

The Withdrawal That Replenishes

A Study of Proverbs 3:9-10

Characteristic of Completeness: Stewardship

Big Idea: In God's economy, when we subtract, He adds.

Related Scriptures: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Proverbs 3:5-8; 11:24; Haggai 1:1-11; Malachi 3:8-12; Matthew 6:25-33; Luke 6:38; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; 9:1-15; Philippians 4:15-19

Introduction:

- A. If you read the Bible, it won't be long before you discover that God often defies our own understanding. God does not always operate according to our logic. God often goes against the flow of our way of thinking.

Let me give you just a few examples. When it comes to power and position, God says the first will be last and last will be first. When it comes to your soul, God says if you want to save it, you'll have to lose it. When it comes to hardship, God says we are to be joyful in it. When it comes to enemies, God says to love them.

When Abraham and Sarah were too old to have children, God said, "Better start planning a baby shower." When Moses and his people were in bondage to an oppressive Egyptian dictator the likes of Saddam Hussein, God said, "Just go tell the bully to let you go." When Gideon's army was vastly outnumbered, God said, "You've got too many guys; send most of them home so you'll be at an even greater disadvantage." When God's people were up against Goliath, the biggest baddest warrior on earth who was calling for an opponent, God said, "Send out the skinny kid with the sling." When we were hopelessly lost and deserving of death, God said, "I want you to live, so I'm going to die." When every other good thing on earth is earned, God says, "I'm offering you the greatest gift of eternal life for free."

You see, God doesn't always make sense—not to our way of thinking, not to the prevailing wisdom of the world.

- B. Today I want to talk about another area of our lives where God doesn't always make sense. It's about our stuff. Our material possessions, our money, our assets, our portfolios. Our Characteristic of Completeness for

the week is ► stewardship. We're going to learn a little more about God's economy and our part in it as stewards or managers of stuff. You see, in the area of money, God does not always make sense; His math does not always add up—not to our culture, not to the world's way of thinking.

Let me show you. Here's ► math the way we learned it in school. You start with everything you have; ► call it "x." "X" is all your stuff. You take away a certain amount from what you have; ► call it "y." "Y" is what you give away. And you end up with less than you had; ► "x" minus "y" equals "z." And ► "z" is less than "x." That is to say what you end up with is less than what you started with. It's called subtraction.

When it comes to our stuff, subtraction is not generally viewed as a good thing. In our culture, we don't normally like subtraction because it means that we're taking away from our stuff and we end up with less. That's the world's math.

My suspicion is that, just a moment ago, when I told you I was going to be talking about stewardship, very few of you said to yourself, "Oh boy, I get to hear a sermon about giving away my money." And I suspect one of the reasons we aren't too excited about stewardship sermons is that we think they're about subtraction. We do the math. We think it's about us ending up with less and being worse off.

But ► God's math is different. You see, in God's economy, when we subtract, He adds. That's the ► big idea of my message: In God's economy, when we subtract, He adds. That is to say, when we subtract from all we have to give an amount to the Lord, we do not end up with less; we are not worse off. We are not worse off because somehow God adds back to our account. We get more. When we withdraw, somehow God replenishes. When we give, somehow God returns.

Let me show you the math. The formula looks the same. You start with everything you have, ► "x." You take away a certain amount from what you have, ► "y." And you ► end up with "z." But here's the kicker. Here's where God's math is different. In the end, ► "z" is greater than "x." That is to say, what you end up with is greater than what you started with.

You say, “Bob, that does not make sense.” I know. God’s math can be hard to believe because it sounds backwards. Let me try to explain it using our biblical text for the week. The text is ► Proverbs 3:9-10. It says,

^{NAU} **Proverbs 3:**

⁹ Honor the LORD from your wealth
 And from the first of all your produce;
¹⁰ So your barns will be filled with plenty
 And your vats will overflow with new wine.

- I. Let’s see how God’s people are commanded to honor the Lord through subtraction.
 - A. Verse 9 issues the command: “Honor the LORD.”
 1. To ► honor means to give weight to a person in the sense that we ascribe respect or glory to that person.¹
 2. The ► term “LORD” is a translation of the Hebrew name *Yahweh*. It emphasizes the greatness of God and His worthiness of our respect.
 - B. We honor the Lord through subtraction.
 1. We start with all our ► “wealth” or all our “produce.” Not just the surplus or leftovers; all of it. The Hebrew term translated, “produce” could be translated “income.”²
 2. The little Hebrew preposition translated ► “from” signals subtraction from the total. It means “away from” or “out of.”³
 3. The amount we are to subtract and give to the Lord is ► “the first.” That means it’s the best or the choicest part.⁴

¹ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), hereinafter referred to as TWOT.

² Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1994-2000), hereinafter referred to as HALOT.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

II. Well, what happens when we subtract or take away our best and give it to honor God? In God's economy, when we subtract, God adds.

A. In Verse 10, the ► “so” marks the result of subtraction. It ties Verses 9 and 10 together in a cause-and-effect relationship.⁵ What follows is an explanation of how God adds when we subtract.

B. When we subtract to give, God adds to provide for our own needs. When we honor God with our best, we will be blessed.

1. Verse 10 says,

^{NAU} **Proverbs 3:**

¹⁰ So your barns will be filled with plenty
And your vats will overflow with new wine.

The ► “barns” and “vats” held the necessities of food and drink in the day in which this was written. The idea is that when we subtract, God adds to the supply of what we really need.

2. And when we are not stingy with our subtraction, God is not stingy with His addition. God provides abundantly a full and adequate supply. Look at the ► words used to describe God's addition: “filled,” “plenty,” “overflow,” and “new wine.” New wine describes the best, most potent wine made from the first drippings of juice before the winepress was trodden.⁶ In God's economy, when we subtract, He adds such that somehow we experience an abundance that we didn't have before.

III. Well, ► how does this work in real life? Let me give you some examples.

A. Consider the biblical account of the ancient prophet Elijah and a poor widow during a time when there was a great drought in the land. God had given a command to a certain widow to subtract, to give, to provide for the

⁵ Robert L. Alden, “Advice to Young Men: Proverbs 3,” in *Learning from the Sages*, Roy B. Zuck, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 207-208.

⁶ Bruce W. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1-15, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 248.

needs of the man of God, Elijah, when he arrived at her hometown of Zarephath. The story begins in ► 1 Kings 17:8-9:

^{NAU} **1 Kings 17:8** Then the word of the LORD came to him [Elijah], saying, ⁹ “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.”

Notice that, before Elijah arrived, God had already issued a command to the widow to subtract, to give, to provide for Elijah.

When Elijah arrives, he provides the opportunity for the widow to give, asking for some water and bread. And if anyone ever had an excuse not to give, it's this widow. She's down to her last meal. She's at the end of her rope. She's only got a handful of flour and a little oil left to make one last meal for herself and her son, and then she expects to die. Let's pick up the story in ► Verse 10:

^{NAU} **1 Kings 17:10** So he [Elijah] arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, “Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink.” ► ¹¹ As she was going to get *it*, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand.” ► ¹² But she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die.”

In the face of this request from Elijah for water and bread, I suspect the widow has done the math: “All I have, minus what the man of God asks for, equals zero. Subtraction means we're going to die that much quicker.”

But Elijah explains God's economy. He introduces the widow to God's math: In God's economy, when we subtract, He ► adds:

^{NAU} **1 Kings 17:13** Then Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring *it* out to me, and afterward you may make *one* for yourself and for your son. ►¹⁴ “For thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth.’”

I wish I could know what the widow was thinking as this point. “Let me get this straight, with God’s math, all I have, minus what the man of God asks for, equals all I will need and more than I had before?” At that point, I suspect there was a crisis of faith. “Do I go with the world’s math and refuse to subtract to protect myself? Or, do I go with God’s math and subtract, trusting that God will add?” The rest of the story reveals that the widow made the ► right choice.

^{NAU} **1 Kings 17:15** So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for *many* days. ¹⁶ The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke through Elijah.

In God’s economy, when we subtract, God adds.

- B. I want ► you to see that God’s math works another way, too. In God’s economy, when we refuse to subtract, God subtracts. That is to say, when we choose not to give when we know we should, we actually end up with less.

Here’s the ► world’s math depicting a common rationale for not giving. We start with all we’ve got, ► call it “x.” We ► subtract zero because we think we can’t afford to give. And we think we’re preserving the amount we started with. ► “X” minus zero equals “x.” Makes sense.

But ► God’s math is different. We start with all we’ve ► got, “x.” We ► subtract zero because we think we can’t afford to give. And we think we’re preserving the amount we started with, but we end up not with “x,” but ► with “y.” In God’s math, “x” minus zero equals “y.” And here’s the

kicker: ► “Y” is less than “x.” That is to say, we end up with less when we refuse to subtract.

Let’s see how this works. Let’s look at an account of some people who didn’t trust God’s math. The people of ancient Israel had been exiled in Babylon for many years. Jerusalem had been largely destroyed, along with the temple of God. When the Israelites finally returned to Jerusalem, God wanted them to subtract and give from their resources to rebuild the temple.

But they faced the troubling math that we still face today: “All that I have, minus what it’s going to take to do the Lord’s work, equals less than I think I need to live comfortably. So the Lord’s work is going to have to wait until I can generate enough margin or surplus to where subtraction and giving won’t be a problem for me.” According to the world’s math, it’s perfectly logical. According to God’s economy, it’s backwards.

Listen to what God has to say about it, beginning in ► Haggai 1:1.

^{NAU} **Haggai 1:1** . . . the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai . . . saying, ² “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘This people says, “The time has not come, *even* the time for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt.”’”

God wanted to rebuild His house, the temple, but the people were saying things like, “Hey, we’d really like to, but we can’t afford it right now. We just took a big hit on rebuilding our own houses, and we’re working very hard, but still barely have enough to make ends meet. So we’re really tight right now.”

► ^{NAU} **Haggai 1:3** Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ⁴ “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house *lies* desolate?”

This is a probing question. Basically, God is asking, “How come your houses are so much nicer than mine? How come your houses have new paneling, and My house has walls that are crumbled? What’s up with that?”

▶ ^{NAU} **Haggai 1:5** Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, “Consider your ways! ⁶ “You have sown much, but harvest little; *you* eat, but *there is not enough* to be satisfied; *you* drink, but *there is not enough* to become drunk; *you* put on clothing, but no one is warm *enough*; and he who earns, earns wages *to put* into a purse with holes.”

I can almost hear the Israelites thinking to themselves, “Well yeah, that’s just it. You said it. Things are tight. There’s not enough. We can’t afford to subtract and give to Your work right now.”

▶ ^{NAU} **Haggai 1:7** Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Consider your ways! ⁸ Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified,” says the LORD. ▶ ⁹ “*You* look for much, but behold, *it comes* to little; when you bring *it* home, I blow it *away*. Why?” declares the LORD of hosts, . . .

Why? Why don’t you have enough? Why is financial freedom so elusive? Why don’t you ever seem to have enough? The Lord answers His own ▶ question:

^{NAU} **Haggai 1:9** . . . “Because of My house which *lies* desolate, while each of you runs to his own house.”

Now, that’s a paradigm shift! The Israelites were thinking that they couldn’t afford to give. But God says the reason they were struggling is that they were unwilling to give. God says that we can’t afford *not* to be generous in His economy. When we refuse to subtract, God subtracts. That’s how God’s economy works. When we subtract, God adds. When we refuse to subtract, God subtracts.

- C. God’s ▶ economy is so counterintuitive, so countercultural, that it requires faith. If you look at the Hebrew text for Proverbs, you will see something that is not apparent in our English Bible. There are little symbols marking paragraph divisions. These symbols indicate that the

paragraph which contains our text actually begins at ► Proverbs 3:5. Maybe you've heard of it. It says,

^{NAU} **Proverbs 3:5**

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.

God is asking us to trust in Him and not our own understanding. Trust His math, not the world's math. In God's economy, when we subtract, God adds.

IV. Let ► me try to address some questions that you may have.

- A. Some may be thinking, "Bob, you've been quoting a lot from the Old Testament. Is it possible that this Old Testament stuff doesn't apply to us anymore?" Good question.

A quick look at the New Testament demonstrates that God's economy is still intact: When we subtract, He still adds.

1. In ► Matthew 6:31, Jesus confirms God's math, saying,

^{NAU} **Matthew 6:31** "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' ³² "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be *added* to you. [Emphasis mine]

When we subtract, God adds.

2. In ► Luke 6:38 Jesus again confirms God's math, saying,

^{NLT} **Luke 6:38** "If you give, you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full measure, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, and running over. Whatever measure you use in

giving—large or small—it will be used to measure what is given back to you.”

When we subtract, God adds.

3. In ► 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, the Apostle Paul confirms God’s math:

^{NAU} **2 Corinthians 9:6** Now this *I say*, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one *must do* just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ► ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed

When we subtract, God adds.

- B. Some ► may be thinking, “Bob, are you one of those prosperity gospel, name-it-and-claim-it preachers who say that we can and should get filthy rich right now by sowing the financial seed into your ministry?” Absolutely not.

I am painfully and embarrassingly aware that some religious charlatans have taken God’s math to an unbiblical extreme in order to line their own pockets. In effect, they say that God wants you to be rich, and they hold out the promise of becoming rich if you’ll only donate to their ministry. Two things are important to keep in mind.

1. First, our text is not an invitation to treat God like some kind of cosmic vending machine where we give in order to get more. Remember ► the command is to honor the Lord, not to exploit Him to satisfy our own greed.
2. Second, while I am convinced that God will indeed add to the person who generously and faithfully subtracts, I am equally convinced that God doesn’t always use the same currency. For example, if God lays it on my heart to give away \$1,000, I will

surely be rewarded if I give, but not necessarily in cash, and not necessarily all in this life. God may somehow add back money to my account if I need it. Or He may choose to reward me with greater contentment and joy in this life, and/or greater treasure in heaven in the next life. Either way, I can be confident that I end up with more when I generously honor God, regardless of what currency He chooses.

- C. Some may be thinking, “I think I get God’s math, but how do I know how much to subtract? How much must I give to honor God with my best? How do I know how much He wants me to give?” I’d like to say a couple of things in this regard.
1. First, back in ► our text, we are not told exactly how much to give, but it is to be ► “from the first.” That is, it is to be our best to honor God. I would argue that our best to honor God must be a significant sacrifice for us. Think about this with me. How can we honor God by giving Him an amount that means very little to us? If God is commanding us to give an amount that honors Him, shouldn’t the amount be a big deal to us? Doesn’t an amount that represents the first, best, and choicest part pretty much have to be a big deal to us? If it’s not a big deal, then how can it be honoring to God?
 2. Second, ► the only way I know to determine what amount is best is to ask God, and keep asking Him in the context of a close, abiding relationship. I’ve said before that I don’t believe you can make a biblical case for any kind of mandated percentages for giving today. It’s between you and God. I’m not asking for money, and I don’t pretend to know what God wants you to give. You ask Him what He wants you to do. And keep asking Him, week in and week out.

I believe the purpose of God’s math is to give us financial freedom. Not financial freedom in the sense that we become independently wealthy or filthy rich. I’m talking about the freedom to give whatever God lays on our hearts, regardless of the world’s math, knowing that God adds; He’ll take care of us; He’ll supply all our

needs; He'll reward us one day. We are, therefore, free to be generous.

- V. Our freedom to be generous as children of God was bought with a great price. I want you to remember with me the greatest subtraction in history. It's when God, the Father subtracted His only Son so that we might be added to His forever family. It's the supreme example of God's math.

God subtracted from Himself by giving Jesus Christ to die on a cross. But then God adds. By Christ's death and resurrection for our sins, God is adding to His forever family all who simply believe in Jesus for eternal life. It requires faith because it makes no sense to the world.