



The Worker Is Worthy of His Hire

by Rev. Heath Curtis

INTRODUCTION

Scene: Church gymnasium on a Monday evening. Four eight-foot tables are set up in a square underneath the basketball hoop. Around the tables sit 12 people, each with a cup of coffee in hand, and a very serious look on their faces.

Chairman of the Church Council: Well, there you have it. You heard what the treasurer had to say. Looking at last year's giving and what we need for a budget this year, we're going to need to find some cuts.

Chairwoman of the Sunday School: But where can we cut? Look at what our bills actually are: heating and cooling the church, postage, office supplies, telephone, water and trash pick-up. We just don't have control over those expenses!

Head of the Trustees: Not to mention that we've actually delayed a lot of needed repairs to the property in the past few years.

Treasurer: I hate to say it, but the only expenses we do have some control over are salary and benefits. Plus, that makes up about two-thirds of our budget. That's where the cost savings have to come from. There's no way we can give cost of living raises this year. And really, we should talk about finding a cheaper benefits package ...

This scene has been played out in countless churches of every denomination all across our country. Just like many American households live on a tight budget that is paycheck to paycheck, so also a lot of American churches live offering to offering with little margin to absorb an emergency.

In fact, this trend in our society has been noticed by those outside the church as well. Back in 2014 *The Atlantic* ran a story entitled Higher Calling, Lower Wages: The Vanishing of the Middle-Class Clergy (theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/07/higher-calling-lower-wages-the-collapse-of-the-middle-class-clergy/374786/, accessed May 7, 2020). David Wheeler summarized his article with these words: "As full-time pastors become a thing of the past, more and more seminary grads are taking on secular jobs to supplement their incomes."

Is this an unavoidable development? Is it something we should just get used to? Do we have any choice?

The church needs to answer these questions the same way the church answers any question: *What does the Bible say?*

We've got to put the Word of God first. So let's examine what the Bible says about paying pastors (and by extension, others who give their full time to work in the church). Once we know that, we can begin to ask how we should proceed in the face of our challenges.

NOT A NEW QUESTION

It is the Lord's plan for churches to have pastors. The church has never existed without pastors. On the church's birthday, Pentecost, Pastor Peter preached the first sermon and thousands came to belief. When new churches popped up on the island of Crete, Pastor Paul told Pastor Titus to "appoint *presbyters* [elders, pastors] in every town" (Titus 1:5).

Since the church has always had pastors, the question of how to provide for them has been with us from the beginning as well. In the Small Catechism's Table of Duties, Martin Luther quotes two Bible verses (in bold below) dealing with the support of pastors in the section called "What Hearers Owe Their Pastors." Let's look at those verses in their wider context.

Galatians 6:1–10:

"[1] Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. [2] Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. [3] For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. [4] But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. [5] For each will have to bear his own load.

[6] Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. [7] Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. [8] For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. [9] And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. [10] So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the "law of Christ"?
2. Paul says both "bear one another's burdens" and "each will have to bear his own load." Is this a contradiction?
3. What does Paul say we will reap if we "do not grow weary of doing good"?
4. What is the value of what is taught in church?
5. What are specific examples of what "the one who is taught" should share with the "the one who teaches"?
6. Give an example of something you remember that a pastor has taught you that really stuck with you, either from your current pastor or from years ago.

1 Corinthians 9:3–14:

“[3] This is my defense to those who would examine me. [4] Do we not have the right to eat and drink? [5] Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? [6] Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? [7] Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

[8] Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? [9] For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? [10] Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. [11] If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? [12] If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?

Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. [13] Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? [14] **In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.**”

Discussion Questions:

1. What percentage of their income does Paul say those who proclaim the Gospel should get from the Gospel?
2. Look at the examples Paul uses in verse 7. What would the Armed Forces be like if soldiers were not paid? What would happen to the size of the Army and the quality of the soldiers?
3. Paul quotes the Old Testament to support his argument. Was there a full-time ministry in the Old Testament? How were they provided for? (See Numbers 18:21–24, quoted in the next section)
4. Whose idea is it that “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living from the gospel”? Who has the authority to override this plan?

HAS THE JOB OF THE CHURCH GOTTEN ANY SMALLER?

Paul encourages us to compare the New Testament ministry to the arrangements God made for the Old Testament ministry. Here are the verses from the Old Testament that lay out God’s plan for the provision of ministers and the scope of their duties.

Numbers 18:21–24:

“[21] To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting, [22] so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. [23] But the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, and among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance. [24] For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the LORD, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel.”

So in the Old Testament, there was a full-time ministry with men who were fully dedicated to that ministry.

They did not receive an inheritance in the land to farm since they had full-time employment in the Tabernacle (and later, the Temple). The level of commitment it took for the people to support that ministry was pegged at a tithe: ten percent of their income.

Now consider the scope and size of the Old Testament ministry. There was only one church building (the Tabernacle which was replaced by the Temple). The geographic area of the church's ministry was only about the size of New Jersey. Aside from a few very special cases like Jonah, there were no missionaries sent out to all the world in the Old Testament. Israelites weren't even supposed to eat lunch with outsiders!

But what is the scope of the New Testament's ministry? "Go ye therefore into **all the world making disciples of all nations**"! Thousands of churches! Thousands of schools! Millions of Christians to be cared for and a whole world to evangelize!

The New Testament ministry and mission is *larger in every way*. **Do we really think that such a ministry can be cared for with less sacrifice on the part of us all?**

SO WHAT DO WE DO?

So far we've been looking at pastors, because the New Testament speaks directly to pastors and their provision from their ministry. The Office of the Ministry is established by Christ and the Church has no right to set it aside or change it. But the church does have Christian freedom to expand the number of servants in the church beyond the Office of the Ministry. And what the Bible says about the fair provision for pastors can be applied to the other offices that the church has created in Christian freedom: teachers, DCE's, deaconesses, etc. When the church asks someone to give their full time to service in the church, then a decent living needs to be provided to them.

What's a decent living? What does that cost?

Those are fair questions. Cost of living varies by location, of course, but, as of 2020, the median income for a household in America is about \$60,000. The "median income" means that half of households make more, and half less. This is about the fairest way to estimate what "average" or "middle class" looks like. Of course, a benefits package that covers health and retirement must be added on top of salary.

So let me ask you: Do you want an average man to be your pastor? Do you want an average person to teach your kids in Lutheran school? Do you want somebody with average dedication and commitment to serve in the church?

Well, nobody expects to get rich serving the church. When a man who had the ability to be an engineer or a pharmacist or a lawyer decides to go to seminary instead, he knows that he is sacrificing some income potential. When a teacher decides to go into Lutheran education instead of teaching for a public school, he or she knows that they are not going to get a gold-plated, state-funded benefits package.

But if we can't provide at least an average living wage for our servants in the church, who do you think is going to be the first to leave church service?

As we saw, in the Old Testament God instructed Israel to support the full-time ministry with the tithe: Ten percent of the people's income was given to the Lord for His work in the church.

Now discuss this question: *What would happen at your church if everyone tithed? If only half the people tithed?*

NEXT STEPS

So maybe a lot of the problems we are facing in providing for the ministry “as the Lord commanded” is actually a matter of our generosity and stewardship. Our problem may be that we have not been listening to what the Word says about sacrificial giving for the sake of Christ’s mission and responding to that word in generosity.

LCMS Stewardship Ministry is here to help your congregation learn what the Bible says about all this and step out in faith. Consider using the following resources, all of which can be found at lcms.org/stewardship:

1. *Stewardship Under the Cross*. A short book that details one LCMS congregation’s journey from financial crisis to faithful stewardship based on the example of God’s mercy toward us in Christ. Lots of practical how-tos for a congregation’s first intentional stewardship education campaign.
2. *A-Z Stewardship Resource Guide*. A large collection of resources covering stewardship in four categories: Theology, Bible Studies, Nuts & Bolts and Practical Wisdom.
3. Email us at stewardship@lcms.org. We can give you specific guidance, point you to resources in your district, and even offer a stewardship workshop in your location.

Put the Word first and amazing things can happen!