

## **GIVING TO THE GLORY OF GOD**

***Let us pray: Lord, help us hear your Word, that we may give thank to you with all our heart and tell of all your wonderful deeds. Amen.***

A few years after he graduated from the Savannah College of Art and Design, our son, Jackson, asked me about the loans we had taken out to pay for his college education. He wanted to know how much we owed, how much we pay each month, and how long we will be paying. When I told him, he said, “Dad, don’t you and mom hate having to pay that money each month?” I think my answer stumped him at first. I told him, “Not at all. In fact, in a way, it makes us happy to pay those loans.” The look on his face told me he didn’t believe me, or at least didn’t understand what I meant, so I continued, “We made the decision to support you in what you wanted to do and it brings us joy to see what you’re doing with your college education.”

Paying the rest of our monthly bills? Maybe not so much! Then again, we don’t pay them grudgingly. The payment to Chase Bank means we have a safe and secure home to live in. The monthly draft to Duke Progress Energy means we are cool in the summer and warm in the winter, and have lights in the dark and power to cook our meals. The Verizon bill is a reminder that at the touch of a button we can talk with Natalie halfway around the world or FaceTime with Jackson in New York City or be in touch with family and friends in many different places. The monthly drafts to North Carolina Farm Bureau and AXA Equitable mean we are fortunate to have some life insurance to provide and protect in the event of a tragedy. In other words, from one perspective, paying monthly bills is really an opportunity to count our blessings and be thankful.

Just the same, I can’t say that I have ever given money to Duke Progress Energy, Verizon, Chase Bank, Spectrum, or Farm Bureau and thought, “This is given to the glory of God!” While I am thankful for the services provided by those companies, and grateful that we have the means to pay for them, those transactions are just that — payment for services rendered.

Of course we have a line item budget in the Wallace Presbyterian Church. Just like all of us, we pay the power company for the lights and air and heat. We pay the Town of Wallace for water and sewer services. We pay for insurance on the physical plant. We buy the paper your bulletin is printed on and the toner used to print the bulletins. We stock the bathrooms with toilet paper and soap. We pay salaries and benefits.

In our consumer culture, it’s easy for that “payment for services rendered” mentality to creep in, even to the church. However, we lose a lot theologically and spiritually when we approach our benevolent giving from a purely transactional point of view. That quickly turns into “What will I get out of it?” rather than “How does my giving glo-

rify God?” As one person has put it, a transactional, payment for services rendered approach results in “no genuine joy, only a cool and calculating self-concern.”

Every year, I find myself re-reading an article from the May 1997 issue of *Presbyterians Today*. Written by Robert Bohl, the article is entitled “The ‘S’ Word.” The subtitle is “Stewardship is a spiritual matter, not a code word for raising money.” In his article, Rev. Bohl writes about our stewardship and giving as Christian disciplines. He says, “Giving has always been a mark of Christian commitment and discipleship. The ways in which a believer uses God’s gifts of material goods, personal abilities, and time should reflect a faithful response to God’s self-giving in Jesus Christ and Christ’s call to minister to and share with others in the world. Those who follow the discipline of Christian stewardship will find themselves called to lives of simplicity, generosity, honesty, hospitality, compassion, receptivity, and concern for the earth and God’s creatures. The Christian life is an offering of one’s self to God. In worship the people are presented with the costly self-offering of Jesus Christ, are claimed and set free by him, and are led to respond by offering to him their lives, their particular gifts and abilities, and their material goods.”<sup>1</sup>

This morning we heard words of encouragement and prompting and warning from the apostle Paul to the Gentile Christians at Corinth. Paul wrote about a very practical matter — a collection of money for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem — but he presented his appeal in theological, God-glorifying language. Here’s the situation: the Jewish Christians in the mother church in Jerusalem were suffering with economic needs; perhaps they needed money to buy food and other necessities of life. Paul was intent on collecting money from Gentile congregations in Asia Minor as he made his tour before heading back to Jerusalem. He had already sent out his appeal for monetary contributions. This morning we heard Paul’s stewardship reminder to the congregation — get ready to fulfill your pledge!

You can’t get much more “nuts-and-bolts” than actually collecting money from one group of people who have the means and giving it to another group of people who have the needs. However, in his stewardship letter to the Gentile Christians, Paul encourages them to think about giving to the glory of God.

Here’s how Paul describes the Christians’ giving:

- \* for the saints
- \* promised in advance (they made a pledge!)
- \* voluntary and intentional
- \* cheerfully given
- \* abounding through many thanksgivings to God
- \* generous (as an extension of their confession of the gospel of Christ)

Here’s how Paul describes what God gives:

- \* provides every gift and blessing, so we may use them as blessings

- \* generous and righteous
- \* gives seed and bread, will supply seed and multiply the harvest of righteousness
- \* grace
- \* Jesus Christ, his indescribable gift!

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem had a very real need. The offering Paul collected would certainly help them. But Paul also had another motivation for gathering the collection and encouraging the Gentile Christians to be generous in their giving. Paul tells us in his own words why it was so important for the Gentile Christians to give joyfully and willingly. At the end of his letter to the Christians at Rome, Paul writes: “At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. So, when I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain; and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.” (Romans 15:25-29)

This week the elders and I have been emailing information to Lindsay Skidmore, who graciously offered her technical gifts to prepare the video portion of our after-lunch Stewardship program. Mid-week Christy Johnson sent me a list of Mission and Outreach projects that our congregation currently supports and has been involved in during the past few years: Operation Christmas Child; St. Nicholas Project; Celebrate Recovery; Angel Tree; Books and Bikes for Zambia; Food Pantry; Hurricane Florence Relief; Backpack Ministry; Summer Reading Program; Charity Rebuild Center; Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries; and the list continues.

Many of the outreach projects you support with your giving are above and beyond the “line item budget.” It’s tempting to think of mission and outreach projects such as the ones I just listed as the “true mission” of the church, while the line-item budget is just concerned with practical, everyday operating expenses. But, as one of our elders said in our budget discussion at the October session meeting, “In my opinion, it’s all mission!” I happen to agree with that elder, especially if we think about our giving in terms of glorifying God.

As I was working on this sermon, I came across this comment: “In practice we more regularly emphasize the relief of the suffering of those for whom we appeal than we do God’s glory.” That’s not to say the relief of suffering of those for whom we appeal is not important. Paul didn’t neglect the needs of the suffering Jewish Christians in Jerusalem when he encouraged the Gentile Christians to be ready to make good on their pledge of support. But, Paul knew there was an even deeper meaning and motivation for faithful giving.

After Paul gave his advice to the Gentile Christians about giving (such as: complete your pledge according to your means; providing for the needs of others from your present abundance; voluntary giving, not under compulsion or reluctantly), he wrote

these words that get to the heart of our Christian giving: “for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others.” (2 Corinthians 9:12-13)

If you ever had to memorize the Larger Catechism, you might remember the first question/answer: “What is the chief and highest end of man? Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.” This is the foundation of our very lives and of everything we are called to do in life. We were created to glorify God, and that means in everything we do and with everything we have — including our material resources. The catechism’s first question echoes what the scriptures teach us: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever.” (Romans 11:36) “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31)

I used to write one check for our monthly pledge to put in the offering plate on the first Sunday. After a while, I realized I was missing something in my weekly worship when I didn’t put anything in the offering plate. Now I write a check each week and put it in the offering plate as an act of worship, with the hope and prayer that our giving somehow will glorify God, as well as meet the needs of the saints. Notice that each week, as we get ready to take up the offering, I always say, “Let us continue our worship of God as we present our tithes and offerings.” We’re not just paying the bills or meeting a line item budget. We’re worshiping and glorifying the God who has given us his indescribable gift in Jesus Christ, the God “who is able to provide us with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, we may share abundantly in every good work.” (adaptation of 2 Corinthians 9:8)

Well, it happened again. As I got ready to write this sermon on Thursday morning, I logged onto YouTube to find some music to listen to as I wrote. Up popped a video from the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, of The Mark Thallander Foundation Choir Festival from February 17, 2008. The massive choir of adults and children was singing John Rutter’s magnificent piece “Look at the World.” And, to make it even better, John Rutter himself was conducting. As I read the words to this wonderful creation, think about how giving to the glory of God can make all the difference in the world, in our church, and in your life.

*Look at the world: Everything all around us  
Look at the world: and marvel everyday  
Look at the world: So many joys and wonders  
So many miracles along our way  
Praise to thee O Lord for all creation  
Give us thankful hearts that we may see  
All the gifts we share and every blessing  
All things come of thee*

*Look at the earth: Bringing forth fruit and flower*

*Look at the sky: The sunshine and the rain  
Look at the hills, look at the trees and mountains,  
Valley and flowing river field and plain.  
Praise to thee O Lord for all creation  
Give us thankful hearts that we may see  
All the gifts we share and every blessing  
All things come of thee*

*Think of the spring, Think of the warmth of summer  
Bringing the harvest before the winters cold  
Everything grows, everything has a season  
Til' it is gathered to the father's fold  
Praise to thee O Lord for all creation  
Give us thankful hearts that we may see  
All the gifts we share and every blessing  
All things come of thee*

*Every good gift, all that we need and cherish  
Comes from the Lord in token of his love  
We are his hands, stewards of all his bounty  
His is the earth and his the heavens above  
Praise to thee, O Lord for all creation.  
Give us thankful hearts that we may see  
All the gifts we share, and every blessing,  
All things come of thee  
All things come of thee*

***Let us pray: Loving God, you have given us life and freedom. Everything we have and everything that we are is a gift from you. You call us to be stewards of this gift. Help our faithful stewardship to show Christ to others. We pray these things in the name of our Savior, your indescribable gift, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert Bohl, "The 'S' Word," May 1997, *Presbyterians Today* at [www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/stewardship/](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/stewardship/)