“A woman was out shopping one day and decided to stop for a cup of coffee. She bought a bag of cookies, put them into her purse, and then entered a coffee shop. All the tables were filled, except for one at which a man sat reading a newspaper. Seating herself in the opposite chair, she opened her purse, took out a magazine, and began reading.

“After a while, she looked up and reached for a cookie, only to see the man across from her also taking a cookie. She glared at him; he just smiled at her, and she resumed her reading.

“Moments later she reached for another cookie, just as the man also took one. Now feeling quite angry, she stared at the one remaining cookie – whereupon the man reached over, broke the cookie in half and offered her a piece. She grabbed it and stuffed it in her mouth as the man smiled at her again, rose, and left.

“The woman was really steaming as she angrily opened her purse, her coffee break now ruined, and put her magazine away. And there was her bag of cookies, unopened. All along she’d unknowingly been helping herself to the cookies belonging to the man she had shared the table with.”

You know, sometimes I’ll just bet we’re like that woman at the table. We’re enjoying the abundance of the Lord, enjoying the sharing of the Lord – all the while thinking it’s our plate of cookies.

I live that way sometimes, and I’m sure I’m not alone. Confronted with that kind of truth, maybe we should ask that question: “What then should we do?” If we do have those moments of forgetfulness about our relationship to God and who we are, what then should we do?

“What then should we do?” is a question, really, about living this life. If you’ll notice in Luke, the question from the people and John the Baptist’s answer are sandwiched between talk of judgment and talk of salvation. The people have that kind of “Aha!” moment where they realize they’ve been eating God’s cookies. John’s tough words create a moment of truth regarding how people live their lives. Folks cannot claim Abraham as an exception to right living or an excuse for wrong living. It’s our lives – living, laboring, loving – that determine the fruit born in our lives.

You know, this portion of the text only appears in Luke, and it’s loosely tied to Jesus’ teaching in Luke 6.38: “Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full – pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back.”

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The words from John and Jesus are about how we live between judgment and promise. The promise, or the moment of truth come in Jesus, is that when Jesus appears, his very presence will bring judgment at salvation. He brings the Holy Spirit; he brings fire; and he brings truth into our lives.

Well, what does that have to do with stewardship? Listen to what Mr. John Wesley has to offer: “When the possessor of heaven and earth brought you into being and placed you in this world, He placed you here not as an owner but as a steward – as such He entrusted you for a season with goods of various kinds – but the sole property of these still rests in Him, nor can ever be alienated from Him. As you are not your own but His, such is likewise all you enjoy.”

“…[T]he sole property of these still rests in Him, nor can ever be alienated from Him. As you are not your own but His, such is likewise all you enjoy.” Everything we have and everything we are is a gift from God. We must, then, be good stewards over our lives: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. As we listen to John the Baptist, maybe what we can realize is that stewardship has something to do with the way we live our lives – the ways we bear fruit in our lives.

One of the ways we bear fruit in our lives is through giving of what God has entrusted to us. God asks for a tithe, a tenth of our income. Listen to these words from Malachi 3.1-12: ‘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! Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not fall from the vine before they are ripe,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. “Then all nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.’

“Bring all tithes into the storehouse.” A tithe is a tenth of our income. We can figure a tenth from our gross, from our take home, or from our Adjusted Gross Income on our 1040’s. That last one is an easy way to go. Move the decimal to the left one digit and divide by twelve.

For the Stone household, we go on what we bring into the house each month. We take ten percent of our income, gifts, bonuses, honoraria – and we give. We teach our kids to give ten percent. If they earn money or receive a gift, then they are expected to tithe. It is a part of the living of our whole household.

We’ve struggled in the past, but we continue toward the goal. It’s a lot of money for us, but I’ve got to tell you that God is faithful, always faithful. Because we’ve been tithing regularly pretty much since we’ve been married, we’ve seen God be faithful countless times.

It’s just a conscious choice for us, and sometimes it means we can’t do things we like to. Well, that’s part of life, isn’t it? We must make decisions about our lives, our time, and our resources. We understand the process in making our schedules – there’s only time for so much, and we should understand it in giving. We have a certain amount to give, and God gets his portion, first.

The struggle for us is that we tend to over-schedule, over-commit, or over-spend – oftentimes on the wrong things. Then our lives are like those fruitless trees – the ones with the axe lying
at the root. We tend to let our decision-making be governed by what’s urgent or what we want as opposed to what’s important or what God wants.

You know what? We totally understand the struggle as it relates to other aspects of our lives. We know this stuff. Yet, we miss how important regular, disciplines tithing is in our own lives.

Truth is, tithing is a conscious, spiritual choice in our lives; it has financial elements in that the choice impacts spending in other parts of our lives, but the choice is spiritual. Will we listen to God? Will we trust God? Do we understand who and whose we are?

Do we recognize that God “entrusted us for a season with goods of various kinds – but the sole property of these still rests in Him, nor can ever be alienated from Him. As [we] are not [our] own but His, such is likewise all [we] enjoy”? Just like praying, worship, service, or mission, tithing is an integral part of disciplined spiritual lives.

Whether we like it or not, how we give says something about our living, about how we see God’s world, about our relationship to God.

“What then should we do?” John’s answer, sandwiched between judgment and salvation, is that we should remember who and whose we are. That will be a huge factor in how we choose to live.

Our giving says something about how we understand and answer that question about life, about relationship. It’s a deep, spiritual life kind of question, but it often gets ignored in the way we live our lives.

What then should we do? Choose to live in a way that says you know whose cookies you’re eating. Choose to live and give in a way that shows who and whose you are. Amen.