

*A sermon given on Sunday, October 16, 2011
At St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
By the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Intentions and Follow-Through

You've heard it before. Now you've heard it again. "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's." The text makes it clear that, in posing their query to Jesus, the Pharisees intended it to be a trick question. It's equally clear that Jesus' reply was, in its own way, a trick answer. "Give to God the things that are God's," he said. And what is that? By definition, of course, that is everything. Everything is God's. That is why in the church we talk about "stewardship." Because theologically we understand that we are not really owners and possessors – we are stewards, caretakers of all things which have been entrusted to us yet are – in the end – God's.

Give to God the things that are God's. How handy that, in our 3-year lectionary cycle of biblical passages to be read in church, this passage is assigned for today. How helpful to the preacher on the one Sunday in the year when he is expected to preach a stewardship sermon! It pretty much preaches itself, doesn't it? "Render to God the things that are God's." ... which is everything ... so, here's the pledge card. You know what to do!

In my experience, we most often *do* know what to do, we have the right intentions. The trouble tends to arise somewhere between Intention and Follow-through. For instance:

A letter to God from a child at age 1: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but you see I'm still in diapers. And I don't have any money of my own. I'm sure you understand.

A letter to God at age 3: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but you see I'm just a toddler, and I haven't learned to count yet. I'm sure you understand.

A letter to God at age 10: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but Mom and Dad only give me a dollar allowance, which doesn't buy me very much as it is. And anyway, ten percent for you would only be a dime, which probably isn't enough to be bothered with. I'm sure you understand.

A letter to God at age 16: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but my folks say I should save money for college. And then, of course, I need money to go to Wendy's, and the movies. I'm sure you understand.

A letter to God at age 20: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but now that I'm in college I'm really strapped for cash. It would be unfair to give money away when other people are helping me out with my tuition. I'm sure you understand.

A letter to God at age 30: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but I just got married and setting up a home has to be my number one priority – furniture, a car, saving for a down payment – and all that. I'm sure you understand.

A letter to God at age 40: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but you see, raising a family is even more expensive than I thought. And I never know when I might be laid off! I'm sure you understand.

A letter to God at age 50: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but my kids college tuition payments are awful, and all the other bills just keep coming. My mission for the next ten years is my kids. I'm sure you understand.

A letter to God at age 66: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but now retirement has come along. And you know what it's like to be on a fixed income. (Or do you? ... well, take my word for it – it's tough!) I'm sure you understand.

A letter to God at age 80: Dear God, I'd like to give to the church, but what's left now is what I've promised to leave to my children. But don't worry. I'm sure my kids will give generously to the church, just the way I always wanted to! I'm sure you understand.

[adapted from "A Spoof on Stewardship," *Stewardship*, Parish Publications, Inc.; 4/94]

We have good intentions most of the time, don't we? We really do. And we intend to follow through on those intentions – eventually, when the time is right.

Often when a catalogue arrives at my house in the mail I will flip through it. I'll see an item that seems worth getting – some gadget to make life easier; a sure bet to finally get my closet organized; a good buy on some clothing I need; or maybe just a CD that would be refreshing to listen to. So I fold down the corner of the page, and toss the catalogue in a pile. Maybe next paycheck, I figure, when there are a few extra dollars left over, I will send for that crucial item.

Do I need to tell you what happens to that pile of catalogues? It sits there until they are hopelessly out of date, or until the pile gets so high that, in a fit of disgust or tidiness, I throw the whole thing out.

A similar process tends to happen with charitable appeals. A letter from some worthy cause arrives. Guilt or genuine desire motivates me to put it into my desk where, I think, the next time there are a few dollars left over between paychecks, I'll send a donation.

Do I need to tell you what happens to that pile of appeals? A few core organizations get our regular support, but most of those appeals sit there until, like the catalogues, it just gets painfully clear that they will never get sent. It's not that the desire wasn't there. It's not that the intentions weren't good. It's just that they never really become a priority.

When all is said and done, what shows up in the way we spend our money is not our good intentions, it's our priorities.

I want to suggest to you, as I have certainly suggested before, that our giving to God should never fall into the category of: "pay this whenever there is a little something left over." God is not a charity. God is not a worthy cause. God is the source and giver of our every blessing. Scripture says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and with a teeny little token of your treasure." Right? Well, no. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, it says, and Jesus tells us that the disposition of our heart is made manifest directly by the disposition of our treasure.

So our giving is indeed meant to be not an afterthought or a good intention only, but a generous, carefully thought-out, deliberate proportion of all that has been entrusted to us. We learn the grace of giving just as we learn any other skill – by experience and effort. But it is a grace. Those who have practice in generous, proportionate giving affirm that it has at least as much effect on their spiritual life as it does on their financial life.

The voices we heard earlier were a light-hearted look at the excuses which are so familiar to all of us, from ages 3 to 93. But the voice we really need to hear is the voice of the God who loves us beyond the telling, and invites us to weigh not only our best intentions, but also at our lived priorities.

This week, I invite you to complete a pledge card for our annual campaign at St. Paul's. Think of it as your own Letter to God. "Dear God, I'd like to give to the church ... and here it is! Here's my commitment!"

May you find joy in so doing.