

“Runs Batted In”

November 22, 2009
Matthew 6:19-21; Mark 11:12-21

Rev. Richard Haney
Fairfield Presbyterian Church

INTRODUCTION

As a North Carolina *native son* I was introduced to quality pork **barbeque** at an early age. In fact Pam and I both appreciate the vinegar based style of eastern NC pit cooked barbeque and look for opportunities to eat it every time we make a visit to Charlotte. My son-in-law hails from Sanford, NC and he likes this native food even more than I do—he is a connoisseur of barbeque and could tell you precisely where to find the best BBQ restaurants in eastern and piedmont NC.

Recently I read a national news story about this world of pit cooked barbeque and a remarkable new idea for marketing it. Evidently there is a growing wine industry in western NC and some enterprising soul has decided to pair eastern NC barbeque with western NC wine. Who said east and west shall never meet? It is a combination, however, that requires some imagination. Sweet tea and barbeque I understand but wine and barbeque seems like a stretch. Nonetheless, someone is calling for tasting and eating tours that match eating barbeque with tasting wine.

And they have some catchy advertising slogans for this endeavor:

- * don't miss our pulled *pork* and pulled *corks*
- * please join us for the *wine* and *swine* tour (swine flu derails this?)

This story inspired me to try to come up with some snazzy ways of referring to church based stewardship. Tell me what you think of these!

1. *Give a buck or you're out of luck!* No, that's bad theology.
2. *Show me the money, honey!* That's been used before.
3. For all the UVA grads, *Develop a propensity for generosity.*
4. Another college one--*A pledge means more than fraternity recruiting.*
5. *Green, green, the grass is green but the budget might run in the red; Green, green, the money's green—please give so we'll get ahead.*

It's good to laugh and remember not to take ourselves too seriously. On the other hand, stewardship is a big and important topic. God has created the whole earth and entrusted it to us; we are men and women called to manage God's economy. So giving is really just a part of stewardship. How we care for the earth and for one another and how we use our gifts and talents are all parts of this bigger picture. I want to think with you today about **giving that counts**. What is that? I don't mean “*giving you can count*” although we do receive pledges, count the dollar amounts pledged and construct a budget largely based on what you and I say we will give in the next year. But I'm thinking of giving that counts in God's eyes—that is, giving deemed valuable in God's sight. What counts as good giving from the viewpoint of heaven? What kind of giving pleases God? What does He approve and commend?

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus links the subjects of one's **Heart** and one's **Treasure** (Matthew 6:19-21). He says in striking words, “*For where your treasure is,*

there will your heart be also.” What do you value, esteem or treasure? Those things lie close to your heart. But our God is a jealous God. He expects us to have priorities but He calls us to glorify Him as our first priority. The contrast in Matthew 6 is “*treasures on earth*” and “*treasures in heaven.*”

Could we agree that the attitudes of our hearts are important for giving that counts? If you give money or time to God but have no real allegiance to Him; neither faith in Christ nor affection toward Him, then your giving fails the Good Intention test. Let’s call that the **GI test** (good intention). Paul taught the Corinthians that each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a **cheerful giver** (2 Corinthians 9:7).

I can think of other reasons to give that have little to do with God; e.g. tax deduction, reputation among others, guilt, others’ expectations, etc. But giving that counts, I’m declaring, is giving that is *voluntary* and *cheerful* and is an *expression of devotion* to God who has been generous with me.

Our second Scripture is more complicated. It features two obvious actions by Jesus shortly after he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday—the so-called triumphal entry. We did not read verse 11 so listen to it now: “*Then he entered Jerusalem (after the parade and loud hosannas) and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*”

By the way, Jesus is spending *days* in Jerusalem and *nights* in Bethany where his good friends live. You might sense from verse 11 that Jesus was thinking ahead and planning something—something having to do with the temple. Or am I thinking that because I’ve read the entire story and already know he cleansed the temple the next day?

The temple *cleansing* incident is reported by Mark alongside another story—the *cursing* of the fig tree. Two actions—fig tree cursed and temple cleansed.

Mark tells us Jesus went to the tree for figs because he was hungry but found none... Then he said to the tree, “*May no one ever eat fruit from you again.*” Then Jesus goes into Jerusalem and cleanses the temple. And then he and his disciples leave Jerusalem to journey back to Bethany at night. The next morning when they pass the fig tree again in the daylight they notice it has withered away to its roots.

Scholars refer to Mark’s storytelling style here (fig tree, temple, fig tree) as a Markan sandwich. And that suggests that the two stories are linked thematically. The fig tree cursing by itself seems unusual. There are but a handful of so-called nature miracles (stilling the storm, walking on water, water into wine, cursing a fig tree). Most of Jesus miracles are healings or exorcisms. And this is the only negative or judgment miracle from Jesus.

Most scholars believe, and I agree, that the fig tree story is an acted out parable. The *judgment* Jesus executes on the fig tree *prefigures* his judgment on the Temple practices. The fig tree represents Israel which has failed to produce the appropriate fruits when her Messiah looked for them. True, it was not the season for figs. But the leaves suggest life and fruitfulness. And when the Messiah comes to his city and temple he expects to find fruitfulness; but both the tree and the temple are *barren*.

We must not jump to the conclusion that Jesus drove out the moneychangers because he disliked the commercial traffic in the temple. There was more going on. First, the moneychangers and merchants were in the Court of the Gentiles. Some people used the court as a shortcut passing from one part of the city to another—the law forbade this. And the moneychangers were taking advantage of pilgrims and poor people who needed the right kind of coin for the temple tax and paid dearly.

The key to understanding what Jesus did is found in the two OT passages cited. Isaiah 56.7, “*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations*” and Jeremiah 7.11, “*but you have made it a robber’s den.*” The final phrase “*for all nations*” (missing from Matthew and Luke) hints at the ultimate outcome. This temple will be destroyed but another temple, made without hands will enable Gentiles to worship God.

Meanwhile, moneychangers and the like defraud poor worshippers and yet claim the temple for their own refuge. The whole garish scene had turned the court of the gentiles (where Gentiles could come to worship) into a bazaar and a passage way. No one could mediate or worship.

The larger picture is an indictment of Jewish worship and devotion that had degenerated under Caiaphas and other officials. The Messiah has come to his city and to his temple looking for genuine faith and honest worship and he finds corruption that keeps both Jews and Gentiles from true worship and fruitful service.

What does that have to do with us? Well, what does God see when He gazes on our devotion, our faith, our worship, our service, our giving, our commitment, our concerns with justice and mercy? When the Messiah comes to visit us what will he find? The Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus’ day were the *religious establishment*. Today **we** are the *religious establishment*. We must pay careful attention to all “judgment on religiosity” passages in the Bible!

Let’s personalize the questions. God has called you to manage your accounts and to utilize your gifts. You are alive in Jesus and your green leaves are visible to all. But your pocketbook discipleship is relatively secret. If you are married presumably your spouse knows because you give jointly (although some may not because of various circumstances). Your church (one or two people) knows what you give. But mostly it is between you and God. And that’s a good thing...mostly (Hauerwas).

Mostly your barometers of generosity are a matter between you and God. And you care, don’t you, that your giving *counts*—that it matters to God and pleases Him? Sure you do. So you want your giving to be from the **heart** (Cheerful, Voluntary, Devoted). **GI** giving—**good intention** giving.

But you also want your giving to amount to something. You want God to use it for blessing others. You want your gifts to help feed the poor and to translate the Scriptures and to send forth the gospel to un-reached peoples and to care for widows and orphans. Right? You want your giving to be productive and to obtain good results. In other words, you wish for your giving to have a **good effect**.

I call that **GE** giving. Giving that counts is GI giving and GE giving. Good intentions and good effects.

Sometimes I use a baseball motif in my sermons. Here is one. “*Keep your eye on the ball.*” In order to hit a baseball that travels 55 feet from the pitching mound to home plate at the speed of 132 feet per second, a baseball player must keep his eye on the ball. If you want to hit the ball, if you want to swing and get a hit, *keep your eye on the ball!*

But the goal of the baseball player goes beyond getting a hit. And it’s more than getting on base. When the team is up to bat—when the team comes off the field for its turn to hit, what is the real goal? To score runs, right? If your team gets the most hits do you win the game? Not necessarily. The winning team has the bigger score—the most runs.

So getting a hit or a walk or a stolen base are means to the end and the end is scoring runs. So the offensive minded baseball player aims at getting hits that produce runs. **Runs-batted-in.** RBI’s. That’s what really counts in baseball. RBI’s and runs scored. Either you bat someone in and get an RBI or a teammate bats you in and you score a run. That’s what wins baseball games. Of course good pitching and good defense help on the other side of the ledger—those are the ingredients of keeping the *other* team from producing runs-batted-in and runs scored.

Does our giving at **Fairfield** produce hits or runs or both? You know, you can get a hit but you won’t score a run unless someone bats you in. So even if you have good *intentions* and the good *effect* of making hits there still is no guarantee of runs. Or if you come up to bat and no one is on base you can’t produce an RBI unless you hit a home run and bat yourself in! Baseball is a **team** sport and everyone needs to contribute.

And in the stewardship practiced by God’s people—we too find ourselves depending on others to be fruitful—for us to be fruitful individually as well as corporately. What do you do when you want to be fruitful and generous and yet cannot guarantee the results? You learn to live by faith.

Faith that someone else gets on base; faith that someone else will bat you in; faith that elders will distribute the funds; faith that your brothers and sisters are also giving; faith that God will give the increase... Yes, giving that counts calls for GI and GE and GF—good faith!

Christian stewardship giving bids us to give **by faith**. Faith in God and faith in people; faith in your brothers and sisters being the body of Christ.

Story: Mark & Crossover

STORY

The people at Crossover Health Clinic are the largest provider of health services to the poor in all of Virginia. This is a true story about a man named Mark, a street person, whom Dr. Dan Januzzi helped four years ago. Like many of the folks who receive help, Mark wanted somehow to say thank you to Crossover.

Recently his mother passed away and left Mark some cash and six gold coins. The coins were Mexican 50 pesos and each contains a hefty 1.2 ounces of gold. At the time they had an aggregate value of \$5000 (probably more today). Mark decided to give the gold coins to Crossover as a thank you gift. He climbed on his bike and rode over to present the gift.

The folks at Crossover have framed one of the coins and the NT passage about the widow's mite as a reminder that poor people are often not only grateful but generous too. They smile when they recall that the widow's mite passage is found in the Gospel of Mark—a reminder of their generous client and friend.