

Mark 12:28-34 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 November 20, 2016
Pledge Commitment Sunday
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

The Stewardship of *All* of Life
THANKSGIVING TO GOD

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.

The carnival came to town. One of the most popular attractions was the strong man. When the crowd assembled, the strong man would take an orange and squeeze it dry with his bare hand. Then he would offer a \$1,000 prize to anyone in the crowd who could manage to squeeze even one more drop of juice out of the crushed, mushy orange.

Since they had nothing to lose, plenty of people tried to squeeze out another drop of juice and make an easy \$1,000. However, no matter how hard they squeezed the orange, no one was able to get a single drop of juice to come out.

Then, in the back of the crowd, a little old man raised his hand and said, “I’d like to try.” As he made his way up to the stage, people started chuckling. They knew the skinny old man would never be able to get anything out of the orange.

With a smile on his face, the strong man handed the little old man the pulverized orange. The old man took the orange and started squeezing. To everyone’s amazement, especially the strong man, as the old man squeezed, one, two, three . . . six drops of juice came out of the flattened orange.

As the crowd erupted in applause and shouts, the strong man asked the old man, “How in the world did you do that?” He said, “Oh, it’s really no big deal. You see, I’m the treasurer down at the Presbyterian Church and I do this with our church budget all the time.”

That one is for Wayne! With our thanks!

But squeezing a few more drops out of a pulverized orange is not really the best image we can conjure up for our stewardship of ***all*** of life. Squeezing the orange dry suggests a mindset of scarcity, worrying that we won’t or don’t have enough to begin with. Squeezing the orange dry suggests that we respond in a crisis mode or that we’re trying to get by with as little as possible.

The apostle Paul’s stewardship letter to the Corinthian Christians is very much about a crisis of need. The mother church in Jerusalem was going through a hard time and needed some financial support. However, Paul doesn’t ***start*** with meeting the crisis — that’s the goal. Instead, Paul starts with the theology of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. So many times we appeal to or get requests based on need. Paul makes his appeal on the basis of what God has ***already*** done for us in Jesus Christ. Paul’s steward-

ship theology can be summed up in 2 Corinthians 9:15: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

If you were in worship two weeks ago, you had the chance to pick up an envelope with information about the ministry and mission of the Wallace Presbyterian Church. If you weren't here that day, I hope you received a packet in the mail. With minutes for mission, personal notes, book discussions, ministry catalogs, personal testimonies, and a narrative budget, the session has shared with all of us both the reason **for** and the goal **of** our stewardship of **all** of life. The verses you have seen in our stewardship information are taken from Paul's own stewardship letter in 2 Corinthians 8-9: “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.” (2 Corinthians 9:11-12)

In August, Dr. Dustin Ellington visited with us from Lusaka, Zambia, where he is a faculty member in the Bible department of Justo Mwale Theological University. Dustin talked about the challenges facing the students while in school and the graduates who go out to be pastors in churches. About a year ago, in their December 2015 update to The Outreach Foundation, Dustin and Sherri described two of the biggest challenges facing the church and pastors in southern Africa. Dustin wrote:

“Two current challenges, which go together, are proliferations of ‘prophets’ and of the message that Jesus Christ is the ticket to wealth on earth. We are encouraged that Justo Mwale University is daily in the thick of working to equip Christian leaders to face these challenges.

In Zambia and neighboring nations, newspapers keep eager readers up-to-date on the latest whereabouts of prophets. People hang their hopes on powerful ‘men of God’ who come to town announcing blessings and prosperity. In contrast to Rev. Jankens, who rides a bicycle between his eight congregations, the last such article I read said the visiting prophet arrived in Zambia from impoverished Malawi by private jet. Zambian military and police escorted him to a large stadium, where he allegedly worked miracles of healing and foretold the future. Another prophet promised in the past month that everyone who came to the stadium would receive an automatic deposit in their bank account. Sorry, but Sherri and I didn't attend, so we can't really say whether it happened! Meanwhile, the Council of Churches in Zambia (CCZ), an organization of some fifty or so Christian denominations working together, has been leaning on Justo Mwale for assistance in thinking through the church's challenges. Recently the CCZ asked us to provide, during their biennial conference for church leaders, a panel discussion on the prosperity gospel. Our head of school, Dr. Zulu, spoke from various Old Testament passages to say that God will help Africa to prosper, but that this does not mean it will occur without suffering and hard work.

I spoke about the need to avoid using key Bible verses to defend one side, but instead to interpret verses in light of the whole chapters and books of the Bible in which they are found. This clarifies the meaning of particular verses and enables us to gauge the prosperity gospel responsibly. I thought I made some good points, but a bishop

quickly stood up to claim Jesus had promised that anyone who follows him will have their material possessions in this life multiplied a hundredfold (Mark 10:29-30).

Unfortunately it seems the church in our part of Africa has largely swallowed the idea that Jesus will make people rich in this life, and many pastors and congregations market themselves with promises of wealth. Recently a colleague visited a church and heard he was very welcome – but that if he stayed and wasn't getting rich within three months, he should probably look elsewhere.”

We might read the apostle Paul's stewardship letter to the Corinthian Church and think he is guilty of preaching that very same “prosperity gospel.” After all, Paul writes, “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance . . .” (2 Cor. 9:8) But there is a comma at the end of that phrase, not a full-stop period. Paul continues, “so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

Yes, the Jewish Christians in the church in Jerusalem had a physical need that the offering from the Gentile Christians in the churches in Asia Minor would help. And yet, Paul's main motivation is primarily theological and spiritual. The Gentiles benefited from the Jews sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Now the Gentiles have the opportunity to return the blessing, this time with their monetary gifts and pledges. Paul was convinced that a pragmatic dollar offering would be a powerful symbol of the unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

In his stewardship letter, Paul writes about the blessings of participating in the mission and ministry to the saints in Jerusalem. He mentions the churches of Macedonia who have already made good on their previous pledge to the offering, and he offers this theological insight about that opportunity: “We want you to know about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints . . . They gave themselves first to the Lord . . .” (2 Cor. 8:1-5)

Over the years, I have been asked many questions about stewardship and personal giving to the church. I think Paul provides a good answer to most, if not all, of the questions.

How much am I supposed to give to the church? “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)

Should I pledge based on my income before or after taxes? “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Should all of my giving be to the church, or can I give to other organizations? “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

What if my life circumstances change next year and I can't meet the pledge I made? "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

What if my life circumstances change next year and I can give a lot more than the pledge I made? "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

As I walked my dogs around the circle on Wednesday afternoon, I worked out my sermon outline in my head. I thought I would begin with a bunch of stewardship jokes to ease the "anxiety level" of talking about money. However, at the Wednesday night Bible study, a little birdie (named Nancy) made the observation that most of what we had talked about (including some of the sample jokes) tended to focus on the negative aspects of giving and stewardship — I would say the perspective of operating out of scarcity. I think that's because we're uncomfortable much of the time talking about money in the church, so we try to chuckle our way through it. Nancy asked, "What if we talked about the joyful stories and experiences of giving and stewardship in the church?"

That's why the left-hand margin note on the front page of the bulletin gives you a place to jot down things for which you are thankful to God. I wonder if any of us wrote something like, "Thank you God for the opportunity to give and to be involved in your work." This week we will spend Thursday in thanksgiving to God, and we will take time to thank God for a list of blessings. That's a good and right thing to do. But what about on Friday and a week from Thursday and on a bleak, dreary winter day in February or on a hot, humid day in July? The stewardship of **all** of life is a way of life, all of the time, year round.

And our children are leading us in thanksgiving to God this morning, with their singing and their invitation to sign our leaves and stick them on the Thanksgiving tree. You are invited to bring your 2017 pledge to the communion table during the offertory, and to put your leaf of gratitude on the Thanksgiving tree at the same time.

As we come to the end of this series of sermons about "The Stewardship of All of Life" and dedicate our 2017 pledges, hear again the lessons we have learned:

* "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2:8, 10)

* "Is this not the fast that I choose? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isaiah 58:7)

* "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life . . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:25, 33)

* "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." (Matthew 14:16)

* "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)

* “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15)

Let us pray: We praise you, O God, from whom all blessings flow. Lord, you gave us your most precious and holy gift, Jesus Christ. Thank you for your Son and his Church. Thank you for your enduring love, your limitless mercy, and your amazing grace. Help us move forward in faith, so that we may grow in love and generosity. Open our hearts and minds as we seek your will for our church, our community, and ourselves. Challenge and inspire us to use the gifts we have received to serve others. In your holy name we humbly pray. Amen.

Response to the Sermon “God, We Honor You”

*God, we honor you. God, we trust in you.
God, we worship and adore you.
Take what we bring, offered to you.
Teach us to show your abundant blessings.
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, amen.*