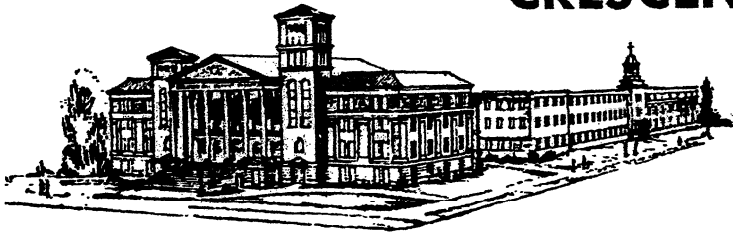


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"CUTTING OFF THE BUTTONS"



Sunday Morning, October 22, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Several years ago we received a letter announcing a clothing drive for underprivileged people. It gave all the information concerning purpose, time, and place, and ended with this sentence: "And please, in the clothing you send, don't cut off the buttons!" Those last words made a deep impression on me, and serve as the title of this morning's sermon.

Why do you suppose the last sentence was included in that letter? I imagine the answer grows out of the agency's long experience in this field. They had learned the giving habits of certain people. It was not at all uncommon for someone to prepare a threadbare, out-of-style garment, and then just before sending it away, to strip off the one thing that might still be useful - the buttons. Thus, they gave what was no longer wanted or needed, and retained for themselves the only part that had value. This was a gesture toward charity, to be sure; however, it involved little generosity. There was no sacrifice here, only the discarding of "the leftovers." As such, it is a telling commentary on certain giving habits.

A more theoretical answer to the question is this: they included that sentence because of the inescapable unity of attitude and act. Now people often try to separate the two, but it cannot be done. When you talk about one you automatically imply the other. Thus, there was no way to ask for a gift without getting into the motivation that was behind it. To request clothing involved the matter of "cutting off the buttons," and so it is with the whole subject of giving. To deal with it adequately you cannot confine yourself to the outward act; you must examine the whole process from beginning to end. This might be called "the approach of totality," and as we move into another financial campaign, I want us to see the matter of stewardship in this light.

As I study the teachings of Jesus, this "approach of totality" is in perfect accord with His words. He never limited His judgment to outward appearances or isolated acts. This was true in all realms, certainly in the realm of giving. In fact, His views were so comprehensive that they were revolutionary. Many times He contradicted the obvious and made assertions that were startling to His followers. A perfect example of this is the episode in the Gospels about what is known as "the widow's mite" (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4).

Let me try to reconstruct the situation. Jesus was seated across the way from the Temple in Jerusalem. In one of the outer porticoes, right along the side of the street, were huge receptacles into which the Temple offerings were placed. There were thirteen of them, one for each item of the Temple budget, and all day long people made their various contributions to the different causes. There must have been several magnanimous and impressive offerings made that day. Then, almost imperceptibly, a peasant woman dressed in the crepe of widowhood stepped up and

dropped in two copper coins. As she disappeared in the crowd, Jesus turned to His disciples and said: "That woman is the biggest giver of them all. When every factor is considered, her gift stands out above all the rest."

I said earlier that His views were revolutionary, and this is an illustration of what I meant. His judgment violates the very criterion men had always used - that of quantitative amount. Her coins were called "leptons," the very smallest in Jewish currency. Their buying power was about two cents apiece. If this constituted "greatness," then Jesus could not have been referring to quantity alone. Either He was an eccentric Humorist, or He looked at giving from an entirely different perspective than men do.

The latter alternative is exactly the case. Jesus did look on giving with a far different insight. He penetrated beneath the surface of outward amount, and considered factors that we either ignore or deem unimportant. There are at least two such hidden criteria in the widow's "greatest" gift. Let us look at these.

The first is the relation of the gift to what she had to give. Jesus looked more at what was left than at what was given. He noted the percentage more than the size. He saw the part, not in isolation, but in relation to the whole. And this is what distinguished the gift of the widow. Others had given far more in amount, but it was "out of their abundance." To use the words of the title, it was "cut the buttons" giving. They had first met their personal desires and then given out of the surplus. But this little woman had given "out of her need." Jesus' words are "she gave everything that she had, even all of her living." Now a peasant made only "two coppers," and never got ahead. They literally lived "from day to day and from meal to meal." Thus, she gave her day's pay, which was all she had and tomorrow's living. Quite obviously, this was real sacrifice. She was doing without something she really wanted and needed in order to contribute to the Temple. This was real denial of self, a costly offering out of the very fabric of life.

This is the first lesson to be learned from Christ's "approach of totality." We are responsible for all that we have. One cannot "pay off" God with a gigantically sized gift. The issue is one of proportion rather than amount. "To whom much is given, much is required." We must never forget that the degree of sacrifice overshadows the degree of size. The gift that counts is the gift that costs.

This is a decided reversal of generally accepted standards. We are sometimes prone to interpret tithing as a means to partial stewardship. I have heard men say: "As long as I give my tithe, I can then do as I please with the other nine tenths." This is not true! The practice of tithing is a wonderful spiritual discipline, but it is not an excuse for waste. All we have is a trust from God, and we are just as accountable for the nine tenths as the one tenth. This also undermines the old idea of "doing one's part." My first pastorate included a wide range of economic abilities. There were some well-to-do land owners in the congregation, and many simple tenants. Yet there was a great equalitarian spirit when it came to giving. Everybody talked about "his part" which was the same no matter what one had. This is a far cry from responsible stewardship. Our giving must be governed by what we have and not what others can do. Therefore, the first "hidden criterion" is the relation of the gift to what one has to give. Christ does not ask: "How much did he give?" he rather inquires: "How much does he have left?" There is an absolute difference in giving "out of one's abundance" and "out of one's need."

The second criterion is one of motive. What a man does is best revealed in why he does it. This widow woman seems to have had no ulterior reason for acting

Sunday Morning, October 22, 1961

as she did. She was obviously grateful to God even for her limited means, and loved the work of the Temple sufficiently to want to support it. She overcame the familiar temptation of thinking that so little was unimportant, and gave what she could out of honest love.

This is quite superior to the motivation of much giving. Although we are not told, I expect her quiet behavior stood in marked contrast to others that had given that day. You see, these coffers were situated in a very public place. They were metal containers that were formed in the shape of an ear trumpet - wide at the top with narrow necks. The Greek word Jesus used here for the big givers is literally "threw in." I am told that many Pharisees would get their gifts broken down in the smallest coinage, wait until the busiest hours, and then come and "throw in" their gifts with great ostentation. The noise of the clattering coins would attract great attention, and many would say: "Behold such generosity." Jesus was familiar with such a display, and quick to discern its true nature. He wrote it off in one terse sentence: "They have their reward" (Matthew 6:2). What such givers wanted was "to be seen of men" and be praised by them. Jesus said that their "gifts" were actually the purchase price of such approval. It is just like wanting a car and putting out so much money for it. You get what you pay for, and should expect no eternal merit for this. So is the case with every "gift" that aims at the applause of men. If one gives to create a reputation, or to have buildings named for him or to bask in the warmth of human approval, this motive determines its real value. It is no giving at all; it is the purchase of that which one wants for himself.

Again, the motive of the widow is superior to those who give in the hope of greater gain. The earliest idea of sacrifice was one of currying the favor of the gods. The primitive savage offered up "sweet saviors" to the deities in the hope that they could win their favor and thus prosper. Of course we have come a long way from such as that, but we still are not purged of what I call "speculative giving." All too often, I fear men give with "the investment attitude"; they hope to reap a richer return later on. I once knew a farmer who listened for years to sermons on tithing. Finally one day he said: "I've decided to try this tithing with my hogs this year." He added: "If it works, I'll tithe everything I've got." Here again we are far removed from the New Testament. I fear that the modern ministry is greatly to blame at this point. In an effort to stimulate giving, we have dangled all kinds of selfish inducements before people. I dare say that Malachi has suffered real agony in his grave over the twisting of his words about "the windows of heaven" (Malachi 3:10). This actually refers to rain clouds; the land was experiencing a terrible drought, and the prophet linked it with the people's sin. The promise was to send thirst-quenching rain, but it has been given the modern connotation of "a signed check by Henry Ford" - the satisfying of every wish from a Cadillac to a silver mink. Now I do not mean to say that tithing is unimportant, but I do mean to say that it is wrong to give in order to get. Many of God's most faithful stewards have remained poor all their lives and experienced adversity. The blessings of God are not mechanical, "quid pro quo" payments. The widow gave not that she might prosper but that God's work might prosper. She gave out of love for God and not love for herself. She was grateful, not grasping, and this was her greatness.

This, then, is "approach of totality," as taught by one Jesus of Nazareth. It does not measure giving in purely quantitative terms. Rather, it asks for the whole story. It probes beneath the surface and asks the penetrating questions: "How much is left and why do you give?"

And much as I want to raise our budget this year, I am forced to approach your giving in this way. We probably could raise more cash by setting quantitative goals, promising you everything, and forgetting about motives. But then I would be betraying my responsibility to you as a spiritual shepherd. A rich man came to Jesus one day with great enthusiasm. Jesus could have certainly used resources such as his. But the demands were too high and the young ruler turned away. As someone astutely commented: "Jesus lost His man but saved His gospel." And this morning I have the same feeling. It may not produce the highest yield, but I am more concerned for your character than for your cash. Thus I must tell you: you are responsible for every penny you possess. The way you make it, the way you spend it, the way you give it - all is under the judgment of God. Big amounts are not enough - it is more important what you are doing with it all and why you give as you do.

I must also remind you that material actions have spiritual consequence. What you are doing with your money is really what you are doing with yourself, for this reflects the values that control your heart. When Jesus last stood face to face with Peter, He asked but one question: "Simon, do you love Me?" Three times He asked it, as if this was all in the world that mattered. And do you know what? I think it is! Your relation to Him is the ultimate issue of destiny. But you do not answer that question with cheap words; you answer it by what you become. And the best test of what you are becoming is how you use what you have. All of our lives are moving in one of two directions; we are either moving in toward ourselves - and destruction, or out toward God and others - and fulfillment. Just as litmus paper determines whether a substance is acid or salt, so material actions reveal the direction of life. Giving is important, for it points toward what we are becoming. Therefore, let me look deep in your soul and ask you honestly: "By the way you have spent your money, are spending your money, will spend your money - what kind of answer are you becoming to that question?"

Well, do you love Him? It will show in how you live and how you give!