

GOD'S ECONOMY

One of the leaders of the early labor movement in the United States was a man by the name of Samuel Gompers. Gompers, by trade a cigar maker, founded the American Federation of Labor in 1886 and then became its first president. He was a tough, gruff man with a dry sense of humor. Once, after a particularly bitter and lengthy strike, a journalist asked Gompers: *"What is it that the working man really wants?"* Gompers took the cigar out of his mouth and said, *"More."*

And that's pretty much how it is with our lives in this world, isn't it? I think we can safely say that the desire for "more" can be attributed not only to the working man, but to all of us. When we seek our happiness in the kingdom of this world (and we do all the time) then we are naturally led to look for it in terms of what this world has to offer: clothes, property, gadgets, money. But we always end up wanting *more..* More clothes, more property, more gadgets, more money. I've seen a bumper that says: *"He who dies with the most toys, wins."* I've also seen one that reads: *"He who dies with the most toys is still dead."* The man who seeks his happiness in things this world has to offer always lives to see his happiness wane as he gets bored with the things he's acquired and they rust and molder and grow old. In this world, nothing lasts. As the Teacher of Ecclesiastes wrote, *"He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income.... When goods increase, they increase who eat them..."* (Eccl. 4:10-11)

Oh the other hand the man who seeks his happiness in the Kingdom of God has a different perspective. Instead of continually grasping for more of everything, he asks God to make him satisfied with he has. His goal is not new acquisitions, but contentment. His motto is St. Paul's: *"For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."* His riches come from a different place; he operates according to a different *economy* than the man of this world.

We hear the word "economy" quite a lot. Back in 2007-08 when the housing industry collapsed, the financial industry was shaken, gasoline prices soared and the dollar was devalued, some economists proclaimed that it was the beginning of a worldwide economic depression. Other economists disagreed and characterized it as a mere blip in the ever-upward trend of the largest and most vibrant economy the world has ever known. That's no surprise: economists are notorious for disagreeing with one another. Harry Truman once famously remarked that he wished he could find a one-armed economist who could never say, *"On the other hand..."*

Sometimes the history of a word can give us insight into its meaning. The word "economy" comes from two ancient Greek words: οἶκος, which meant "house" or "household," and νομος, which meant, "law." The two were combined in the Greek word, "οικονομία," which referred to the "law" or management of a household. Over time the meaning of "οικονομία" expanded to include the management of businesses and cities and even nations, and it began to acquire the same meaning as the word "economy" has today. Another word sprang up--"οικονομος"--which was used to designate the manager or steward of a business. In

Jesus' parable about a dishonest manager, he is called the "οικονομος," the steward of his master's property.

The Bible makes it clear that God has called each one of us to be a worthy οικονομος or economist—a good steward or manager of the resources He has entrusted to us. These resources include our time, our energy, our talents and our money. God, you might say, has *invested* these resources in us and left us to manage them. We can be good managers or poor managers; we can grow the investment that God has made in us, or we can squander it. He has left that choice up to us.

Now I don't know about you, but the first time I heard a preacher urge me to be a good steward of my time and energy and talents and ESPECIALLY MY MONEY—my reaction was negative. First of all, it sounded a lot like work. Second, it sounded like the church was trying to get its hands in my pockets. Third it seemed sort of coercive—like the sergeant who says to his platoon: *"I need three volunteers: you, you and you."* I mean, how could a serious Christian, having been urged to be a good steward of his time and energy and talents and MONEY say with a good conscience: *"No thanks; I'd rather not."* I felt as if I were being morally blackmailed.

If we think of stewardship as a zero-sum game where we have a finite amount of time and energy and money and talents and what we give up, we lose—we're missing the point. We're not only missing the point; we're missing the boat. Because stewardship in the Kingdom of God doesn't work that way.

To begin with, when we think that we lose what we give to the Lord, we're thinking like fallen creatures in a fallen world instead of risen creatures in a new creation. Our primary residence isn't in the kingdom of this world; it's in the Kingdom of God--and that's a kingdom with an entirely different kind of economy: God's economy.

We have a beautiful description of God's economy in our *Old Testament* lesson for today, taken from the fifty-fifth chapter of the *Book of Isaiah*. Listen to God's words, as he speaks through the prophet: *"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you...."* This is not an economy of finite energy and limited resources where people squabble over getting their own piece of the pie; this is an economy of infinite resources and unlimited growth. It is the economy prophesied by Amos (9:13), who said: *"The days are coming...when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills..."* This is the economy of paradise restored, the Kingdom of God coming into this world. And when you and I were born again of water and the Word we entered this Kingdom and gained all the rights and privileges of citizenship; we became living, active inhabitants of the Kingdom of God, which is a kingdom of infinite resources.

And God has made it easy for us to enjoy the riches of His Kingdom. He supplies our worldly needs so that we can dedicate ourselves to seeking Kingdom treasures. Jesus was speaking of this in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, *"...do not worry, saying, 'What shall we*

eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” When we spend all our time “running after” the goods this world has to offer—and imagine that they are going to bring us lasting pleasure—we’re thinking and acting like pagans. After all, if God takes care of the birds of the air that neither save nor store, won’t he take care of us who are more precious to him than many birds? When we spend all our time and energy chasing after more of what God gives us free of charge, aren’t we a lot like those Israelites in the wilderness who, against God’s instructions, stored up manna and then found it full of maggots? God wants to take care of the small stuff so that we can focus on more important things.

And what are these important things that God wants us to focus on? Well, it pretty much boils down to one BIG thing: HE WANTS TO PERSUADE US THAT THERE IS MORE JOY IN GIVING THAN IN RECEIVING! And He Himself showed us the Way by giving us His Own Son without asking anything in return except that we receive the gift. In the Bible this is called love. Not emotional love but loving other people in truth and action. This is called “kingdom work” and folks, there is nothing else that we can do in this world that is as important as the Kingdom work that God calls us to do. When we do it, we are not wasting our time accumulating “...treasures on earth, where moth and rust devour and thieves break in and steal...but treasures in heaven.” (Matt. 6:19-20) As we do so, our hearts and minds leave our worldly goods behind and soar to where our real treasures are laid up.

The importance of loving and helping others was brought home to me forcibly a few years ago when my family and I attended a 4th of July celebration in our community. Before the festivities began, a small memorial ceremony was held to honor those who had passed away during the prior year. The speaker was a good friend of mine, a man who has lived in the community for almost thirty years. Towards the end of his presentation, he asked his audience the following questions: *“What are the names of the five richest people in the world? What are the names of the last five Heisman trophy winners? What are the names of the last five Nobel Prize winners? What are the names of the last five Miss Americas? What are the names of the last five Pulitzer Prize winners?”* He paused and asked the crowd, *“How are you doing so far?”* The answer, of course, was: *“Not very well.”* After the trophies are put on the shelves the names of the trophy winners tend to fade from our memory. Then he asked us: *“What is the name of a teacher you really liked with you were in grade school? What is the name of the doctor your Mom took you to when you were a little boy or girl? What was the name of your favorite Sunday School teacher? What was the name of your best friend in high school?”* Nobody had any trouble remembering *those* names. The point was clear: the people we remember are not celebrities we admired for a moment; they’re the people who showed us love.

And that’s what the Kingdom of God is all about: receiving gifts from God and sharing our gifts with others. We can easily absorb ourselves with the passing pleasures that this world has to offer, but sooner or later we will find that those pleasures just breed a desire for more of the same because that’s the way the kingdom of this world works; that’s its economy. Or, we can seek Kingdom treasures that have value before God and enrich the lives of our fellow human beings, treasures of giving rather than taking. Those are treasures that last into eternity. That’s a very different economy—God’s economy.

I hope and I pray that you and I have the wisdom to invest our time and energy and talents and money in treasures that have eternal value. Amen

Isaiah 55:6-13

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn bush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever."

2nd Corinthians 9:6-11

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

Matthew 6:19-21; 25-33

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also... "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? " And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.