

THE INDESCRIBABLE JOY OF *Giving*



LIVING AND GIVING STEWARDSHIP TEAM • NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN CHURCH • 2022



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INTRODUCTION

The *Indescribable Joy of Giving* explores and celebrates the joy of giving — not only as a spiritual gift, but also as the lifeblood of the Christian way of life.

I hope that you have experienced, many times over, the joy of giving. There is a certain excitement and joyful anticipation that comes when you give someone a gift, and that joy exponentially grows when the gift is generous and is a sacrifice. Why? It's simple: God gave each of us the need to give. Giving generously is inherently Christian. It is who we are.

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than receive" (Acts 20:35). And he was absolutely right. Paul said, "God loves a cheerful (joyful) giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). However, we live in a world that has schooled us in consumerism, a world in which receiving is all that matters. Our success is often motivated by the need for more wealth, achievement and power, as opposed to finding our significance in generosity, service towards others and in our relationships.

In many respects, giving has become purely transactional: I give to get something back. But true giving is transformational. Joy-filled giving warms the heart. It is contagious, and it has the power to transform the human heart. Joy is released in us when we put God and others first in our lives. As written in Mark 8:36, Jesus said, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" When I put God first in my life, it imposes certain limits on my behavior. And it is a universal struggle to

want to rebel against those limits. We profess to believe we cannot worship God and mammon; we profess to worship someone who told us to give away, not accumulate; we profess to follow a tradition that in its infancy demanded communal sharing amongst its members; but at times, it seems as if we have bracketed off those central portions of the message.

In a world where it seems like there is never enough — enough faith, enough love, enough money, enough service — we who confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior know we already have been given enough. We have it all! In the words of Paul, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

We were chosen for joy, and joy comes from God. If you haven't already experienced the indescribable joy of giving, our Living and Giving Stewardship Team trusts this six-week biblical study will ignite a fire within you, transform your heart and rekindle the joy of living generously. I am grateful to the members of our Living and Giving Stewardship Team for their faithful and gracious contributions to the chapters of this book and to building a culture of generosity throughout the North American Lutheran Church: Rev. Dr. Amy Little, Rev. Dr. Eugene Grimm, Rev. Carl Johnson, Mike Johnson and Rev. Taylor Stempniak.

Te Deum. To God be the glory!

*Rev. Dona Johnson
Chair of the Living and Giving Stewardship Team*

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

Mark 8:36



CHAPTER ONE

THE GRACE OF GIVING

THE REV. CARL JOHNSON

Wow! To borrow from the old Hallmark ad campaign: God cares enough to send His very best!

What Christ endured for us and for our salvation on the cross goes beyond human imagination. Seeing that our God spared nothing from us — not even His Son, His very self — shows us the true measure of His love.

Contrast that to other religions.

I am always amazed at the gods of other religions: they are depicted as cold and uncaring. Some are even downright evil. The notion that the gods actually care about humans is beneath them. Being creatures of human imagination, they are limited by reason. No reasonable god would sacrifice itself for mere mortals. Gods are to be served, not to serve. They stand aloof. It breaks the contract of religions, which is: we serve gods in order to get stuff from them. Religion by its very nature is ultimately a self-serving enterprise.

Some people make the mistake of believing that the Christian God is a mean, judgmental, cold-hearted God; that the Christian God wants us to go to hell, and so He stacks the deck against us. Not so! Our God is deeply passionate. God is the one who loved you first (since before the universe was created) and is the one who loves you best.

Dr. James Nestingen talks about how the grammar of the gospel always puts God as the subject of the sentence. God acts first. The motive is love. He cannot help Himself. His love compels Him to send His only Son. No reasonable god would give up its “godness” in order to become human, let alone suffer and die for those who were their enemies (Romans 5:10). God’s love goes beyond human reason. Far beyond.

The power of John 3:16 is that it begins in God’s love. It begins with God as the subject. It provides motivation. And yet we constantly underestimate the measure of God’s love. Think of “my cup runneth over.” Imagine holding a

JOHN 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–7

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints — and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you — see that you excel in this act of grace also.

12-ounce glass while bucket upon bucket is poured into it — a constant stream of way too much. That doesn't even begin to do God's love justice. Grace upon grace. Gift upon gift. To begin to comprehend is the beginning of being overwhelmed by the grace of God.

Grace means gift. We begin this study by noting the title of this chapter: The Grace of Giving actually means "The Gift of Giving." Beginning with John 3:16 is appropriate because all giving is a mere response to the greatest Gift: Jesus. It doesn't get more basic than the gift of God's love, gift of Jesus, gift of faith, gift of eternal life. Add these four gifts together and we have the indescribable joy!

In 2 Corinthians, Saint Paul was writing to the saints in Corinth about the saints in Macedonia. Saint, saint, saint. You are a saint because saints are those people who have been set apart by God in baptism to serve Him. If you have been baptized, then you are a saint. The saints in Macedonia were so overwhelmed by the gift of being claimed by God and made His own people that they could not help but to beg to be allowed to participate in the collection for the relief of the saints in Jerusalem.

"I want to play, too!"

"Put me in, Coach!"

"I want to thank God by helping!"

"I beg you to let me help."

In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther offers these comments on the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What does this mean? "The good and gracious will of God is surely done without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may be

done also among us."

God's will is unstoppable. You would have better luck stopping a speeding freight train with your bare hands than trying to thwart the will of God, "but we ask in this prayer that it may be done also among us." We want to be doing God's will. He doesn't need us, but we need Him. We need to be a part of His will. The Macedonians begged to be a part of the relief effort because they wanted to be doing the will of God.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul says, "But they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us" (v. 5). The ordering is important: "First to the Lord and then by the will of God to us." God always comes first.

God's giving begets giving. Even in the midst of "a severe test of affliction" and "their extreme poverty," there was "a wealth of generosity on their part" (v. 2). Their cups overflowed, and when their cups overflowed they experienced the indescribable joy of giving.

In conclusion:

- God is the first Giver (John 3:16). God gives first and shows us how to give.
- God's grace and his love for us inspire us to give (2 Corinthians 8 and John 3:16).
- God has planted in each of us a need to give — a need to give to God and a need to give to others (2 Corinthians 8:5).
- God's love for us compelled His Son to redeem us, like the Macedonian churches whose joy for Jesus removed the obstacles and produced a generosity beyond their means.
- We are most complete and most fulfilled when we give.

ENGAGE

1. What is God's motive for sending His Son?
2. What gift is better than Jesus?
3. When you receive a gift, what do you say?
4. How did the Macedonians say thank you to God for His love, the gift of Jesus, the gift of faith, and the gift of eternal life?
5. Why does giving, when motivated by love, bring joy?

Oh Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank and praise you for the mystery of the depth of your unbounded love. You withhold nothing from us. Fill us with your love that our cups might truly overflow. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.



CHAPTER TWO

GIVING AS AN ACT OF WORSHIP

THE REV. DR. EUGENE GRIMM

What is worship? Many books have been written about it, so how can we hope to cover it adequately here? A simple definition of worship could be “the act of adoring God.” Going beyond a definition, descriptions of worship could go on and on. We can label it liturgical, contemporary, and so on, but form is not the essence of worship. If one form helps you to express your adoration for God better than another, then that style of worship is right for you. There is no right or wrong way to adore God.

Maybe a good question to ask is, “When we leave worship, do we feel uplifted? Do we feel like we’ve been in the presence of the Lord?” I once had a member named Ed leave church one Sunday with a scowl on his face. He confronted me, saying, “Preacher, I’ve got a bone to pick with you. You haven’t stepped on my toes in six weeks.” Ed’s idea of worship was to leave the service feeling guilty. Isn’t that sad?

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if he left worship

with a sense of exultation at having been in the presence of our Holy God? Wouldn’t it be great for him to feel a sense of forgiveness? Wouldn’t it be great for him to leave thinking, “I adore God more than ever and am so grateful for the salvation our Lord has brought to us”?

Have you ever stopped to look at what our Lutheran liturgy does? We often begin our worship with a brief order of confession and forgiveness. Then we may progress to singing a hymn of praise. All this is to draw us closer to our Lord and prepare our hearts for what’s next — the opportunity to receive his Word. Indeed, what we may think of as worship preliminaries — these are all about preparing our hearts to receive and take heart in the reading of God’s Word. Following the reading may come the preaching of the Word. After being touched by the preaching of God’s Word, in whatever form it takes, and in response to all that’s gone before, we make confession of our faith in the words of a creed.

MALACHI 3:10

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.

MARK 12:42-44

And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

1 CORINTHIANS 16:1-2 (RSV)

Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come.

To this point, the liturgy has been confessing and hearing from God. Following the creed is our first really overt act: the offering. Giving is our act of worship that responds to all that has gone before it. Then come the prayers and, finally, the Holy Sacrament.

Whether your worship follows this more traditional style or is a more contemporary approach, the fluidity of the service is all about preparing our hearts and hearing God's voice. Giving in worship is an act acknowledging all that God is doing in our hearts and lives. Giving is always a love response — not to the sermon, but to the Gospel. We give because we love Jesus. We give generously and sacrificially because we want to show our love (*agape*) for our Lord.

Dr. Mark Allan Powell, in his 2006 book *Giving to God*, addresses giving as an act of worship in his first chapter. He notes that in the Old Testament, people brought their sacrificial offerings to the altar and laid them there. He writes: "The offering is an act of worship, an instance in which we are invited to give up something that we value — our money — as a sacrifice to God. In many ways it is the high point of the liturgy. We come to church to worship God and at no other point in the service are we provided with so pure an opportunity for worship as this" (p. 11).

He continues: "On a simple, practical level, I find it easier to sing hymns and not really mean them than it is to part with my money and not really mean it" (p. 12).

St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:2, "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I

come." In this single verse we can glean that:

- Giving is an act of worship — Sunday worship had already begun.
- Giving is systematic — we give whenever we worship.
- Giving is proportionate to income — we give as we have prospered.
- Giving is planned in advance — so contributions need not be made at the last minute.

God wants all of us — our whole being. God wants our hearts. We give not because our church needs the money but because giving is an intrinsic need. Giving expresses, or demonstrates, our love for God. It acknowledges that we love Jesus: "I need to give." We all need to give. It's part and parcel of Whose we are.

We give generously and sacrificially not because God needs it or even because the church needs it, but because we want to show our love for Him. I once heard about a pastor in Philadelphia that noted the offerings had fallen short of the congregation's needs. On receiving the offering plates from the ushers, he rather audaciously turned, faced the altar and prayed, "Well, God, this is what we think of you." What a wake-up call!

Worship giving, first-fruit giving, is not designated. You don't control it. You don't direct it. You don't tell God what to do with it. You give. The early Hebrews put their sacrificial gifts on the altar, and in some cases, set them on fire. They would never have presumed to tell God what to do with the gifts they gave.

Worship giving is both duty (obedience and obligation) and delight (joy). Joyful giving of our time, talents and treasure to God is then an expression of our love for our Lord.

ENGAGE

1. How have you experienced giving as an act of worship? Do you think of your offering as a "love offering"?
2. How have you experienced giving as an expression of love in your own life as either the giver or the receiver of gifts?
3. What is the purpose of worship for you? Is the concept of "adoring" God new to you? What other emotions do you feel?
4. Do you feel obligated to give as a duty? To whom do you feel your giving is a duty? To your church? To God?
5. When is it appropriate to designate one's gift, and when is it inappropriate? Discuss for a few moments.

Holy Lord God, help us to grow in both our sense of duty and of delight as we make our offerings. Help us realize that, while there are many motives for giving, our primary motive must be a love response. Even as the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, so now we ask you to teach us to give. Grant us a new lesson on giving every week as we make our offering to you. We ask this, O God, through our Savior and Lord, Jesus the Christ. Amen.



CHAPTER THREE

NURTURING GENEROSITY

THE REV. TAYLOR STEMPNIAK

My husband, Luke, has a gift for gift giving. I can't send the man to the grocery store without him coming home with a bouquet of flowers. He's spent a tremendous amount of time figuring out my taste in just about everything. Whether it be food, candy, art or jewelry, he tends to know exactly what I'll love. My appreciation for his generosity and consideration truly knows no bounds, but throughout our relationship, we've run into a bit of a problem. I'm grateful for gifts, and I know that they are undoubtedly signs of his love, but when I think about love, I don't think of wrapping paper or fresh cut flowers. I think about words. More than anything, I need profession and affirmation. I need proclamations. "Yes! I love you!" and "Of course! I'm proud of you!" and "Absolutely! I enjoyed spending time with you!" and so on. You get the idea.

You can see where the conflict may pop up. For all that I desired words, I was too worried about sounding ungrateful to express what I needed. When I finally just confessed that I needed him to say nice things to me, he was baffled. We had a couple of conversations about it, he explained that he put much more stock in actions than in words, and I made him take the Love Languages Quiz. After we talked, he snuck in "I love you" more often in our day-to-day life, but as we continued to grow closer to one another and mature, things changed more drastically. Along with gifts, suddenly I was getting cards with messages written inside. Some of the messages were sweet, some were silly, but all of them were full of love. He recognized what I needed, and even though it came unnaturally at first, he was bound and determined to use his gifts ("Giving a card counts as a present," he has remarked) to help

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

HEBREWS 10:23-25

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

me feel exactly how important he finds our relationship.

Relationships — romantic, platonic, familial or otherwise — are the building blocks of community, and how we cultivate healthy relationships with the people in our lives teaches us a lot about what it looks like to create healthy communities. For a marriage or friendship or even just society as a whole to function, there has to exist a willingness to give to one another. To be clear, I'm not just talking about picking up the tab for lunch or selecting the perfect box of Valentine's Day chocolates. Just the very act of being in relationship is an act of giving. We give of ourselves. We take time to listen, to encourage, to communicate and to rejoice.

Healthy relationships and communities look like the kind of community Paul describes in his letter to the Thessalonians. God created us with intentionality so that we would dwell alongside each other, not only learning from each other's gifts but also encouraging each other's gifts. We show gratitude for those who care for us, and, just as importantly, we learn how to care for our neighbors the same way. Being in relationship with one another provokes us to think about our gifts in a new light and with new creativity. My husband never would've considered the way his gift for gift-giving could help fulfill my longing for words of affirmation, but the stack of cards he's given me has become one of my most treasured possessions. When we spend time with one another and develop empathy for one another, a desire to care and an outpouring of generosity are the natural results.

But this isn't a hollow generosity; it is a generosity that considers the needs and desires

of those we give to. We don't keep insisting on chocolates and flowers when our loved one needs words of comfort and reassurance. We take time to invest in our relationships and communities, so that we may be still and listen to the needs and desires of those around us. A spirit of generosity grows from spending time with one another, sharing burdens and joys, and from a heart willing to listen to the honest needs and wants of our loved ones, communities, and our church.

The necessity of relationships and the generosity that forms there is modeled for us on the very first pages of scripture, where our Lord dwells with Adam and Eve in the garden. Our God is not distant but present alongside his beloved creation. Moreover, our Lord responds with tremendous mercy and giving, clothing the naked Adam and Eve even after they have fallen into sin, recognizing their desire for dignity, even amid pain and suffering. Our Lord continues to show us the importance of relationships, taking on flesh and dwelling amongst us as the one we call Immanuel, "God with us." How could we ever seek to live separately from one another? God himself became human and dwelled alongside his friends through weddings and fishing trips and grief-stricken funerals. Moreover, the generosity that Christ shows our community extends past turning water into wine and healing the sick — it is a generosity that is willing to give of itself so that we may see that grace is an outpouring of God's own sacrificial love. Filled with this love, and in relation with the Holy Spirit, we are freed to go into our communities, equipped with the spiritual gifts the Lord has freely given us, and think creatively, mercifully and joyfully about how God's generosity may overflow onto all we meet.

ENGAGE

1. How can your spiritual gifts be used to care for your neighbor? How can your neighbors' spiritual gifts be used to care for you or your neighbor?
2. Are you willing to think creatively about the gifts and resources the Lord has given you? What is one way to show generosity that you've never shared before?
3. How might prayer equip you and your community to live generously?
4. How does generosity — or lack thereof — affect the sustainability of relationships? Of communities? Of the church?

God of mercy and grace, you have taken delight in pouring out love and blessings upon your people. Help us to recognize the needs of our communities and the ways that you have uniquely equipped us to give of ourselves for the sake of our neighbor. Reorient our hearts towards a spirit of generosity, grace, and love. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.



CHAPTER FOUR

GENEROSITY'S RIPPLE EFFECT

THE REV. DR. AMY LITTLE

Remember the days of “paying it forward” when you went to McDonald’s or another restaurant with a drive-through lane? You’d get to the window expecting to pay for your Big Mac, and the cashier would happily announce, “The guy in front of you already took care of your order.” What a feeling that was! Someone you didn’t even know paid for your lunch!

Then what did you do? The generosity you experienced became contagious! You wanted to get in on it, didn’t you? So, you paid for the person behind you in line, right? It was fun to see just how long that would go on — five cars, six cars — how long could we keep it up? Sometimes the cashier would tell you how many times it happened already and what number you were in that line of spontaneous giving.

1 CHRONICLES 29:1–9 OFFERING TO THE TEMPLE

In 1 Chronicles 29, we hear how King David started his own line of spontaneous generosity. In this story David gave from his own private treasury to the temple of the Lord. He had already given a great offering of gifts in service to the temple as he was a generous man, but this was another gift entirely. He says to Israel, “The palace will not be for man but for the Lord God” (v. 1). In the ESV, “palace” is the word *bi-rah* which can also be translated as “temple.”

This offering, King David says, was given to the fullness of his power and strength. He gave as he was able to give, which, in his case, was significantly. We see that among the gifts given

to the temple were gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, onyx and precious stones, and marble. Then David encouraged others to give to the house of the Lord as well. Notice he doesn’t ask them to match his gift — surely that would have been impossible for almost all who heard his invitation — but he asked them to offer whatever they could, willingly and in service to the Lord. He even uses the word “consecrate” to show that this kind of free will giving is holy, set apart for the work of the Lord. As the leaders were moved they also made their offerings, and there was great joy.

The author of Chronicles reports: “Then the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the Lord. David the king also rejoiced greatly” (1 Chronicles 29:9).

David led the way by sharing his bounteous gifts and inviting others to join him in generosity. He wasn’t asking Israel to do something he was unwilling to do himself. Rather, he modeled joyful giving, and those who were leaders in the community followed the king’s example and gave freely and sacrificially. This story shows us how contagious giving can be. When we see someone we trust giving joyfully, not worrying about what they might be parting with but instead excited about what God is doing, we then see others giving in the same way. Generosity has a ripple effect. It is exciting! But most times we need to invite others to join us! We may be denying them the opportunity to share in our joy if we never mention what God is doing and how we can be a part of it.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-12

ENCOURAGEMENT TO GIVE GENEROUSLY

We are all familiar, no doubt, with Jesus' observation of the widow in the temple who put into the offering her last two coins (Luke 21:14). Jesus makes the point that the poor widow gave more than everyone in the temple because she gave out of her poverty all that she possessed, and she gave it to God as an act of worship. That story is indelibly marked in the minds of all who love Jesus and are passionate about stewardship and generosity. That nameless widow is a hero of giving.

There is a story that is probably less well known than the widow's mite, a story about a community which gave out of its poverty. Paul tells the story about the church in Macedonia in 2 Corinthians 8. He remarks that this faith family was experiencing a "severe test of affliction" and that they were in a state of "extreme poverty." Nonetheless, they gave an offering, a collection to be delivered to the saints in Jerusalem, not only according to what they could afford, but well beyond that! In fact, Paul says, they begged for the chance to give to the collection that would provide relief to brothers and sisters they had never met! Can you even imagine begging someone to give you the chance to give?!

All of this occurred because of the great joy the

Macedonians had in the Lord. Their abundant joy caused them to be extremely generous. It is important to notice the order of things here: first, the Macedonians gave of themselves to the Lord. They gave their hearts and their lives to Christ, by the will of God. Second, they gave of themselves to Paul and his companions. Third, they gave overwhelmingly of their possessions in service to those who were suffering, though they themselves were suffering. This is the miracle of faith in our lives. We are transformed by the love of Christ which brings us great joy, and in that joy we are compelled to be generous which brings us even more joy.

As leaders and members of a local faith community, the Holy Spirit works to form us into generous people. As we grow in faith and generosity, we set a powerful example to those around us that there is great joy in giving. As our congregation becomes more generous and more trusting in God's ability to provide, our mission and ministry expand beyond our imagination. The generosity we express creates generosity amongst those for whom we act generously. A ripple effect of giving is started. People are moved to joy. For those still on the sidelines of ministry and mission, our generosity connects people and creates new relational bonds which strengthens the body of Christ as they step out in faith to engage a cause greater than themselves.

ENGAGE

1. How often do we think that the church (or in David's case, the temple) is something that belongs to us? Why is this misguided thinking? To whom does it actually belong?
2. Do you find it easy or difficult to invite others to give the way you give?
3. When has someone asked you to be a part of giving to something important? How did you respond to their invitation?
4. In what ways have you experienced giving as a great joy? How has giving increased your ministry?
5. How is giving a faith practice that develops over time?
6. How is generosity a fruit of the Holy Spirit?
7. Why do we have to lead by example when it comes to generosity?
8. When there are successes in giving (time, talents or treasure), how is this celebrated by the whole congregation?

Generous God, teach us to be joyful givers, recognizing that all we have comes from you in the first place. May we use the gifts you've graciously given us for the sake of the world you love, so that all would come to know your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.



CHAPTER FIVE

THE WHY, HOW AND WHAT OF GIVING

MIKE JOHNSON

So often I have heard members of congregations ask, "How much should I give?" Luke 6:38 says, "... give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap." In my younger days I heard many a sermon telling me that if I wanted to be blessed then I should give lots of money to the preacher or church doing the asking. It was much like a barter system for the blessings of God. "God, I give to you, and you give back to me." What was most often missing was a heart for Jesus. My thinking is this: If Jesus has our hearts, then would not giving flow naturally? Hopefully we give for all that God has given and done for us.

All we have comes from God. It would be foolish to think we created this wealth independently of God. I believe there is no such thing a self-made man or woman. There is only the person who refuses to recognize all that they have has come

from God's blessings. Everything I have, everything I am and everything I ever will be all came from God and belongs to God. We give to God and to others only what God has already given us.

Through our congregations, we give a tithe or a percent of the income from what God has already blessed us with. Often, we are presented with opportunities outside the church to ease a burden or support someone who is in need. Recently, my wife and I and another couple from our church gave our favorite food server at a local restaurant a financial gift so he could apply for his real estate license. He wanted to pursue a different career path so he could more adequately support his family. He was totally shocked, and tears fell down his cheeks when he received our card with a prayer and financial gift. Who do you think received the greater gift — him or us?

Because God has so richly blessed us, do

LUKE 6:38

[Jesus said,] "... give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

1 CHRONICLES 29:12,14

[David said,] "Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you."

1 TIMOTHY 6:17,18

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share

PHILIPPIANS 4:19

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

we endeavor to hold onto the wealth and possessions (that He has blessed us with) with a loose grip? It's not ours. It's all His. He gives us the health, energy, discipline, brain power and favor with people to create the wealth we have and enjoy. First Timothy 6:17-18 explains this well: "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share."

Three guiding principles of effective stewardship are to be humble, be grateful and be generous. One cannot go wrong if these are put into practice!

In the book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the late Stephen Covey shares examples of stimulus and response. Each day, we are presented with many opportunities that we often negotiate away. In those moments when we encounter an opportunity to give (the stimulus), there is a split-second negotiation in our minds: to give or not (the response)? Do I listen to that voice, which I believe to be the Holy Spirit's, or do I put forth dozens of excuses, and miss the opportunity to give? I am not saying to give without rational thought or evaluating the result of the gift. There is a balance of sound stewardship when responding to a need or opportunity. What I am saying is this: be wise, but do not let the analysis cause paralysis of acting.

Covey also contrasts scarcity thinking and abundance thinking. Scarcity says, "I only have so much. If I give away what I have then I'll have less and may never be able to make it up." Abundance thinking sees the world as limitless and full of possibilities, which are attributes of the God we serve. Philippians 4:19 says, "And my God will supply every need of yours according

to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Our God, who owns everything — can we not trust His love for us to meet our needs?

In the current age, fewer and fewer people have been taught about tithing. One reason might be that it was not modeled by our parents. Perhaps at the church you attend, the pastor rarely speaks about tithing. I think in the church there is a shroud over the topic of money because under that shroud is where our true self resides. We trust Jesus to save us, but often fail to trust Him with the money He gives us. Discussions about money in the church are often taboo. Why should anyone ever know how much I give? One parishioner in a previous church often stated how much he loved the church, yet when you saw the giving record, he likely only gave a percent or two of his income. If we say we love God, we will give!

When pastors began approaching Dave Ramsey asking how to get people to give more money, they usually wanted a special sermon or teaching. His answer was the same for all of them: Until people learn to have Christ's lordship of their money, they will never tithe or give more than 3%. What was his advice? People must learn to budget, control spending, and get out of debt! Without these in place, preaching about growing in giving will be of little effect. That lead him to start Financial Peace Universities in churches across the country, and the results for the church has been remarkable. When we transform our money habits to what God wants for us, our relationship with Christ is transformed as well. When we grow in faith, the result will be growing in generosity. Consider attending or bringing a Financial Peace University to your church twice a year for the next three years, and watch what will happen. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is calling you into a deeper relationship with Him, one in which you more fully trust him with your money.

ENGAGE

1. Can you share an experience in which giving felt burdensome and had little joy?
2. Can you share an experience when giving brought you much joy?
3. What do you think was the difference in the two experiences?
4. When have you been presented with the opportunity to give and negotiated away the opportunity? What were you thinking and feeling?
5. Do you believe the statement "a growing faith results in growing generosity"?



CHAPTER SIX

THE INDESCRIBABLE JOY OF GIVING

THE REV. DONA JOHNSON

Have you ever wondered why the Bible says that “God loves a cheerful giver”? God loves a joyful giver because such givers are investing in heaven, and such an investment pays eternal dividends. How would you feel if you knew the person who gave you a special gift was in fact resentful or irritated that they gave it to you? You sure wouldn’t feel any joy in receiving it. For many, giving of our time, talents and treasures may seem like a total chore, a duty void of any joy because of a fear there isn’t enough. Henri Nouwen once said, “Every time I take a step in the direction of generosity, I know I am moving from fear to love.” For many others giving is pure joy — they see their life with God in terms of abundance. How do you generally approach giving? How you and I approach giving demonstrates the conditions of our hearts and our spiritual life.

JOY IS TRUSTING GOD

Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). God’s joy is in us. It is overflowing. Christian joy is not based solely on feelings, and it cannot be taken away. Jesus also said, “Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:24). The joy that God gives us is not at the mercy of the world but is independent of the world. When giving is generous in congregations, there is a consistent message of trust among leadership that God is enough. This trust is a fundamental precondition; through it, a culture of scarcity can be transformed into an ever-expanding culture of generosity.

In the Old Testament, when the tabernacle was being built, people were asked to trust God’s promises, to give and receive great joy! They got so caught up in the joy of their heavenly

investments there was no more fear and they had to be “restrained” from giving more (Exodus 36:1-7). Imagine for a moment if giving was so generous and joy so overflowing in your congregation that you had to tell those who gave to stop giving! In the building of the tabernacle, we see how the act of giving becomes a joyful act of worship, an expression of one’s own experiences of and trust of God’s love and care.

GENEROUS LIVING A MATTER OF THE HEART

In 2 Corinthians 9:6-11, Paul insists that no one is ever a loser through generosity. Giving is like sowing seeds. Those who sow with a sparing hand cannot hope for anything more than a meager harvest, but those who sow with a generous hand will in time reap a generous return. The New Testament is never afraid of the reward motive. Living within the commands and teachings of our Lord makes us not so much wealthy in material things as it makes us rich in the heart — rich in love, rich in friendships and rich towards God. Paul hoped that ultimately giving would be an act of worship, glorifying God and leading to growth in the giver. Luther said, “We can mark our lack of faith by our joy; for our joy must necessarily be as great as our faith.”

God loves a cheerful giver because a giver can’t be cheerful unless his or her heart is fully open towards God. Joy comes from God. It is a spiritual gift (Galatians 5:22). There is an unbreakable connection between what I offer to God and the state or attitude of my heart. If I am stingy with money towards God, then that says something about how I think about God and how I trust God. If I am reluctant to give my time and talents to serve others, it says something about how seriously I take the Great Commission and my own discipleship. If I am hesitant to sacrifice things that already belong to God (my

life, my time, my spiritual gifts, my talents and all my wealth and material possessions), then it speaks volumes about the condition of my own heart and where I find my security in this world. First Chronicles 29:9 reminds us that true giving is a spiritual practice. In the end, the offering was more than a material one, for its substance already belonged to the Lord. The real offerings were spiritual, matters of the heart — a sincere motivation to honor God and a readiness to give.

Joy can only come from a heart set on things above, not on earthly things. In today's world, there seems to be a shortage of joy. Giving is often stripped of the spiritual and seen as purely transactional. When I purchase an item or service, I expect to get something back in return. If what I purchase doesn't meet my expectations or I am not happy with it, then I might ask for a refund or withhold payment. That is how the world's economy works. But in God's economy, the motive for giving is not fueled by the expectation of getting something back, but is driven solely by what God has already given us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, joyful giving becomes purely transformational. Every time we give generously, our hearts are opened and we become God's image bearers. Because God gives first. We give to God and others because God first moves the human heart to give. God gives us both the substance to give and the spirit in which to give it. Giving then becomes a joyful sacrifice rather than a reluctant obligation. When a person's heart trusts God to provide for every need, then he or she feels free to give, is eager to give, and looks for every opportunity to give abundantly.

THE GRACE OF GIVING

In 2 Corinthians 9:8, Paul uses the word *autarkeia*, which means "having all sufficiency," and, being properly self-sufficient, having all we need within through the indwelling of Christ. Having all we need in Jesus Christ — love, mercy, an abundance of forgiveness, and eternal life — we are then content and satisfied to live on less, so that others might live abundantly. Then we are defined not by how much we have but by how much we give away. It is so often true that we want so much for ourselves that there is nothing left to give others, but our significance and sufficiency are found in Jesus alone. Not only that, it is not us but God who gives us the spirit in which to give — all grace. For when we give, it does something for others, it does something in us and it brings us into the very heart of God. And thus, the joy of giving is all the more transformational.

While visiting several rural parishes in Tanzania, I was amazed that the people who were very poor by the world's standards were extremely rich in joy. Their churches were humble structures — no windows or doors, no chairs, let alone electricity or music or audio-visual equipment — but their hearts were filled with joy. The songs they sang were joyful and put me to shame. They gave us gifts: hard-boiled eggs, bags of beans and rice — all of great value to them. In my mind's eye, I still see them hugging our Jeep and waving goodbye.

No, they were not secure in the riches of the world, but they were rich in the joy of our Lord. To this day, I find their joy indescribable. Their joyous generosity convicted me, filled my heart with hope and transformed my own outlook on joyful giving.

ENGAGE

1. Describe a time when you gave generously and it gave you great joy. Describe a time when you received a generous gift. What happened inside you?
2. Is giving a transformational experience for you, filled with joy, or is it more transactional, like a duty or obligation? When you give, do you give with the mindset of "pay the bills," or do you give to embrace your congregation's vision? What's the difference? Openly discuss.
3. Read Exodus 36:1-7, and imagine for a moment that in your own congregation, God's people gave so much of their time, talents, and wealth that you had to tell them to stop giving — you had more than enough. Is this level of generosity possible? Why or why not? What may be some barriers?
4. Name a few ways you joyfully celebrate generosity in your congregation.

Heavenly Father, as the psalmist says, you open your hand and satisfy the thirst and hunger of every living thing. We give and are filled with joy at all the generous blessings of grace and provisions you daily provide us. Holy Spirit, open our hearts to the indescribable joy of giving, stir us to see giving generously as a heavenly investment which can be used now to help our neighbor and build up Christ's Church, and empower us to give abundantly, sacrificially, and joyfully as God's chosen priesthood. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

“A joyous heart is an offering pleasing to God. For there is no sacrifice lovelier and more pleasing than a cheerful heart, joyful in the Lord.”

Martin Luther



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