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**September 23, 2006**

**The Art of Giving**  
Mark 9:35

In December of 2005, Doug Finke wrote an article that ran on the front page of *The State Journal-Register*. It explored the charitable giving records of candidates running for political office. Eighteen politicians were asked to release copies of their 2003 Federal Income Tax returns to document their charitable donations from the previous year. Eleven of the eighteen candidates agreed to participate in this survey.

The eleven participating candidates comprised a very broad spectrum of charitable giving from a high of \$675,000 for the year to a low of \$0. The writer of the article then used the information on the tax returns to compare the giving of the candidates as a percentage of adjusted gross income. Again there was great diversity among the giving patterns of the candidates. One gave 36% of his adjusted gross income, one was at 13%, one was 12%, and the other eight averaged only 2.7%.

The most revealing part of the article came when Doug Finke asked the candidates to comment on their charitable giving patterns.

One said, 'You donate stuff to Goodwill and Salvation Army. I give to United Way and a local mental health group. I think I told my accountant to not even mess with it.' Another said, 'I still donate and give, I just don't put it on my deductions.' Another said, 'I made a series of charitable gifts throughout the year to local churches and various relief efforts, and not all of that is claimed on my taxes.' Another said, 'On a weekly basis, I put at least \$10 in the collection plate, probably more. My other contributions I really don't keep track of.'

It is easy for us to chuckle about the dissembling of politicians who are embarrassed by the level of their charitable giving. But we may want to pause and think about how generous we would appear if our tax returns were published in the newspaper. What would they say about us? What explanations would we need to give? But more than that we may also want to reflect on the important question Doug Finke's article poses. What is the relationship between leadership and giving?

This question is explored in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. There we find Jesus on the road with his disciples. Jesus is offering them a new vision of leadership that runs counter to their cultural expectations. The disciples do not know how to process Jesus' teaching. Mark tells us in this chapter that Jesus is trying a new approach in training the disciples. He is spending time with them away from the crowds in order to accomplish some intensive teaching. Away from all the distractions Jesus speaks to them about the act of self-giving that is the central event of his ministry. He tells them that he will be betrayed into the hands of people who will kill him.

The disciples do not know what to make of a messiah who sacrifices himself for the benefit of others. They have always been taught that the messiah is one who will seize power to defeat their enemies. Mark tells us that the disciples are so confused at this point that they don't even know how to question Jesus about what he has just said. But later Jesus questions them about a heated argument that

had been raging among the disciples on the last leg of the journey. Once again they communicate more by their silence than words can convey. No one wants to be first to admit that they have been arguing about the pecking order of the new kingdom. They all want to be chief of staff in the new administration. They see their relationship with Jesus as the path to power.

Jesus understands the meaning of their silence as he understands their failure to grasp the significance of his ministry. Jesus then restates the issue in a slightly different way. He points out that they are not on the path of accumulating power. They are on the path of giving themselves for God and others. He redefines their understanding of leadership by saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35)." The true leader is the one who masters the art of giving.

Our Westminster Cornerstone Campaign is an opportunity for all of us to grow in the art of giving. Members who are able to do so are asked this year to make a separate pledge for debt retirement. We are hoping over the next three years to bring to a conclusion the process of renewing this building that began in the year 2000. We need to do that to prevent the cost of interest from eating away at our program and our mission commitments.

This is a time for all of us to take stock of our overall giving as a percentage of annual income. During Westminster's major campaign of 2001, Barbara and I took our percentage giving above the 10% level for the first time. We have discovered that we can continue to do that. Next year we plan to push it up again so that we can support this debt retirement program while increasing our operating pledge by 5%. Traveling the path of stewardship with you has been, for us, a very joyful journey.

Last month Barbara and I were visiting Dover Castle on the southern coast of England. I found posted on the wall a list of Lieutenants of the castle. Because the name of one of my ancestors was on that list I pulled out my camera to take a picture of it. I was thrilled to find that record of my ancestor but I was also frustrated that his name was with a cluster of names where dates of service were not clearly delineated.

A docent in the castle noticed me taking the picture and approached to ask what I was doing. I told him that I was trying to understand the dates of my ancestor's service. He looked at the list and then spent the next fifteen minutes describing to me the historical context of my ancestor's relationship to the castle. It was the beginning of the English Civil War in 1642. The castle was held by a garrison which supported the King. But the Dover townspeople supported Parliament. Under the cover of darkness people from the town scaled the white cliffs of Dover and surprised the garrison. The townspeople then delivered the castle to Parliament. My ancestor then became the first lieutenant of the castle appointed by Parliament and not the King. When the docent finished I knew far more about this ancestor than I ever expected to know. It was a wonderful gift from a stranger who had mastered the art of giving. That is the path that Jesus invites us to travel.