



Grand Blanc UMC

Taco Bell and Other Financial Priorities

By: Pastor Brian West

apartment. For the most part, this wasn't too concerning thanks to the generosity of a family who was connected with the seminary and had provided me with a full-tuition scholarship. To this, day, I am exceedingly grateful for the generosity the family bestowed on me, making it possible for me to attend seminary, debt free.

Ultimately, this left me with the expenses you might expect: rent, bills, groceries, entertainment here and there. Oh, and Taco Bell. I loved and still love Taco Bell. Say what you will (and I can say plenty about the bad habit it is), but I do enjoy it! Anyway, I'll say more about Taco Bell in a bit. But, in order to cover my various monthly expenses, I found a job as a receptionist and mailroom employee in the seminary's administrative building. It didn't pay much, but it allowed me to get enough Hamburger Helper, SmartOnes frozen dinners, and milk to keep a growing boy happy.

As a seminary student, you might suspect that part of my education revolved around an understanding of church leadership and the need for giving and tithing in the church. You'd be right! I could, and still can (and will) give every theological justification for tithing, understanding the spiritual health that is related to it, and all of the other good stuff that surrounds church giving. The only problem was that, as a 22 year old with minimal connections to a church (nearby, anyway), my experience of giving was fairly non-existent. As I've shared before, in childhood and adolescence, I saw church giving – tithing – as something the adults did. It never occurred to me (nor was it ever impressed upon me) that I could do the same with my babysitting and lawn mowing wages. And so, at 22, I sat down in the lounge between 3 different classrooms the school's homiletics chapel (a classroom for learning to preach), and I drew up my first adult budget with every intention of building in a line-item for an offering. I was determined not to be the emerging pastor who never gave an offering!

And so, I started to add my expected expenses to a spread sheet. Gas, bills, rent, groceries, etc., etc. I even had a line item for "entertainment." And then, right at the bottom was "Church offering." Earning about \$450/month, I decided that a \$45 giving was just right! It's a tithe (10%), right!? All was going according to plan...until lunch. Lunch came around, and the last thing I wanted to do was cook in my apartment. And so, Taco Bell it was! For \$5.30, I could get a "Beefy 5-Layer Burrito, chips, and a drink! *Delicious!* (and it was). No problem, budget wise, though. I could just take that out of entertainment (\$50 was budgeted). Then the texts started coming in from friends: "would you like to meet some place for dinner, tonight?" Well, sure! Why not. Afterall, I'm in my 20's! These are supposed to be my best years, right!?

You see where this is going. Real quickly, my budget was edited to support my love for Taco Bell. My offering went from \$45/month to \$25/month. Then to \$10/month. And then I became a justification machine! I reasoned my way all the way down to \$0. Other things *had* to come first. Looking back, I'm a bit irritated with 22 year old Brian. He knew what he wanted to do. He felt compelled to be a supporting part of ministry – a vocation that he was called to! But he never thought about priorities; what really mattered. Not what mattered to others, but what mattered to him and to God. His priorities were, for lack of better eloquence, "out of wack!"

It took me a few years to learn how to give, how to prioritize my budget better, and how to discover what really matters. Even today, putting together our budget, I see what we set aside for our tithe, and I can feel the justification machine rev its engine. Here, though, is what I've learned to do to shut that machine off. I ask myself if my joy would be any greater if I changed my priorities? If I had the extra amount for the next vacation, would my joy increase? If I could have more Taco Bell, would my joy increase (my cholesterol might)?

All of this has required me to explore my priorities, and I'm convinced that's a good thing. It helps me discover, day after day, what really matters...to me...and to God. My prayer is that you'll discover the same.

Pastor Brian