

THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S - The Midas Trap and How to Avoid it - Part three

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IS IT GOOD OR BAD WHEN I CAN GIVE TO MY CHURCH AND STILL AFFORD EVERYTHING I WANT?

TEXT NUMBER ONE:

1 Chronicles 21:18-27 - "Now the angel of the LORD had commanded Gad to say to David that David should go up and raise an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. [19] So David went up at Gad's word, which he had spoken in the name of the LORD. [20] Now Ornan was threshing wheat. He turned and saw the angel, and his four sons who were with him hid themselves. [21] As David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David and went out from the threshing floor and paid homage to David with his face to the ground. [22] And David said to Ornan, "Give me the site of the threshing floor that I may build on it an altar to the LORD—give it to me at its full price—that the plague may be averted from the people." [23] Then Ornan said to David, "Take it, and let my lord the king do what seems good to him. See, I give the oxen for burnt offerings and the threshing sledges for the wood and the wheat for a grain offering; I give it all." [24] But King David said to Ornan, "No, but I will buy them for the full price. *I will not take for the LORD what is yours, nor offer burnt offerings that cost me nothing.*" [25] So David paid Ornan 600 shekels of gold by weight for the site. [26] And David built there an altar to the LORD and presented burnt offerings and peace offerings and called on the LORD, and the LORD answered him with fire from heaven upon the altar of burnt offering. [27] Then the LORD commanded the angel, and he put his sword back into its sheath."

We are picking up the end of a fascinating story with our teaching text. The background is important. David sinned by numbering the fighting men of Israel (and Judah). In an account bearing slight resemblance to Gideon and his need to be purged from self-reliance against his enemy, it seems David should have trusted in the unchanging source of his strength, the Lord of hosts.

David refuses the advice of his godly advisors to *not* take the census and so displays a lack of trust in the Lord. He is a wealthy, powerful man, can do whatever he wants, and *puts his own interests first*. No acts of immorality are committed. No idols are erected. No words of blasphemy are spoken. *David puts his own interests first. He is at the peak of his game in ambition and influence. He has huge military resources and he knows it. He does what he wants because he has the power and the means to do it.*

The parallel account of this event in **2 Samuel 24** reveals that after taking his census, to his credit, David's heart was repentant *before* God confronted him with punishment for his sin. That's important because it shows the nature of a repentant heart. It's not the *consequences* of his sin that trouble David. He hasn't heard them yet. It's the broken *relationship* with God he can't live with. That's the only authentically spiritual starting place in dealing with sin. See how this unfolds in **2 Samuel**:

2 Samuel 24:10-13 - "But *David's heart struck him after he had numbered the people*. And David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O LORD, please take away the iniquity of your servant, for I have done very foolishly." [11] And when David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, [12] "Go and say to David, 'Thus says the LORD, Three things I offer you. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you.'" [13] So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, "Shall three years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me."

Back to our **1 Chronicles** text. David makes his decision and God judges:

1 Chronicles 21:13-17 - "Then David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Let me fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is very great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man." [14] So the LORD sent a pestilence on Israel, and

70,000 men of Israel fell. [15] And God sent the angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, but as he was about to destroy it, the LORD saw, and he relented from the calamity. And he said to the angel who was working destruction, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the LORD was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. [16] And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces. [17] And David said to God, "Was it not I who gave command to number the people? It is I who have sinned and done great evil. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand, O LORD my God, be against me and against my father's house. But do not let the plague be on your people."

It is interesting that David chooses *divine* punishment over *human*. Perhaps he knows how human judgment can overstep the bounds of justice through sinful anger, revenge and bitterness. Seventy thousand men die and the text hints there was more judgment about to come. Verse 15 presents some terrifying words wrapped up in a lot of unexplainable mystery - "And God sent the angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, but as he was about to destroy it, the LORD saw, and he relented from the calamity. And he said to the angel who was working destruction, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the LORD was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite."

This whole story seems to reek with *Old Testament* divine wrath. We all feel the truth of those haunting words, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." And we need to remind ourselves those are *New Testament* words (**Hebrews 10:31**).

Even this all-too-quick over-view helps bring our morning text into clearer focus. Context matters. David gets *into* this mess by **putting himself first** because he can. And now we're in a better position to understand his present passion that he *cannot* - he *dare not* - come to this fresh altar of forgiveness and restoration and put himself first again. There simply must be *sacrifice*. There must be *cost*. Only sacrifice can provide the adequate counterweight for the selfish imbalance in human heart. An *apology* isn't enough. *Selfishness* must be turned back. *Self-reliance* must be exposed and confronted. And this new altar he is about to purchase is the place for this surgical alteration.

Now you and I aren't kings and queens of a theocratic nation. And we aren't building altars upon which we will butcher animals so blood can be shed for the pardoning of our sins. That once-for-all sacrifice for sin has been divinely provided in the physical death of God the Son on the cross. So it might appear there is little application to be found in this ancient account of David and the purchasing of land for the construction of this altar.

But this would be moving too quickly. True enough, we need offer no sacrifices for the atoning of our sins. But we still face some of King David's same disease in our own beings. David's *position* and David's *resources* make it possible for him to take care of almost all his needs. He has much in terms of both wealth and power. He relishes counting off 1.1 million soldiers at his disposal. All of them there to protect David's empire.

That makes it hard for him to escape the kind of *independence and greed* that accompanies such calculation. And he knows he *needs something in his worship to train him in denying self in the rest of his life*. He doesn't need to sacrifice to buy forgiveness. He needs to sacrifice to keep himself safe from corruption.

Ornan thinks he's doing David a great service - **1 Chronicles 21:23** - "Then Ornan said to David, "Take it, and let my lord the king do what seems good to him. See, I give the oxen for burnt offerings and the threshing sledges for the wood and the wheat for a grain offering; I give it all."

But this won't help David one bit. This would be more of the same uncostly mind-set that *got David into this mess!* David doesn't need to be easily taking more *in*. He needs to be *untangling his soul by sacrificially giving more out*.

David is re-enforcing the necessity of sacrifice. Not sacrifice for *pardon*, but sacrifice for *protection*. David is learning again the importance of *guarding his own heart from the deadly weight of abundance*.

TEXT NUMBER TWO:

Malachi 1:8 and 14 - "When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts....[14] Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations."

Yes. For those who think we've erred here I have deliberately left out the classic "***you have robbed God,***" passage. There is a tighter link with David's uncostly sacrifice issue in these two verses from the prophet Malachi. God's people have not always been as quick to spot the wickedness of giving sacrifices to God in less sacrificial ways.

The ***giving*** is still there. As with David's altar purchase, it's the ***sacrifice*** of the gift that becomes the issue. These verses are God's words to people who were alert to the issue of ***bringing their offering*** but not honoring the principle of ***sacrifice***. They knew what was required. God wanted the finest male from the flock. And that's what they ***pretended*** to be giving. But what they were actually offering was the blind and the lame. They couldn't sell them for as much anyway.

Please notice the searching question in **verse 8** - "***When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor?*** says the LORD of hosts." They were more mindful of their appearance and acceptance with other people than obedience to an ***invisible*** God. The people were more ***real*** in effecting their actions than God. And it was what they did with their material goods that ***revealed*** that fact.

So how much does that matter? And why does God ***need*** the best of the flock anyway? What's He going to do with it? God is a spirit and doesn't eat meat. So why is He so adamant about the ***costly*** offering?

First, in one sense, those sacrifices had to be perfect because they pictured the perfect One who would be the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the whole world. But there is something else here too. Just as with David, our hearts not only need ***cleansing***. They need ***protecting***. Self-sufficiency and materialism are ***deadly*** to spiritual life and wholeness. So God prescribes worship patterns like a doctor prescribes medicine - "***Don't bring anything uncostly. Not for my sake. But for yours.***"

Every day you and I have the chance for easy giving to the Lord. We can get receipts. So the gift doesn't cost as much as it might. We can give to the Lord because we're going to have to part with it anyway - "Either I give it to the church or the government gets it." We can see to it that all of our needs and desires are put first, leaving what we feel is affordable to the Lord and His work. Sometimes we can set up such standards of living for ourselves that we virtually ***insure*** that there won't be enough money to cover even ***our*** needs, let alone do something truly sacrificial for ***Christ's church***.

And all of the above situations evade or ignore the real issue. At what point will I learn that God is actually asking that I put myself ***second*** and Him ***first?*** At what point will I grasp that I'm actually being asked to ***scale down*** what I spend on myself so I can have ***more*** for the ongoing work of the Lord?

Finally, we need to see if this concept of God delighting in the offering of sacrifice carries over into the New Testament and the teaching of our Lord.

TEXT NUMBER THREE:

Mark 12:41-44 - "And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. [42] And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. [43] And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. [44] For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she

out of her poverty has put in everything she had, *all she had to live on.*”

That *forty-first verse* seems almost impolite to modern givers. Jesus seems to deliberately seat Himself so he can see who is putting what into the offering. So much for Jesus not caring about our money.

By any human reckoning the rich had put in far more than this widow. That’s why we need Jesus’ perspective. He tells us how **God** assesses gifts. The poor widow put in more because her gift was *sacrificial*. She put in all she had to live on. She could not do *more* than what she did.

Whether we’re ready for it or not, God dishes up a truth that stuns us. **God measures our giving not by what we put in the plate, but by what we keep for ourselves.** Which is another way of saying He measures our gifts by our sacrifice. And for the same abiding reason that stands throughout the Old Testament and the New. It’s true for Kings and it’s true for poor widows. **All** need to sacrifice to protect our hearts from spiritual life’s greatest silent killer.

Understand. I don’t mean we can’t spend our money on nice things. And yes, I suppose we all have that spiritual gift of setting material standards for *other* people. But all of that being said, it’s impossible to skate around this solid Biblical principle that we endanger our own souls when we don’t have to alter our personal consumption when we give sacrificially to the Lord. The sacrifice must be *proportional* to my rate of self spending. In other words, my giving to the **Lord** is proportionate to my giving to *myself*.

You can’t *pray* a greedy heart away. God’s appointed means is regular, self-negating, life-style altering giving. It’s as important to your soul as your devotions.