



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Live Abundantly...
by sowing generously**

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We continue our *Live Abundantly* series by considering how to steward our financial resources; our money. The ancients and early Christians encountered the same cultural tension concerning money that persists today with too many demands on seemingly limited resources and an inordinate value placed on a fungible commodity.

With respect to our faith and the church, what is our obligation? Why is giving fair? How are we to feel?

Let's ask these questions of our sacred text. Scripture does not consider money a taboo topic.

Sometime around twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul arrived in the bustling city of Corinth situated on the coast of the Greek mainland.

Given its size as a Mediterranean port, Corinth became one of the most important Roman cities outside of Italy. Its residents were savvy to all forms of commerce. They anticipated the impact of a bumper crop from the fields or fishing nets and remembered the decline from only meager amounts appeared.

From their international exposure and trade experience, they understood the impact of the flow of goods and money for themselves and the wider world.

Paul preaches, first to Jews and then Gentiles, establishing a church comprised of elite professions to common laborers, enslaved and free, and like many churches, filled with opinionated, boisterous, and deeply faithful members.

After he left Corinth, Paul loved this congregation from afar through a series of letters. In their correspondence back and

forth, he attempts to correct their misbehaviors in worship and teach them to care for one another.

Paul's letters implore the Corinthians to live a joy-filled life, with grace at the very center.

Not one to mince words, Paul chastises them for forgetting that the church extends to those in Jerusalem and for being stingy to those in need.

Before I read, please pray with me that his words will illuminate our lives.

Dear God, we gather in worship, just as those before us, eager to know how to live with Christ at the center and all the edges of our lives. Silence the noise around and startle us with delight in the simplicity and clarity of your son's way of life. Amen.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

⁶... (t)he one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, "God scatters abroad, gives to the poor; God's righteousness endures forever."

¹⁰ God...who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

¹³ Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that Christ has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

A photo is making the rounds on social media of a pizza along with the question, “what do you do if you there is not enough?”

The next photo displays a plate with a couple of slices “to ensure a full tummy” compared to another photo of a plate carrying only one slice “to ensure enough for everyone.” Choices matter.

I believe the quotes were more succinct than what I just shared.

In the process of reading and researching for today’s sermon on the scripture passage and the theology of giving, I googled phrases to find that image and the elegance of the message.

Although I never found the image, I learned of the pending pepperoni shortage among the backlog of cargo ships waiting at coastal ports.

One of the lingering effects of the pandemic is a persistent sense of scarcity. It started with hand sanitizer and frozen pizza and continues across industries today.

Are we so accustomed to the potential of scarcity or not getting exactly what we want that we are blind to abundance?

What informs our ability to weigh scarcity versus abundance?

More importantly, if we dig deeper, we ask, at what point do we turn our attention from counting what we have or might lose to instead consider how our actions impact those around us?

As an observant Jew, Paul knew the requirements of faith and the role of money within the economy of faith. Scripture teems with stories and commands – sometimes contradictory – but always subordinating money under the devotion to God. How one uses money expresses one's obedience to God.

- Do not worship an idol; and money can become an idol.
- Give the first fruits of your labor, whether in grain or livestock, to God. The offering reminds you that whatever you produced originated from God and your gift of the first and best of the harvest implies you trust God to provide for your life.

- Leave a portion of your harvest for the good of others. The laws of Leviticus prescribe intentionally leaving at least 10% of the crops – grain or fruit or olives – in the field for the immigrant, widow, those without land to glean to support their families. It is not all yours.

Paul kept score through these ledgers and all the other laws, justifying his desire to condemn those who ignored the laws. He measured the worth of insiders, whether they complied with the obligations, and drew boundaries to exclude outsiders.

That's how he lived. That's how he killed. Until he encountered the risen Christ.

Jesus' gospel destroyed Paul's world view of transactions and transformed him by grace. Jesus literally opened his eyes to see that all of life is a gift. Nothing is deserved or earned.

All of life is a gift and because of God's limitless love and Christ's sacrificial giving. Through Christ, we share in the promise of intimate union with God. The more we give to spread his gospel, the more everyone's life flourishes.

As a tradesman and world traveler, when Paul ministered to the Corinthians, he was quite aware that he contradicted normal economic practices. Through his ministry of the gospel, he persuaded them to give, freely, of their money to support the Jerusalem church on a weekly basis. They developed the habit of giving that opened them to trust and delight in the wider church.

When Paul learns they grew to neglect their privilege as Christians to give, he takes up an agricultural image, one they would know from their trade ports: if you sow seed sparingly, you'll reap sparingly. But if you sow generously, you reap generously. Oh by the way, God provides the seed.

He pleads with them to remain faithful to the gospel and share.¹

When Paul points them to the non-striving, un-ambitious, open-hearted trust of a cheerful giver, it is as if to say “stop racing. stop counting. There is enough. Grace abounds.”

Years ago, when I presided in a children's worship service, one of my colleagues, elbowed me so I'd notice. When they received the offering, the children ran with joy to place a coin in the plate. She whispered, “that's the look of a cheerful giver.”

Children teach us to trust God's abundance. Young children generally expect that there's enough to go around. Enough time, enough hugs, enough attention, enough love. It doesn't occur to them to fear scarcity unless they're conditioned to do so; left to themselves, they assume plenty.

Habits of the heart and mind take hold at a young age to carry for a lifetime. For this reason, we give Bibles to our children and celebrate their milestones of stitching ancient words into their memory.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, Interpretation, Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 219-237.

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The beatitudes teach God's blessings will heal the deeply wounded. The comfort of knowing "the Lord is my shepherd" shapes a life of faith to endure the dark valleys and trust goodness and mercy will pursue them throughout their lives.

We teach them songs that replay over and over of the simplicity of Jesus' love and in the process remember the gift of grace cannot be measured or hoarded.

As they grow into youth, they teach us what it means to be a creative giver. A recent research study by Barna Group identified over 80% teens think they are more apt to create a positive experience for someone who is not Christian by letting their actions speak louder than words, by giving of their time and ideas and energy.² For years, Westminster sparked imaginative work with youth.

We learn by giving. We gain power over money and possessions in our lives as we hold them loosely by deliberately looking beyond ourselves and investing in others. We learn by giving; our faith grows as we give ourselves away.³

Who is the cheerful giver?

Certainly, the children who give, trusting there will be more.

The youth who see the needs of others and seeks to care. We need to equip them and get out of their way.

² "Actions, Invitations, Storytelling—How Gen Z Approaches Evangelism," *The Barna Group*, July 27, 2021 <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-evangelism/>

³ *Beyond the Plate*, 36

In conversations with you, one member described making his pledge as a conversation with God. He looks forward to such intimacy begun in prayer and repeated in his periodic giving.

Another member spoke of sitting each month with the bills. He sent his gift to the church first. That brings him joy, offering it before the any of the other payments.

The cheerful giver pledges not out of obligation, like paying the gas or electric bill, or for a budget. The cheerful giver lives a life of gratitude to God in his or her own way, within his or her capacity.

For those of you who opened your mail from the Stewardship Commission and returned your pledge card, thank you. In my first stewardship campaign with Westminster, your immediacy and generosity overwhelm me. Thank you.

If you received the request and have questions about pledging or about the use of your gift, call one of the members of the Commission or me.

Here is my ask, for those of you who have never pledged or contributed a gift, prayerfully consider what it means to belong to God through this church. Imagine how you may give to sustain the gospel in this place and beyond, for this generation and the future.

We all rise when everyone in the church participates, in whatever manner brings you joy.

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Generosity as a way of life that has nothing to do with means, or the size of your gift, it is simply loving God and neighbor.

It's one thing to enjoy moments of personal generosity — a good deed here and a kindness there. It's another thing to be a person so generous in spirit that a desire to be grateful for the gospel guides one's entire outlook on life. It changed Paul's life. The Corinthians learned from him to sow generously the seed provided by God. It is your choice.

May it be so.



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