

## Distributing God's Money

Romans 12:13b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Loved ones, will you turn to Romans 12:13. It reads "Contribute to the needs of the saints." Let's imagine that you and I lived about 1000 A.D. in America; I'm not as clear what 1000 A.D. was like in America as I am about Ireland, but it was probably fairly primitive. And let's imagine you had a cow and I had hens and I wanted some milk for my corn flakes -- well, it was easy, it was no big problem. I went to you and said "Would you like some eggs for your breakfast, and could you give me some milk for my corn flakes from your cow?" You said "sure" and it worked well. The only question was, how many eggs we should barter for how much milk? But this system worked until I needed some corn for my corn flakes and my neighbor who grew corn didn't want any eggs -- in fact he hated eggs! Then I had to start looking around to find somebody who had something that my neighbor wanted and somebody who also wanted my eggs so the little bartering system became just a little more complicated. It became an intolerable burden for the guy who provided ivory for piano keys; because when someone had to start learning music, this poor guy had to trundle his elephant right down through the rush hour traffic and exchange some ivory tusks for some milk! So the whole system began to be very, very clumsy.

Then somebody obviously decided "Let's value all things -- ivory tusks and milk and corn and eggs because they're easily carried." Then somebody said presumably, "Well, the eggs break easily, let's value everything in these little round stones, and let's put an impression of our leader's head on them." So we began to use those little round stones instead of the things themselves. And then somebody else thought, "Let's get a little piece of green paper and let's put an impression of our leader's head on them. So here; we put an impression of Washington's head and this thing will stand for those things -- that will stand for so many eggs and that will stand for so much corn or for so much ivory."

Why I went through this is that it's vital for you and me to remember that these green pieces of paper actually are pretty worthless in themselves; you can't cover yourself with them and you can't eat them. All they do is stand for what we want them to stand for. They stand for things like eggs and corn and milk. They stand for the things in this earth that keep us alive, but these things themselves don't keep us alive, it's the things that they stand for that keep us alive.

It's vital for us to realize that the guy that says he owns the milk or the cows and the guy that says he owns the corn or the ivory, doesn't actually own it. The things in this earth -- the rocks and the woods, the rivers and the mountains, were not made by any of us; they're not made by any human being so they're actually not owned by any human being. At best, any human being here who says he owns something has a kind of rental agreement on it, that's all he has. Even those who have held the property down through generations eventually have to admit that their claim to ownership ends when they die. And indeed, any of us who want to argue this point are always proven wrong after roughly 70 or 80 years. At that moment the thing may not pass out of our ownership, but we pass out of the position where we can own anything.

So it's pretty important for us all to see that when we talk of ownership as human beings, we're talking a kind of fairytale language. There is really only one who owns all of us. And you see it in Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." So the earth is the Lord's, and

everything that is filled into the earth, "The world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the rivers." There's only one that owns anything in this universe, and that's the one who made it. You or I can talk as if we own it, but at best, all we have is a kind of stewardship of it while we're alive. We have a kind of a rental agreement on it while we're here on earth; but he owns it.

And he of course has said to us, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about what you wear, or what you're going to drink or what you're going to eat because the Gentiles seek all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you have need of them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." (Matthew 6:32-34)

Now about 1800 B.C. there was a man called Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, and therefore he became the father of all who really trusted in God and believed that God was the maker and owner of the whole universe. That man, in the light of that fact, made an arrangement with God about his finances. You'll see what that arrangement was if you turn to Genesis 28:20; "Then Jacob made a vow saying, if God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my Father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that Thou givest me, I will give the tenth to Thee." So that's what Jacob said.

"Dear God, you own this whole world, and if you'll give me enough to eat, and enough to clothe me, I'll give a tenth of what you give me back to you." So that's what it was; wasn't a big legal deal at all; it wasn't some Church steward finance committee coming to your door and saying, "I believe your salary is this, therefore you ought to give this" -- it wasn't that. It wasn't a whole legal thing at all; it was a dear person like ourselves realizing that God owns the whole place anyway, and then saying to him, "Lord, if you give me what I need here to express my faith that you own it all -- to keep that before my eyes every day in life I'll give you a tenth of it."

In Anglo-Saxon, which was old English which became our English language, there is a word "teogoba" which means "tenth". Through the consonantal and vowel changes that take place, old English becomes middle English and then modern English and the word became "tithe." So "tithe" is just an old English word for "tenth." So the "tithe" became the way the Israelites, who were Jacob's descendants, expressed their faith in God and their trust in him and expressed to him their belief that he owned and had created the whole world. The "tithe" was an expression, "Lord, we know you own it all anyway. We're giving you a tenth to show you that we're not trying to grind out of this a salary for ourselves, we believe it all comes from you and this is our expression of that faith."

And actually because the death of their old nature in Jesus from before the foundation of the world in Calvary had not been revealed to them, they still found themselves trying to make a law of this kind of thing and they actually did make a law. God allowed them to do it, because he wanted them to see, "This is the normal attitude my children have to me. The normal attitude of my children to me is, that I own it all anyway so they're giving me a tenth to affirm that again to me and to themselves and to their neighbors that I do own it." And so, it did become a law loved ones, and yet you see even in this law, God was always trying to draw them back from making it a legal thing. He was always trying to bring home to them, "The reason you do this is because your love and gratitude to me is real." And you'll find that in Leviticus 27:30, "All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the trees, is the Lord's; it is holy to the Lord." That's it -- no argument about it: "This person owns it all anyway, so a tenth of it from now on for us is the Lord's, a tenth of it we give to him."

God is so good because he made an arrangement that in certain types of situations, such as a recession, they would be able to do with a little less, and you see that in the next verse, "If a man wishes to redeem any of his tithe" -- in other words, if you were in a hard year and you felt, "I really need that tenth Lord, I am under tight circumstances", "he shall add a fifth to it." You could take a fifth of your tithe and give it to God on the understanding that this tithe could be used by you temporarily, but would eventually go back to God because it was his anyway since he owned everything in the first place. So God was always trying to emphasize, "I'm not demanding this from you; this is something that you all have felt is a help to your own faith and it helps you to keep things right in your own mind and in your own life."

Loved ones, that was the whole meaning of all the Old Testament laws; I don't know if you realize it. But that was the meaning of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was not a big argument over the seventh day as opposed to the first day. That's made very plain by Jesus' own comment, in connection with working on the Sabbath. He said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27) The whole purpose of setting aside a seventh day, was that you were setting aside a seventh of your time that God had given you in your life and you were setting aside a seventh to him and saying "Lord, that stands for all my time which belongs to you anyway." And that was the purpose of the Old Testament laws. It wasn't -- "We'll give a seventh to you and then we can whoop it up on the other six days, whatever way we like." It was, "Lord, we set aside a seventh, because the whole thing belongs to you. You're here every moment of the day. All the bright things and the best things in life are yours and we want to give you a seventh of our time to signify that all our time is yours." It was the same with the tenth loved ones. It wasn't, "We'll give you a tenth and then we're going to do what we want with the 9/10ths." It was, "Lord, we give you a tenth to express to you that the whole thing is yours anyway."

There's a funny story about Lyndon Baines Johnson, the President. A military aide, a young man, was bringing the President out to where he was to get into his helicopter to go to the next stop. The young man said to him, "Mr. President, which is your helicopter?" (There were all kinds of helicopters out in the field.) The President said, "Son, they're all my helicopters." He was implying that as President of the United States, he owned them all anyway. But that's true with God, you see -- he owns it all anyway. He owns this body -- he's lent it to me for a while and he's lent one to you; but he owns it all anyway, it is all his. The money that you and I got last month for our jobs -- he's kind to us, he allows us to believe in cause and effect: we worked, therefore we got. When we get to Heaven, we'll probably find there was no cause and effect; he was just being kind to us, giving us the feeling that we're doing something and really, it's just him giving it. And when you think of it, life has been like that, hasn't it? Think of the numbers of times we've been badly off when we've had good jobs and think of the number of times we've been well off even if there has been no job. It's as if God has his way of getting over to us, "Look, you're not really bringing about anything here, you're just growing in my likeness; and I'm the one that's giving this to you."

So loved ones, always one tenth has that meaning in it. It has the meaning that it was expressing to God that "It's all yours, it's not mine." And actually in the Old Testament even, there was a big generosity about it. It wasn't just the "tenth" -- God was always bringing home to the Israelites in all kinds of ways, "Be generous; I've given you everything, I've given you these massive mountains, these great rivers, these great oceans, I've given it all to you. You go down into the ocean and you find colors that people have never seen for centuries. I'm extravagant in my generosity to you, now I want you to be the same to me."

So he would introduce not just the tenth, but even introduced other generous practices in the way they ploughed the field for instance. You'll find it in Leviticus 19:9, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest; and you shall not strip your vineyard bare; neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor, and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God." It has a good feel to it, hasn't it? It's absolutely opposite to getting "the pound of flesh" or grinding the last ounce out of everybody; it's much more an attitude, "No, no, listen, don't take your reaper close to the border. Leave that so that the poor and the people who are just visiting have something to gather. Do that because I've given it all to you anyway. I'll give you enough for them as well as yourselves."

That's the attitude that comes over in the Old Testament: "Set forth a tenth to declare to yourself and everybody else that I own it all anyway and then in the way you conduct your business, be generous, don't be small, don't be beggarly, don't be people who declare, 'Boy! I'm really good how I get on with the little that my miserly, heavenly Father gives me.' Don't be like that. In your attitude to others and the way you conduct your business, be generous and magnanimous and as you are, so I will be to you."

So that's the attitude behind this business of giving money. So how should you and I then, as people who know Jesus' Spirit is in us, deal with this business of giving money in church on Sundays, or giving gifts or giving financial help? There are several principles and 1 Corinthians 4:2 is one of them: "Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy." That's the first thing: see that everything that you and I have is God's anyway. All we are is stewards who are taking care of the distribution of that. That's why we talk about distributing God's money; none of us really have any money; we have stuff that he has lent us that stands for the other things in the world that he has given us freely. So first of all we're stewards of his -- that means, even to you and to me -- we're stewards to ourselves, we're objects of God's charity.

So when you set out your money you have to see, "Oh yes, and there's me, and I need rent. And I need this much for the car, okay." But you deal with it as stewards. You don't deal with it as gods who distribute the surplus that you don't need -- there's a difference. You don't take the salary and say, "Good, I am god of that salary, I'll use first of all what I need of it, and any leftover, I'll give to other people." That's treating you as a god. No, treat yourself as a steward of God's money and say, "Lord, this guy happens to be called Ernest O'Neill and he needs so much there for rent, needs so much there for gas, needs so much there..." And deal with it like that. Deal with it as stewards; see yourself as part of the people that you have to give this money to. You're just the same as everybody else who has to have his share of this money. That's the first principle that it seems God teaches.

Then there's another one, loved ones, in Matthew 5:20, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Some people like to say, "Oh well, our righteousness exceeds that because it's Jesus' righteousness." But he doesn't say that. He says, "Not unless my righteousness" -- I'm not talking about mine or imputed righteousness or anything like that; I'm saying, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you'll never enter the kingdom of Heaven. They give a tenth plus all kinds of other things like special offerings and not reaping the corners of their fields, all kinds of other gifts to widows and orphans." So, our giving needs to express that kind of generosity, do you see that? It needs to be a tenth plus all kinds of other gifts. We need to express the

magnanimous generosity of our Father and our absolute confidence that he is providing for us -- not us on our own, trying to shake enough trees in this miserable workaday world to get enough apples to keep us and our children alive; not that, loved ones. It's a matter of the heart; it's not a matter of one tenth, or somebody getting money out of us. What we're talking about today is get rid of the stuff! Even if you put it down the drain, get rid of it.

I'm not talking about the object of it, but talking about the importance of expressing in our day-to-day lives our absolute confidence and faith that God our creator will give us not only enough for our own needs, but enough to be generous to those whom he brings across our path. That's it. And we need to make arrangements accordingly. We need to make our arrangements and that comes out of 2 Corinthians 9:7. "Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." So we should each think this through ourselves. We shouldn't feel a compulsion because I say it, or because anybody says it. We shouldn't feel all this is a legal matter because if it's a legal matter for you loved ones, then there's little love in it. But it seems to me you can see this as a way of building up your own faith and confidence in the Father.

Faith is not, "Lord, I believe you're there, I believe you're there, I believe you provide everything." But then when it comes to the moment when we're in trouble, we just get down into it and try to sort it out ourselves -- that's not fair. It's not fair to say, "Father, I believe you'll give me all that I need" and then some person comes and needs help and we have our little sums done so that we know where every penny goes and we have no intention of deviating. We don't make provision for the Spirit; we make provision for the flesh. We assume the Lord isn't going to come down with anything extra here even though I believe he's a generous God, so we say "I can't help you."

Faith is expressed in the way we run our practical affairs. So make arrangements; arrange your life so that you can pay the tenth and then give others more, beyond that -- arrange that in your life. Don't get yourself into the spot where you suddenly try to turn it on now and you go bankrupt. Don't do that. And don't leave your loans unpaid; you have to pay your debts. But you know what I mean. You can arrange the housing situation and the automobile situation over the next three or four months. You can begin to make adjustments there so that on your present salary you are able to express this faith to the Father. That's it. Don't get yourself into an emergency situation today, but make arrangements so that you can do that. And then you see; God loves a cheerful giver, not a bargain hunter -- not a bargain hunter. That's heresy loved ones, that other stuff. "Give more and God will give you more." That's not right.

The Father knows the difference between a philanthropist and a bargain hunter. God is not stupid; we need to see that; God is not stupid. He knows when a person is giving him money out of an expression of their faith and their love for him, and when that person is giving the money because they have some idea that seed faith will bring money back to them -- that's not right. That's heresy. God loves the gifts of loving faithful hearts that look for nothing in return but simply trust him to continue true to his nature. So don't bargain with God; give out of a willing and a loving heart, and give faithfully.

Then the last principle is in 1 Corinthians 16:2. "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come." God has been good to us, and I've never asked you for money and I will never ask you for money. I'll starve and die before I ever do that. But over twelve years, we've never had a financial appeal. Over 12 years, we've never had any special collections because of the generosity and the

kindness of your hearts. And so I am without words -- I rehearsed this so that I would say it, because otherwise, I would have difficulty finding words. But I would be without words to express to you my love and my gratitude for your generosity that has enabled this ministry to continue through from the early days. Two hundred dollars you remember, we had from our first offering. I think I was still teaching school at that time. You have never failed; the money has always been more than I thought I could ever have hoped for. Your generosity has made the thing possible. I can only express my gratitude to you. I think that's the right thing to do.

I think each of us should, as Jesus guides us -- now, don't come under legalism on this, but as Jesus guides us I think we should set aside a tenth and we should give it to the local body where your heart and life are, whose elders we trust and whose ministry our heart is in. And then, over and above that, we should be willing to help our neighbors and give generously to others.

Now, any questions?

[Question from audience]

What do you do if you are supporting a ministry, and the head of the ministry is not using the money wisely, do you have a responsibility to go and talk to them?

Answer: I think you do. But I think most of all; you have a responsibility not to be irresponsible with God's money. Your money is something that God has given you and is an expression of your own life and your own interest and your own aims in life. I think first of all, go to the person, and then, if they will not make a change, then simply stop giving money to that.

[Question from audience]

What would be your guideline in regard to giving to ministries other than your own Church?

Answer: Do you all know I hate this subject! I started the businesses, but I hate money -- and I deal with it because I have to deal with it. It seems to me that you need to pray and seek God's guidance as to what other things you're to be interested in besides the ministries of your own body. It seems to me there is great safety in this business of emphasizing the local body to which you belong because you know the people; you know who I am, you know am I married, am I faithful to my wife, what is my day to day life like; you know the elders, you know what they're doing, you see the things we're doing with the money, and it seems to me there's great safety in that. Once you go outside that local ministry which you know personally, then it seems to me you have to seek God's guidance very carefully to see what other things you should be involved in and you have to be very sure that he does want you involved in other ministries, and then be prepared to commit your heart and your intellectual interest to them, so that you know them well enough to have a real faith in where your money is going.

I think that's vital. I think this throwing the money around in all directions is often used by Satan to mislead loved ones. So I would say that I think there's no place, loved ones, for stuffing the check quickly into the envelope to satisfy someone or get them off your back or deal with a guilty conscience. There's no place for that. It seems to me, it should be as careful a study as a responsible investor would make in the stocks and shares; it should be something that takes not just our money, but our heart and our mind interest.

[Question from Audience]

What should we do when religious organizations take up collections and use the money in connection with politicians or backing certain politicians and that whole thing?

Answer:

Martin Luther was so good, he said, "There's the power of the sword, and there's the power of the Spirit." And you remember in his reaction against the Catholic Church's tendency to unite the civil and religious powers together, he said, "No, they're separate -- there's the power of the sword and the power of the spirit." And he said, "The power of the sword is government, politicians, priests; it keeps the world from chaos and expresses God's preserving grace, while the power of the Spirit through his body expresses his redeeming grace and saves people, and brings them into eternal life" and I think those two need to be kept separate. We get into grave difficulties when we begin to try to move blocks of votes. It seems to me our calling is to individual hearts and to educate and edify those individual hearts so that they will vote accordingly and that's how the democratic principle works. It works on the free willed votes of people who have thought about what they're going to do and then do it. But it doesn't work on the special interest principle, or the block vote principle. That very principle will have a backlash against us later on, it seems to me.

Remember, I'm a little man; I know nothing. We have to go to Jesus with these things. So I say what I think as God shows me; but finally, you have to go to Jesus.

[Question from Audience]

What about using the tithe that you would normally give in the offering here for instance, to help other people in the body who are in Sudan or in Switzerland?

Answer: I can answer that very plainly and certainly, because God dealt with me personally on it. So that you know -- a lot of the financial decisions are mine; they are mine and the elders', but I chair the elders so a lot of the decisions are mine. I've tried always to use your money and to increase it. I always felt that is the whole vision of self-sustaining ministries. I always felt that you're giving that precious money so I should be faithful and increase it, and multiply it a hundredfold so that we have more and more ministries abroad and that's why the businesses are operating. And I thought shouldn't I be able, of all people -- I mean, I'm determining where a lot of the money is going anyway, so why can't I just take my own tithe and help a specific person -- and God said to me, "You do that, and you're controlling that tithe." And I said to him, "But Lord, I control many of the tithes." He said, "When you control them in that light, I give you wisdom and grace. You're then not Ernest O'Neill an individual, you're the pastor of the Body and I give you grace and wisdom: I show you where to give the money, but you're not to direct your own tithe, you're to lay it at the feet of me and of my people and let them determine what's to be done." So I'm pretty clear in my own life. I'm not laying that on everybody, but I'm pretty clear in my own life. He showed me that I was controlling my giving instead of getting rid of it.

[Question from Audience]

Do we distribute to the needs of suffering Christians in communist countries?

Answer: I think the very first time we got into trouble I was trying to give the money away fast to keep our bank accounts empty. And I remember the special prayer meeting where we gave the money to

somebody who was buying chickens for farmers in China to raise chickens or something -- that's how wild and anxious we were to get rid of the money. And God just rebuked us on that. I think we gave something like \$200 -- it was in the early months when we started many years ago. He said, "Now, wait a minute, don't try to give to everything and don't try to just get rid of the money, be guided by me." And so brother, God guided us into this whole vision of getting ten thousand of us abroad in self-sustaining ministries and the bulk of our money goes to that. But yes, some of our money goes to what you've said, and some of us actually have helped Brother Andrew in the ministry to communist countries. So yes, we do and probably we'd given to most ministries at one time or other but we try to be guided by God as to where he wants us to put the money.

We've always felt not only put your money where your mouth is, but put your lives where you're putting your money. And we believe we should not be a Body that simply pays other people to go and do missionary work, but we should use our money to get ourselves abroad, so that we put our lives and our money together, and we believe that God will bless that.

Now, shall we pray?

Dear Father, we thank you for each other. We thank you for the generosity that you have brought about in our family here and we know that is meant to spill over into our everyday lives. So Lord we would be generous. We would not live as beggars, but as children of a king. So Father, we give ourselves to generosity and responsibility for our own debts and our own obligations. But we commit ourselves to generosity in our ordinary everyday lives. And then our Father, in regard to your ministry here, we would ask you to confirm in us what we ourselves should do and Lord, I would ask you to guide each of my brothers and sisters here. You alone know where we should go. Father, if you bring us \$10 each Sunday, we'll do with \$10; if you bring us \$50, we'll do with that; if you bring us \$6000, we'll do with that. Lord, guide my brothers and sisters, so that we as a Body engage in the ministries that you want us to engage in and live the way you want us to live.

Father, we thank you that it's all yours anyway, and we thank you for lending it to us for this short time. Now the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. Amen.