

“WHAT’S IN YOUR HAND?”

by Rom A. Pegram (6/5/16)

Today, I continue on in our teaching on vision with this story: Some time ago now, I attended a Clergy Day at St. Paul’s UMC in Steven’s Point, at the invitation of my bishop. The guest speaker, Pastor Rudy Rasmus from St. John’s UMC Houston, asked at one point where the deepest hurts were in our congregations today; in other words, where are people’s deepest struggles? Where are they *not* experiencing hope? The overwhelming answer from my colleagues was this: **People are over-extended—period.** They are over-extended on time, energy, and finances ... *especially finances!*

But, is this God’s plan or God’s vision for our lives? We’ve been talking about vision for a few weeks now, and by now we should realize that if it’s God’s vision it should infiltrate every area of our lives—individually and together. So, if people are struggling because they’re over-extended in all these areas, is this God’s vision for our lives as his children? Is it God’s desire for his children to be stressed out over what he gives us to manage ... or be stewards of? Listen to today’s scripture and let’s see what Moses learned about what he was taking care of for God (Exodus 4:1-12, NLT)...

But Moses protested again, “What if they won’t believe me or listen to me? What if they say, ‘The LORD never appeared to you?’”² Then the LORD asked him, “What is that in your hand?” “A shepherd’s staff,” Moses replied.³ “Throw it down on the ground,” the LORD told him. So Moses threw down the staff, and it turned into a snake! Moses jumped back.⁴ Then the LORD told him, “Reach out and grab its tail.” So Moses reached out and grabbed it, and it turned back into a shepherd’s staff in his hand.⁵ “Perform this sign,” the LORD told him. “Then they will believe that the LORD, the God of their ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—really has appeared to you.”⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Now put your hand inside your cloak.” So Moses put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out again, his hand was white as snow with a severe skin disease.⁷ “Now put your hand back into your cloak,” the LORD said. So Moses put his hand back in, and when he took it out again, it was as healthy as the rest of his body.⁸ The LORD said to Moses, “If they do not believe you and are not convinced by the first miraculous sign, they will be convinced by the second sign.⁹ And if they don’t believe you or listen to you even after these two signs, then take some water from the Nile River and pour it out on the dry ground. When you do, the water from the Nile will turn to blood on the ground.”¹⁰ But Moses pleaded with the LORD, “O Lord, I’m not very good with words. I never have been, and I’m not now, even though you have spoken to me. I get tongue-tied, and my words get tangled.”¹¹ Then the LORD asked Moses, “Who makes a person’s mouth? Who decides whether people speak or do not speak, hear or do not hear, see or do not see? Is it not I, the LORD?”¹² Now go! I will be with you as you speak, and I will instruct you in what to say.”

Talk about an overwhelming responsibility! Moses was being called on to lead (be a steward of) God’s people, taking them out of Egypt, to lead them through a barren wilderness, with the hope of someday coming to a promised land—a land of milk and

honey. But, he had a good number of them who *didn't want to be led*. Moses had a good number of them who *didn't really want change* in their lives. Moses had several who *wanted to just do things their own way*; they were not concerned at all with what God wanted from them. It wasn't an easy congregation; but God had called Moses to 'manage' them, so to speak. He was to be a steward of all that God had given him to be responsible for. Was he stressed out? Well, the way it sounds in this scripture, *just a bit...*

- Verse 1 - But Moses protested again, "What if they won't believe me or listen to me? What if they say, 'The LORD never appeared to you?'"
- Verse 10 - But Moses pleaded with the LORD, "O Lord, I'm not very good with words. I never have been, and I'm not now, even though you have spoken to me. I get tongue-tied, and my words get tangled."

You and I might have been a little stressed out, too... But, **HERE IS WHAT WE NEED TO LISTEN TO TODAY:** *What was God's response to Moses' stress?* Did he want Moses to be stressed out over what he'd given him to manage? **NO!** God wanted Moses to experience freedom in his life of stewardship ... *by doing things God's way!*

Folks, if we are truly living in a time where one of our deepest hurts is that we are over-extended in so many ways, that means that something is 'out of balance.' And, most likely, we're not doing things God's way—the way that leads to **PEACE ... and FREEDOM ... and TRUE SECURITY!** I truly believe God wants all of us—his kids—to experience freedom in every area of our lives—including the handling of money. And if we do that, we're going to experience freedom in other areas of our lives too. How's that? It's all connected; for followers of Christ, stewardship is simply a part of our discipleship. It's a spiritual thing, not just a monetary thing. So, let me get into it today... If a life of freedom is something you desire, it requires this:

WE HAVE TO BE TOTALLY DEVOTED TO THE RIGHTFUL OWNER! Being totally devoted to God may require ... **A SERIES OF CONVERSIONS.**

I believe there is only one new birth in life—a time where we personally turn our entire life (as much as we know about it) over to Jesus Christ, asking him to be our Lord and Savior, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, and having made available to us all the resources of heaven. There's only one new birth. But, there are probably many conversions that one goes through during a lifetime. Let me explain with a conversion that Jane and I have been through...

On June 3rd (a couple days ago), Jane and I celebrated 38 years of marriage. When we were first married, both of us had experienced a new birth. We had both given our lives to Jesus Christ—totally, to the best of our knowledge at that time. We both had the gift of the Holy Spirit and the resources of heaven available to us. But, we were *not* able to tap into those resources and reach our potential in our marriage because our practices within the relationship had not yet been converted into the type of marriage God promises; this went on for a few decades of marriage. We needed to practice God's

perspective of marriage—doing it God’s way—before the resources of the Holy Spirit could be released for God’s blessing in our relationship. In other words, we were sitting on those resources for several years ... until we experienced a relational conversion... It’s a process—learning to do things in life, God’s way...

That’s kind of like many people are today with their finances; they’ve become slaves financially. We have been born again ... and have all of the resources of the Holy Spirit in our lives, but those resources cannot be released until we are converted ... financially. A conversion in our finances means ... we will change our thinking and our practice to the thinking and practice of Jesus. I will say this for Jane and me today: We are in the midst of this conversion! *We have tithed all of our lives ...* but we still had some thinking that needed to be converted—to begin to think and act in our financial lives in ways that God would be pleased with. So, *a series of conversions may be necessary for us to be totally devoted to the rightful owner!* What type of conversion do you need today? And...

Being totally devoted to God will require ...THE RECOGNITION OF RIGHTFUL OWNERSHIP. Exodus 4:2 shows God calling Moses to a place of conversion in his life, to a higher place in his life... What does God ask Moses? **“What is in your hand?”** Folks, that staff in Moses hand represented his skills and talents and all of his experience, which is the package that God had given him to make a living and a life. Everything that Moses needed for freedom in his life ... was right there in his hand! And it’s the same with us: God isn’t asking us to come up with something ‘extra’ to be obedient to him; everything we need for freedom—even *financial freedom*—in our lives ... is already right there in our hands. So, hear me! God isn’t looking for something ‘extra’; he’s just looking at what’s already in your hands ... and he wants to bless it! If you want to experience a life of freedom, it’s going to take *a total devotion to the rightful owner!* Finally, it’s also going to take this:

WE HAVE TO TAKE ... OUR RESPONSIBILITY OF TRUST! Trusting God for his promises IS *our responsibility!* And we’ll be held accountable for this ‘trust’...

So, how much of who we are and what we are belongs to God? ‘Everything, right? Sometimes, Christians make the mistake of thinking that the tithe (the *first* ten percent of our earned income) belongs to God ... and the rest is ours, but that’s where we get into trouble. Psalm 24:1 (NLT) says, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him.” So, it’s really all his. God asks for a tithe (the *first* ten percent of our earned income) to come into the Temple (the Church), the rest being ours to *manage*. This is what Jesus was talking about with the Rich Young Ruler—he didn’t want him homeless or in the poorhouse, but he did want him to realize who the rightful owner of all that he had was...

So, the tithe is really a part of how we’re supposed to handle *all* that God has given to us—all that is God’s anyway. *God’s instructions to give, by the way, are really relational—not so much financial.* But, God gives us promises about handling things this

way, if we are obedient. What promises am I speaking of? Look with me at the prophet Malachi (last book in the Old Testament), Chapter 3, and verse 10 (NLT), where it says:

Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, "I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!

Do you believe this? 'Two things I really want to ask here: Do you believe this promise of God? Will you put your faith in this promise?

There's a difference between 'belief' and 'faith.' Did you know that? Belief is important, but that can't be the end of it ... for disciples. As my father used to say, "Even Satan believes!" The difference is Satan won't put his faith in God and God's promises. But, here, God calls us to. What does God say? Bring me your tithes! Put me to the test! If you haven't ever brought yourself to the point of tithing, you've never really 'tested' God like he's asked us to! So, my *questions* still remain (and you have to ask yourself both):

- Do you believe this promise of God?
- Will you put your faith in this promise (in other words, will your life show it)?

Remember, *God isn't calling you to release what you don't have; he's only calling you to release what you do have.* And, the relational principle at work here is this: We must release [our ownership over] something ... before God can increase it. *We must release it ... before God can increase it!* As my dad used to say, "You give God the left-overs, that's exactly what you're going to get back!" It's relational, isn't it? And God can't increase his vision for our lives—all of our lives—unless we're willing to get the relationship right, to put our faith in him...

Folks, let me be clear that I'm not talking about an investment plan here; I'm talking about a relationship ... where the more we trust God—really put our faith in God's promises, the more God trusts us ... with responsibility in his kingdom! God doesn't want us to be financially free ... to do with the extra what we want; God wants us to be financially free ... to serve him as *he* wants! Oswald Chambers says it this way:

"The promises of God are of no value to us until, through obedience, we come to understand the nature of God."

Keeping in mind that God has a vision for our church, let me ask you: WHAT'S IN YOUR HAND? God doesn't expect you to do something with what you *don't* have; but, God does expect you to do something with (and bless) what you *do* have! Are you willing to trust God for that? Are you willing to put your faith into action and let God know: "I not only believe in your promise ... but I'm going to TRUST your promise to me as well!"

So, how faithful will we be to God's vision for our lives—including our financial lives? That *will* make a difference in God's vision for this entire community of faith being realized here in Lomira and beyond. However, I also believe this. This church is going to move ahead with what God wants accomplished here one way or another; if we (you and me) are *not* obedient to all that God is calling us to ... including our financial lives, *God will send us those who will be ...* and God's work *will* be done! But, folks, the reason I'm preaching the truth I am today is because ... I don't want anyone to miss out on God's very best! And God doesn't either...

A few weeks ago, I gave you a simple definition of what vision is: "Vision is simply hope with a blueprint." Next week, we begin to unfold that blueprint...