

First Presbyterian Church, Sylacauga, AL
The Rev. James B. Stanford III
October 25, 2009

1 Timothy 6:17-19
“The Generosity Principle”

As I was growing up, when my family of mother, father and three boys gathered around Mother’s kitchen table, it was hard to decide whose turn it was to say the blessing. That is, until we came up with the solution: all of the sons and the father would say the blessing. So each of us had a line to say.

I would begin: Thank you for the world so sweet.
Then, Johnny would add: Thank you for the food we eat.
Larry would say: Thank you for the birds that sing.
And all three of us would finish: Thank you, God, for everything.
Finally, my father would intone: “For T-H-E-S-E and all
Thy many blessings, we give thanks, O Lord. Amen.”

When Jeremy, Tre and I started our friendship in Memphis, we probably ate out more than anything. I would always insist that we join hands, and at first, I would say the blessing. I can remember being in restaurants where people would stop by and comment on how good it was to see us praying like that in public. As they got older, I would call on them to say the blessing, and while they might hesitate, each would say a blessing in their own words.

We still have that custom, today, to join hands and say the blessing at mealtime. The blessing each one uses is different and not always the same, because we’ve come to realize what those words mean. To say grace ... to speak God’s grace into the world ... is no small thing.

To say grace ... to speak God’s grace over what we have ... is to allow generosity to flourish in our midst. With a clear commitment and with our hearts in the right place, we emphasize what we can ... and not what we can’t. One way of putting it is to imagine that we are shoulder-to-shoulder with God ... in all things ... all the way ... living out God’s grace in the world.

I. A Theological Foundation for a Generous Life

God created us with the willingness to give --- to God and to others. This design is part of who we are and our need to be generous. Against that is the voice of fear – fear of what might happen to us – and it is a fear that leads us to hoard what we have.

When we give our lives to Christ ... when we invite Him to be Lord of our life, and when we allow the Holy Spirit to begin changing us from the inside out, then we find that our fears begin to dissipate and that our aim in life shifts from seeking personal pleasure to pleasing God and to caring for other. Although from time-to-time we may wrestle with the voices from outside and from inside, we are able to silence them more readily and effectively the more we grow in Christ. And the more we grow in Christ ... realizing that our lives belong to Him ... the more generous we become. Generosity is a fruit of spiritual growth.

From the early days of the Old Testament, God's people observed the practice of giving some portion ... OF THE BEST OF WHAT THEY HAD ... to God. A gift offered to God was called the "first fruits" or "the tithe," and it equaled one-tenth of one's flocks or crops or income. Abraham was the first person mentioned to actually give a tithe or a tenth. You can find this story in Genesis, chapters 14 and 28.

As Christians who live under the new covenant, we are not bound by the Law of Moses. However, we do look to it as a guide. Yet most Christians agree that the tithe is a good guideline for our lives ... one that is pleasing to God.

Remember the story of the Ten Apples: Once upon a time there was man who had nothing, and God gave him ten apples. God gave him three apples to eat ... and three apples to trade for shelter from the sun and rain ... and three apples to trade for clothing to wear. God also gave him one apple so that he might have something to give back to God to show his gratitude for the other nine.

The man ate the first three apples. He traded three for shelter from sun and rain and three more for clothing to wear. The man looked at the tenth apple ... and it seemed bigger and juicier than the rest. So the man ate the tenth apple ... and gave back to God ... THE CORE!

I have not always been able to tithe, nor will I stand here and tell you that I have found tithing easy. The secret for me is to always write the first check to God ... to always pay my commitment first. Though tithing can be a struggle, it is possible at virtually every income level. I have one son who insists on giving 10% of every paycheck. There have been times, when I looked at his bills and what he owed and suggested that he might want to give less. Thankfully, in this instance he has never listened to me.

If you cannot tithe right away, take a step in that direction. Give 2 percent ... or 5 percent ... or 7 percent. God understands where you are, and God will help you make the adjustments necessary for you to become more and more generous.

Nevertheless, tithing is a floor, not a ceiling. God calls us to grow beyond the tithe. We should strive to set aside an additional percentage as offering for other things that are important, such as mission projects, building funds, and other nonprofit causes.

II. What Our Giving Means to God

Again, from the Old Testament we find that the primary way people worshipped God was by building an altar and offering the fruit of one's labors to God. Check back early in Genesis, the 4th chapter, at the story of Cain and Abel and see what was at the basis of that sinfulness. What God saw people doing was giving a gift that expressed love, faith, and the desire to honor God. When people gave their gifts in this spirit, their offerings blessed the Lord, and it moved God's heart.

In both the Old and the New Testaments the Bible has more to say about money than just about anything else ... particularly is this true in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 11:24-25 says: "Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; while others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water."

People have tried to express this principle of generosity in various ways. Paul Bunyan once wrote:

**"A man there was and they called him mad,
The more he gave the more he had."**

And one person's tombstone read:

**What I gave, I have.
What I spent, I had.
What I kept, I lost.**

There is that great prayer of St. Francis of Assisi that begins:

"Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace..."

Do you remember how that prayer ends?

**For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.**

One well-known Presbyterian minister and author, Eugene Peterson, paraphrased the proverb this way:

**The world of the generous gets larger and larger ...
The world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller.**

III. How Our Generosity Affects Us

When you and I are generous --- to God and to our families, to our friends and neighbors, to others who are in need and to the least among us --- our hearts are full of joy. They are enlarged by the very act of generosity ... for when we give generously, we become more generous.

Many people ... even many Christians ... have it wrong. They say that if you give, then God will give more back to you. That's not how it works! We do not give to God so that we can get something in return. Yet, it is amazing that when we give to God and to others, the blessings just seem to come back to us. No guarantee, you understand, no promise that if you tithe, you will never lose your job or never have other bad things happen to you. But when we give generously, the unmistakable blessings of God flow into our lives.

As we come to the end of this series of sermons on discovering joy through simplicity and generosity, there is a sheet in your bulletin with five personal goals and commitments for 2010. Please sit down with this and make it a time of meditation and prayer.

Yesterday, Jeremy and Katie had planned for all of us to go to Baker Farm to enjoy the day and to get pumpkins. Then, Katie wanted us to come home to carve pumpkin faces and enjoy Jeremy's pumpkin pie. Though yesterday's news meant that Jeremy and Katie couldn't be with us, Tre, Erica and I did what they had planned. We got pumpkins, and Erica carved a neat face in one of them.

Halloween is approaching, and I have seen this email every year at this time. It seems appropriate to mention it this morning. After giving her life to Christ, a woman was asked by a co-worker what it was like to be a Christian. She replied, "It's like being a pumpkin. God picks you from the patch ... brings you in ... and washes all the dirt off that you may have gotten from the other pumpkins. Then God cuts the top off and scoops out all the yucky stuff. God removes the seeds of doubt ... the seeds of hatred ... the seeds of greed. Then God carves a new smile on your face and puts His light inside of you to shine for all the world to see!

Remember these verses from James 1:17-18. "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of light with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures."

Be light in this world! Be faithful! Be generous! Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayer

O God, we thank you for the abundance that we have in our lives. And we pray that you would help us. Help us, Lord, to honor you with our tithes. Help us to care for the poor and those who are in need ... those you consider the least of these. Help us to recognize that it is more blessed to give than to received. We offer ourselves to you. Guide us now as we prepare to set goals and make commitments for 2010. Help us to do your will. Lead us, we pray, in your holy name. Amen.

Resources

John M. Buchanan, "A Little Biblical Straight Talk About Money," Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, 9/30/07

Adam Hamilton, "Defined By Generosity," ENOUGH STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM GUIDE, pages. 85-89

Roger Heerspink, "The Joy of Generosity: Service Plans for a Three-week Series on Stewardship, REFORMED WORSHIP

Drew Henry, "Generosity," First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL, 6/28/09

David Miles, "Expanding Your World," Luther Seminary, 3/10/96
"Thank You for the World So Sweet," WEE SING BIBLE SONGS

Enough Stewardship Campaign

During the past few weeks, we have examined some of the financial challenges facing us as a nation, and we have looked at our own spending, saving, and giving habits. We have examined the biblical principles of financial management, and we have learned about ways to assess our financial situation and develop a financial plan that will allow us to experience the true joy that comes through simplicity and generosity. As we get ready for Consecration Sunday on November 1st, ask God's blessing on your commitment to the following financial goals for the upcoming year.

My Personal Goals and Commitment for 2010

1. I will thank God daily for all my blessings. My goal for daily Bible reading and prayer is _____ days each week.

2. I will seek contentment and simplicity and live within my means. My spending goal is _____.

3. I will seek freedom from the bonds of credit and debt. My debt reduction goal is _____.

4. I will seek to wisely manage the gifts God has given me, investing and saving for the future. My saving goal is _____.

5. I will worship God each week by the giving of my tithes and offerings. My estimate of giving for 2010 is _____.

Lord, I present this commitment to you, acknowledging that everything I have and everything I am is a gift from you. I pray that you will grant me wisdom and strength in the coming year, and that you will bless and use the gifts that I humbly present to you. Amen.

For personal use. Place in your Bible for reference in the coming year.