

Learning to Tithe

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My mom and dad are in their late seventies, members of the generation Tom Brokaw calls the greatest, married fifty years this year, Dad a navy veteran of World War II, Mom a young woman who went to work in the bank in her North Dakota hometown while the men went to war. Good people, church people, put four kids through college, people who wouldn't want someone to write about them, draw attention to them, my mom a first generation American, the daughter of Norwegian immigrant homesteaders. Think Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* and you know what our family reunions are like.

They are the people who taught me my first lesson about stewardship. I remember our Sunday morning ritual, rushing to get all six of us to church on time, and I remember my mom pulling out the checkbook every Sunday and writing a check to our church, every Sunday.

I remember asking her once why she did it. "Do they make you do it?" I don't remember her answer, but I remember the ritual, the discipline, the commitment, kids taking turns putting the envelope in the plate. I didn't know to ask if my parents tithed, but I suspect they did: ritual, discipline, commitment. (To "tithe," by the way, is to follow the Biblical standard of giving 10% of one's income to the church.)

The next person who taught me about stewardship is my wife. When we got married I was an investment banker with a big European bank, made more money than I do now or likely ever will again, and I thought I was being pretty generous with my giving, until she came along. She was then an associate pastor in a church in the Chicago suburbs, lived next door to the church in a parsonage built in 1855, a single mom with three kids, a tither. She didn't make tithing a condition of our marriage, but it was close, and I learned again about ritual, discipline, commitment.

And when you get down to it, that's what tithing is. It's really not so much about money as it is a spiritual discipline. I once had a boss who told me that you pretty much get used to whatever your salary is after two paychecks. And he was right. After we began tithing it became automatic, every week – ritual, discipline, commitment – and to my surprise it felt good!

As a person who works with churches in all manner of stewardship issues, I always get a little queasy when I hear someone stand up and say that if you tithe you will be financially rewarded in return. It doesn't work that way. I once heard someone testify that they began enjoying financial success only after they began to tithe, and while I don't doubt that they did, I question the causal linkage. And I'm equally uneasy writing about my own experience, but I can testify that through tithing we have come to a deeper level of commitment to our church and its mission and ministry, both locally and through our connection. We are invested in the future of our church. That's the "reward."

And remembering our parents' examples, we encourage our children to tithe on their allowance and on the gifts slipped into birthday or Christmas cards.

I hope the lesson sticks. Thanks Mom.

As the stewardship voice of the Florida Conference, the Foundation is ready to help you, your family and your church with anything related to stewardship, from personal estate issues to church fundraising campaigns. Please call, click or write us at 1-800-282-8011, extension 106; www.fumf.org; or PO Box 3767, Lakeland, FL 33802.