

First Presbyterian Church, Sylacauga, AL
The Rev. James B. Stanford III
November 1, 2009

2 Corinthians 8:1-7
"2 B Generous"

I turned on TV one night this week and was immediately transported back to my "coonskin cap" days ... to Wednesday night's Wonderful World of Disney and "Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier". Only ... this happened to be John Wayne's epic movie, THE ALAMO, and John Wayne played Davy Crockett instead of Fess Parker.

If you are familiar with the characters at the Alamo, besides Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie, there was Sam Houston. The story is told about Sam Houston that, when he gave his life to Christ, he went to be baptized at a river gathering. As he waded into the water, someone noticed his wallet was still in his back pocket. Fearing that the money might get wet, folks shouted for Houston to leave his wallet on the bank. For a moment he paused, as if he might return and hand his wallet over for safekeeping, but instead he went back down into the water. It is reported that he said: "If I am to be baptized, I must baptize my wallet also!"

Stewardship does affect every part of our lives. The apostle Paul gives the topic of money serious consideration. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul writes: "But just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I'm not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others."

Consider three things this morning.

Christians are to give themselves to the Lord first.

We give because giving began with God. The entire life of Jesus is concentrated on the act of giving:

**He gave in feeding the multitude.
He gave in healing the sick.
He gave in teaching His disciples.
He gave in empowering His followers for evangelism.
He gave in compassion for the poor.
He gave in offering rest to the weary.
He gave in dying on the cross for our sins.
He gave in sending His Holy Spirit.**

The life of Jesus is God's gift to us, and through that life Jesus set the example for our giving ... for our generosity.

Certainly God doesn't need our giving. He doesn't need our tithe. He does not need our gift in whatever amount. Tonight, the Sunday Evening Bible Study will look at the story of the rich young ruler. We have been using Max Lucado's book, **CAST OF CHARACTERS. In this chapter Lucado says this about God: "Only a puny god can be bought with tithes."**

No, instead of what we give, God wants us. He wants us to respond to His gifts to us. It is for our spiritual well-being that He allows us to give. When you embrace the concept of generosity in the tithe, that marks a new spiritual step in your faith and spiritual maturity. It also protects you from the love of money, because you are learning to give your money away. It protects you from the threat that possessions or material things might possess you, instead of you taking hold of them and using them with simplicity and generosity.

John Ruskin, the philosopher and social scientist, used to pose a question to this class in the form of a story. He would tell of a rich man who carried his gold with him to the New World. As he was crossing the Atlantic, the ship on which he sailed began to sink. The rich man ran to his safe to grab his pouch of gold and strapped it around his waist. He then jumped into the water with the other passengers. Ruskin loved to ask the question – "As he was sinking, did the man have the gold ... or did the gold have the man?" You and I can smile at the folly of such a question. Yet we often run the same danger ourselves because our lives lack simplicity. The real question is: "Do our possessions possess us?"

Next, Christians are to give in response to a felt need.

Giving is the proof of love. To be able to say, “Lord Jesus, I love you because you have given Yourself for me. You’ve given me, as well, all things to richly enjoy. I want to give in return ... in gratitude for all that you have given and done for me.”

Remember these words from James Russell Lowell, addressed to God:

It’s now what we give, but what we share.
For the gift without the giver is bare.
Who gives himself with alms feeds three:
Himself, his hungry neighbor and me.

Paul encouraged the saints at Corinth: “Each person should give what they have decided in their heart to give. For the God who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge your harvest of righteousness and you will be made rich in every way so that you may become generous on every occasion.” (2 Corinthians 9:7-11)

Finally, Christians are to give sacrificially.

Paul writes in verse 3: “For I testify that they gave as much as they were able to give.” (2 Corinthians 8:3) If you truly read that verse, you will discover that Paul doesn’t stop there. He goes on to add: “... they gave as much as they were able to give ... and even beyond their ability.” Think about that! They gave not according to their ability to give, but beyond their ability to give.

Take that list of “all saints” in this congregation in just the past nine years and note the names of those who “gave as much as they were able” ... and especially those who gave “even beyond their ability.” For instance, I think about Nellie Brand giving me the quarters she won in Bingo to give to the youth.

Yesterday, just before the Auburn game, I called to check on Joanne Rea. She was in fine spirit, waiting for the football game to begin. When I asked if she needed anything, she responded that

Bernice had just brought her mail and that she had the letter from the church but hadn't opened it. I replied that she probably knew what the letter was without opening it, and she said that she did. But she went on to say, "I'm afraid that I'm going to have to give the same as last year, because I don't have any additional income. Jokingly, I said, "Joanne, that's not true! You're getting \$250 from the government." She laughed and said, "Well, you can have that."

During the football game I thought about what she had said, and when the game was over (thank goodness they won), I called her back and asked if I could tell about our conversation in my sermon. Her immediate response was, "By all means. If I can encourage someone in any way, I want to."

Gordon Cosby once served as a pastor in rural Virginia, where a deacon in his church came to him concerned. It seemed that there was a very poor widow in the congregation, who had six children, but who kept on giving four dollars a month to the church, as a tithe of everything she had. She was in such poverty that the deacons thought it would be a good idea for the pastor to go and tell her that she didn't need to give anymore ... that the church loved her and would support her through this financial crisis in her life.

So, Gordon went to visit her, wanting to relieve her of the obligation of giving. This is how he tells the story. This pastor said, "I am not wise now. I was less then. I went and told her of the concern of the deacons. I told her as graciously and as supportively as I knew how that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. As I talked with her, tears trickled down her cheeks. She said quietly, 'I want to tell you that you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning.'"

Wow! That is sacrificial giving ... the true essence of the Christian attitude towards generosity. Instead of asking: How much we are going to give? ... a better question might be: "How much are we withholding?"

Mark tells the story in his 12th chapter of the day when Jesus sat at the Temple gate and watched people drop in their offering. A widow came and put in two very small copper coins worth only a

fraction of a penny. Jesus called His followers over and said, “I tell you, this poor widow has put more money into the treasure than all the others. For they all gave out of their wealth but she, out of her poverty, put in everything ... all that she had to live on.”

This morning, you and I have the opportunity to respond to the grace of God in our lives. The financial need at First Presbyterian is great. I haven’t even talked about that. If you received the November newsletter, THANK HEAVEN, and read Clint’s letter, you know how tight things are. However, that’s NOT the reason you should give.

Give because:

- 1. You understand that all things belong to God.**
- 2. That no matter what you give away, God’s going to look after you and take care of you.**
- 3. That the tithe is not something to aim at. It is the floor from which you and I are to build.**

What a tremendous privilege it is that God actually paused and said, “I’m going to let you give to me.” It blows my mind that God has allowed me ... allowed us ... the privilege of giving to Him.

This is your opportunity. It is an opportunity to say to God, “Let me give back to you!” May God bless you in your giving.

Resources

CeeGee McCord, “Stewardship Sermon,” St. Paul’s Presbyterian Episcopal Church, Kingsport, TN, October 29, 2000.

Alan J. Meenan, “Money Matters,” Hollywood Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, CA, 10-24-1999.

Alan J. Meenan, “Withholding Taxes,” Hollywood Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, CA, 10-31-1999.

James Russell Lowell, Wikiquote.

Source of Sam Houston story is unknown, but it has been widely quoted.

THE ALAMO (1960 film), Wikipedia.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Session has called a Congregational Meeting for next Sunday, at the end of worship, to hear and act on a report from the Nominating Committee.

Fall Festival – next Sunday night with the games beginning at 5 p.m. (children may wear costumes if they wish) At 5:45 the games will end, and we will gather in Perryman for some pre-supper entertainment. Then our supper will benefit our Youth Group. Following supper, there will be singing and the auction. When you arrive, buy tickets for the games, supper and the auction.

Operation Christmas Child

Care House Christmas Basket --- 250 cans of white potatoes

Today is All Saints Sunday. As we sing our first hymn, you may wish to have your bulletin open in the middle where all of our saints since 2000 are listed. Think about them as you sing. This hymn is a little different, so listen for the choir and Pastor Jim to know when to start each of the four verses.

PRAYERS

Sympathy for Pastor Hugh and Dorothy and their family in the death of Hugh's nephew, Tony Getton. He is the son of Hugh's sister, Isabel, who visited here recently. We remember that it was only 5 months ago that she lost her husband.

Joanne Rae – Sylacauga Health Care #150 on the East wing or Rehab wing.

My neighbor, Gene Lessley – Wednesday – spot on lungs

Mike Ellis – cancer of the liver

Lyndol Bolton – slow recovery