

The Spiritual Practice of Giving
January 15, 2017
Brian R. Wipf

At the start of every New Year there are several things I do. First all I determine what Bible reading plan I'm going to use. I need a daily diet of the word of God. There's a lot of good plans out there; I've found one that I usually use, but I do a quick assessment if I should stick with what I've got or start a different one. This year more so than in previous years, I'm also determining a plan to pray. God is pressing on my heart more and more the importance of prayer in my life. It's taken me longer to realize that I need a plan for this; I don't *just pray*. My default is self-reliance. So, I've strategized some plans concerning prayer and will be giving them a try in 2017. The last thing I do every year is evaluate and adjust my giving. Giving to the Lord by giving to my local church is one of the regular spiritual practices that I need to practice so my heart is inclined to the Lord. And it's this last discipline, the practice of giving, that we are going to talk about today.

Why would I do this? Why would I analyze and evaluate my giving every year? Well, like I mentioned, giving is a spiritual practice that God expects of his followers. Romans 12 clearly tells us that whatever God has given us we are to give and invest back into his local church in direct proportion to what he's given. In vs. 6 of Romans 12 Paul says, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." When he continues to apply them specifically to gifts in vs 6 with prophecy he says, "if prophecy, in proportion to our faith." That phrase, in proportion to our faith, I would argue, is meant for every act of service, not just prophecy. He hints at the same thing back in vs. 3 when he says the presentation of gifts should be "according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

I'm hoping that helps you understand why I would evaluate it from year to year. I'm guessing this is true for a lot of you (maybe not all of you), but my financial situation changes from year to year. You graciously increase my compensation from year to year; thank you! There are other changes, too. Health coverage, taxes, living expenses, investments... all of these things change. And if I am to give in proportion to the measure God has given to me, then I obviously need to change my giving. If I locked in my giving back in 2003 when I moved here and it just stayed perpetually at that spot, I wouldn't be giving according to the measure of faith God has assigned to me, would I?

Now, one last thing before we move on from Romans 12: giving money is directly referenced by Paul in this passage. It's found in vs. 8 where he says, "the one who contributes, in generosity." Both of those terms, *contributes* and *generosity*, are used in financial context in the NT. So giving, then, is one of those gifts God has entrusted to us to implement in the local church.

Here's what I want to do today. I want to summarize for you a theology of giving; don't let that word *theology* scare you. A theology of giving simply means a way of thinking about our giving from God's perspective. We all have that already. My hope would be to help shape that more biblically this morning. For those of you who are newer to FBC and haven't heard a sermon

on giving here, this will help you understand why we do what we do and why you should participate in the spiritual practice of giving, too. For us who have been around for a while, I'm hoping it provides the helpful reminder we all need. I want to do this by reading a passage from Phil. 4 (READ Phil. 4:14-20).

Let's again start with some background information; that's what we call a context. Paul planted this church on his second missionary journey (Acts 16) and it seems from the letter that he had a very good relationship with this church. As we heard from the passage we read, the Philippian church provided financial assistance for Paul during other missionary and church planting work. Paul wrote this letter in prison and he's remembering their financial support, which we can see from our text.

There are three words used by Paul in this passage that are very informative about how we should consider our giving. We are going to look at these three words because because they are very important to our theology of giving. The first word that I want to draw your attention to is *gift*. He calls their giving a gift in vs. 17; "not that I seek the gift," he says, meaning your donation of money. He doesn't call it their due or their payment. It's not a fee or a charge. He doesn't say, "You owe God this money; good job on making sure you paid." Here's the point: we don't give our financial resources out of an obligation or legalistic requirement; we don't give because we are in God's debt, nor do we give to try and earn God's blessing. Why? Because all of that has been accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that Jesus died for our sins to make us the righteousness of God is at the heart of faithful giving. On the one hand, our debt is paid because Jesus paid it. So we don't give money or serve in nursery or do good deeds in the name of Jesus to fix our spiritual bankruptcy. Jesus Christ has done that for us. So the gospel takes care of our debt problem. But there's also an earning side. We can't earn God's grace or favor. We can't give enough or do enough to impress God enough to say, "You know, Brian's offering is pretty big, I think that deserves some extra grace." I know that's how it works at our jobs; our performance earns compensation. Not with God. The precious blood of Jesus poured onto the ground at Golgotha was the payment that earned you and I and everyone else who calls on the name of Jesus Christ the salvation of our souls.

Because of Jesus' work on my behalf, my giving is always a gift. It's not payment, it's not a fee; I'm under no legal obligation to give. Make sure your giving is just that; a gift. So, give it freely.

The second word I want to draw your attention to is *partnership*. I get that from vs. 15, "And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into *partnership* with me in giving and receiving, except you only." Giving our resources to the work of God is one of the significant ways (not only way) we partner in the work of the ministry. Now, this is interesting: Paul said that their giving was partnering with him. That makes sense, right? He's planting churches; they give in support of that. They are partnering with

Paul. Who do we partner with when we give here? I would submit to you that our partnership through our giving is with one another. That's who we are partnering with. Certainly, there's a partnership with God, but that's a little different. We don't link arms with God like we link arms with one another as we give of ourselves (not just monetarily, but through our service, too).

The church of Jesus Christ is called together to proclaim the praises of his marvelous grace. That's our job together. That's not merely my job or the paid staff. That's not the job of only those who volunteer to lead ministries. Together, as one church, through the various ways we serve we proclaim the good news of Jesus together. So, as we all give different amounts (because we all give in proportion to what God has given us) we partner together in this gospel work.

This is one of the reasons why when you take a membership class here at FBC you hear in that class the expectation to serve and to give. Our worship and service together is partnership. We all may give and serve in different ways with differing amounts of money, but being a church member is our way of saying to each other, "We're in this together; we are going to partner together."

You know, as I think about our RB project and the money that so many of us are donating to this project, I'm so excited for that day when we can say, "Look what God has done in us and through us! Look what our partnership in the Lord has produced!" Friends, we will all put our arms around each other, some of us who gave \$100 to the project, others \$1000, others \$10,000, others \$100,000, as God has proportioned to all of us, as fellow partners in the work of the ministry. That's what you're giving does; it makes you a partner with the other FBCers by the strength and grace of God.

The last word I want to highlight is a phrase; *fragrant offering*. Look at vs. 18, "I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God." When Paul calls their gift of money a fragrant offering, what's he saying it is? He's saying it's their worship. He's saying it's the way they honor and please God. Giving is one of your acts of worship.

Certainly, friends, it's not our only act of worship, but there's not much that speaks to our prizing and valuing of God like the sacrificial giving of money. So, when we give sacrificially after every pay period we are making a statement; we are saying, "God's work matters to me." Every time we spend money we're making a statement of value, am I right? This car is worth this much to me. This stick of gum is worth this much to me. These new clothes are worth this much to me. There is a direct correlation between our prizing of something and our spending; we spend money on what we value.

This is why we so often couch our offering time and offertory prayers in the language of worship. We say things like, "God, we honor and worship you in the giving of these finances. God,

receive these gifts as an expression of our worship.” It’s because that’s what it is; when we give with a joyful heart in praise to God, it is an act of worship.

Our giving is a gift; it’s not a fee or a due. We’re not paying God back for what he’s done; we’re not try to buy anything from God. It is a free will offering (using some OT language). So, give it freely or don’t give it at all. I really mean that; God loves a cheerful giver. A giver who wants to give it. Our giving is also partnership; it’s way we lock arms together and proclaim the praises of Jesus to this community all by the help of God. Finally, Our giving is worship. It’s a way we offer up to God our praises; it’s a way we say, “God, no one and nothing compares to the infinite worth of knowing you!”

So, let’s get practical. How much should you give? What should be your aim? How should you go about it? Of course, we remember what our giving is (like we just said). It’s a gift (not payment of debt), it’s partnership and it’s worship. For me, it starts with a tithe. A tithe is an OT reference to giving. Tithe means “a tenth;” giving 10%. There were several tithes for the people of God, but we’re not going to get into that this morning.

I have two biblical or theological reasons to start with a tithe. You may think, “Why would blood bought followers of Jesus go to the OT law to find direction on giving. Jesus freed us from the law; Jesus kept the law for us so we wouldn’t have to.” Right - and this is very important for us to understand - but, Jesus did not keep the law for us so we could ignore it. Jesus kept the law for us so that we could freely obey it without fear of condemnation (REPEAT). Now, there are some of God’s laws that have been done away with. Ceremonial laws of worship have been fulfilled in Christ so there are no longer any requirements to make offerings for sin; Jesus is our sin offering. Jesus also eliminated dietary laws so we are free to eat whatever to the glory of God. But there are a host of moral and ethical laws that we certainly should practice today. The 10 commandments are a great example; we ought to follow them. Not so that we get saved, but because we follow God and love Jesus. So, here are my two reasons to start your giving with a tithe.

First of all, God’s law is for our good. Deut. 10:12-13, “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and the statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good.” Look what God’s laws are: they are good for us! It’s good that I serve God alone; it’s good that I do not make a graven image of him. It’s good for me that I find a day of rest to do good and remember the Lord. And I would argue it’s good for you and me to tithe.

There’s so much wisdom in giving a tithe. On the one hand, 10% is a good chunk of money. If you make \$50K, giving \$5K to the Lord is a lot. That’s a reliable, pre owned car every year; that’s a pretty nice vacation every year. It’s a big enough check to sufficiently remind you, “God matters to me.” If you’re making a \$100K, tossing \$20 in the offering plate once a Sunday doesn’t wake you up to the important realities of God like a tithe does. God’s ownership of all I

have; the great value of God and his work. The joy of partnership with God's people. But a tithe gets you there.

Secondly, God's law can be summarized this way: Love for God and others. So, there's a way that giving a tithe was an expression of love. That's the call of God. That's why I start with a tithe.

But we learn something else from the NT about love; love has no limits or borders. This is why I aim to give more than a tithe - a tithe is a just a beginning for me. Randy Alcorn calls tithing our training wheels, the first step towards generous giving. Why do I look to give more than a tithe? Because my obligation is love and love has no limits. And, if giving is partnership with my brothers and sisters and giving is worship to God, the more I give, the greater my partnership and the greater my worship. So, every year, I look at my circumstances and see how much we can give. When I think we should make a change, I talk to my wife; we're in this together. I can honestly say, my good brothers and sisters, I've never regretted giving too much to the work of God; I've never missed what I've given. God has a way of changing you through the obedience of giving and there's only one way to find out... start to give.

I want to share two more things. First of all, the kind of giving that's lifted high as an example for us will take sacrifice. The Philippians giving is pretty impressive. Paul says no one gave to me, but you alone. And they kept on giving again and again. So much so where Paul says in vs. 18, "I've got all I need." That requires sacrifice. You and I will not follow that example without sacrifices; without tough decisions. So, you have to ask yourself, "Why would I give so much? Why would I 10%, 15%, 25% of my income... I can do a lot with that money." You're right, you can. But God can do more. But you won't know until you give. In fact, you may not know on this side of heaven. So, it takes sacrifice. But it's worth it.

Secondly, you have to plan. There will always be other needs and opportunities that pop up. There's always a good deal somewhere; there's always a great investment to make. Unless you plan your giving and stick to the plan, chances are you will not be the giver you want to be. Money might be a little tight for someone of you; work a plan and stick to the plan as best as possible. Some of you make plenty of money, but you're committed in places that you wish you weren't. Well, come up with a plan to change your course. If it takes a few years, that's ok; remember, God's not waiting for you to hit a certain percentage; he wants you to give with a cheerful heart. And as you keep experiencing the transforming power of God, giving generously is exactly what will give you delight.

Key verse: Phil. 4:18

Questions for the week

- Is it uncomfortable to hear a sermon on money? Why or why not? How important are your finances? How important do you think they are to the Lord? How come?

- Giving is a gift, a partnership and worship; which of those were particularly important for you to hear and think about today? How come?
- What's one thing you'd like God's help with about giving?