

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



## **“Thank You for the Opportunity”**

**Remarks by Mel Williams**

**Stewardship Dinner**

**November 15, 2010**

---

I'm honored to be here, and I thank you for the opportunity to spend some time with some first-class Presbyterians. Joe and I have been friends since we played basketball at Yale Divinity School in the late 1960's. I've always thought we need to get Presbyterians and Baptists together. After all, I married a Presbyterian. Jan was a member of Joe's former church in Atlanta, and I've found that putting Presbyterians and Baptists together is a great combination.

Now let me get started with a children's song I learned many years ago. It centers on love and money—which is the theme (I hope) of this gathering. Listen carefully to the words.

Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away.  
Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more.  
It's just like a magic penny. Hold it tight and you won't have any.  
Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many they'll roll all over the floor.  
For—love is something if you give it away....

The giving of money can be an expression of both love and gratitude!

I'm honored to be with you tonight to talk about giving money away—the Ministry of Money. I grew up in a family where we had very little money, so we talked about money a lot. (Somewhere I read that wealthy families don't talk about money; but poor families talk about money all the time.) As I was growing up, my father would tell us exactly what every item cost. Many times I sat down at the table when he would show us his pay check alongside a stack of bills. We knew

exactly where the family money went, and the first check written was to the church.

Through the years, I've noticed that in church, we either don't talk about money, hoping that the church budget will magically be pledged, or... we banter and make jokes about money—to lighten the mood.

You've likely heard some of the jokes. God loves a cheerful giver, but God will also accept money from a grouch.

There's good news and bad news about the stewardship campaign. The good news is that we have all the money we need to meet the budget. The bad news is that it's still in your pocket.

I believe that the high point of every worship service is not the sermon and not the music—it's the offering. Why? At the offering we give ourselves to God; and a major symbol of our giving is money. Yes, we give our time and talent, but money represents our life energy—the work we do to produce income. At the offering we give back to God our life energy.

We give to God's work out of gratitude. I believe that when we put our pledge in the offering plate, as you will do next Sunday, we are in essence saying, "Thank you, God, for the opportunity to give to your work!" Gratitude!

Years ago I listened to a university fund raiser say that when a need is presented to a potential donor, and the donor feels a genuine connection to that need, they will inevitably thank you for the opportunity to give. The goal of stewardship is for all of us to say "Thank you for the opportunity to give to this church's ministry."

I'm convinced that the giving of our money to God's work is a matter of spiritual health. The central issue of giving is our own spiritual life. In this culture, money is a god—an idol. Our mutual friend, Haywood Holderness, likes to remind us that we need to be liberated from our money so it will cease to be an idol.

As we move up the economic ladder, there's a danger that comes with affluence. Affluent living can lead to an illness called "affluenza." I'm saying that our spiritual health is tied to our giving. To be spiritually healthy, we give—out of gratitude. Generosity and spiritual health grow out of gratitude.

I've learned this lesson through a variety of experiences, including some adventures with my car. You may not know that for 25 years, I drove a 1974 yellow Volkswagen Beetle. I drove that car 500,000 miles. It was a wonderful car. I was attached to it; but at times I found myself beside the road in what they now call a "disabled vehicle."

One day I was coming back from a trip to South Carolina, and I had just passed through Charlotte when my car died. It just quit. There I sat on the side of I-85 with traffic whizzing by. I had no cell phone, so I sat and waited. In about 10 minutes a purple VW came screeching to a halt just in front of my car. A young man, a total stranger, got out and said, "How can I help?" I told him I didn't know what was wrong, but it could be the fuel pump.

He went back over to his car, rummaged through his back seat, and pulled out a fuel pump and a batch of wrenches. In 15 or 20 minutes, he had replaced the fuel pump and cleaned out the gas line. He started the car and said, "I think it will be fine now." I was elated, and I felt much gratitude, so I handed him a check. He said, "I don't want any money." I insisted that he accept the check, and I asked if he liked tomatoes. When he said yes, I reached in my back seat and handed him a sack of tomatoes from my father's South Carolina garden. We chatted, I thanked him and handed him a card with my name and the address of the church.

The story did not end there. The next week in the church office, the financial secretary came to me and said that we had received a check in the mail signed by someone named "Sidney Hancock." She asked if I knew him. I thought for a moment and said, "Yes! He's the young man who was my Good Samaritan by the side of the road."

Sidney Hancock had sent a check to the church for double the amount that I had given him beside the road. When I called to thank him, I said, "This is an amazing gift." He said, "Well, I wanted to give the money to your church. Maybe it will sow a seed that will grow." I had goosebumps. I'm telling you the story so that seed can continue to grow—the seed of grateful generosity—at First Presbyterian and Watts Street Baptist Church. Gratitude and generosity go hand in hand.

How can we deepen our gratitude and our generosity? It's a spiritual matter. Martin Luther said, "There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, of the mind, and of the purse." I don't think we are fully converted until heart, mind, and pocketbook are all intimately involved in our commitment. Sam

Houston of Texas, a Baptist, said, “When I got baptized, my pocketbook got baptized too.”

Joe Harvard and I met at Yale Divinity School. The reason Joe and I are friends is directly related to the stewardship of money. (Joe, I’ve never told you this story.) After college, I took a year off. A man in my home church, who owned a prosperous business, called me to his home. He said, “I’m concerned that you’re not heading on to seminary.” I said, “I needed to work to earn some money.” (My family had very little money and none to give me for education.)

He said, “I don’t want you to worry about money. Your father has three other boys behind you, so I’d like to be your financial Daddy.” I was stunned. I said, “Could I choose any school, any divinity school—like Union or Harvard or Yale?” He said, “You choose the school, and don’t worry about the money.” He said, “God has been good to me, and I want to help you get prepared to do God’s work.”

I had never imagined I could go to a school like Yale, but Jack Taylor opened that door. And that’s how I met Joe Harvard—through the generosity of Jack Taylor. When he died, I went to his funeral, and the minister said, “Jack Taylor allowed God to use him.” Jack Taylor helped me and many other young people to finance their education. And he did it gladly and gratefully. I think he said, “Thank you, God, for the opportunity.” He changed my life through his ministry of money.

When you give to First Presbyterian Church, you are supporting God’s work that reaches out in many and varied ways to the Durham community. You have an array of missions—I’ve seen your list: Presbyterian Urban Ministry, Genesis Home, Community Shelter, Habitat, Housing for New Hope, Hispanic congregation, your child care center and many more.

From my 22 years in Durham, I know that First Presbyterian is a vital and vigorous congregation—a bellwether church that is terribly important to the city of Durham. But the vitality and vigor of this church must be nurtured. We can’t do what God has called us to do without financial resources, without the “ministry of money.”

How much do we give? What is the guideline for our financial giving? The Bible’s guide is ten percent. My minister brother Ken is pastor of First Baptist Church, Rochester, NY, and he recently told me a story of a denominational board meeting where the people were lamenting the fact that offerings were down in their churches. One minister, who happened to be African American, said, “I don’t understand you folks. Why is it so hard to support God’s work?” He then asked

each person to take out a dime and put it on the table. They all took out their dimes. He then said, “The Lord has already given you a dollar, and the Lord is asking for only a dime back. That dime is a tithe –10 %. It belongs to God, but you are still way ahead! Look how much God has left for you in every dollar—90 cents more, and it’s all gift from God!”

Imagine! If we all gave a dime out of each dollar, we could accomplish remarkable missions. We could undertake impossible missions that could change our lives and the lives of many other people.

The central issue of giving is what the giving does for the giver. Giving our money is a spiritual practice. We are made healthy when we give. The bottom line is not money but our spiritual lives. We need to give to be healthy.

When I was growing up, my family had so little money that if my father missed one paycheck, we’d be going to live with Aunt Thelma. So we talked about money a lot. It was my father’s openness about money that has been a gift to my life.

Dad’s openness in talking about money prompted me to see tithing as a spiritual practice. The scene is etched in my memory. I was 14 years old when I got my first job as a bagboy in a local grocery store. I made \$5.00 on my first day of work. I was so proud of that money. I sat in my room, counting and counting again my five crisp one-dollar bills.

Then my dad walked in and said, “Son, you know that ten per cent of that money belongs to God and God’s work through the church.” Then he took one of my five one-dollar bills, and he gave me fifty cents back. “This fifty cents should go to God’s work at the church.” He put the money back on the table and walked out of my room, leaving me squirming.

But that experience with my dad, plus my study of the Bible, has guided my practice of giving all of my life. The first check I write every month is to the church—ten percent of my income. This opportunity to give is one of the finest satisfactions of my life—a habit I gladly affirm and recommend to you.

For people of faith, the issue of money is not money; the issue is our own spiritual health. We need to give our money, so we can be spiritually healthy—so we can practice grateful generosity. The Bible says the earliest Christians gave “with glad and generous hearts.”

Do we dare to imagine what is possible when we give our money gladly and generously to God's work? Durham needs the vital witness, the vital support, of First Presbyterian Church. We need you to stay strong spiritually and financially.

The high point of worship is the offering, for this is the place where we give to God what belongs to God—where we give generously, cheerfully, and gratefully. By giving generously with our money, we give witness to the reality that our purse has been converted, along with our mind and our heart.

As you make your pledge to support your church's ministry and mission, I hope you will say to God and to First Presbyterian: Thank you for the opportunity to give.

**Rev. Mel Williams** is the pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, NC. Williams, who is a native of Aberdeen, North Carolina, completed his undergraduate degree at Wake Forest University before graduating from Yale Divinity School. He returned to North Carolina to accept a position as Associate Pastor at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, Raleigh (1969-79), followed by an 8-year pastorate at Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia (1980-88). In July 1988, he became pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church.

Mel's interests include peace and social justice. He, along with several other area pastors, worked toward the establishment of the Walltown Neighborhood Ministries, Inc., a mission that seeks to address spiritual, physical, emotional, and economic needs for the people of the Walltown neighborhood. Mel is also a singer and shares his talent with Watts Street and the wider community. Mel is married to Jan, a clinical social worker. They have two adult children, Jenna and Mark.