

Enough, IV *Generously Thankful*

2 Corinthians 9: 6 - 15

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 9 As it is written:

"They have scattered abroad their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever."

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

The "Ad Council" has been a leading producer of public service ads since the 1940s. One of their most effective ads is a series called "Don't Almost Give". One of those ads shows an older woman sitting alone in a room, staring out a window. The narrator says, "*This is Sarah Watkins. A lot of people almost helped her. One almost cooked for her. Another almost drove her to the doctor. Still another almost stopped by to say hello. They almost helped. They almost gave of themselves. But almost giving is the same as not giving at all.*" Each ad ends with a simple, direct message: "*Don't almost give. Give.*"

Over the past few weeks, we've been looking at what the Bible teaches us about financial management and stewardship. We've considered how we make and spend money, how we deal with debt, and how we save and invest for the future. We've examined how God wants us to relate to our money and earthly possessions, and we've explored what it means to live a life of gratitude and contentment.

We've seen, hopefully, that real joy – *authentic* joy as opposed to artificial, temporary joy – is found in something deeper than in simply gathering things that we can measure. It is a spiritual thing, and begins in a right relationship with God, and in our taking on the characteristics of God as givers as well as receiving with gratitude.

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To that end, we've talked about getting our wants under control, and taking steps to get out from the bondage of debt, and the constant desire for more. I am very happy to tell you that thanks to the efforts of Sue Harris and Karen Murray, and the willingness of some of our financial people here to get involved, that there are some panel discussions about debt reduction and budgeting that are being offered in the next couple of weeks at the 9:30 and 11:00 Sunday School hours. Please look at the bulletin for the schedules and we hope you take advantage of this.

We've talked about how important it is that we all learn to live *below* our means, not above it, and not right to 'the edge' so that we have some cushion available for emergencies, we have less stress, less clutter, and most importantly, so that we create 'room to be generous'. We have a *need* to give, it is hard wired into us by our Creator, and when we ignore it, we wither.

We talked last week about our giving specifically to God through the church; and how Biblically, while we are not under the Law as New Covenant people, still a tithe – a tenth – of our income is a good place to start. And many will go beyond that as we mature in faith, and step out in love. We're trusting you – as we always do – to consider all this in your future giving to this church, which is something that we pray with confidence will happen.

We've also talked about *learning* to be content with what we have. Paul said that he *learned* this, it's not something that necessarily comes naturally. But *we* can learn it too, as we commit our lives to the control of the Holy Spirit each morning; starting each new day by inviting God to rework us from the inside out.

We have a little gift for you this morning that sums up all the things we've been talking about here over the past month. It's a little Key Tag – something that you can put on your key ring. On one side it simply says "Contentment". The other side is this prayer:

*Lord, help me to be grateful for what I have,
to remember that I don't need most of what I want,
and that joy is found in simplicity and generosity.*

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The idea is that this will be a reminder to you as you grab your keys to go out to the mall, or page through those holiday catalogues to keep your priorities in line with God's.

This (tomorrow) is Christ the King Sunday – the last weekend in the Liturgical Year. That means that next Sunday is the first week of Advent, which is a wonderful time of spiritual preparation for the welcoming of Christ into the world, into our church, and into our hearts.

I'll introduce our Advent theme in just a few moments (in closing). But I was thinking about where we are here in our journey together today, and this is a unique moment. We've just finished talking very practically about adopting Kingdom values with regard to our possessions, and not allowing the culture to tell us what is important or meaningful in our lives. And yet we're about to enter the time of year when those two values come into their greatest conflict.

You all realize that each year Americans spend billions and billions of dollars on material items at Christmas. Mostly stuff we don't need, and truth be told, don't really even want. And if you think about it, it's a pretty weird way to celebrate the birth of Jesus, who gave up all of his riches to save the world. And every year I hear people lamenting how the commercialization of Christmas has sucked the meaning out of the season for them... it has become stressful, so much of our giving is rather mindless, and done out of duty...and we try to 'capture' joy in our worship and traditions but there seems to be something missing.

There are a number of churches that have been responding to this 'conflict' in some creative ways. I've mentioned Michael Slaughter, the lead pastor of the Ginghamburg UM Church, in Tipp City, Ohio. This is a church that is not only growing, but is making a difference in their extended community. It is a church that is truly focused on Service, on letting their Light shine – they've sent something like 56 Katrina work teams to the Gulf Coast, as one example among hundreds.

But they have gained national attention for their work in Darfur, Sudan. They decided that they as Christians, just couldn't go on without doing *something* about the terrible suffering there. And they began to send mission teams and funds to *western* Darfur – a dangerous place where few

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westerners go. A predominately Muslim area. They've built schools and staffed them (with a focus on girls, who traditionally do not get the benefit of an education in that culture), they have built 8 water yards – which provide drinking water for up to 20,000 people each (their goal is 13 by next year), and much more. When Slaughter was asked on CNN why they go to this Muslim area to serve, his response was simply, “God so loved *the world...*”

All of their work in Darfur is funded by one offering each year. It is a Christmas Eve offering. Pastor Slaughter challenged his people four years ago to take whatever they were planning to spend on themselves that Christmas and bring an offering of an equal amount for the work in Darfur. Their slogan was “It’s Not Your Birthday”, which is pretty much to the point.

Now, let me tell you this: Gimhamsburg church is located on the I-75 corridor, about 15 miles north of Dayton, OH. Dayton was recently listed in USA Today as one of the 10 fastest declining US cities. It is surrounded by 7 auto plants and a host of satellite industries related to auto manufacturing. But the offering the first year for Darfur was about \$1,000,000.

Last year, on December 23rd, the day before their 4th offering, the last of the seven auto plants closed. They were wondering how this mission was going to continue, with such a large percentage of their church population unemployed. They received the offering: \$750,000, from a congregation of about 3,000. It’s not your birthday! They get it.

There is a similar movement which is really catching on around our country that I believe started at the Church of the Resurrection, but it has taken on a life of its own. It goes along with Mike Slaughter’s “Its Not Your Birthday” idea, but it is not as much ‘in your face’! (That’s who he is, God bless the people at Ginghamburg!)

It’s called “The Advent Conspiracy” (which is now a book published by Zondervan). It is based the idea that Christmas for Christians can be a time that is not a contradiction. It can be a time of worship, meaning and giving that is prophetic, powerful and transformative. The *conspiracy* is our belief that we really can change the world!

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If you check out YouTube and enter “Advent Conspiracy” you’ll see a number of videos that churches are putting out to invite their people to become part of this Conspiracy... here’s one of them...

[Show COR DVD]

There was an article in a recent Relay (our GNJAC newspaper) that talked about what some churches in our Annual Conference have done as they participate in this “Advent Conspiracy”.

“Thomasville Church challenged each family member to spend \$50 less during the Christmas season and put it to work...” One family “sat down with our kids and made decisions with them on what gifts they wanted to give up and how they wanted to contribute.”

Some teens wore Advent Revolution tee shirts to school to talk with their peers and move them toward compassion rather than materialism.

One family did not exchange gifts but served a meal on Christmas Eve at a rescue mission.

People in one church gave \$50 per family toward a global mission project. One kid broke his piggy bank to bring in money for the cause. Some families pulled names from a hat to give one gift per person instead of people buying for all the family members. Some people gave non-bought gifts. A techie created a slideshow of family memories as his present. Kids made popcorn balls and cookies to give. Churches emphasized spending time with family instead of “shop till you drop.”

When I heard about this I guess my ‘antennae’ went up, and I started hearing about how stuff like this is already happening in our own congregation. The thing is, because you do this for the right reasons, you keep it quiet; but I’m grateful for these next two stories that I ferreted out, and got permission to share with you today.

(Picture on Screen)

This handsome young man is Chris Keppel. Karen Murray received an email from his mom, Mary, telling us about a decision that he made on his own...

(email on screen)

Every year for Christmas Grandma Bea gave Chris \$100. In his early years we put the money into a savings account and now he can use this money as he wants, (generally he has wanted to keep that early money in savings). The year you started the charity drive for the wheel chairs

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Chris had received Grandma's monetary gift; I took him to the store of his choice, as usual he gave thoughtful consideration to each and every toy on the shelf! In the end he selected something that cost about \$20. When I asked what he wanted to do with the other \$80 he said in effect 'I have enough and want to give the rest to the wheel chair fund'. I was blown away, my heart sang, and that was that. He walked into his Sunday school class the first day of the drive and dropped \$80 into the collection bucket. He gave joyfully and was very proud of his decision.

We love our church!
Mary

Just as a reminder to you: Our Free Wheel Chair Mission collection raised \$2,215.25, enough for 45 Wheel Chairs! Our recent Wells in Africa collection raised \$4,700+, providing 2 entire wells. And we had a missionary here during our mission conference who spontaneously shared with us how significant those wells are from her first-hand experience. Not only providing water for everyone in a village, but also telling us how these wells become community 'hubs' – places where people can gather. A place of praise to God!

And then I stumbled across this story...this is John and Karen Halligan, from FUMC.

[Show clip of John and Karen]

I do appreciate these two 'behind the scenes' people sharing that story with us. (I think that might have been the most words I ever heard Karen speak in a row!)

Our Praise Team is meeting tomorrow night to discuss a Service Project that we're going to do this Christmas. And there is a lot of excitement around that. I know I'm looking forward to it.

Another thing that we're already doing here is truly blessing my heart and honoring God. During the month of Advent, Pastor HY and I are going to be sharing a 'vision statement' with you that goes perfectly with the Advent Season.

I shared with you about a month ago my desire to see us have a more well thought out plan which will describe how we are going to accomplish our "Mission", which you see on the wall here every week. Next week pastor HY will introduce a two word 'vision statement' that at the same time gives an instant picture of how we're going to approach our mission from now on, but also leaves a lot of space to 'unpack' – again, which is something that we'll be doing during Advent

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and during the months to come.

The two words are “**Radical Hospitality**”...

Radical Hospitality begins with God reaching out to *us*, inviting all of us to his ‘table’. The invitation is to come as we are – broken, messed up, confused people, whatever – and find God’s grace and God’s peace. That’s the message of Christmas and it’s the heart of the message of the Gospel itself.

But as the Body of Christ, *we* become the hands and feet of Jesus in this hurting world. And it is then up to us, to offer that Radical Hospitality to others. Which involves two ‘sets’ of people, both very important. The first is the Community of Faith. How do we/ can we demonstrate radical hospitality to *each other*? When Jesus said in the Gospel of John (13) –

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”, he was talking about the disciples.

We’re also told to share God’s love with the world, but in a significant way, that love starts in the church. (I’m going to come back to that in a minute).

The third way that Radical Hospitality is expressed is in boldly letting our light shine before the world, that they might see our good works and give glory to God in heaven. We read this principle in our Scripture reading a few minutes ago:

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

So, we’ll be continuing what we already do – but casting a wider net – in finding ways to truly serve our community. Moorestown, Mt. Laurel, Maple Shade, Camden, Mount Holly... etc.

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Now, back to the second point, to radical hospitality within the Community...

We've been talking about the recession for a long time now, and praying for people that are hurting because of a loss of income, or a drastic reduction in income. And I've mentioned at times in my prayers how happy I am that we are doing more than talking and praying. We've been able to help some families make ends meet with some gifts and help. What has been blowing me away recently are individuals who are hearing about needs of people in our community of faith, and they are coming to me and Pastor HY, and saying, "Here's a check...can you run it through the discretionary fund, and give it to _____ for us?" And, of course, we have.

Or, special gifts that are directed to the Discretionary Fund to help people in need. Or, (as last week, some Visa gift cards that are going into some Thanksgiving baskets that we're preparing.

We've been using discretionary funds to minister to many outside this community as a way of showing our concern for them as well as God's love. But we've felt a tug from the Holy Spirit to be more aware of financial needs within this church community. In other words, we want to demonstrate God's radical hospitality to each other.

So, here's what I need from you. This is a word to those who are struggling...friends, you need to let the church be the church. If you are hurting, struggling financially, we need to know that, because we want to help you. We can't help if we are unaware, and the Scripture tells us to 'weep with those who weep' as well as to 'rejoice with those who rejoice.' We will not advertise our help, I won't use you as a sermon illustration! But let us help you. Give pastor HY a call, or an email and we'll see what we can do to stand beside you.

And to the rest of us... friends, our funds are limited. I'm making this offer because I have absolute confidence that you will back me up. If our Discretionary funds start to run low, I'm going to come to you, and say, "Help! Please!" I know you understand what it means to be the Body of Christ. And here's a tangible way for us to do that.

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And, it just so happens... you probably know that our CoffeeHouse ministry (1st at the First) on the first Friday of each month features good coffee, a chance to meet some people in a relaxed manner, and the \$5 admission goes toward a different cause each month. December's coffee house (Dec. 4) is designated to go towards... our Pastor's discretionary fund. What timing! I had nothing to do with that at all.

In another curious turn of events... the entertainment that night... is me! I'm putting together a small jazz combo, and I'm breaking out the sax, doing some jazz standards, and maybe a Christmas tune or two. So whichever of those items motivates you more, come on out and meet some folks for a good cause.

We have a choice this Christmas... we can let stuff take over. Or, we can use our resources to bless the church community, the ministry here, our community at large... and I promise you, there will be no contest between the satisfaction that comes from that kind of giving vs. simply passing 'stuff' around.