

November 15, 2020

Altar-ed Giving Series

“Altar-nate View of Giving”

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

I have seen and heard some amazing stories connected to giving and generosity during my almost three decades of pastoral ministry in the Church:

[Sorry, details in online service sermon but not typed out here.]

A senior adults childhood memory – family ‘Tithing box’ & ‘There was always enough.’

Our many VBS Giving Challenges (And the Incentive of Being Slimed)

An architectural and ministry consultant in my former church who said:

“Before you decide or do anything, you need to talk about money.”

Houston Thomas; the most generous person I ever knew who couldn’t outgive God.

The last two years with IJM’s Freedom Sunday offering

Unexpected & Well-Timed Gifts here at FPC: from Marion Fletcher; Ruth Speckmann; Judy Parker. None of them had or made a lot, but they spent less, saved more, and gave so much.

I have also seen and heard painful stories connected to money and finances. A spouse addicted to shopping who covered up huge amounts of debt using secret credit cards. Overextended families who couldn’t resist a bigger, newer, and better home only to find themselves upside-down after an economic downturn. Business partners that couldn’t agree on financial matters. Churches hiding financial realities from their congregation. And the list goes on.

Talking about giving, spending, greed and generosity – which all come into play when thinking about money – can be awkward OR unsafe. It can inspire OR scare off. Talking about money and giving can evoke guilt and shame or pride and arrogance. But, regardless of what it might do to us or in us, the Bible talks a lot about money and giving.

In fact, a little after last week’s passage in Acts 2 – in Acts 4 & 5 – we read specific stories of supportive and sacrificial generosity. But we also read about giving that is insincere and pretentious. Let’s remember last week’s two words: Togetherness and Sincerity. Let’s practice both as we talk and think about giving . . . AND as we practice it.

Let’s just try to get in touch with our feelings around discussing the practice/discipline of financial giving. Complete the sentence:

Talking about money and giving makes me feel _____.

Nervous, suspicious, anxious, excited?

How would you finish this sentence?

Talking about money and giving is a _____.

Challenge; button-pusher; turn-off; necessary evil

“Talking about money and giving is a *Privilege!*”

That’s the word the Macedonians used with Paul. Paul said they “begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.” (2 Corinthians 8:4) They said, ‘Don’t leave us out! We want to be a part of this special offering for the poor and the widows in Jerusalem. We want our Jewish brothers and sisters to know there are Gentiles who love them and are connected to them through Jesus Christ.’

[By the way, we are likely to overlook this highly significant part of the story. Gentile believers are supporting Jewish followers of Jesus. Are you kidding? What a pleasant surprise for Jewish Christians, most of whom were extremely suspicious of Gentiles, to be blessed by those who were former enemies! You think Democrats and Republicans are suspicious of each other and divided?! This is revolutionary. Talk about Life-altering Giving and Living! These guys found that giving to each other was a way to come together.]

For the next few minutes, I want to lift up a couple of practical matters in no particular order.

1) This offering which Paul is overseeing in the churches he planted, was an over-and-above giving endeavor. In addition to supporting their local church/synagogue, they were pooling their money to care for those in need back in Jerusalem.

[This would be more like a Capital Campaign of sorts; or . . . Save/Shave the Beard for IJM’s Freedom Sunday offering; Joy Offering at Christmas; a number of giving opportunities we encourage or make available here – Families in Need, FCA, Young Life, Nursing Home and Salvation Army Christmas tree gifts]

2) We notice that the Macedonians “gave according to their means, and even beyond their means.” (2 Corinthians 8:3) And they were the impoverished ones. Paul tells us that the Macedonians took “their abundant joy and extreme poverty” and “overflowed in a wealth of generosity.” (2 Corinthians 8:2)

Here we see two more biblical truths:

a) proportional giving is emphasized; not certain levels/amounts. We are invited to give based on what we have received, NOT in comparison to others. Toward the end of today’s passage Paul reemphasizes this when he says, “the gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have.” (2 Corinthians 8:12) Proportional giving is God’s plan throughout scripture. [I’m sorry if you grew up in a church that put everyone’s names and amounts given up on a wall in the Narthex. Not only does it break the anonymity rule of not letting your right hand know what your left hand is doing, but it made false comparisons and

directly contradicts Jesus' commendation of the widow who gave more than anyone else by giving her last two coins.]

b) We also see what has been statistically-proven, again and again: the less income a person or family earns, the more they tend to give as a % of their income. The people of Corinth were economically more prosperous than the Macedonians; but they're being OUTDONE. Which Paul plays on a bit. This leads to another question.

3) Is Paul baiting or challenging the Corinthians? He's on tricky and treacherous ground here. Might this lead to comparison, pride, antagonism or favoritism? [Shave/Save was a fun way to pit two groups against each other, but Paul might have been a little passive-aggressive here.] At least he declares what he's doing: "I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others." (2 Corinthians 8:8) And notice he lowers the authoritative tone by saying this is not a command?

There are more details and nuances here in 2 Corinthians 8 (continuing into chapter 9), and a ton of other passages to look at which focus on money, giving, generosity and greed. But the heart of giving . . . the most important part of any discussion we need to have is our motivation for giving. And right in the middle of our passage, with a lot of practical and contextual details surrounding it, Paul underscores the reason for our generous giving and living. **Without this one line, any conversation about giving or call to give becomes an arm-twisting pep talk to help us pay the bills.**

Here's the line that Altar-s everything: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9) That's the Gospel in a nutshell and Paul inserts it right into the middle of his challenge to give. Paul is reminding us that the only motivation that lasts and allows us to give freely, generously, sacrificially AND HUMBLY, is the Good News that God went bankrupt so that we could hit the jackpot. The Gospel keeps restating this central and universally-unique truth: **God gave to us what we could never earn or pay back.** Having that kind of a focus and perspective is what it means to be Gospel-Centered. And being Gospel-Centered impacts everything; including our giving and generosity. It also reminds me and others to pay more attention to the Gospel than any one area of practical living. The Christian life is NOT the accumulation of a bunch of principles to stack on the backs of willing people. It is a way of life centered around "the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Altar-ed Living translates into Altar-ed Giving. Or is it the opposite? If you make the change to regular, sacrificial giving – which we'll talk more about next week – what you'll likely find is that your spending habits change; your list of "needs" is altered; you spend less and give more

AND – quite often – have MORE than you had when you gave less. It’s crazy, but true. Try it; but only as a response to what God has done for you, in Christ, and not because you think God (or others) will love you more if you do.

Here’s what I know: when the Holy Spirit gets inside of us and shapes us “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18), becoming more and more generous is inevitable. Remember, it’s not all at once for most of us. And yet, no matter what we might choose, God – in the end – will have His way. As someone who resisted God’s giving plan during my childhood, teenage years, and up to the time I married Shelly, let me recommend letting God have His way sooner than later.

I know my parents supported our local church. But we never talked about doing that as kids. They never told me to take some of my paper route and chore money and give it back to God. I never heard the word tithe or 10%. As I’ve said before, I went up to the front of church and begged the congregation to give more so we could have a full-time youth pastor. I was even the very part-time custodian who got a paycheck from the church; but I never committed to giving financially. On the other hand, Shelly learned about and witnessed biblical giving as an imperative and privilege. Giving, she learned is what followers of Jesus – saved by grace – do. [The lesson here for parents is that you can start teaching your kids about Biblical, Gospel-Centered generosity before they are even old enough to get an allowance. Earlier this week, one of our elders said: “Giving starts at home.” It does! And, parents, you can do it. Even if you struggle personally practicing biblical generosity, let your kids know how much of a struggle it is and invite them into the struggle with you: TOGETHERNESS AND SINCERITY/HONESTY.

When we are “Rooted in Jesus” we become like the One who “though He was rich, yet for [our] sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty [we] might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9) So let’s remain or become “Rooted in Jesus.” Let’s loosen our grip on that which actually belongs to God anyways. And let’s allow God to alter our giving, as we choose to follow His Altar-nate plan.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. What are your feelings around the topic of giving, money, generosity?
2. How have churches been helpful in this conversation? Harmful?
3. Has it been possible to practice TOGETHERNESS AND SINCERITY and HONESTY in this area of discipleship?
4. Do you know any “Macedonians” who gave beyond their means? Do you know any “Corinthians” who dragged their feet? Which do you identify with more?
5. What makes it hard to get excited about biblical generosity? What makes it exciting?
6. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love [Together], [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?