

To the folks at St Mark's,

Happy stewardship season! I am still several weeks away from being there with you, but I wanted to share some encouragement and an exhortation as you all prayerfully consider your pledges for the next year.

Over the next month or so, your wardens and vestry will be putting in front of you a new-look budget for 2025. I am certain that you will have questions. I encourage you to reach out to them with those questions, and once I arrive, I am happy to share my perspective on the budget as well. Let me just say, for now, that the intent of this budget is to make as clear as possible the true operating expense of the parish. This presentation does shine a light on a few challenges but also provides the opportunity for each giver at St Mark's to intentionally participate in God's mission from this parish through their stewardship.

Be assured that, as the budget is finalized, it will be done with the full conviction of a theological principle that is taught by Jesus.

A person cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money.

Often when this teaching of Jesus is cited by preachers it is some sort of warning against greed. However, that reading completely misses the mark of what Jesus is telling his followers. He is saying something more difficult to achieve than just "don't be greedy." I believe he is exhorting people that when they are making decisions that present a seeming conflict between the bottom line and an act of mission or love, choosing the bottom line is serving money. Choosing to act on mission is serving God. Simply put: What has the most weight in your decision-making process—dollars or people? As we bring this fiscal document into balance, we need to also square it with our deep desire to serve God's mission first. It is not that there are no financial considerations, but they cannot be the most heavily weighted in our decision-making process.

As you pray on your own pledge, I want to remind you of a couple of lines from Psalm 50.

*If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.*

In this psalm, the writer is reminding those who give offerings that they are not giving them because God needs them. Later on, the writer exhorts the people not to give out of obligation, but out of thankfulness and spiritual discipline.

*Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay your vows to the Most High.*

Our stewardship should take on the same themes. God is not lacking, and our act of pledging should be done out of gratitude and as a spiritual practice.

The budget is a necessary document that helps us to be faithful with our financial resources. More importantly, your pledge is an essential practice for growth in faith. The growth occurs when we learn to give out of thankfulness, and not obligation. The growth occurs when we begin to see the ways in our life that we serve money instead of God's people and we start to act differently with our material goods.

Of course, money is only one thing we steward, but often it is a good indicator of how we steward our time and our abilities as we share with one another. Learning to pledge—anything at all—and keeping that pledge is a huge step forward for many of us. If you have taken a step like that in the past, I hope you will take a bigger one this year. If this is your first pledge season, step out in faith. In both cases, it is God's grace that will sustain you in that pledge.

In Christ,

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