

## HANDFULS ON PURPOSE

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Psalms 126:5-6. "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping carrying seeds to sow will return with songs of joy carrying sheaves with him."

I brought along today an illustrated sermon. I've got a bucket full of seed. I needed this to get the context of this passage of going out to sow. I'd like to present to you the theme to let the seed represent all the income we have in life. And that stewardship of the Lord's work involves us taking some of the seed and taking it out of our resources and letting it disappear from our hands. And be invested so that there will be a harvest down the road. Seed won't do any good just setting in a pail. It has to be ground into something or it has to be reinvested in the ground.

So my message today is "Handfuls on Purpose." I'm going to speak on the subject of our tithe and our financial commitment to the Lord's work.

Whenever I do this which is perhaps as much as twice a year or once a year, or sometimes once every five years, people around me who are close to me know how nervous I get on this subject because I recognize that there may be somebody in the service that hasn't been in church for five years or ten years and the last time you were in church the minister talked about money. And here you are back today and sure enough, you have the conclusion that every time you go to church all they're interested in is money. Our business manager, knowing my sensitivities on the subject said to me, "George, when you preach on salvation do you apologize?" I said no. She said, "When you preach on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ do you apologize?" No. She said, "When you preach on the inspiration of scripture and the authority of God's word do you apologize?" No. She said, "Then why do you always apologize when you're going to preach a sermon on giving? Do you believe that that's God's word? Why do you apologize? Don't apologize." I guess she's right.

Last night, I walked over to the new Orange County Center for the Performing Arts. Dazzling building. They've put 76 million dollars in that project. I haven't heard hardly any criticism of it. I would suggest to you that that is an amount more than all the churches in Costa Mesa will operate on for Lord knows how long and yet I think that the church of Jesus Christ is a better investment. That's not to diminish the arts but it's to say the church of Jesus Christ is a better investment.

I let this bucket of seed represent our income and suggest that we need to take handfuls on purpose and re-seed it in the kingdom of God.

That always raised the question, How much seed am I supposed to reinvest in the work of God?

I'm convinced that scripture tells us to begin by taking the first ten percent of our income and sowing it again in the kingdom of God. If I sow it, it is lost to me for a time. But if I do not sow it, there will not be a crop next year. There will not be a harvest.

The Bible really does each the tithe principle. There are a lot of scriptures I could take to expand this but perhaps most of all of you are familiar with them so time doesn't need to be devoted to that. Just to be said that the principle of the tithe was established first in scripture with Abraham. Genesis 14:20 when he gave a tithe, a ten percent of all he had to a man named Melchizedek who

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was at that time king of Jerusalem. His name meant “king of righteousness.” The book of Hebrews suggests that he is an analogy for us, a type of Christ. The reason why I mentioned that tithing began with Abraham was that there are some that feel that tithing is an Old Testament principle given under the law of Moses and is not binding on New Testament Christians. The Bible establishes tithing as coming 400 years before the giving of the law. It was established by the man of faith whose faith in scripture we are called to emulate.

If we believe that Jesus Christ has given us a better covenant, a better priesthood, a better sacrifice how would we want to do less under a better covenant.

Jesus himself endorsed the law of the tithe in Matthew 23 while he corrected the misinterpretation of the Pharisees who neglected justice, mercy and faith. He endorsed the principle of tithe by saying “These ought you to have done.”

When I look at the whole principle that both the Old and New Testament establishes on giving, I just want to ask you personally three practical questions. One is do you believe that tithing is taught in the Bible as a principle that we should keep?

If you’re not sure you can answer that yes, I encourage you to talk with me. I’d be happy to talk with anyone of you individually or in groups and establish a biblical base of that. I just touched it lightly this morning but there’s more to be said on the subject.

Secondly, if you believe that that is a biblical principle that is taught then do you personally tithe? The reason I raise the second question is I intellectually believe in tithing but for a time in my life I did not, as a matter of fact, tithe.

It goes back to the early years of my marriage. I was faculty member at Evangel college teaching Biblical studies. We had moved into our little apartment on campus. There were two things I think that we owned at the time. A black chair which we still have as kind of a memento of those years. And a refrigerator that I think ran on kerosene. It smelled up the apartment so bad. We’d stay away from the apartment for hours on end because the fumes were too strong. But we needed the ice box.

I was on a salary and our income was about \$6500 a year. We were just barely scraping by. We weren’t paying tithes. I remember Jewel and I had a conversation one Saturday morning because we practically dreaded going to church on Sunday and having the offering bag pass by in front of us. We decided that even if we couldn’t afford it, it was a biblical truth and we needed to start doing it. So at effort to us we began. But the Lord that first week miraculously made up the check to us. Over the course of months we were tried at various times. It wasn’t always a miraculous check in the mail. But I’ve found in my own life and I’m sure that any dedicated tither who’s practiced tithing for any period of time that I have yet to find a tither who wasn’t excited about their work for the Lord. I have yet to find anybody to regret that who was a committed disciplined tither.

God helps us to live on the 90% even better than we live on the 100%. In fact I’ve become convinced that tithing is only a beginning principle for New Testament stewardship. As our income increases rather than always letting our demands for more things increase with it maybe one of the things we ought to do as western Christians for sure is to evaluate what pace of

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lifestyle we think we need to obey God's calling in our lives. Then freeze that life style somewhat so that we can have more to invest in the work of God.

I know we've had to reach that place in our family. I am reluctant to open myself up on this part because I realize to do so is to risk not doing things in secret. But at the same time those who are in the ministry have an obligation to sometimes open the windows and let in a little role modeling. We have not really found it a need in our life over the past number of years to upgrade our housing, to upgrade our automobiles, to upgrade our clothing. We don't live any differently today than we lived 10-15 years ago. Inflation has come along and things cost more but the net result because the church has been generous with us is that we've been able now to go past the tithe and commit about a quarter of our income to the Lord's work. I hope that before I die, 80 years down the road, I'm putting about 90-95% back in. I think there's a principle. For me the most important thing in my life outside of my family is the church of Jesus Christ. I mean this church and I mean the body of Christ and it's mission world wide.

The Bible tells us to test God on the tithe. It tells us that if we sow sparingly we'll reap sparingly. If for example we just take a little bit of seed and put it in the ground we're just going to get a little bitty crop. But if we take a lot of seed we'll get a much better crop.

One other thing I think the scriptures teach about the tithe and that is to give it undivided. Malachi 3:10 says "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse." That is into the central gathering place. I've always believed that the New Testament application of Malachi is that the storehouse is where you give and receive ministry at the local church. That tithe belongs undivided and undesignated in the local church. Anything that beyond the tithe then is an offering that is free for a person to designate.

Some investments we make, God holds us responsible to where we're putting the seed. I would suggest that there are some places you ought not to put seed. To the guy who wears the hats and smokes cigars and talks about bibles and pyramids, I would not recommend that you put seed on that ground. And a few other places I can think of. Put it where you're going to get a harvest for the kingdom of God.

So the Lord tells us as a starting place in our stewardship take ten percent of our income, your allowance. I don't think there's any better place to begin tithing than when you're getting an allowance. At any age level, whatever our income level to begin with the tithe. Then as God prospers us to see if we can put more seed as an investment in his work and even give beyond the tithe. I challenge you today to an even greater level of stewardship than just the tithe. If you're not at the tithe, begin there. It's difficult to get into the switch for the first few weeks or months baptism you'll make that transition. Then God will bring you to a further point in which he'll begin stirring you up and asking you about more designations for his work and offerings for ministries and missions and the like.

I quoted the scripture from Psalm 126 "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy." I want to close this message with a story that illustrates that truth.

Del Tar is a former missionary of 14 years to west Africa. I heard he'd told this story so I called him this week. He is now president of California Theological Seminary in Fresno. I said I want to check this story for veracity. I personally don't like to tell stories that I'm not sure are true. Part of authenticity of ministry is if you're going to tell a story at least try to get the facts

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straight. He said it was true and told me where I could find it in print. He'd had it published. So I share this with you as an application of Psalm 126.

Del grew up in a preacher's home in little farming communities of Minnesota and South Dakota. He spent much of his free time with deacons kids on John Deere tractors, International Harvesters, and others. And by the way preachers kids and deacons kids can grow up serving the Lord. But Del said that in his childhood years of riding around with the deacons kids out on the farm he never once saw one of their dads going out to sow with tears. So he said I always wondered what this scripture meant, "He that goes to sow with tears shall reap with songs of joy."

He said when I finally came to understand this scripture I was out on the vast savanna of grasslands that stretches four thousand miles wide across the breadth of the continent of Africa, just below the Sahara. It's being invaded by the Sahara desert and the winds and the dryness. Some of the land is very much like the climate in Bible lands. The moisture only comes four months a year – May, June, July and August. I was there in August. I remember driving into the capital, a city of 750,000 people. It was raining that day and it was Africa-cold, about 65 degrees. When we checked into the hotel I went up to the room and tried to find where you turn the heat on. I couldn't find it. I came to my cousin who is a life long resident of west Africa. I asked where is the thermostat for the heat. He started laughing, he thought it was so funny. He said why would you want heat? When in the summer it gets 135 degrees here. It happened that I was there on the coldest day of the year. You don't need heat.

After August, not a drop of rain falls for the next 8 months. The ground begins to crack with dryness and your hands and your feet if you're out in it crack as well. The winds off the Sahara blow the dust and swirl it thousands of feet up into the air. It gets into your mouth, it gets into your system, it gets inside your watch and stops it. If you have a refrigerator it gets inside of it. the dust has a way of getting everywhere.

The year's supply of food must also be grown in these four months of wet season. People grow sorghum and milo out in the fields. Fields not larger than this sanctuary is. They do it the Africa way. Not with great equipment but with their back and a short hoe. Their annual income is \$80-100 a year. October and November, Del says, these are the beautiful months. The grainiers are full. The harvest has come. People sing and dance. They eat 2 meals a day. One at about 10 in the morning after a morning work in the fields. The other they eat just after sundown. They take sorghum and grind it between two stones to make flour which becomes a mush with the consistency of yesterday's Cream of Wheat. I've seen the Africa women out there doing this and eating this. The sticky mush is eaten hot. They take little balls of it and dip it in a sauce and pop it in their mouth. They eat their second meal after sundown before they go to bed at night so that they may sleep with their stomach's comfortable.

Then December comes. The grainiers start to recede. Many families begin to omit the morning meal. By January, Del says, and this is before the days of the famine relief, by January not one family in fifty is still eating two meals a day. By February the evening meal diminishes. People feel the clutch of hunger again. The meal shrinks even more. During March children succumb to sickness because you don't do well on half a meal a day. Del says that of all the months in the Africa season that haunt his memory it is the month of April because April in the Africa dust is quiet. There's no jet engines. There's no automobiles. There's no machinery. There's no traffic noses to break the stillness. You can hear the slightest sound and you can hear the babies crying in the villages down the way at night. Crying because their mother's milk has

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ceased and because they do not have food. He says parents go at this time of the year to the bush country where they scrape bark from certain trees, they dig up roots, they collect leaves, they grind it all together to make a thin gruel. If they have something left to barter like a chair or a cooking pot or some bicycle tires and if they can find somebody who still has some grain they will trade in what they have to get some precious grain.

Then Del says inevitably it happens. A 6 or 7 year old Africa boy begins to excitedly call, "Daddy! Daddy!" And he runs up to his daddy and say, "We've got grain!" His father looks at him and says, "Son, you know we're out of grain." "No, daddy! Out in the shed where we keep the goats. I found a leather bag that's hanging up on the wall and I reached my hand into it and it's filled with grain. Tell mommy to get the grain and grind it and we'll have some meal and our bellies will sleep tonight." Del says that the African father will look down at his son and say, "Son, we cannot take the grain. That is our seed for next year's crop. That's all that stands between us and starvation. We cannot eat it." Del says the rains finally arrive in May and when they do the young boy watches as his father takes the sack from the wall and does the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family he goes into the field, Del says he's seen this many times, where the father with tears streaming down his face takes his precious seed and throws it away. Why does he do this? Why does he scatter the seed? It's because he believe in the harvest. And he knows if he doesn't seed the ground there will not be a harvest.

The seed is his. He owns it. He can do anything he wants with it. But the act of sowing is so profound a moment in his life that he weeps. Del says that when Africa preachers preach on this psalm, 126, they say things like, "Brothers and sisters, this is God's law of the harvest. Don't expect to rejoice later on unless you've been willing to sow in tears."

It's interesting that Paul's comments in 2 Corinthians 9 on giving is linked to this very idea where he commends the Macedonians who have given out of their poverty and he teaches the principle that "He who sows sparingly will reap sparingly but he who sows liberally will reap liberally." There is a kind of sowing that is a sowing out of abundance. I've done that. I've given money out of the kingdom of God and to the church when I had it to give. But it's quite another thing when they that go forth in tears – oh, Lord, is my commitment to you at such a point in my life that I'm willing to release what is precious to me because I believe there's a harvest.

When I give to the kingdom of God it's not just an act that ends there with a gift. I believe I am planting for the future church and for outreach and for mission to this community and to all the world. I believe in that with all my heart. So I choose to give handfuls on purpose. Not giving just because I'm emotionally moved or periodically moved or my senses are stimulated. But I recognize the principle established in scripture of sowing and harvesting. If here's to be a harvest, someone has got to be sowing. And if you sow, God promises us in his word to put him to the test and see if he will not provide for us and sustain us and bless us in the process.

So I ask you if you've not yet made a commitment in your life to what I would call intentional Christianity that is making a decision to make specific commitments to the Lord's work that one of the aspects of being a purposeful disciple of Jesus Christ is regularly committing the beginning of your income, the top of it, the tenth of it to the Lord. And doing it systematically and faithfully as an investment in his harvest.

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Our Father, we come to the close of this time today with a commitment that is in all of our hearts to say Lord, everything we have is yours. We are yours. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." But sometimes, Lord, you ask us to more narrowly specifically what we mean because we find it easier to say everything is yours. And find it more difficult to say the first tenth is yours. So help us, Lord, to stay away from the pious spiritualities and generalities of our life and make the kind of commitments that are nuts and bolts faith, practical faith, faith that has definite commitment to it. Shape and form and texture and size. You looked upon the fields that were white and ready to harvest. We look upon the community that we live, Lord, in the same way. In order to gain the harvest we're always involved in seeding. Part of that seed is the investment of our life. Part of it is the investment of our funds. I pray for those, Lord, who know the time has come to begin this pathway of discipleship in tithing. Give them the courage. I know that you will more than meet the test. For you have invited us in this matter to prove you and to see if you would not pour out a blessing upon us that we would not be able to contain. I believe, Lord, that you will do that for us. I believe that you will give to each one faith and strength to even go beyond that. Give us, Lord, this treasured spiritual experience of even sowing with tears. Knowing that we will reap with joy. Thank you, Lord, for your word today. In Jesus' name. Amen.