

AMERICAN BAPTIST UNITED MISSION
“Money Matters and United Mission”

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**When we are united in God’s mission,
our United Mission will grow.**

Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’ (Luke 12:13-21.)

On February 2, 1959, at age 45, Vince Lombardi accepted the position of head coach of the National Football League’s Green Bay (Wisconsin) Packers. The previous year the team had lost all but two of its 12 games (a win & a tie), the worst record in Packers’ history. Team morale was abysmal. During summer practice, Lombardi’s patience ran out. According to reports, he blew his whistle and called the team together. He picked up the oblong pigskin and said, “Gentlemen, this is a football!” Wide Receiver Max McGee is said to have replied, “Hey, coach, not so fast. Not so fast.” The 1959 team was an immediate improvement, finishing at 7–5, and Lombardi was named coach of the year.

Does Jesus sometimes grow impatient? Do we say, “Not so fast”? In the parable Jesus told (see Luke 12:13-21 above), the “someone in the crowd” asked Jesus to tell the man’s brother to divide the family inheritance with him. Jesus’ response was not to take sides in this family dispute. Rather, he moved to higher ground. “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Jesus was impatient with the greed expressed by the man. The man

probably thought, “Not so fast, Jesus.”

Many of the sermons preached on this text boil down to “You can’t take it with you.” The visual image sometimes connected with these words is a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer. While such a sermon and visual image are accurate as far as they go, they don’t capture the fullness of Jesus’ words. Jesus concluded with the words, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.” What does it mean to be rich toward God?” I’ll move back to this question below.

The pronouns, “I,” “me,” and “my” dominate the story, both in the English and the original Greek texts. The man in the parable is self-centered. We are living in days of a pinching national economy. Individuals and congregations feel the financial squeeze. “Self-centeredness” seems the natural state of things. But Jesus does not agree.

“Money matters” is a subject Jesus discussed often. Whether “matters” is considered as a noun or as a verb in this phrase, an important message is communicated. Jesus did not dance around the matter of money. The issue in this parable is distraction. What distracts us from being rich toward God? The man in the parable was distracted by his fixation on the extra resources he might garner from his brother. (“If only my brother would divvy up. “If only my barns were bigger.”) He argued that he had no place to store his goods. Jesus said, “You fool!”

I have often said that a church’s budget, as well as an individual’s budget, is a theological statement. Reading a person’s checkbook register can give great insight into that person’s priorities and values. And so it is with church budgets. A budget is more than a listing of items and dollar amounts. It speaks of priorities. And, if one reads between the lines, it may speak of omissions and distractions. It is a theological statement!

We are nearing the season when most churches begin to think about next year’s church budget. Once fall arrives, we are in the thick of things. My hope is that each church will pause, take a deep breath, pray, and think about priorities as the budget and financial stewardship process begins.

For example, what do we say in our congregations? Perhaps we sometimes think or say something like this:

- “If only we could get some new members who could help us support the church budget.” *(More than once, I have heard this argument made. I would not want to be the prospective new member who is wanted mostly for the money I could contribute to the church.)*
- “We can barely pay the church bills as things are. How can we give more to United Mission? Probably we’ll have to cut back on our mission giving. After all, charity begins at home.” *(I shudder to surmise what Jesus thinks about this characterization of God’s mission.) The sentence, “Charity begins at home,”*

was written by Sir Thomas Browne, an English physician, in his 1642 book, Religio Medici. It is not a biblical statement.

This brings us back to the question, “What does it mean to be rich toward God?” Perhaps the answer is something like this: Instead of building bigger barns to store more goods, God invites us into God’s economy of Christ’s grace and love. That is good news in the summer, and in every season.

What is our priority for our church’s resources? Is it to build bigger buildings to store more “stuff”? For me as an American Baptist, and I hope for you and your congregation as well, the answer includes a healthy and growing contribution to United Mission. United Mission supports the entire family of American Baptists. It unites us in God’s mission. **What’s in your church’s budget? Does it reflect a strong priority for United Mission? Are other things “distracting” from the main thing? Our money matters should include United Mission.**

- Your church’s United Mission giving supports your local region, which makes it possible for the region to provide more effective support for your church and others. In fact, most of the income for each of our regions comes from **gifts to United Mission**. Our giving to UM pays the major parts of the salaries of our region’s staff who provide: • staff service for search committees; • assistance resolving church conflicts; • area ministers to maintain contact with individual pastors and with associations and small groups of churches; • camping ministry; • resources to assist your church in growth and spiritual health; and • education and training of pastors, youth, and lay leaders in congregational empowerment. UM giving also supports: • The Office of the General Secretary • American Baptist Men • American Baptist Women’s Ministries (through the Love Gift) • ABC Information Services • National Ministries (**now American Baptist Home Mission Societies**) • International Ministries • Colleges, Seminaries, Homes Hospitals, etc. • Career Centers • Mission Resource Development • American Baptist Historical Society • American Baptist Personnel Services • Orientation to ABC Life Reminder: If you need a remittance form with your church’s name, address, and PIN number, please contact your regional office.

Next month, I will write more specifically about the church budget as a theological statement.

THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

Ron