

## **“We Will Serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:18) Stewardship, November 11, 2007**

The preacher is on a roll! He shouts, “If this church is going to serve God, it’s got to get down on its knees and crawl!” The people shout back, “Make us crawl, Lord! Make us crawl!” He shouts, “And once this church has learned to crawl, it’s got to get up on its feet and walk!” The people shout back, “Make us walk, Lord! Make us walk!” “And once this church has learned to walk, it’s got to learn to run!” “Make us run, Lord! Make us run!” “And if this church is going to run, it’s got to reach deep down into its pockets and really give!” *[pause]* “Make us crawl, Lord! Make us crawl.”

Now, since today is Stewardship Sunday, you’ve probably guessed where this sermon is heading. Why would I tell such a joke unless my next move was to put pressure on those who don’t give? But...actually, that’s not the plan. I mean, what would be the point? People who don’t want to give probably wouldn’t show up on Stewardship Sunday anyway, and those who showed up by accident would probably just dig in their heels. Now, that’s not the kind of response I want to encourage. So no, I’m not going to put pressure on those who don’t give.

Then is the plan to put pressure on those who do give to give even more? No, that’s not it, either. Here again, what would be the point? I’m pretty sure most of us have already thought and prayed about the amount we’re going to give next year. In fact, chances are we’ve already written the figure on our pledge card and put it in the envelope – which means that at this point the commitment is a done deal. So no, I’m also not going to put on pressure to give more.

Then where is the sermon heading? I think in a more positive direction. I simply want to tell those who are giving faithfully: *Well done!* **“Well done, good and faithful servants!”** And I say this not just in my name, but in God’s name. For you’re not content to just be spiritual crawlers! You’re committed to making this church stand up and run! In fact, you’re so committed that you don’t just support God’s work *in theory*; you dig deep down into your pockets and really give! So I want to say: *Well done!* And beyond that, I also want to say a word about the importance of what you’ve done...and are doing. That’s really where I’m heading. Before we dedicate our commitments for 2008, I want to talk about what our giving means and how it connects with our theme verse: **“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”**

Does that put your minds at rest? I hope so! For money is a touchy subject, isn’t it? Especially giving money to the church. It’s uncomfortable to hear about, and believe it or not, it’s uncomfortable to preach about. Frankly, I wish I could just say: *You know this church’s ministry is important. You know it doesn’t come cheap. You know who’s got to pay for it. So ante up! Amen.* But that would be kind of crass, wouldn’t it? Plus, it would miss the point. For if stewardship were just about paying the bills, we could charge annual dues and be done with it. But stewardship is not just about paying bills. It is not just about donating to the

church. Stewardship is about our relationship with God – specifically, serving God with our resources. It's about honoring His lordship, appreciating His blessings, obeying His Will, carrying out His mission – and doing it not just in theory, but in action; concrete, down-to-earth, dollars-and-cents action.

That is why we have chosen Joshua's words as the theme of this year's stewardship emphasis: **“Choose this day whom you will serve... As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”** These words go back to the days when Israel had finally reached the promised land and subdued it. Now Joshua had gathered the people at Shechem to renew their covenant with God. As he stood before them, Joshua knew they faced big challenges – big enough that though the people might want to be faithful *in theory*, following through would be tough. In this new land, they'd have neighbors all around who worshipped idols. How tempted they'd be to do the same! In this new land, they'd face a culture that rejected their values. How tempted they'd be to fit in! In this new land, they'd also have new responsibilities – work, trade, politics. Things would be much more complicated than when they were wandering around in the desert! So how tempted they'd be to just focus on these worldly matters! In fact, how tempted they'd be to just live for worldly rewards! And how tempted they'd be to think themselves entitled to whatever they had. Not *blessed* with it. Certainly not *beholden* to God for it. Entitled! How tempted they'd be to think: *What's mine is mine, and can do with it what I want!*

Yes, Joshua knew that staying faithful would be tough. Tough for all of them, including himself. Now, he couldn't control what others might do, but he could control what he would do, and he could certainly control how much he'd let the other people's choices affect his own. So in challenging the people, **“Choose this day whom you will serve,”** Joshua was saying as much to himself as everyone else: *After we're done renewing our covenant with God, some of you may not follow through. But I will never use your lack of commitment as an excuse to slack off myself. “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” After we're done here, some of you may put God way down your list of priorities. You may ignore God until you need help. But that's not going to change the way I operate: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Some of you may well forget the Lord; I will remember who I belong to. Some of you may forget how much you owe the Lord; I will remember all His blessings. Some of you may forsake the Lord when faith proves inconvenient, but I'm sticking with Him no matter what. I'm keeping the Lord front and center, not just in theory but in action: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*

Some 3400 years have passed since Joshua spoke these words. Our situation is very different today. Yet the same basic challenge remains: to follow through on our commitment to serve the Lord, and follow through no matter what others may or may not do. Now, as back then, there are many components to this commitment – among them practicing biblical morality; discipling our children and grandchildren; giving of our time and talent; being faithful in worship and prayer;

sharing our faith as opportunities arise; and resisting the pressure of our culture to value beauty, power, material things, even sports above the things of God. Yes, now as back then, there are many components to this commitment, **“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”** And one component we don’t want to overlook is **stewardship**. Or not to put too fine a point on it: **money**. This is also an area for faithfulness. Our attitude toward money. Our use of money. Our willingness to invest money in ministry.

Some may think this component is unimportant. If only that were true! The fact is: anyone who thinks they can serve the Lord but ignore the “money component” is fooling themselves! They’re kind of like Clovis, king of the Franks, who converted to Christianity and had his entire army baptized, but told them to hold their sword-arms out the water, so that they would not be dedicated to God and could still battle like heathens. We may smile at such naiveté, but is it so different from thinking one can be faithful except when it comes to money? That one can skimp on giving because *“What’s mine is mine, and I can do with it what I want!”*? That’s sort of like holding your pocket book out of the water so it will not be dedicated to God! True faith doesn’t work that way! How could a Christian affirm that God is the maker and owner of all, then say, *“What’s mine is mine, and I can do with it what I want!”*? How could a Christian say that Jesus is Lord, but ignore His teachings, **“It is more blessed to give than to receive”** and **“You cannot serve God and wealth.”** How could a Christian claim they’re open to the Holy Spirit, yet harden their heart to generosity, one of the fruits of the Spirit, or resist the call **“to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.”** True faith doesn’t work that way! There is a reason why Scripture says, **“The Lord loves a cheerful giver.”** Because that’s one clear sign that our faith is not just theory. Our giving is a concrete, down-to-earth, dollars-and-cents way of showing: *I know that my blessings come from God and belong to Him. I appreciate all God has done for me and I want to show my thanks. I value God’s work and I want to support it all I can. So I’m putting my money where my mouth is. I’m letting my light shine.* **“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”**

You show that faith in action every time you give, and you’ll especially be showing it in just a moment when you come forward to offer your financial commitment at God’s altar. It may seem just a little thing to fill out a card and place it in a basket. It may seem just a little thing to write out a check and put it in the offering plate. But make no mistake! This is a powerful witness! Cheerful giving, regular giving, generous giving – it’s as powerful as the witness Joshua made at Shechem. You offer no excuses: *Well, why should I give generously if others don’t put in their fair share?* Nor do you rationalize: *With so many other givers, what difference will it make if I slack off?* And you do not delay: *It’s not convenient to give right now, but maybe someday I will when I have more money.* No, like Joshua, you brush all that aside. You keep your focus on God, you show your commitment to Him, and you follow through with action: **“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”**

This is a powerful witness! In a world that makes an idol of money and material things, in a culture that puts God way down the priority list, in a society that's comfortable thinking that "*what's mine is mine, and I can do with it what I want,*" your giving shows what a difference Christian values make! You are letting your light shine – not just in theory but in action!

So keep this in mind as you bring your commitment to the altar in just a moment. Keep this in mind as you bring your candle home and light it there. Keep this in mind every time you put something in the offering plate: *I'm doing more than just paying bills or donating to the church. My giving is a confession of faith. It's a witness to God's importance in my life. It's a commitment to do His work and His will. Not just in theory. Not just in words. I'm showing in a concrete, down-to-earth, dollar-and-cents way: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."* Amen.