

Gifts of Decision

2nd of 3 sermons on “Putting Your Faith Into Practice”

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October 20, 2019

- 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a (Good News Translation) For we remember before our God and Father how you put your faith into practice, how your love made you work so hard, and how your hope in our Lord Jesus Christ is firm.
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (Good News Translation) Each one should give, then, as he has decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Pledges and offerings should be the result of your *decision*... your thoughtful, deliberate, prayerfully considered act of deciding how you will put your faith into practice.

When I was a new minister right out of seminary I served a large Presbyterian congregation in Detroit’s southern suburbs. The other two ministers at that church made sure that I understood the importance of attending the monthly meetings of the local clergy association. They said, “That’s what we Presbyterians do; we encourage churches to work together.” So I started meeting other pastors in town.

The largest Roman Catholic parish in the state was in our city; to my dismay, the priests didn’t participate in the group. There was a United Methodist pastor, of course (those Methodists are everywhere!). There was an Episcopal priest, a Lutheran pastor. We had a large Hungarian Reformed Church in town, and their pastor was quite active in our group. And surprisingly, the local Baptist preacher was a regular participant in the clergy association.

Seeing that I was fresh out of seminary the Baptist pastor took it upon himself to give me unsolicited advice. I remember two pieces in particular; one amazed me and the other intimidated me. I don’t think he meant to intimidate me, but that’s what I felt when he told me, “Son, if you can’t preach a strong Easter sermon, you should just get out of the business.” Well, since I was an associate pastor at the time, I never was going to be preaching on Easter; the senior pastor always did that. But when I moved here, those words unnerved me as I approached my first Easter in Rocky River... and that was six years later!

The other piece of advice he had for me is one I’ve never even considered implementing. He told me, “If you pass the offering plates and you don’t get what the church needs, you just need to call for a second offering. A third, too, if you need to.”

Three offerings – I couldn’t imagine! But guess what? It’s biblical. Well, in a way it is.

The Bible says three things about how much, at the least, we should give in gratitude to God:

1. The Old Testament speaks of “first fruits” giving, in which what is shared from all we have been given comes “off the top” – a good reminder that, before all else, God and what God does for us is priority number one in our lives.
2. Then, the Old Testament teaches, and the New Testament presumes, the “tithe” – the giving of ten percent of one’s income and belongings through one’s place of worship.
3. The New Testament, and particularly St. Paul, go beyond tithing to teach “proportionate giving” – meaning the more we have, the more we should give.¹

The “first fruit” offering originated in an agrarian society, of course. People farmed. They fished. They raised livestock. The idea was that when harvest time arrived, you began the process by collecting

¹ “What Scripture Says about Giving.” Brochure produced by Stewardship and Church Finances, United Church of Christ, available through ucc.org.

the first fruits of the harvest and then presenting those gifts to the priests at the Temple as a thank offering to the God who had made it all possible. If most of us were to try to initiate an offering of first fruits, about the only thing we might be bringing in would be zucchini or tomatoes.

A modern interpretation of first fruits would be taking a portion of “any income, wealth or blessings that a Christian receives over the course of a year” and presenting that offering – whatever portion one chooses – as a joyful expression of gratitude.² The modern interpretation of first fruits recognizes that different people have “harvests” at different times of the year: maybe one receives a bonus at year-end, while for another their “harvest” is the tax refund they receive in the spring, and yet someone else “reaps a harvest of green stuff” when they are able to sell their home or some old jewelry or their collection of baseball cards or Barbies.

Giving our first fruits means giving our best to God. It means sacrificing something that costs us a little. It means putting God first, even before ourselves, or our family. Making a first fruit offering opens us up to allow God to work in our life. When we approach God with open hands – rather than clenched fists – it makes it easier for [God] to give us more to work with.³

After “first fruit” offerings, the second kind of offering sounds more familiar, even if it also seems unrealistic. Most of us have heard of a “tithe.” The word comes from an Olde English word simply meaning “one-tenth.” Where does the concept come from? In a familiar story in Genesis, God reveals Jacob’s destiny to him by causing him to dream about a stairway or ladder reaching from earth to heaven – the proverbial “Jacob’s Ladder.” As soon as he awakens from the dream Jacob realizes how much God promises to bless him, and right then and there he pledges to God a tenth – a tithe – of everything God will provide for him. Later in the Old Testament God directs Moses to remind the Israelite people to offer one-tenth – a tithe – of the crops they grow, the herds they raise, and what they catch from the sea. Right into Jesus’ day, everyone was familiar with the practice of tithing.

The apostle Paul further developed the Christian perspective on offerings when he urged a third kind of offering. In addition to “first fruits” and “tithes” Paul encouraged “proportionate giving.” Maybe he had heard the story of Jesus watching as people made their gifts at the Temple’s treasury. Many wealthy people made sizeable offerings. Then Jesus saw a poor widow put two tiny copper coins in the Temple’s offering box. Jesus told his disciples,

“I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who’s been putting money in the treasury. All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on.”⁴

Her act of generosity, prompted by her sincere dedication, may have been what prompted Paul to write in 1 Corinthians Chapter 16, “Every Sunday each of you must put aside some money, in proportion to what he has earned, and save it up, so that there will be no need to collect money when I come.”⁵

So our own tradition gives us three ways of thinking about offerings. That third kind of offering, “proportionate giving,” is perhaps the most “logical” rationale. It brings to mind Jesus’ explanation to the apostles, “Much is required from the person to whom much is given; much more is required from the person to whom much more is given.”⁶

The first one, offerings of our “first fruits,” reminds us to celebrate and be thankful whenever blessings come into our lives.

But the middle one, tithing, is both the most familiar and (for many) the hardest to by into. *Ten percent!!!* That’s a sizeable amount. Most of us would find it pretty tricky to take our current household budget right now and set aside ten percent for our church offering. It might even be difficult to achieve

² Jesse Wisnewski, “What Is First Fruit? A Short Guide” October 8, 2018 at <https://get.tithe.ly/blog/first-fruit>, accessed 10/14/2019

³ Jesse Wisnewski, “What Is First Fruit? A Short Guide” October 8, 2018 at <https://get.tithe.ly/blog/first-fruit>, accessed 10/14/2019

⁴ See Mark 12:41-44 Common English Bible

⁵ 1 Corinthians 16:2 Good News Translation

⁶ Luke 12:48b Good News Translation

what I've heard called the "modern tithe" meaning that church and other charitable giving together accounts for ten percent of one's income.

Some of us will protest that this [tithing] is much more than we can do. But is this not also the case with Jesus' command to love our enemies? And what of the other hard demands of following Christ? Do they not go far beyond what we think reasonable and practical? Just because something might not be possible *now* doesn't mean that we can't work toward achieving it. Listen, please, to this "Parable of the Sweating Preacher."

There was a middle-aged minister who began working once a week with a personal trainer at the gym to improve his strength, flexibility, stamina. In addition to the weekly training sessions he would work out on his own, sometimes two, usually three more times each week. When he started he couldn't touch his toes, or do a dozen push-ups, or lift 40-lb. weights. But just because he couldn't do it *then* didn't mean that he should never try. He had to start somewhere. Over time he worked at increasing his body's capacity to do more, and he succeeded – he felt better and his body worked better... but he didn't stop. He kept working on being able to do even more.

What was true for the Sweating Preacher applies to us growing in our ability to be generous with the treasures God has entrusted to us. The biblical ideal of ten percent is not unreasonable; it just might be impractical right now. Maybe your first step would be to see where you stand today in your offerings – are they ½% of your household income? 3%? 7%? What could you decide to do to be able to grow that percentage by a point in the year ahead?

- Make coffee in the kitchen rather than stop at the shop every day?
- Watch a movie at home sometimes rather than in the theatre?
- Delay replacing the patio furniture for a year?
- Forego a weekend trip once each quarter?

Come up with imaginative and creative ways enabling you to redirect a little of your resources to increasing your offerings. If your offerings amount to about 3% this year, how could it become 4% next year, and 6%... 8%.... Then what do you know? What you once thought was impossible or impractical has become your new reality when you've grown your offering to a biblical tithe--10%!

We heard earlier the apostle Paul's guidance in 2 Corinthians Chapter 9, verse 8 where he wrote, "Each one should give, then, as he has decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly." We usually emphasize the final phrase "for God loves the one who gives gladly" (or "God loves the cheerful giver"), and that's certainly true. Almost by definition, offerings need to be given freely and gladly, not as a requirement or out of obligation. But today I want us to hear another phrase in that verse where Paul wrote, "Each one should give, then, *as he has decided....*" "...As he has decided...."

Your church asks every member to consider making a pledge of offerings for the coming year as an act of faith: faith in God providing for your needs, and faith in your ability to follow through with your commitment. Just as you need to know what income your household can count on, stewardship pledges enable your church to make plans for the year ahead.

An offering is what God is enabling you to do, what God is inviting you to do, what God is challenging you to do to continue the ministry of compassion and service through the work of Christ's church in this place. Let your pledges and offerings be the result of your *decision*... your thoughtful, deliberate, prayerfully considered act of deciding how you will put your faith into practice.

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⁷ "What Scripture Says about Giving." Brochure produced by Stewardship and Church Finances, United Church of Christ, available through ucc.org.