

Good Stewards of God's Grace
BUILDING A SPIRIT OF COOPERATION

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

#1: Two men were stranded on a small, deserted island in the middle of the vast ocean. They had nothing but the clothes on their backs and one palm tree to sit under. One man was in an absolute panic. "We're going to die," he screamed. "They'll never find us out here. We're going to die!"

The other man was casually lying under the palm tree, relaxing in the shade. "We have nothing to worry about," he said. "Calm down. They'll find us and it won't take long."

"Are you crazy?" shouted the first man. "We're out here on a deserted island in the middle of the ocean. How in the world can you be so calm? We're going to die!"

Once again the other man very calmly said, "We're going to be fine. They're going to find us. Don't worry."

The first man was beside himself. "How can you say that? What makes you so sure they're going to find us?"

"Look," said the man under the palm tree. "I make \$100,000 a week and I give 10% each week to my church. My preacher is going to find us!"

#2: Three preachers were talking one day about how they decided how much of the Sunday offering to keep for themselves.

The first minister said, "After worship, I take all of the money into the sanctuary. I draw a big circle on the carpet and I throw all of the money in the air. Whatever lands outside the circle goes to God. Whatever lands inside the circle I keep."

The second preacher said, "I do something very similar. I also draw a big circle on the carpet and throw the money in the air. However, what lands inside the circle goes to God. Whatever lands outside the circle I keep."

The third preacher said, "Well, I draw a circle on the carpet and throw the money in the air. Whatever stays up in the air goes to God. Everything that lands on the carpet I keep."

#3: On the way to church one Sunday morning, six-year-old Johnny's mother gave him a quarter. "Now, Johnny," she said, "when it's time for the offering, put the quarter in the offering plate." Johnny held the quarter tightly in his fist throughout the whole worship service.

When the offering plate came down their pew, Johnny's mother whispered to him, "OK Johnny, put your money in the plate." Johnny shook his head NO. Johnny's

father also said, “Johnny, put your quarter in the offering plate.” Again, Johnny shook his head. Not wanting to cause a scene in church, his parents gave up.

After the service, as Johnny and his parents were shaking hands with the minister, Johnny gave the minister the quarter and said, “Here, this is for you.” The minister said, “Now Johnny, you really should have put that in the offering plate.” Johnny said, “Well, I was going to, but on the way to church, I heard my dad say you were the poorest preacher we’ve ever had, so I thought you might need it!”

OK, I’ve gotten that out of the way. Oh, I’ve got a million preacher jokes, most of them told at the preacher’s expense.

Now, let’s hear what the apostle Paul has to say about being good stewards of God’s grace.

When we first moved to Wallace in March 1998, folks here told me about how our church had responded to some devastating floods in the mid-West. They had organized a relief effort for people they didn’t even know, but the people were in dire need and this church responded.

Eighteen months later, in August and September 1999, Hurricanes Dennis and Floyd inundated our area with torrential rains and massive flooding. Almost overnight, our Fellowship Hall became a relief center. The room was filled and emptied to the brim three or four times with a variety of relief items.

Within a couple of days of the flooding, I began to receive cash contributions from church members and other people to help with the relief efforts. I had the feeling that aspect of the relief effort was something I didn’t need to or want to handle. One day, as many folks were working in the Fellowship Hall sorting and packing food, water, and other items, I talked with Toots Carlton and asked him if he would be willing to oversee the receipt and disbursement of financial contributions. Before he agreed, Toots asked me, “How much money are you talking about?” “I don’t know, Toots,” I said, “maybe \$40,000 - \$50,000.” Toots agreed to take on that job and, with the help of his daughters Linda and Emily and a group appointed by the session to make decisions about how to distribute the relief money, he handled that part of our church’s relief effort. Well, when it was all said and done, we received and distributed almost \$285,000 from across the United States!

One of the most memorable experiences was when three people from the farm country of Indiana arrived in time for one of our Thursday Advent services. They had driven all the way to Wallace to hand-deliver a check for flood relief, three months after the fact. They worshiped with us, ate lunch, and then headed back to Indiana. In February, they returned to help rebuild a house in Chinquapin. When we asked them why they had come all the way from Indiana to help us, they said they had heard in church about the flooding and the needs here in Wallace and they wanted to help.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Mississippi Gulf Coast and New Orleans. Our session asked me to find a way to help some individuals in their recovery. My brother, David, who has lived and worked in New Orleans since 1968, told me about two valued employees at his business who lost everything in the flooding.

Our church responded generously and overwhelmingly, not just in the immediate aftermath, but for a couple of years afterward, sending many boxes of Christmas and birthday gifts, along with financial support.

Some of you will remember that we sent a final check to Mary Washington for about \$7,000. When David called Mary into his office and gave her the check, she broke down and cried. She had found a new house for her and her daughter, but was \$7,000 short of what she needed to purchase the house and didn't know where the money was going to come from. The check allowed her to buy another home.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth about their benevolent giving, "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance." (2 Corinthians 8:13-14)

Paul was determined to make good on his promise to take an offering of money to the Jewish Christians in the mother church in Jerusalem. They were experiencing hard economic times. Paul started a financial campaign in the Gentile churches in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia, churches he had established and served as pastor. Paul knew the Gentile Christians. He had lived and worked with them. He also knew the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. In another of his letters to the Galatians, Paul tells about an earlier visit with the pillars of the mother church, Peter, James, and John. He laid out his missionary/preaching work among the Gentiles in the west and, he writes, "they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do." (Galatians 2:9-10)

Paul knew the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem desperately needed the financial help the other churches could provide. Paul was also determined to collect the offering from the Gentile churches because he knew it would be an important and powerful symbol of the unity between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. In so many words, Paul reminded the Gentile Christians how they had benefited from the Jewish Christians proclaiming the gospel of salvation to them. When the opportunity came for the Gentiles to do something to benefit the Jewish Christian (this time with material blessings), Paul encouraged them strongly to make good on their promise to help. He knew the importance of the monetary offering went far beyond the dollars and cents that would be taken back to Jerusalem.

Last Sunday I shared some thoughts about what stewardship **is not** and what stewardship **is**.

This week I'd like to share some principles of being "good stewards of God's grace." These come straight from 2 Corinthians 8 & 9.

* "They gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us." (2 Cor. 8:5)

* "For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has — not according to what one does not have." (2 Cor. 8:12)

* “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Cor. 9:7)

* “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” (2 Cor. 9:8)

* “For the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.” (2 Cor. 9:12)

These stewardship principles apply to our regular giving as well as our response to emergency situations. The principles apply to our use of our time and our spiritual gifts as well as our money and other material resources. The principles remind us that our stewardship is, first and foremost, rooted in the grace of God and God’s gift in Jesus Christ.

Once again, we have an opportunity to share from our abundance with saints who are in need. Susie has shared with us about the devastating floods in her hometown of Georgetown, SC and home state of South Carolina. As Yogi Berra would say, “It’s de ja vu all over again!” Once again, there is a personal connection between the folks in need and someone in our congregation.

There will always be opportunities for us to help and there will always be times when *we* need help. As you consider how you will use what God has given you — your money, your possessions, your time, your spiritual gifts — remember that we are all called to be “good stewards of God’s grace” and that “the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.” (2 Cor. 9:12)

The most important and most basic stewardship principle of all is this: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

Let us pray: (I remember Rev. Joe Morrison, my predecessor here at WPC 1966-1973 often used this prayer — a paraphrase of the first lines of George Herbert’s prayer, “Gratefulness.”)

Lord, you have given so much to us. Give us one thing more, a grateful heart. Amen.