Israelites offered for sacrifice was the lamb. At the first Passover, when the Israelites were still slaves in Egypt, the blood of the lamb protected them from the angel of death. Jesus was crucified at the same time as the sacrifice of lambs at the temple on the Israelite holiday of Passover. Afterwards, the apostles realized that Jesus was a sacrifice in the same manner as a Passover lamb: his blood protects us from the angel of death. His sacrifice brings us safely to the promised land of everlasting life.

But it's clear from this how costly our salvation is: it cost Jesus his life. He sacrificed his life for ours. The heavenly Father blessed Jesus' sacrifice by giving him new life.

Most of the time, our stewardship should be a proper fit for our income and time. God does not expect us to give *everything*, so that we are left homeless and starving. God blesses us with food, clothing, shelter, and pleasures like music and books and movies and travel, because He desires all His creatures to have joyful lives. By asking us to give back to Him, God is actually just setting us free from overdependence on these things. By giving a portion of our goods to God, we are able to enjoy the things we keep even more!

But this is not quite the complete picture. It's a good for giving generously to become an ordinary part of life. But it can become *so* ordinary that we no longer notice it or feel it. In fact, it can start to feel like a payment. "I gave God X percent of my income; I enjoy what I have left; now God will bless me." This is not really a gift in faith. It has become another habit, something we can do without thinking or believing at all.

So sometimes we need to consider sacrificial giving. This is risky giving, more than ordinary giving. It's giving more than is comfortable. It's giving to something so important that our ordinary needs fall to a lower level of value. It's realizing that we are too comfortable with God, that we take God for granted, and that we need to do something big—make a sacrifice—to remind ourselves that everything we have comes from God. He doesn't demand this of us. We give this freely, cheerfully, because we feel the need to respond to God's sacrificial generosity with sacrificial generosity of our own.

We never give sacrificially *in order to* win God's love for us. God already loves us! God has already given us everything we need, and more besides. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

Sacrificial giving is always a *response* to God's love. It's a way to share God's love with more people. Sacrificial giving is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.