

Tithing: the First Step in Giving

^{NRS} **1 Chronicles 29:1-9** King David said to the whole assembly, "I have provided for the house of my God, so far as I was able, the gold for the things of gold, the silver for the things of silver, and the bronze for the things of bronze, the iron for the things of iron, and wood for the things of wood, besides great quantities of onyx and stones for setting, antimony, colored stones, all sorts of precious stones, and marble in abundance. Who then will offer willingly, consecrating themselves today to the LORD?"

Then the leaders of ancestral houses made their freewill offerings, as did also the leaders of the tribes, the commanders of the thousands and of the hundreds, and the officers over the king's work. They gave for the service of the house of God five thousand talents of gold, ten thousand talents of silver, eighteen thousand talents of bronze, and one hundred thousand talents of iron. Then the people rejoiced because these had given willingly, for with single mind they had offered freely to the LORD; King David also rejoiced greatly.

2 Corinthians 8:1-14 We want you to know, brothers and sisters, 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 privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints-- ⁵ and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord.

⁷ Now as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you-- so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. ⁹ 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. ¹³ I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴ your present abundance and their need.

Matthew 23: 23"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, 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.

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The apostle Paul, in one of several letters to the church in Corinth, spoke of the Macedonian Christians and a gift that they were going to send to the people in Jerusalem. He wrote, "*And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord.*" Next, Paul pointed out very clearly and powerfully that they gave beyond their ability to give. Outsiders would look at them and ask, "How can they do that?" Then, Paul encouraged the Christian sin Corinth - as well as each of us today - to be cheerful givers.

I have struggled through the years about tithing ten percent or more. I'm very aware, and I hope you are, too, that in the Old Testament, the tithe was the requirement. You were required by the law to give ten percent or more, and believe me, they gave more. As we learned this morning in adult education, it was the requirement in some of the early American colonies, and even today in some Christian churches. In the New Testament it isn't directly mentioned as a requirement to give the ten percent, but Paul wrote, "*You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.*" (2 Corinthians 9:11).

A man named Bill Asceim has authored a book about growing churches. He wrote that it seemed to him that 20 percent of the people, those who are really giving generously, are having 80 percent of the

enjoyment of being fulfilled by their giving. Then he went on to say that people he knows who are generous givers are happy people. They really know how to live life.

Pastors do their people an injustice when they fail to preach about the stewardship of money. I pray that, as we read and learn what Scripture has to say to us on this subject, we'll rejoice in the foundation that God has built for us to stand upon and that we'll become the kind of givers that he desires us to be – givers who honor and please God and give glory to his name.

Now, what did Paul have to say to us? One of the first things that struck Paul is that these people did not give as he had expected them to give. They gave themselves first to the Lord. What does it mean to give yourself to the Lord? What does it mean to really give yourself to the Lord? It means that you recognize God's ownership of all of creation - and especially of everything in your life – everything, including yourself. That's right. Your baptism was a recognition that you are a child of God. Through trust in Jesus Christ, the relationship is reinforced that we are his.

What is the second thing Paul saw? When he looked at these Macedonian Christians, he said, "They're giving beyond their ability – generous givers, very generous givers." People looked at them and said, "Wow! Where did all this come from? They don't have this." Or better yet, the question might be, "What has enabled them to give like that?" The same thing enables you and me to give like that. Let me illustrate:

There was a wise woman who was walking along one day when she found a very precious stone in a stream. She picked up the stone, put it in her bag along with her food, closed it up, and went on her way. As she was going along her journey, she met a traveler, and she could see in his face that he was hungry, tired, and weary. She opened her bag and offered him some food. He looked in the bag, and the sun hit right on that precious stone. Instead of taking the food, he asked, "Well, may I have that stone?" Without hesitating, she reached inside her bag, lifted out the jewel, and with a smile on her face gave it to him. Greedily he grabbed it and raced off. She closed her bag and continued on her journey, until a few days later when the strange traveler came back to her with outstretched hand holding the stone. He said, "I give this back to you in the hope that you can give me something even more precious than this stone." Even though the traveler knew that the stone could provide years of security for him and his family, he returned the stone to the woman, saying, "I hope you can give me that which enabled you to so freely give it to me." He wanted the gift of generosity, of giving – kind of like Mother Teresa. What was it that enabled Mother Teresa to give so freely and in such difficult circumstances? What enabled her to so completely give her life to people who were poor and filthy? What enabled her to give a lifetime to those who were diseased and hurting, harassed and helpless? What enabled her to do that, but the grace of God? The grace of God, which is given to each and every one of us, enables us to be people different than what we ever imagined we could be.

The Holy Spirit in our hearts can change us, can transform us. We're not a people who are getters; we are givers. We're transformed from people who keep score into people who are forgetters. We're people who are not superstars in our own right, but rather we're servants of our Lord - and of one another. God's grace enables us to give beyond our ability. May God receive the glory for that. God can change us. We're different, never to be the same again. God's grace enables us to be cheerful givers. The Lord loves a cheerful giver and would rather that we not give under compulsion or because we have to. God wants to change our "have to" into an "I want to." Unfortunately, a survey has revealed that today Christians give, on average, 2.5 percent of their income. That's sad, because it would appear that the requirement of the Mosaic Law accomplished more than the Gospel, which proclaims that Jesus Christ came in love to show

and teach us how to love and serve each other, just as he loved and served us. When we really learn that and make it part of our life, we're transformed and motivated to give in a way that is far beyond what anyone could ever imagine.

Cheerful giving is desiring to share and wanting to help. Cheerful giving comes from thinking of others - rather than being preoccupied with self. I wonder – when the offering plate goes by, are you smiling? I see cheerful giving of time and talents and treasures all around me. I see that smile. I see it when food is put in the red wagon in the hallway. I see it when you put your arm around someone who needs comfort and assurance. I saw it yesterday as we hosted the chili cook-off to raise money for food pantries in this area. So, maybe we can smile when we put our money into the offering plate. It's a thought, just a thought.

May we give ourselves first to the Lord. May we give beyond our ability, and give cheerfully. May God grant his grace to work so powerfully and abundantly in your life and in mine that we continue to see new horizons as we live lives of faith, following Jesus Christ with trust and joy. **Amen.**