

Series: “Generous”
#3: “Giving God His Due”
Malachi 3:6-10 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 (GNT)
By John Gill

There’s an old saying that “The only things that are certain in life – are death and taxes.” In the church, we might also add one more thing that is a certainty; You can count on the fact that once every year, you can expect a stewardship campaign! So, true to form, we are now in the midst of our stewardship campaign.

Of course, most of you (if you are on our mailing list) have received a letter this week about why it is important to give generously. Today, I want to continue that theme, as we consider what level of generosity God expects of us as we pool our resources to fund the ministries of his church.

One thing I know from 35 years in the ministry (well, among many things) is that it’s dangerous to announce ahead of time that you will be preaching on stewardship. When people KNOW that the preacher is going to be talking about money, they manage to find some convenient excuse to be absent. For some reason, many otherwise faithful and God-fearing Christians have an aversion to hearing about money in the church. Of course, this year, the theme is harder to avoid, since the entire month of February is begin devoted to stewardship!

When it comes to the subject of giving to the church, some of us may be like farmer Anderson’s cow. Asked how much milk the cow gave, the farmer answered, “If you mean willingly, not a drop. But if you corner her in her stall, you can take about 10 quarts from her!”

We’re not here to “corner anyone in their stall” this morning. But, we ARE here to talk about money – we’re here talk about giving to the work of God, through this church.

Whether we like it or not, “giving” and “the spiritual life” go hand in hand. Just read your Bible! The Bible is not hesitant to talk about giving: 700 times the word “giving” is used; the word “sacrifice” is used over 300 times; and the word “money,” over 100 times. It’s been said that Jesus said more about money than he did about love. No, the Bible is NOT ashamed to talk about money and giving – and neither am I – because money and giving are part of what it means for us to call ourselves “Christians.”

Our second scripture lesson for this morning (that was read a moment ago) is taken from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church. He is writing them about – you guessed it – MONEY and GIVING.

You see, the church in Jerusalem was going through hard times, and Paul was taking up an offering from all the churches that he had established all over Asia-Minor and Europe. I think you’ll agree that his words to the Church at Corinth could easily apply to us at Sebastian, as well.

It’s a wonderful text because it can tell us so much about giving in the church. I want to take just a few moments this morning to reflect on this passage section by section so that, when we consider our level of giving, we will understand what God expects from us.

The first thing Paul says is that **GIVING TO GOD IS A JOY AND A PRIVILEGE.**

If you read between the lines of this letter, you get the impression that “farmer Anderson’s cow” was alive and well in the church in Corinth. In the 8th and 9th chapters of his letter, Paul doesn’t come right out and say it, but there seems to have been some stinginess among the Corinthians when it came to giving. Sure, he complements and flatters them, but while he is doing it, he is prodding them – goading them – to do what they already know they ought to do. He does this by holding up the churches of Macedonia as an example to emulate: “The churches of Macedonia are very poor,” Paul tells them, “but their joy was such that they begged and pleaded for the privilege of having a part in helping God’s people in Judea.” They BEGGED and PLEADED for the PRIVILEGE of giving!

Douglas Brown was on the Stewardship Committee of his church. Along with others on the committee, he was assigned to make calls on church members to invite them to make a financial commitment for the coming year (by the way, we’re not doing that here this year). One member he was assigned to visit was a poor widow. Knowing her circumstances, his first impulse was to not even stop at her house. But then he changed his mind - Douglas decided to stop just for a visit, but NOT ask her to give. To his great surprise, the woman was expecting the visit and was ready with her commitment card. His inclination was to encourage her to keep the money for herself. But when he suggested it, she scolded him: “Now, young man,” she said, “you must not take this PRIVILEGE away from me.”

Paul says to us that giving to God should NOT be done out of a sense of obligation (although, as Christians, we ARE obliged to give). Giving to God should be seen as a privilege – that we can be partners with Christ in carrying out his ministry in the world.

How about us? Do we “beg and plead for the privilege” of giving to God?

The second thing Paul wants to tell us this morning is that **OUR GIVING, WHEN RIGHTLY MOTIVATED, IS AN OUTGROWTH OF OUR FAITH**: “You are so rich in all you have,” Paul tells the Corinthians, “in faith, speech, and knowledge, in your eagerness to help and in your love for us. And so we want you to be generous also in this service of love.”

Or slightly paraphrased: “Why don’t you put your money where your mouth is.”

In a Baptist church, a man was already in the baptismal pool when he realized that he still had his wallet in his back pocket. He started to take it out, then changed his mind. “Shucks,” he told his pastor, “go ahead and baptize my wallet, too!”

We need our wallets baptized as well as our bodies – because generosity grows out of our faith. Has YOUR wallet been baptized? – or have you held that part of your life back from God?

The third lesson from Paul about giving is that we have a role-model to follow: **WE SHOULD GIVE TO GOD JUST AS GOD HAS GIVEN TO US**. “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: RICH as he was, he made himself POOR for your sake, in order to make you RICH by means of his POVERTY.” There should be no limit to our willingness to give to God, because there was no limit to his giving to us.

An elderly woman in Scotland went one day to a missionary-society meeting where only “contributing members” were admitted. The doorkeeper asked, “Are you a contributor?” “I’m afraid I’m not,” she answered. When he wouldn’t let her in, she left disappointed. Thinking of his words, she thought about her son who, years before, had gone as a missionary to Sierra Leone in Africa. He had died in the mission field, and was buried in that country. She returned to the site of the meeting and explained to

the doorman, "I forgot. You asked me if I was a contributor. I gave my only son. He was a missionary and is buried in Sierra Leone." The doorkeeper removed his hat, bowed graciously, and escorted her to a seat on the front row.

You see, we are to be contributors to God's work – why? Because God, like this woman, has given HIS only Son – to us. That's why we can never out-give God!

This is explained nicely in a little poem I came across:

"Go give to the needy, sweet charity's bread.
For giving is living," the angel said.
"And must I be giving again and again?"
my peevish, petulant answer ran.
"Oh, no," said the angel, piercing me through.
"Just give till the Master STOPS giving to you!"

So, the bottom line for us as we consider what our level of giving should be, is this: "God has given his all for us - How much should WE give to God?"

Well, Paul gave us some guidelines to help us make our decision about that. Paul tells the Corinthians that, as long as we give with EAGERNESS, our offerings, however large or small they are, are acceptable to the Lord. Paul writes, "If you are eager to give, God will accept your gift on the basis of what you have to give, not on what you don't have."

There's a cute little poem I like that goes like this:

"It's not what you'd do with a million,
if a million should e're be your lot;
But what you are doing
With the buck-and-a-half you've got."

In this verse, Paul isn't trying to give us an excuse to give as little as we can get away with. God KNOWS our bank accounts and He can see our check books. God knows how we spend our money and He knows the level of giving we are capable of.

Paul is telling us that we ALL should give according to our ABILITY to give. He writes, "I am not trying to relieve others by putting a burden on you; but since you have plenty at this time, it is ONLY FAIR that you should help those who are in need."

We all know there are always SOME in every church who have been blessed financially more than others. There are also some who, even when they are giving generously, can only give a small amount. There are others who may give more in total dollars, but who are not giving up to their potential. Paul teaches us that – if we all are giving PROPORTIONALLY in relation to our income, we will all be doing our fair share.

"Proportional giving" – that, my brothers and sisters, is called "tithing." "Tithing" is the biblical principle of proportional giving, and it's simple: The rule of thumb is that the first 10% of our income belongs to God. Period.

Through the Prophet Malachi, God condemned the people of Judah for not giving him the “tithe.” God said it plainly (in or first lesson this morning): “I ask you, is it right for a person to cheat God? Of course not! Yet you are cheating me! ‘How?’ you ask? In the matter of tithes and offerings.”

When Terri and I go out to dinner, we always tip our server 20% and we gladly do so – knowing that it is a way for us to show our gratitude for how we have been cared for. God isn’t even asking for a waitress’s tip. He is content with only 10%.

An unemployed man attended a service of worship and heard a powerful sermon on “tithing.” He vowed that from that moment on, he would give God 10% of his income. In his pocket was \$10 in cash. When the offering plate was passed, he put in a \$1 bill. Then his fortunes changed – he got a job that paid \$100,000 per year! So, he went to the preacher and said, “Is there any way I can get out of my commitment? Whoever heard of giving \$10,000!” The preacher said, “Oh, yes, there is one sure way – we can pray to the Lord that he REDUCE your income so that you can AFFORD to tithe again!”

Now, let me say this: We know that most of you could not realistically move from what you are currently giving to a tithe of 10%. Most of us have constructed our personal finances in such a way that almost all of our income is committed to other expenses. Others have such a small income that they need most of it just to survive. To jump to a 10% tithe may mean defaulting on other financial obligations.

However, the truth is that most of us can give more than we are currently giving. Our Stewardship Team is challenging us all to “step up” to a higher level of giving. In the mailing you received, there was a “step up” sheet that suggested a reasonable increase you might consider. Another way to “step up” toward a tithe is to calculate what percentage of your income you are currently giving (say 3%), and “step up” a percentage point, to 4%. If you do this each year, over time, you will be able to gradually move toward the full tithe. (This is explained in the brochure inserted your bulletin this morning in more detail). I have never met a person who gives the full tithe who is sorry they do.

I don’t typically announce what Terri and I give – I just usually say that “we tithe.” And I wouldn’t ask you to share what you give publicly. But today, I am making an exception so that you know that I’m not asking you to do anything that I am not willing to do. As I said, we have always tithed 10%. That means that, in the next 12 months, we are committing to give \$200 per week, or \$10,400 for a year, to the General Ministry Fund of this church.

Friends, the first 10% of our incomes belongs to God. If we spend it, rather than give it to God, we are stealing from God. It’s that simple. That’s what the Bible says.

Certainly, this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote this letter. But he DOESN’T lay down the tithe as a hard-and-fast rule for the Corinthians to follow. Instead, he offers them a CHALLENGE – a challenge I am offering YOU this morning: Paul writes, “I am not laying down any rules, but by showing how eager others are to help, I am trying to find out how REAL your own love is.”

That’s what our “Generous” financial campaign is really all about – it’s NOT so much about raising funds to underwrite a budget (well, not just about meeting a budget). The main purpose of our financial campaign is, in Paul’s words, “to find out how real our love is!”

A minister made a plea for a sacrificial offering one Sunday and watched as each member of his church laid a gift on the altar. After the service, he singled out a young lady who he knew to be wealthy. He told her that he had noticed her giving only a small amount, and asked, "Don't you love Jesus?" "Yes," she replied, "I love Him – but I'm not crazy about him!"

How much do you love Jesus? Are we crazy about Jesus?

So, what will it be? Do you and I love God enough to finally give God his due? Are you "crazy - in love" with Jesus?

Prayer:

O Almighty God, whose blessed Son, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might become rich: Grant us the spirit of generous self-giving that we may further the work of your church and relieve those who are in need. Help us who have received so freely from you to give as freely in return, and so to share the blessedness of giving as well as the happiness of receiving. We ask this in the name of him who gave himself for the life of the world, even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.