

“Parchment”

Genesis 28:10-22, II Corinthians 9:6-15, Matthew 6:19-21

September 29, 2019

Once there was a man lost in the desert, near death from thirst. He had wandered aimlessly through the burning sands for many days, growing weaker by the moment. At long last he saw an oasis far in the distance, where palm trees indicated a source of water!

He stumbled forward feverishly and fell beneath the shade of the trees. Finally he might quench his tortured thirst. But then he noticed something strange about this particular oasis.

Instead of a pool of water, or a well, or a spring bubbling up from the ground, the man found a pump. And beside the pump were two objects: a small jar of water, and a note inscribed on parchment.

The note explained that a leather gasket within the pump had to be saturated with water for the pump to work. Within the jar was just enough water for this purpose.

The note also warned the reader not to drink a drop from the jar. Every bit had to be poured into an opening at the base of the pump to soak the heat-dried gasket. Then, as the leather softened and expanded, an unlimited supply of sweet water would be available. The parchment’s final instructions were to refill the container for the next traveler’s use.

Well! Our friend now faces a dilemma! He is dying of thirst, and he has found water. Not much, of course. Maybe not enough to save his life. But wouldn’t it seem the height of folly in this parched wasteland to pour the water away, down the base of the pump. On the other hand, if the note was accurate, by pouring out of the small quantity of water, he would then have all he wanted. What should he do?

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Would you trust your life to an unknown author who penned some strange message on an ancient piece of parchment? Would you be willing to throw away what seemed to be the obvious thing to do, risking even life itself, in the hope of finding a

great abundance of life lived richly and fully - not only by yourself, but for others? Are you willing to part with what little this life offers in return for a life whose rewards you cannot see, whose path is unknown, yet whose promises are great?

A few decades ago there appeared on television and in magazines small ads asking people to do something quite contrary to the spirit of our life and times. The request was strange, but not because it was something new or unheard of. In fact, its theme reaches back thousands of years. And that theme is this: just think of how much better this world would be if you gave just five hours per week, or five percent of your income, to some selfless pursuit, some charitable cause, some effort to reach beyond, to touch the lives of other persons who are less fortunate than you. If everybody gave just five hours, or five percent, the world would be transformed, not just uplifting the downcast, but also by uplifting those who are doing the giving, rather than the receiving. So said those ads.

Of course, we as Christians are used to hearing calls for giving twice that much, though there is nothing magic about 10%. After all, a rich young ruler who came to Jesus by night was told by Jesus to give 100%, not just a tithe. But just think: Jesus himself gave just 10% of his lifetime to God's public service, when we consider that many scholars agree that Christ's ministry began at age 30, and ended three years later at Calvary. Only 10% - and look at the results he got!

But there are so many who don't want to give up 10% or 5% or even 1% - they would rather clutch at that jar of water in the desert, ignoring the life-giving and life-saving message on that bit of parchment, and forgo the chance to live life abundantly.

Pastor Gordon Cosby, a celebrated name of the American church, once pastored the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC. But earlier, he had ministered in a small Baptist congregation outside of Lynchburg, VA. One day, a Deacon in Lynchburg shared a concern with Pastor Cosby. There was a very poor widow in their congregation with six children, and the Deacon had discovered the widow was giving \$4 a month to the church - 10% of her total income. This tithe was a considerable sum, way back in the

early 1950's, and the woman was so obviously poverty-stricken that the Deacons felt she couldn't afford to give that much. They had decided that the pastor should call on her to assure her that they felt she was under no obligation to give any money to the church. They understood her difficult circumstances, and wanted to relieve her accordingly.

Pastor Cosby went on to relate the story in his own words: "I am not wise now; I was less wise then. I went and told her of the concern of the Deacons. I told her as graciously and supportively as I knew how that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. As I talked with her, tears came to her eyes. 'I want to tell you,' she said, 'that you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning.'"

Now what is it, pray tell, that the widow in Lynchburg knew that so many others do not? For her, there would have been no question whatsoever of what to do had she stumbled upon that pump in the desert. There would be no debate, no dilemma. Why should there be for any of the rest of us?

And just in case we think that God is only interested in our wallets, let me remind you that God is interested in so much more. The problem is, God is NOT interested in making it too easy for us, because whatever we prize most in our lives, God is always reminding us: Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven, for that is more important than anything else.

That is why when Israel was a nation of shepherds, God required every shepherd's best lamb. When Israel settled down to a life of farming, God required the first fruits of their crop. It is no accident that when the rich young ruler named Nicodemus came to Jesus, he found that God demanded of him his riches. For whatever we treasure, whatever we cherish, whatever we prize the most, God is there, saying, "Love Me More than These."

Is it any wonder, then, in our materialistic society bent on big bucks, early retirement, and prestige, God requires our treasure, our time, and our humility. Sort of

like a note written on parchment, telling a man dying of thirst, that the water he has found must go elsewhere, and not to his own self-perceived needs, desires, and wants.

But it doesn't stop there. The Lord taketh away, but He also giveth. And what does the Lord give in return? Now let's not get confused about this, so listen in:

Giving money to God's work is not like putting it in a bank. Giving today is no guarantee of raking it all back with interest tomorrow - because what God returns to us can take many forms: it may be the satisfaction of knowing we are doing what is right; it could be the sense of doing something meaningful and lending dignity to who we are; it might also be the right to participate in the work of God's kingdom; it will certainly be the joy of being part of the blessing of giving; and maybe - just maybe - the opportunity to do even more by receiving greater gifts than the ones we have first parted with.

Now what about our pump? Each and everyone of us have been there, or else I doubt we would be seated here this morning. We have come out of some need, seeking to fill some void, to satisfy some thirst. The question is, what are we going to do about those instructions on parchment?

Let us pray: