

First things first: Giving back to God

Message for Sunday, January 20, 2012
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:5-8; 1 Corinthians 16:2;
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Children's Message: Ask someone with a recent/upcoming birthday to come forward. Give her/him a poorly wrapped present. As I give it, say something like, "I didn't want to spend much money on you, so I found something that I don't use any more and it's no good to me. You can have it. I didn't want to waste time wrapping it, so I just threw it in this shopping bag. But it's the thought that counts, right?"

Ask them if they're pleased or excited about my gift. Probably not! Why not? Because there was no love in the gift.

The Bible says "God loves the person who gives cheerfully." When we give our offering, we give it from the heart.

Sermon "First things first: Giving back to God" We're reading the Bible to see what principles God has given us about handling money. Money is one of the most potent forces in the world: it has the power to do good; but it can also warp people's values and lives for bad.

Today's message is about the money we give to God in the church offering. You know about the mission of our church: how we aim to bring the good news of God's love to people in our community, how we help the poor and needy through our contributions to the Christmas campaign and the Food Bank, how we provide a place where young people can grow in their knowledge and faith in God. Our offerings help to make this possible.

But let me get honest for a minute: if you don't put money in the offering, I don't get paid! Obviously I have a vested interest in encouraging you to give generously. This reminds me of the story of a man whose ticket held the winning number in a lottery where the prize was \$30 million. He was away from home when the draw was made, so he didn't know anything about it. His wife was worried that the shock of sudden riches might be too great for him, so she asked her pastor to meet him when he returned home, and break the news to him.

The man was both thrilled and thankful. He announced, "As a sign of my thanks to God, I'm going to give half of the money to the church." The pastor had a heart attack!

So I have a bias here. But I hope that we can go beyond that, and see how God wants to bless you through the offering.

Review of last week's message

Let me quickly review what we saw last week in the Bible:

- All our money and possessions belong to God
- God supplies all that we need in life.
- God is the owner, we are the managers. Our job is to wisely and rightly use the resources that God has given us.

One of the ways God tells us to use the money he gives us is to support the ministry through our offerings. There are three basic principles we see in the Bible.

1) Attitude is more important than amount

During this time, the Christians in Jerusalem were suffering from a famine. The people in the new churches in Greece took up an offering to help their brothers and sisters in Christ. They were poor themselves, yet they gave sacrificially. Paul wrote to congratulate them and offer guidance.

2 Corinthians 9:5-8, New Living Translation:

But I want [your offering] to be a willing gift, not one given under pressure. Remember this — a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves the person who gives cheerfully. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.

These are the motives or attitudes that God wants when we give our offering:

- dedication to Jesus Christ and his church
- love for fellow Christians
- the joy of helping people in need
- give generously
- give willingly and cheerfully
- have faith and trust that God will generously supply all our needs, thus enabling us to give generously.

All of these are more important than the actual dollar figure. That's not surprising; that's just common sense. If your heart is in the right place, then your giving will be in the right place, too.

I heard a story about a wealthy person who was asked to make a major contribution in a community fundraising campaign. The caller explained how worthwhile the project was and how great the need. The wealthy person

responded: “I understand why you think I can give fifty thousand dollars. I have my own business and, it is true, I have all the signs of wealth. But there are some things you don’t know. Did you know that my mother is in an expensive nursing home?” Well, no, I didn’t know. “Did you know my son is deeply religious, has gone into missionary work, and his income is below the poverty line, and yet he needs to provide for his family on that?” “Did you know also that my brother died, and left a family of five and had no life insurance to provide for them?” No, I didn’t.”

By now the caller was feeling ashamed. “No, I’m sorry; I had no idea.”

The wealthy person concluded, “Well, then, if I don’t give any of them a penny, why do you think I’ll give any to you?”

I’ll say it again: having the right attitude, the right priorities, and the right heart come first.

Twice this passage warns “don’t give because of pressure.” Someone once said there are three kinds of giving: grudge giving, duty giving, and thanksgiving. Grudge giving says, “I hate to;” duty giving says, “I ought to;” thanksgiving says, “I love to.” Grudge giving comes from pressure; duty giving comes from obligation; but thanksgiving comes from the heart. That’s the kind of offering that God desires from us: giving from the heart.

[If we had a projector, this would be a great spot to watch the video skit from Willow Creek about “The Offering.”]

Still, everyone has to figure out an answer to the question: how much should I give? ...

2) Amount is based on what God has given us

First of all, we need to always remember that everything we have belongs to God. That was the main theme of last week’s message, and it’s the message of Jesus Christ. He called disciples to *total* commitment of their lives to him, not just a percentage. That means I don’t just give a bit to the church, and I can go wild with the rest. All of it belongs to God, and must be used wisely.

The question here is: of all the resources that God has placed under my management, how much should I give to the church to fulfill it’s mission? The answer is clear: your offering should be in proportion to how much money you have.

1 Corinthians 16:2, Today’s English Version:

“Every Sunday each of you must put aside some money, in proportion to what you have earned, and

save it up, so that there will be no need to collect money when I come.”

2 Corinthians 8:11, New Living Translation:

“Give whatever you can according to what you have.”

Again, this is very plain, practical common sense. I have known churches which say, “We need to raise \$10,000. We have 50 families, so if everyone gives \$200, we’ll reach our goal.” That’s good math, but bad Christianity. There may be some people who can afford to give only \$10. There may be others could pay the whole \$10,000 without even blinking.

Or I’ve seen the same thing when the church budget is being adopted. “If everyone increases their giving by 10% — wonderful! — we’ll meet our budget.” But if a person gave nothing last year, 10% of nothing is still nothing. Is that wonderful? If a person gave \$50 last year — a dollar a week, less than what they spend on one day’s coffee — and they increase it by 10% to \$55, does that make it wonderful?

For most people, \$50 is a *donation*, not *discipleship*. Those are two key words here. When people think of the church as a charity — like the Heart Foundation or the United Way — then \$50 is a big donation. But when people see that they are part of the living Body of Christ, when people think of the church’s mission to reach out to the world with the love of God, when people are personally committed to being part of that mission — when they are *disciples* of Jesus Christ — then their offering will reflect that vision.

Think about it: what percentage of your income do you put in your offering? Would you call that a donation or discipleship?

3) Tithing helps us put God first in our lives

Up until now I haven’t specified a formula for calculating how much to give in the offering. I’ve used the rather imprecise term “discipleship.” The Bible, however, does have a suggested formula. It’s called the *tithe*.

Tithing is the practice of giving to God 1/10th of all our income. It is mentioned many times in the Old Testament. Here is one example.

Leviticus 27:30, Today’s English Version:

One tenth of all the produce of the land, whether grain or fruit, belongs to the Lord.

Another thing: the offering was not given from the leftovers, after everything else had been looked after.

Their offering was the first thing taken from their income, before anything else.

Deuteronomy 26:2, Today's English Version:

Each of you must place in a basket the first part of each crop that you harvest and you must take it with you to the one place of worship.

The Bible makes the purpose of tithing very clear: it teaches us to put God first in our lives. We are to give God the first and best of what we earn. For example, what we do first with our money shows what we value most. Giving the first part of our income to God immediately focuses our attention on him.

Maybe you've noticed that most Sundays when we take up the offering, I don't put anything in it. If you've seen that, you may be thinking, "Well, Bruce doesn't give anything; why should I?" It's because I give my offering on the first Sunday of the month, for the whole month. It comes off right at the first of the month. It's my way of following this principle.

Now I know that the reaction of many people to this suggestion is to laugh or shake their heads. Maybe that's true of you. And part of the Bible supports you: there is no mention at all of tithing in the New Testament.

May I suggest this idea: since tithing was the standard before Jesus, and since Jesus surpassed everything that came before him, then perhaps our offerings should use the tithe as a starting point, rather than the maximum.

I tithed when I was in university, living on \$2,000 per year. Jane and I have done this ever since we were married. We have never lacked for anything. God has always supplied all that we need, and far more besides, so that we've been able to give substantial help to people in need.

In our churches, we spend so much time and energy on fund-raising. Imagine this: if just three or four people started tithing, that would take care of all that work. We could invest that time and energy into fulfilling the mission of the church instead. Perhaps God is calling you today to take that step of faith.

I heard of one church where a man named Bernie had doubts about tithing. He talked to his pastor, "I just don't see how I can give 10 percent of my income to the church when I can't even keep on top of our bills."

The pastor replied, "Bernie, if I promise to make up the difference in your bills if you should fall short, do you think you could try tithing for just one month?"

After a moment's pause, Bernie responded, "Sure, if you promise to make up any shortage, I guess I could try tithing for one month."

"Now, what do you think of that," mused the pastor. "You say you'd be willing to put your trust in a mere human like myself who possesses so little materially, but you couldn't trust your Heavenly Father who owns the whole universe!" The next Sunday, Bernie gave his tithe, and has been doing so faithfully ever since.

I don't blame you if you're sceptical. I don't blame you one bit. It sounds too good to be true. Look again at the Scripture we read earlier.

2 Corinthians 9:7-8, Today's English Version:

"You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves the person who gives cheerfully. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others."

That's a promise from God. You can trust him. Why not try and find out for yourself?

Next Steps:

- Acknowledge all that God has given to you. In wonder, give God thanks and praise.
- Make your offering an act of thanksgiving and praise. It's not a duty; it's a joy.
- Choose to live and give like a disciple of Jesus.