

Gleeful Giving

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Luke 6:37-38 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

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I was struck the other day by how preoccupied we are with money. We think about it and worry about it almost constantly. We talk about taxes, the cost of education, how much is spent on this or that government program, the price of gold, the Dow-Jones for the day, grocery coupons, the price of gas, the cost of medicine, and on and on the list goes. We talk about money, a lot. But we almost never talk about our money. We're pretty eager to talk about someone else's money, but we clam up about our own money.

I find this pretty amazing, but I see it all the time. I know people who are more willing to talk about their sex lives than they are about their bank account. In fact, that seems to be pretty common. And of course, this whole attitude about money carries over into our relationship with our faith and the church. C.S. Lewis wrote a book of letters, the correspondence between a high ranking devil and a young devil in training.¹ Part of the instruction for the trainee was the observation that an effective way to slow down God's work was to not talk about money. That's certainly true, and since we don't want to slow down God's work, we are going to talk about money.

Consciously or unconsciously we seem to have some rather warped ideas about our financial involvement in God's work. There are some who approach this like club dues. You aren't really a member of the church unless your giving has reached some definite level. If you give a lesser portion of your income, then you might be moving closer to the pearly gates, but the gate is still locked. On the other hand, if you give large sums, build up the endowment, and remember the church in your will, some expect that their heavenly accommodations will have nicer furniture and larger rooms. Things work that way in our economy, but the economy of our Lord is very different. We aren't buying our heavenly condo on the installment plan. We aren't making mortgage payments on the eternal mansion. If our view of giving to God's work has elements of a transaction, then it's time to clear up our thinking and reset our view of this. Our offerings are not dues to an organization. We are not leaving a tip for the church.

Others tend to see giving as a moral issue. A good person gives at some particular level and a bad person gives at a lower level. You're pretty bad until you begin giving in some specified way and at a specified level, and then, "bingo!" – suddenly, you're a righteous person. Wrong! We can't buy righteousness. Supporting God's work isn't about morality so much as it's about motivation. This is about wanting to support and increase our witness, our understanding of the Word, and our sense of "God-with-us and that involves all of our resources, money included. Our reluctance about the topic of money isn't a new thing. Back in the sixteenth century Martin Luther said that, "The last part of a person to be converted is his wallet!"

Unfortunately, our motivation to give can be weak because our vision for the future is pale and fuzzy. Most of us have never gotten serious enough about what we give to God's work to actually have goals about it. We just kind of give, and that's it. At some point we decided that we'd put ten dollars in the offering plate – and now, years later, we're still doing the same thing. Or, we pledged some annual amount at some time in the past. Each year we either pledge the same amount for the coming year, or we add a little to our pledge, without much

thought about how we decided on whatever amount we pledge. Often, what we pledge is some amount that won't be inconvenient – it won't disturb our budget, won't cause stress or any change in what we do or what we buy. Our offering is essentially our leftovers.

One time King David was looking for a site to build an altar to God. He approached a man named Ornan about buying a piece of his land. Ornan offered the land to King David for free. **1 Chronicles 21:24** But King David said to Ornan, "No; I will buy them for the full price. I will not take for the LORD what is yours, nor offer burnt offerings that cost me nothing." King David is saying, "I won't offer anything to God that costs me nothing." We should probably expect God to ask us to do something that will have some impact on our lifestyle. If we offer that which is free, then it isn't worth much to us – or to God.

I used to get an annual consolidated statement from one of my credit cards. It'd be broken down into categories – how much I'd spent the past year on airline tickets, how much on travel lodging, how much on merchandise, and how much on eating out, to name some of the classifications. I was usually surprised by much of the data. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there is where your heart is also."² I'd look at my statement and ask myself, "How much have I spent on fine dining? How much have I helped to feed people who can't afford to buy food? I'm buying nice clothes. Am I clothing the naked? I have a nice house and I spend money on it. Am I paying attention to the homeless? Am I mostly focused inward, or am I looking outward to the situation of those around me? Is my outlook one of ownership or one of stewardship?" When I looked at my check register and at my credit card statement, I saw what had been important to me – and what I'd been overlooking.

The more I think about all of this, the more I realize that for many of us, our vision of giving is totally distorted. We ask how much do I have to give instead of how can I help, how can I make a difference. We think about how much will it hurt, not how much joy will it give us. We think of giving as a command instead of an opportunity. And we essentially say, I'll think about someone else after I've completely taken care of me. We put God on the layaway plan. Here's a little down. Here's a little on account. I'll offer more when the car is paid for, or the kids are out of college, or I get a better job, or the boat is paid for, or my IRA account is as big as I need. At some more convenient time, I'll turn my gaze outward and heavenward. But right now, here is what I can spare.

Here's the biggest example of skewed vision that I can think of – and I've done this myself – dream of winning the lottery. We tell ourselves, "If I won the lottery, I give half of it to the church. I'd build a new fellowship hall for the church. I'd buy this and I'd give that and the list goes on and on of all the good that I'd do." What's wrong with that? How is that a skewed vision? First of all, it's poor vision because it's a freebie. It doesn't cost the giver any thought or effort. Anybody who comes into a lot of money is liable to throw some of it around. It's like when Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, so what? Everybody does that. There's no great virtue in that!" If a lot of money falls in your lap and you give some away, so what? Besides, this is just a fantasy form of "re-gifting," only we're doing it to God.

The second reason why this is a distorted vision is that it has no power to transform us. It isn't that we were made for giving, but rather that giving was made for us. Giving isn't about meeting a budget or sustaining the organizational church. The person who gives freely and happily is really the principle benefactor. Giving enriches our life with personal spiritual growth.

I have no idea who counts this sort of thing, but there are over 2000 verses in the Bible that touch on money and our resources. That's about one out of twenty verses. About twenty percent of the stories and teachings of Jesus are about our money and our heart. When people grow as givers who give out of joyful response to the love of God, they grow spiritually and grow in discipleship. Paul praised the churches in Macedonia because their heart was right. Despite their own poverty, they were insistent about wanting to relieve the suffering of others. They were eager to give and it is that eagerness that makes the gift acceptable to God. Paul told the church in Corinth that God loves a cheerful giver. Cheerful is a bit understated. The Greek word is the root of our word hilarious. God loves an enthusiastic giver, an eager giver, an uproariously joyful giver.

We have trouble finding the joy in giving because we tend to be lost in the concept of transaction. We're stuck in accounting mode. How much do I owe? How much do I have to give? We want to do the computation on how much of our mint and basil that we have to give and we lose sight of the opportunity to promote justice,

mercy, and faith. We're so busy scribbling in the ledger book- that we fail to notice the air that we breathe, the gifts of wind, sun, and rain, the crops of the fields and the beauty of a sunset.

Where there is no vision, the people perish. Don't lose sight of the vision that is transforming this congregation. Don't lose sight of all of the wonderful things that are happening here. We've put together kits to care for the homeless during the winter, educational kits for Haitian children, and food packs for hungry children during the summer. Attendance is up at worship and worship has more variety and less formality than ever. There are interesting and challenging classes for adults on Sunday morning and Thursday nights, confirmation classes for our youth, and programs that engage the parents of the young children in this congregation. We are feeding the hungry and are a major support to the homeless shelter in Thomasville. Yesterday, we worked hard, we brought the community together, and we raised significant funds, not for ourselves, but for four food pantries in Thomasville. The list goes on and on. The bulletin insert gives a long and impressive list of how we are using our money, our time, and our God given talent to serve God by caring for each other and reaching out to others. And recognizing what we have done gives us the momentum to believe in tomorrow.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is always talking about the kingdom of heaven. This is how life is when life is lived as God wills. The kingdom is near, the kingdom is within you, may the kingdom blossom and grow on earth just like it does in heaven. And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says don't work so hard at accumulating earthly things. You'll have to spend more and more time and effort maintaining and protecting your stuff. The more you have, the more it'll attract thieves. Instead, store up treasures in the life of God's kingdom. Build relationships based on love. Support justice, mercy, compassion, and spiritual health. Know that you have fed hungry families. Find comfort in knowing that the homeless can come in out of the freezing rain. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness can find worship that lifts them up and heals their wounds, rather than whips them with cords of guilt and shame. At the end of the day, at the end of the year, no one can steal the good you've done. No one can erase the love that you've shown. No one can take away the joy and contentment that you know from giving to others. Moths can't eat the fabric of a life lived in service. The framework of justice and peace will not rust. You will have added to the treasures in the kingdom of God. Your heart will have put them there. There is great joy in being able to say, "I have made a difference." There's the joy in giving. It is in giving that we receive. Amen.

CHARGE

Sisters and Brothers,

Don't let your giving be an accounting transaction
But make it a gift of love, of compassion, and of healing.
Lay up treasures in the kingdom of God,
Treasures that can't deteriorate or be stolen.

^{NRS} **2 Corinthians 8:1-9** We want you to know, brothers and sisters,¹ about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ² for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the privilege¹ of sharing in this ministry to the saints -- ⁵ and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶ so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking¹ among you. ⁷ Now as you excel in everything -- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you¹ -- so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. ^{2,8} I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the generous act¹ 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.

^{NRS} **2 Corinthians 8:12** For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has -- not according to what one does not have.

2Co 9:6-15 NRS ⁶ The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves

a cheerful [hilarious] giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, "*He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness¹ endures forever.*"

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; [enriched in heart, in contentment, in feeling worthwhile, etc.] ¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! [This is not, repeat not, prosperity theology.]

Mat 23:23 NRS "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

Matt 6:19-21 NRS "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust¹ consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust¹ consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*

² Matthew 6:21