

“Stepping In”  
1 Kings 17:8-16  
February 12, 2017

Several years ago an agent for the Internal Revenue Service went to visit a man in California who appeared to have a rather odd tax return. His income was under \$10,000 and he claimed to have given \$1,248 – about 13% of his income – to his church. While he was certainly within the 20% limit, which apparently is the level that can call for an investigation, the agent thought that it still looked very suspicious. So he went to visit the man and asked to see the documentation that would support his offerings to the church. The man provided all of the appropriate documentation, even though the agent continued to question the man about his church offerings for quite a while. Finally, the agent realized that the man was telling the truth and apologized for bothering him, but he explained that he was required to check on deductions that seemed unusually high. As the agent was leaving, the man invited him to his church. The agent said, “Thank you, but I already belong to a church.” “Oh, excuse me,” replied the man, “but that possibility never occurred to me.” As the agent drove home, he kept wondering what the man meant by that last remark. But it wasn’t until Sunday morning when the agent put in his usual offering at his church – about 1% of his income – that he finally understood. He had never given sacrificially to God, even though God had sacrificed tremendously for him.

Sacrificial giving is linked to trust – trusting in God to provide and to meet all of our needs, and this is seen dramatically in our Old Testament lesson for today. In this text God sent Elijah to see a widow in the city of Zarephath and God told him that this widow would care for him. Now, to understand this story in all of its fullness, we need to know that there was a great famine and drought that was taking place in the land and it had been going on now for 3 years. Also, it is important to understand that widows in those days were the lowest people on the totem pole. Their husbands did not have retirement accounts, there was no social security for them, and people did not have canned food stored in their homes. As a result, widows were usually poor as they had no one to provide for them. So when God told Elijah to go to a city and see a widow who would take care of him, that had to sound unusual to Elijah. I’m sure he thought, “A widow is going to provide for me?” But, as always, God already had everything figured out. There is nothing that happens in life that surprises God. In other words, God will never look at a situation and say, “Wow, I never saw that coming.”

Plus, this widow has a son she is caring for; and yet somehow she has managed to survive this famine up to this point. So Elijah goes to the city as God commanded him, he sees a widow gathering sticks, and says to her in Verses 10-11, “Please bring me some water to drink and some bread to eat.” Now this had to sound outrageous to her. This lady had nothing left. She knows she is not going to make it. In Verse 12, it says that things are so bad that she has decided to make one last meal for her and her son, and then she is going to die. Can you imagine that? I’m sure we have all experienced discouragement and disappointment, maybe even disaster in our lives, but this widow has no hope of survival. She is so poor that she is certain she is going to die. She has got to be scared. But then God, through Elijah, makes this promise to her in Verses 13-14 saying, “Do not fear. Go and make that last meal, but before you do make a meal for me, because this is what God is saying to you: That handful of flour in your jar will not run out, and that oil will not run dry, you will have food every day until this famine is over.”

Now that had to sound ridiculous. There is no way any rational human being, looking at what she had left and knowing there is no more food in the region, would have believed those words. But God was working on her heart and she takes a huge leap of faith. She trusts that outrageous promise. She acted as though the flour and oil would last forever, and that is the very essence of faith – “being certain of what we do not see” as it says in Hebrews 11. This widow had faith. She trusted in the word of God to provide and that word came true for her. Can you relate to that kind of trust and sacrificial giving? Have you experienced the extreme happiness of a deep love for God in which giving becomes a source of joy and not a duty?

At the end of the Old Testament, God said in the book of Malachi 3:10, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.” This is the only place in Scripture where God invites us to test Him. It is the only place where God says test me, try me, and see if I am not faithful. God makes this promise to all of us. Why? Because when it comes to our money, when it comes to what we have to survive on, we tend to measure that very carefully. But why does

God ask us to test Him on something we can measure so carefully? In other places in Scripture where He asks us to trust Him, we can't measure it.

For example, He asks us to trust Him for the forgiveness of sin, but we can't see it. We may feel like the guilt is lifted, but we can't measure it. He asks us to trust Him for eternal life, but no one has ever come back from the dead to tell us what happens. But we know dollars and cents, and yet God says that He is going to give us 100% of everything we have and He asks us to give back to Him a portion of what He has given to us, and then says in Malachi I want you to live on 90% of what I give you. Now that sounds crazy, because for many people 100% is never quite enough as they struggle to make ends meet. But God says I'm going to make 90% end up being more than 100% ever was – test me on this. God doesn't need our money, but He does desire our trust. As you walk with Him and trust His promise that may not make a lot of sense, but your faith will grow stronger and stronger. The promise made in Malachi is the same one made in 1 Kings 17 to this widow. God says, "Take an irrational leap of faith and put your trust in my promises, because nothing is impossible for God."

I want you to hear from someone today who made an irrational leap of faith at one time in her life. Several years ago many of you may remember that we had a special "Miracle Sunday" offering to help our members and our missionaries in need. The housing crisis had hit this area, several of our members had lost their jobs, and many people were hurting. So we did a special offering in which our goal was to raise \$40,000 in cash on one day. After we collected that offering in some special boxes in the sanctuary, I then announced to the congregation that if you have a financial need then go and take as much money as you need from those boxes. If you have financial blessings, then give again or give more, but if you have a need, then take whatever you need. No one will know if you are giving or taking, it's the same hand motions. Many people came forward that day to give and take. We raised about \$60,000 that day and we eventually gave it all away to those who were struggling. We tested God and He provided. One person who had needs at the time, but decided to test God, was Chris Michetti, and I would like to invite her to come forward to tell you how God provided for her when she trusted Him.

Our "Building To Serve" campaign is not about money, it's about faith. It's about stepping in to the joys and challenges we experience each day and trusting God to provide for us as we live sacrificially. So as you leave here today, consider: Do others see in you a love for Christ that will encourage them in their faith? And are you ready to step in and to trust God in all areas of your life?