

## Stewardship

### Seventeen Camels

Frankton – 11/08/15

Scripture: Matthew 2.1-12 the Magi give gifts to Jesus

Proposition: The Magi brought Jesus gifts thanking him for what he was going to do, we bring gifts thanking Jesus for what he has done.

There is an old Arabian story that tells of a Mohammedan who died and left his herd of seventeen camels to be divided among his three sons.<sup>1</sup> The oldest son was to get one half of the herd; and the second son was to inherit one third of the herd, and the youngest son was to receive one ninth of the herd. Did you catch how big the herd was? I said it just a moment ago. The herd totaled 17 camels. [SLIDE] How many of you have done the math already? How many of you understand that seventeen camels cannot be divided as the father wished without shedding a little camel blood? As some of you might expect because you've seen how some families act when a loved one's possessions are fought over after their death, the three sons argued long and loud about what to do given their situation. In a desperate final act, they agreed to let the town wise man decide what they should do.

The three sons took their seventeen camels and approached a man the town generally considered the wisest man around. He was seated in front of his own tent with his own camel staked out back. He sat and patiently listened to the three sons explain the dilemma of their father's wishes and the seventeen camels. After hearing the case, the wise man thought for a while. Finally, he got up and went out back to his own camel. He untied it from the hitching post and brought it around to the front where the three sons and seventeen camels were waiting. [SLIDE] Then he took his own camel and added it to the other seventeen camels making the herd now eighteen camels. Once he did this, he divided the now eighteen camel herd as the sons' father had requested. [SLIDE] To the oldest son, he gave half of the herd – nine camels. To the middle son, he gave one-third of the herd – six camels. Finally, to the youngest son, he gave one-ninth of the herd – 2 camels. And everyone went away pretty happy.

This man was truly a "wise man." He had settled the problem of dividing the herd by actually giving something of his own to the three sons. He gave them a camel. And lest you think he lost something in the deal, think again. Some of you have probably figured something out already by doing the math. If the oldest son got nine camels, the middle son got six camels and the youngest son got two camels, how many camels is that? That's right. The answer isn't eighteen camels, which was the total herd size after the wise man gave his camel to the herd, [SLIDE] but rather seventeen camels, the size of the original herd. The wise man had given a gift, settled the problem to everyone's satisfaction, **and** had his own camel back right where it started – hitched in his own backyard. He gave the gift and got one back in return.

I chose this Arabian story of the wise man because it fits so well with today's scripture of the Magi visiting Jesus. I know that's a story for the end of the Christmas season, but it just fit so well with what I wanted to talk about that I used it anyway. I hope all of you know the story, but here's the

---

<sup>1</sup> This story is from a *Homiletics Online* sermon titled "A Camel on the Roof" dated 1/06/91.

## Stewardship

Reader's Digest condensed version. The wise men, lived in the east and they saw an extremely bright star in the west and they knew the prophecies that when this extremely bright star appeared, a great king had been born. So they saddled up their camels and traveled west to where they had seen the star, hoping to find the child king. After a detour or two, in Bethlehem they found the child, who was probably by then a toddler. The wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the child, Jesus.

Let's look at these three gifts just a little bit.<sup>2</sup> These three items were some of the most valuable things in the Ancient World. So the Magi gave to the Christ child "nothing but the best" monetarily speaking. Let's just assume that each gift was about a pound of each substance. When you add up the value of the gifts at that time, then the wise men gave the child about [SLIDE] \$5,100 worth of gifts. A significant amount for a carpenter's family. As you can guess, since Jesus' time prices have changed. Frankincense and myrrh have greatly declined in value while gold has increased dramatically. So, a similar gift today would set a 21st century king back maybe \$22,000. Not so outrageous for a king, but a whole bunch on a pastor's salary.

But these gifts were not just of monetary value. They were also gifts associated with health and long life. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were among the earliest and most prized therapeutic medicines in the ancient world. **Gold** was believed to harbor supernatural healing powers. Even today, gold injections help people with rheumatoid arthritis. The whole civilized world at Jesus' time was begging for **frankincense** as both a fragrance and a medicine that cured everything from bad breath when taken orally to skin infections when applied topically. **Myrrh** is biochemically similar to frankincense, though its value in the ancient world was many times most costly, because it was tougher to come by. A drop of myrrh placed in a cheap perfume could double the perfume's value. So the Wise Men gave doubly great gifts to the child-king Jesus. They gave gifts of great monetary value and gifts for a good and healthy life.

But let's think about it for just a minute. Why did the Wise Men bring gifts? For certain, the Wise Men did not give gifts for what Jesus had done for them. Jesus hadn't done anything for them or for anyone else for that matter. Aside from giving his parents and family the joy that any newborn baby brings, Jesus hadn't given anybody anything. Jesus, hadn't done anything special for anybody. He was just, a baby, probably by the time the wise men came, a toddler. He was doing the things any toddler does. He was perfecting how to walk and eat with a spoon maybe even not dirtying his diaper. Jesus really hadn't done anything to deserve the doubly great gifts that the Wise Men had brought him.

So why did the wise men bring him gifts? [SLIDE] They brought him gifts thanking him for what he was going to do. They believed in the prophecy that said he was going to be a king among kings. A king among kings might bring honor or peace or prosperity or unity to their area of the world. So, they weren't giving these gifts in response to anything Jesus had done. They gave gifts for what they hoped he would do.

[SLIDE] We, on the other hand, have the opportunity to give gifts in response to what Jesus did. We have the great fortune of being able to look back on what he did for us during his life, and we can give in response to that. We know that he was an itinerant pastor who went all over the

---

<sup>2</sup> From Homiletics Online Sermon Titled "Three Wise Gifts" dated 12/27/92

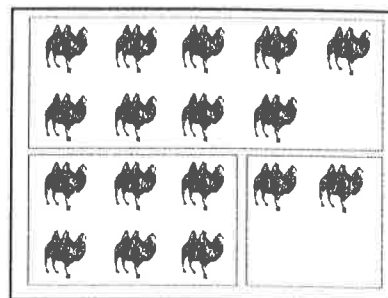
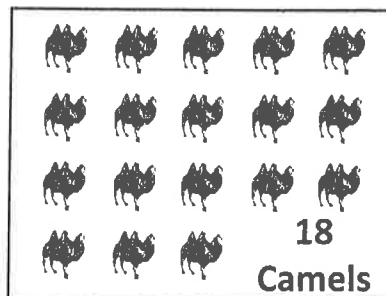
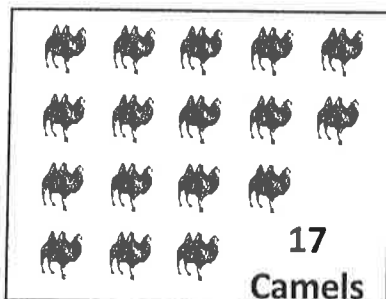
## Stewardship

countryside preaching, teaching, and miraculously healing scads of people; that he was outcast by the religious leaders of his own people; that he was scorned and mocked and beaten and whipped at the hands of the ruling government; that he allowed himself to be horribly crucified while carrying the weight of the sin of the world on his shoulders; that he was put in a grave that couldn't hold him by a devil that couldn't beat him; that he was raised from the dead and showed himself to his followers in an upper room, on the beach and on the hillside; that he overcame death so that we too could overcome death and live with him in his palace, not built by the gold of the Wise Men, but by his heavenly Father, the very hands of God. And we get the opportunity, with all that knowledge, to give Jesus gifts in response to what he did for us.

So what do you give a person who has given you everything, including his life and your eternal life? We know that we will never be able to repay him for what he did for us. Even if we could give the gifts of the Wise Men, they wouldn't be enough to come close to being appropriate. So what's an appropriate gift that we could/should give in response to Christ's actions for us? [SLIDE] My guess is, nothing less than the best you have to offer – yourself, your entire self: spiritually and physically. Spiritually we give our souls to him by letting him live in us. Paul's words are that we die so that Christ might live in us. We choose to put our own selves second so that we can glorify Christ by allowing him to be first in our life. It's not easy, but that's what we strive for. Physically, we give what we have, which is really what he has already given us. We give like the Wise Men gave. They gave abundant physical gifts. We should also. In the Old Testament, it calls for us to give a tithe to God in response to what God does for us. Matthew records that Jesus said we should tithe [MT 23], but that is really just a good beginning.

So are you following scripture, following Jesus' words? Are you appropriately giving in response to what Christ has done for you? Spiritually, have you died so that Christ can live within you? Or are you holding out and not trusting God enough to give him complete control of your life? Do you trust yourself more than God where your life is concerned? Physically, are you tithing your income? If not, are you at least working toward a tithe? Do you trust God with your material possessions or do you think he will let you down or that you know better how to use them? Are you letting go of today's gold, frankincense and myrrh, whatever they are for you, like the Wise Men did so long ago?

And one last thing about giving in response that I want to point out quickly and it goes clear back to the story I used starting out on this sermon. Do you remember the three sons and seventeen camels and the wise man and his camel? Do you remember that the wise man gave his camel, distributed the herd as the deceased father wanted, everyone went away happy and the wise man got his camel back? I think that's a pretty interesting way to end this sermon. The wise man gave a gift then he got it back in return. I think it's the same way with God when we give an appropriate response to him. When we give to God an appropriate response to what God has given us, God gives back in return. He may not give the same thing. He may not give exactly the same amount. But God will not let flounder those who give appropriately in response. He will take care of them. And that's what I want to leave you with. When you give appropriately to God, when you make your gift a sacrifice, as God sacrificed for us, God sees that and will not let you down. If you think you can't give more to God than you already are because, well for whatever reason, just try it for a while and see if God doesn't take care of you. I challenge you to test God with an appropriate gift in response and then sit back and wait for his response.



The Math	
Oldest Son	9
Middle Son	6
Youngest Son	<u>2</u>
<b>Total Camels</b>	<b>17</b>

Wise Men Gifts  
 \$5,100 value  
 Today: \$22,000

**The Wise Men  
 brought him gifts  
 thanking him for what  
 he was going to do.**

We can look back on  
 what Christ did **for us**  
 and we can  
give in response  
 to what he's done.

Nothing less than the  
 best you have to offer  
 – yourself:  
*spiritually and  
 physically*