

Doctrinal Brief: Sacrificial Giving

John D. Schuetze

"Christian giving involves sacrifice and pain." "Give until it hurts." "To really give you have to give up something of value." These statements are sometimes used when speaking about Christian stewardship. They are usually preceded or followed by a reference to "sacrificial giving." But what is sacrificial giving? And does it have a biblical basis?

As the above statements indicate, some would see sacrificial giving as something that brings pain. You have to give up that widescreen TV or that fancy house or luxury car so that you can give more to the Lord. Unless there is some pain in giving, small as that pain may be for a society with an excess of wealth, we are not really practicing Christian stewardship in the biblical sense.

But do these statements provide an accurate picture of Christian stewardship, much less the proper motivation for giving? First of all, we have to remember that for the Christian in us (new man) there is no pain in giving. "He delights in the law of the Lord" (Psalm 1:2), including that law which guides our Christian giving. He rejoices with those who say, "Let us go up to the house of the Lord (Psalm 122:1)—and give a generous offering to our God." The only one who winces when we give a gift to the Lord is our sinful nature. He is not happy even when we give our scraps and plate scrapings. And he screams in protest when we use our first fruits to prepare God a generous meal. He uses noble sounding arguments similar to those of Judas Iscariot, "Couldn't this money have been given to the poor?" If when speaking about the "pain" of Christian giving we are preaching law to the sinful nature, then we are right on track. We need to make the sinful nature suffer and stuff him down anytime he raises his sinful voice in protest.

Yet many times it appears that we are not pushing down the sinful nature but rather appealing to the new man when we talk about the "pain" of sacrificial giving. The new man is not motivated by our pain, only by the pain of that one who became poor to make us rich. The only type of sacrificial giving our new man makes is offering his body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. He gives his entire being to the Lord and then considers how he can use his life, abilities, possessions, body, and time to glorify that one who made the supreme sacrifice. Such a sacrifice brings pleasure not pain to the new man.

A second thing the "pain" of sacrificial giving confuses is the management of all of our blessings. It easily pits stewardship in the narrow sense (what I give to God to support his work) with stewardship in the broad sense (how I manage all of my blessings to meet the responsibilities God places before me). When I hear someone give me the impression that I need to give until it hurts, I am left wondering what should hurt. Should I hurt my family to give to the Lord? Should I give less to the poor? Should I sell my newer car and get an older one and feel the "hurt" of added repair bills or a bumpy road? Rather we should be talking about how we manage all of God's blessings faithfully. We are giving glory to God and honoring him with our wealth when we provide for the needs of our family. It is a responsibility God places before us (1 Timothy 5:8). The same is true when we give to the poor and needy (Ephesians 4:28), or pay our taxes (Romans 13:6,7). The issue here is not that we need to "hurt" one area so that we can help another area. The issue is our management in all areas. Does our management as a whole give glory to God? Does the amount we spend on family or personal needs and desires reflect a selfish heart or a heart that is seeking to glorify God? Do we give less to support God's work because we are giving more to support our "work." The answer is not making our "work" suffer. It is recognizing that our "work" is nothing if it is not God's "work" (Psalm 127:1). It is being faithful in our management of all of God's blessings.

So we want to be careful that we do not create a false division when it comes to stewardship. For example, we may feel that what we give to the Lord to support his work is his—that such giving involves the spiritual realm. But when we pay the light bill, buy groceries, or send money to help hurricane victims, then we are dealing with secular matters and are free to do as we please. Yet the truth is that all areas of life are spiritual. All is done to the glory of God. All is given to the Lord. We need to evaluate how we spend all of our money, time, and abilities, recognizing that God asks us to give his work a priority in our overall management of things.

When speaking about the "pain" of sacrificial giving, some will refer to the account of the widow's mite. Didn't she exercise true sacrificial giving? After all, she gave everything she had. Yet as we look at the principles of faith and giving, we see that the reason why Jesus praises her is not because she gave all she had (Lk 21:4), but because she put all her trust in God. The wealthy people who gave large gifts were still relying on their large leftovers to support them. But this woman knew that God would get her through the next day, and the next week, and the next month. Anytime we give a gift to the Lord, trusting that he will provide for our needs, we are following the model of the widow's mite. True sacrificial giving is not measured in terms of pain but trust. Such trust frees us from the tyranny of materialism and frees us for a joyful life of giving to God. Such trust leads us to give generously of our first fruits, even when we can't see how God will provide for all of our needs. What we give to God through his church is a reflection of the trust we place in God, a reflection of that greater offering God asks us to give—ourselves and all that we have. In Christ God asks us to give all to him (Romans 12:1) and do all to his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31).

When presenting a scriptural view of Christian stewardship, let us be sure we are crisp and clear in applying law and gospel. This means that if we use the term "sacrificial giving" we need to define it carefully. The only sacrifice that God asks of us is that of ourselves. The only pain that comes from Christian giving is the pain felt by the sinful nature.