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 Stewardship Focus

Giving to God
2 Corinthians 8:1-7

*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the **grace of God** that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia, ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction **their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.** ³For, as I can testify, they **voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means,** ⁴begging us earnestly for the favor^[a] of partnering in this ministry to the saints, ⁵and not as we expected. *Instead, 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 undertaking***^[b] *among you.* ⁷*Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you*^[c]—*so we want you to **excel also in this generous undertaking.****

They say we can ***tell a lot about our priorities if we look at just two things:***
 our calendar, and our bank statement.

Where we spend our ***time***, and how we spend our ***money***.

So, what does your calendar and money say about your life?

What if we thought about that?

Anybody give to any ***non-profits, schools, or other organizations?***

Why do you give to them?

I know I was a recipient of ***scholarships*** in college and seminary, so I give back to support that.

I give to ***Compassion International*** to sponsor a little girl in Uganda and her education and food and shelter, because I've seen two other children grow up in that program.

I wonder, where do you give, and why?

And what about giving to the ***church and its ministries?***

Why do you give to GOD?

If someone asked you—what would you say?

The blog Ministry Matters suggests two main motivations for giving to God:

The first motivation is giving based on OUTCOME.

We give because....We want to SEE our gifts used for the kingdom of God, in the church and the world.

We know that giving to the church changes lives---

when we support what the church is doing, people grow in faith, they are being fed, cared for, supported, loved, and communities transformed—here in this place, and well beyond. This is what our trifold brochure about stewardship is describing.

Outcome-based giving means we want to see the IMPACT of our gifts.

The gift makes a difference, something that can be quantified and seen, experienced and measured.

And I think it's so important to see what our money does here in the church and beyond.

It does take money to support our worship, music, education, missions and more—and those ministries change lives!

But there is *yet another motivation* for giving to God.

It's the *spiritual* dimension.

It's the *heart*.

And we have several **REASONS** that we give from the heart.

****We give because....we want to PUT GOD FIRST.**

That's what the Gospel story about the coin and Caesar is all about.

Jesus says, pay taxes, and give to Caesar what is Caesar's.

But, then he says, *give to God what is God's*.

And what is God's?

Well, if we're honest about it---**EVERYTHING belongs to God**.

Nothing is really ours.

Even the money and stuff we feel that we have earned, that we own,

Is not really ours.

So, if we put God first, we understand *what to give and why*.

In the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament,

God's people are asked to give the *first of their harvest* back to God.

This was called giving *first fruits* to God—a tithe of ten percent, of their best.

Not what was leftover, but the first and best, to God.

I wonder—how do we do that **TODAY**?

Do we give at the **first of each month or year**, or do we give what's left at the end?

Do we give our **best**, or do we give God extra money—
like what we'd spend on eating out or coffee?

What is a first fruit for you?

In Matthew 6, Jesus tells us not to worry
about what we will eat or drink or wear,
but **seek first** the kingdom of God,
and all that we need will be provided by God!

We give to God because.....we put God FIRST.

****We also give because.....we FOLLOW JESUS.**

And strangely enough, Jesus talked a LOT about money.

It's so funny—that we are so hesitant to talk about money in church.

It's considered private or taboo.

And let's be honest, sometimes money is addressed the **wrong way** in churches---
it's used as a guilt trip, or a power trip.

Sometimes churches ask for money, but they don't use it right,

Or they don't thank people,

or reach out with care, or show the impact of the gifts given.

***Ideally, as Christians, we could be open and transparent
about what we have and what we give.***

Ed and I just spent time with seminary friends,

and part of our conversations about faith were also about what we give, where, and
why—how we pledge, tithe, and give to church and other places we feel called to
support.

We talked about the life--changing nature of giving. The joy of it.

It's refreshing to have friends to talk with about money and giving,
to encourage us and hold us accountable.

I know for Ed and I, when we got married—giving to God first actually helped us
get out of debt, not the other way around!

God has a different kind of math when it comes to giving.

Truth is, if we follow Jesus, we'll THINK about our money—

Because Jesus spoke a lot about money.

Not just as currency, like the coin with Caesar's image on it.

But as a ***spiritual*** issue.

I just finished a series on Jesus' parables.
 Did you know that of the 43 parables in the four gospels,
28 of them are about money and possessions!
One out of ten verses in the Gospels is about money or possessions!
 The Bible has over 500 verses about prayer, over 500 about faith,
 but over **2000 verses** are about money or possessions.
 Herb Miller, *Stewardship Nuggets*, 1999.

Money is not really “private”.

People know what kind of money we have based on what we drive,
 where we live, what we wear, and what we support.
 So, why are we so squeamish to talk about it?

Giving to God is just a NORMAL part of following Jesus,

Like prayer, worship, study, or fellowship.
 And Jesus taught us to not worry, but to share,
 to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth.

We give because—we follow Jesus.

*****We also give because.....we are GENEROUS.***

Generosity is not just something for billionaires like Warren Buffet,
 who can give oodles of money,
 or rich people who can leave a lavish estate behind for the church.
 Generosity is about the expanding ALL of our hearts,
 No matter how much money we have.

As Churchill said,

We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.

Generosity is a gift of the Holy Spirit, it's in our hearts.

And generosity starts with God—the greatest giver of all!
 Generosity is an essential part of faith!

Do you want to be more generous? Open your wallet, and give!

Then ask God for your heart to follow those gifts.
 That's what Jesus said—*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*
 Ask God for the faith to give generously, sacrificially, and proportionally.
We give because—we are generous.

****We also give because.....we have ENOUGH.**

This is so true.

We Americans are the richest people on the planet,

even those who live the most modestly.

We hold and use and store most of the earth's resources.

Our calling as Christians is *to live simply, so others can simply live.*

Years ago, in the Evangelical Church of India newly baptized Christians were given the *gift of a coconut palm tree.*

They are encouraged to care for this tree,

knowing that after four years it will start bearing fruit,

eventually yielding about 150 coconuts a year.

A family selling that fruit could earn quite a bit,

and the church asks that the believers give a *tithe, or ten percent,*

of their harvest each year.

Isn't that a great example of stewardship?

Because the *tree* is a gift from God, the *produce* is a gift,

and it is a *joy and a gift* for each family to be able to give back to God!

What has *God given YOU*, like that tree?

We can give—because we have received so many gifts.

We are so blessed, in thousands of ways, by God's abundance.

God has given us enough---enough to live, enough to share, enough to give.

We give because---we have enough.

****We also give because.....we are ABLE.**

We ALL have time, talent, and treasure.

So we can ALL give.

Sometimes people say, I live on a fixed income, so I can't give.

Well, we ALL have finite resources.

But, if we have any resources, we have the ability to give.

If we have anything, we have something to share!

Do you know who the most generous Christians are?

The ones with the smallest incomes!

This is what Paul describes in the Macedonian churches in 2 Corinthians 8:

their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Wow.

I read something in the Faith and Worship blog this week. It said:

Consider this---a sizeable city, with a population suffering on several levels. There have been years of crop failures, burdening an impoverished people overburdened by heavy taxation and oppression.

There is also an influx of returning exiles.

It is difficult enough for the existing population to feed themselves without the added burden of extra people. Many are dying for lack of adequate food, the situation is getting desperate.

A church hears of this crisis and sends two leaders with what aid they can provide, and following this visit a more general fund-raising effort is initiated throughout the nearby regions, with churches being encouraged to give as much as they are able.

Where is this? Jerusalem

When? between AD 44-46

Who are the Church Leaders? Paul and Barnabas.

Giving was integral to the lives of ancient Jews and early Christians.

The annual feast of Purim commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people.

Part of that celebration is a command to give to the poor.

However poor a person is,

they are required to find someone in need and give a gift of food.

Did you catch that last part?

Giving was NOT based on having extra.

Giving is for everyone, regardless of income.

Generosity is central to Christianity.

Did you know that the ***early Church*** was based on ***sacrificial giving?***

Acts 2:44 tells us that believers sold their possessions and goods in order to give to anyone in need!

2 Corinthians 8 is about Paul's approach to fund-raising.

He speaks to the Corinthian church,

comparing their gifts with the ***gifts of other churches and Jesus himself.***

He admits that the church often has good intentions, without follow-through.

So Paul encourages them to look at Jesus to understand true giving.

And he holds up the Macedonian churches as a great example of giving,
because they had almost nothing, and yet they gave willingly and generously.
https://www.faithandworship.com/Sermons/Christians_and_giving

You know, we often think of stewardship as giving what we OWN to God.
 But the truth is, we are really just freely using, enjoying,
 and giving something that *already belongs to God!*
 That's what it means to be a steward.

What if we had that attitude about our possessions and money?
 That's it's all God's and *we are just enjoying it?*
 What if we held our money loosely, and gave it generously?
We give because....we are ABLE.

*****Finally, we give because....we are CALLED BY GOD.***
 We are called to be generous, because our God is so generous.

This year our theme is *G.I.F.T.: Growing in Faith Together.*
 Pastor Karen spoke about this last week, and she made the beautiful stewardship
 banners hanging in the sanctuary, so be sure and thank her.
 Growing in Faith Together *happens when we give.*
Faith grows when giving grows.
 Giving grows when faith grows.

Giving is an act of faith.
 Next week, we'll bring our *pledge cards*,
 as a sign of our promise to God for next year, and we'll dedicate them in worship.
 Ed and I will join all of you.
 And giving is simple these days—you can give online or in the offering plate.
***The point is to give, and give generously, with joy—knowing God does amazing
 things with our gifts.***

It's not based on what we have, but on ***WHO and WHOSE we are.***
 We are children of the biggest Giver of all.

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today:
 Just like the early church, we too can give—

We can give, because our gifts make a *difference* in countless lives.
And we can give, because our *hearts are changed* when we give.
Giving is a *spiritual act of faith*,
It's far more than putting money in an offering plate.
And we can give,
because we *love God*,
We *follow* Jesus,
We have *enough*,
We are *generous*,
We are *able*,
And we are *called* by God—to give.
And for that calling, all God's people can say together, Amen.