

The Thirteen Commandments for a More Prayerful Congregation

Suggestions for Leaders - Prepared by Dick Craft

Thoughts for the Presentation Leader

This presentation is based on the conviction that there is no fundamental theological distinction between *giving* and *praying*. *Giving*, in fact, is a way of praying - especially when you remember Meister Eckhart's claim "If you said only one prayer in your life, 'Thank You' would suffice."

The presentation isn't very subtle! Its lightheartedness helps people relax as they explore a very serious subject: the way we usually "do stewardship" in a congregation.

The unspoken question raised by this satirical presentation is, "What would it look like if we promoted *prayer* in our congregation the same way we often promote *giving*?"

It's meant to be presented conversationally with a group. All the way through, with each slide, ask people to say what they think it's about. Ask them to *state the obvious* about what a particular slide is trying to say - for example, if you substitute "giving" or "money" when the word "prayer" appears. Stating the obvious, all the way through, out loud, helps groups hear how ridiculous it is, and, thus, raise questions about practices in their own congregations.

If your time is very short, you can go through this presentation with a minimum of commentary, in about ten minutes, letting people use their imaginations as they look at the slides. But it's more effective if people have a brief conversation with you on nearly every slide.

Slide-by-Slide Comments

The slides are identified by their slide numbers - appearing in the lower right corner of some, but not all, the slides. Strictly speaking, the first two slides (1 & 2) are not part of the "Thirteen Commandments" presentation.

Slide 1: Horrified Congregation Ask the group what is happening here. What is the preacher's subject? How is the congregation responding? I like to suggest that the scene depicted here is *a lie!* We sometimes think that people don't like it when we talk about money in church, but most Christians want to see the connection between their faith and money.

Slide 2: Graph: This graph may also be in your participants' materials; it's available for download on the PCUSA Stewardship website in a document entitled "Why Do They Give." You may wish to use that full document, or spend some time with this slide. The article was published in *Presbyterians Today* in August, 2004, based on a survey done by Research Services. Note that there are two categories of givers here:

- Those who give 10% or more of their income to the church each year; and
- Those who give 4% or less (including zero or negligible amounts). It's interesting to note that 4% represents about twice the proportion of annual income given by most Presbyterians these days - and it may be safe to say that most of your group will be

in this category. Be careful not to insult them - but make no pretense about the fact that one goal of stewardship ministry is to recover the joy of generosity.

Ask the group to identify the top two motivators for each group. If the goal of stewardship ministry is to encourage joyful, generous giving, what does this graph say about how we go about it? What does it say about what is *not* helpful?

Slide 3: Title. The title “Thirteen Commandments” isn’t something we dwell on. It’s just part of the whimsy.

Slide 4: Satire Alert. When I first did this, I noticed that early in the presentation people were dutifully taking notes, as if these “commandments” were meant to be taken seriously. Hence, this slide!

Slide 5: “Pick A Time...” With this slide, begin encouraging folks to “state the obvious” - if what we’re really talking about is giving, not praying, what is this? (Of course, it’s the “annual stewardship campaign.”)

Slide 6: “The P.E.P. should be for about three weeks...” No need to dwell on this one. It’s obvious - but it won’t hurt to ask people to say what it is, out loud.

Slide 7: “Then, never mention prayer again...” All kinds of opportunities to state the obvious. Why are we so reluctant to mention money and giving most of the year? Why do we think some people will be offended?

Slide 8: “Even during the Prayer Emphasis Period...” What’s all this discomfort about, if giving is a way of praying?

Slide 9: “You can think of prayer...” Well, taking a bite of a lemon may not be *necessary* unpleasantness, but the drawing certainly conveys unpleasantness, doesn’t it? Why is talking about money so unpleasant? Or is it?

Slide 10: “but remind folks...” If your computer’s speakers are on, you can tell the group, just before clicking the mouse, that they’re about to hear the only sound effect in this entire presentation. Another time to state the obvious! Why are we so glad it’s over?

Slide 11: “Teach folks to pray...” Some folks don’t get this one as easily, so some prodding may be in order. This is intended as a challenge to the commonly-heard assertion that people should give only to the church because the church needs the money. In its crassest form, it suggests that you shouldn’t ask people to give unless the roof is leaking, the furnace is broken, or the pastor needs a raise. If the goal is not raising the budget or responding to emergencies, but expressing thanksgiving to God and funding ministry, what’s wrong with this picture?

Slide 12: “Teach, (subtly, by example)...” If prayer is considered a spare-time activity, how do we regard giving?

Slide 13: “Don’t ask people to pray for you...” This one may not be so obvious. It came into being because so many pastors feel reluctant to exercise spiritual leadership in a congregation’s giving because so much of the budget goes to the pastor. Tell pastors, “Get over it.” Too much is at stake here; you’re cheating people out of a crucial dimension of spiritual growth when you fail to lead because of anxiety or guilt about your part of the budget. It’s not selfish to ask people to pray for you; it’s also not selfish to ask people to

give, even when their giving supports your ministry. Ask lay people to help pastors get over their reluctance - this is too important a spiritual matter.

Slide 14: “Encourage people...” This is probably the most controversial slide; it never fails to evoke a discussion - sometimes animated - about the pros and cons of a pastor knowing who gives, and how much. A group could spend hours with this one! Instead of trying to reach a conclusion here, or force an idea on people, encourage them to take this question home. Ask them to have as non-anxious a conversation as they know how, about the spiritual price that is paid for the pastor knowing, or not knowing, what people give. If the pastor is seen as a spiritual guide, people may approach this question differently than if they see the pastor as a fundraiser.

I’m preparing an article on this subject, to be published in the 2006 PCUSA Stewardship Magazine. I’d be happy to send a draft of this article, upon request. My e-mail address is at the end of this document.

Slide 15: “When prayer time comes in worship...” A not-so subtle reference to the offering. So often it seems that the offering is a time to say, “And now a word from our sponsor” - a materialistic intrusion into the sacred hour. But my conviction is that *the offering may be the most profoundly spiritual moment in the entire service*, as it gives us an opportunity to say to God, “I really mean it when I say I love you.” Sometimes viewers raise the issue that very few people put a check in the plate every week any more. That’s a valid concern. (In fact, passing the plate has not always been the primary way for people to support the church.) But given the offering’s place in worship today, a conversation around these offering-related slides can be fruitful. Can the offering be a holy time even for people who don’t put something in? My own practice has been to encourage the congregation, just before the offering, to “give thanks to God as the plate goes by, whether you put something in this time or not, that the money people give today will go to help support...” and then mention some very specific ministry (local or not) that the congregation’s giving supports. This practice ties together the two primary motivators for that 10%-and-above group: thanksgiving to God, and support of Christ’s ministry in the world. When I was a parish pastor I did this every single Sunday.

Slide 16: “Let us [euphemism].” Folks chuckle over this one, but it’s a chance to talk about how reluctant we are to use the word “money” in church. Same idea as slide #1. If the church is afraid to talk about money, who shapes people’s values around money and possessions?

Slide 17 (photo): Does this look like Lyndon Johnson and Walter Matthau? Anyhow, the caption for this one might be “The Lord loveth a cheerful giver.” You’ve seen the saying that adds to that caption, “but also accepteth from a grinch” - but that’s not true. The truth is that people who give - voluntarily, to a cause they believe in - *like* to give. God doesn’t need your money and isn’t interested in giving that isn’t cheerful (Greek: *hilarious!*) as well as voluntary. This could be an opportunity to mention some places in the world where the offering in worship really is not only a high and holy time, but a time of great joy, where people literally dance in the aisles as they bring their offerings forward. (A video clip will soon be available of the offering during a time of worship in Nigeria - a clip that perfectly illustrates this point.)

I recently heard from a person for whom the offering was not a happy, holy time. For this person, gratitude was hard to come by; yet, in this spiritual low point, the person kept on giving - kept on tithing. That was more than just habit; the person was falling back on *commitment* when there was no immediate motivator for giving. This person hoped and expected that the spiritual low point would pass, and gratitude would return - like the psalmist who said, "I will again praise thee" (Psalm 42:5).

Slide 18: "It's okay to mention prayer in session..." Not very subtle, but it points out how out-of-kilter our money-talk is in the church. What would a theology of abundance mean for the way church leaders view their task?

Slide 19: "Let your own prayer life slide..." This one is specifically aimed at the spiritual leaders of the congregation, including the pastor. Again, substitute "giving" for "prayer" and see what conversation ensues. Ask the group what they think the artist was trying to convey in this cartoon. Perhaps he means that our lives are so cluttered with stuff (some requiring storage) that prayer gets squeezed out. Perhaps he means that we've got a lot of stuff locked into our innards that we're afraid that if we pray it might all come spilling out. Maybe it's that we keep our personal life of prayer (and giving), locked up and private. I asked the artist, and he said, "Yes..."

By the way, a good many non-tithers serve on sessions and stewardship committees. And a good many pastors are in the non-tithing category. Without being legalistic, how can the church help folks discover the joy of generous giving? Are we doing people any favor by ignoring what stunts people's spiritual growth?

Slide 20: "Except for the Prayer Emphasis Period..." Here's another dimension of the strange silence in the church about money. A good question may be, "How often should money be mentioned in the church - particularly in worship?" One possible answer is "As often as Jesus mentioned it" - more often than nearly any other subject. (However, Jesus didn't preach a gazillion "stewardship" sermons encouraging people to give; he was much more interested in helping people in their relationship with money and possessions, pointing out the mortal danger of letting such things interfere with the love of God and neighbor.)

When the abundant money-talk in the Bible is ignored except during a "stewardship campaign," folks can smell the deception miles away. If we only employ the Bible's words on money in the service of fundraising, we are demeaning stewardship, deceiving ourselves and others, and cheating our congregations out of spiritual riches.

Some church leaders don't have a clue how to change that pattern and move toward a year-round, multifaceted emphasis on stewardship. That's a topic for another time - and a lot more time! - but perhaps this slide will help to drive home how important it is.

Slide 21: "Don't teach children to pray." Another opportunity to say, "This isn't very subtle, is it?" Actually, we *do* teach children about the use of money, and a lot of what we teach isn't spiritually healthy. This is a huge issue. Our culture is awash in the spiritual disease of "Affluenza," and the church isn't doing much to help us cope with it. Perhaps it'd be a good idea to think this through as it relates to children. This is another huge topic!

Slide 22: "When they're grown..." Continuing the theme of the previous slide. In most congregations, sadly, children are hardly encouraged to give at all. How will they learn?

Slide 23: “The same goes with teens...” It’s interesting to hear the excuses offered by people who don’t want to ask older youth and young adults to give. Often, church leaders will offer up excuses *on behalf of* younger people, as if these young folks can’t respond to the Gospel on their own because they have other priorities.

Part of the problem is that church leaders tend to be in the older generations and they can’t figure out what to say to younger ones. They might benefit from a study of generational theory as it pertains to giving and stewardship. Again, the idea is not to figure out what’ll make young people turn loose of their money, but what will help them grow spiritually.

Slide 24: “Finally...” A good question to ask here is, “Why is this ‘the biggie’?” This slide points to the all-too-common disconnect in the church between fundraising and faith.

Slide 25: “Follow Me...” Folks are going the other way. But at least one is looking back in the right direction! Groups can talk about the meaning of repentance, which is not about feeling guilty or sorry, but intentionally turning around and going the other direction. In a great many congregations, a “turnaround” is called for. What will that look like in your congregation?

Slide 26: “If we are faithless...” It’s a good idea to read this scripture out loud, and start with the word “even.” “*Even if we are faithless, Christ remains faithful.*” It’s meant to be an encouraging conclusion to the presentation, reminding us of the amazing grace of God.

Slide 27: Copyright information. No commentary from the leader is necessary, but you are asked to leave this slide on the screen briefly. If others want a copy of the presentation, you may feel free to make copies, or suggest that folks download it from the PCUSA Stewardship website.

Richard H. Craft
Associate for Stewardship Education
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
2398 W. Fox Park Rd.
Montrose, CO 81401
Phone and fax (970) 240-9004
Cellular (970) 209-4377
Dick.craft@pcusa.org
www.pcusa.org/stewardship