

June 18, 2006 Sermon

An excerpt from “Giving to God: The Bible’s Good News about Living a Generous Life” by Mark Allan Powell, professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus Ohio. Printed with permission.

*“All things come from you, and of your own have we given you.” 1  
Chronicles 29:14*

Picture yourself in Ancient Israel, in the early years before there was a temple. The community gathers to worship around some rudimentary altar and each person brings an offering to God. Some have “drink offerings” that they pour on the altar until the liquid is gone. Others have grain offerings, sheaves of wheat that they place on the altar and light on fire. A few may even bring birds or small animals, which are killed and like the wheat, consumed in the flames....the basic point seems to have been this: worshippers brought things that they valued to the altar and left them there...what was going *on* in ancient Israel? The grain, the animals, even the drink offerings...these were the ancient equivalents of money. The Israelites found it worthwhile, indeed necessary, to give away their possessions in sacrificial acts of worship to God...

I sometimes imagine someone in Israel saying, after a time, “You know, it is kind of a waste to just put this grain on the altar and burn it up. Maybe we could give it to the poor instead? Or maybe we could give it to the priests and let it be their salary?” Such suggestions have obvious merit, but the problem comes when, over time, people begin to forget the

real reason for making these offerings. They begin to think, “God wants me to give up some of my grain so that the poor can be fed or the priests can be paid.” That had not been the original idea. Such concerns are only afterthoughts; they do not represent the real reason for the offerings. The primary purpose of sacrifice is worship.

According to the Psalmist: “With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good.”--Psalm 54:6

“Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.” Psalm 96:8-9

I don't know for sure if anything like that ever happened in ancient Israel, but something similar has happened in Christian churches. Many people seem to think that the reason we have an offering during the Sunday morning service is because the church needs to pay its bills...but that is not *why* we have an offering...the offering is an act of worship, an instance in which we are invited to give up something that we value—our money—as a sacrifice to God.

Think about this for a moment. We sing hymns of praise to God: “How great thou Art,” “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,” “Beautiful Savior.” When I sing those hymns, I do try to take the words to heart and really mean them as an expression of my devotion and thanksgiving to the Lord who is good to me. But words can come easily and the Bible speaks of people who honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from God (Isaiah 29:13; Mark 7:6). The connection between hearts and treasures is

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more secure: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21) I find that this is true: on a simple level, I find that it is easier to sing hymns and not really mean them than it is to part with my money and not really mean it.

We are invited to put money in the offering plate on Sunday morning not because the church needs our money but because *we want and need to give it...* The good news of biblical stewardship is that church offerings are not fund raising rituals but acts of worship in which we are invited to express our heartfelt devotion to God who is so devoted to us. If we think the point of the offering is collecting funds to meet the church’s budgetary expenses then we will probably derive no more satisfaction from this portion of the liturgy than we do from paying our gas bill...why not just send out notices in the mail and let church members write checks and mail them in, as they do when tending to any other financial commitment?... The Sunday offering is a worship event that provides us with an opportunity for expressing our love for God in the purest way imaginable, by giving up something that we value.

The essence of faith is worship and the essence of worship is sacrifice—giving of ourselves in devotion to God. (Which, I might add, rubs against our modern senses that we shouldn’t have to sacrifice anything.) In that regard, ancient Israelites and modern Christians are the same. There is more to the matter, but this is the first and possibly most important thing to learn about Biblical Stewardship: we give to God in return as an act of worship.

There is a strong connection between love and giving. Most of us know what it is like to love someone so much that we want to give them things. The motivation for such gifts is not primarily obligation but desire; we give not because it is something we should do but because it is something we want to do. Of course, there may be some sense of obligation. We are generally expected to get gifts for our loved ones at certain times and on certain occasions regardless of how we feel about it. Still, in a healthy relationship, we do not give only or always out of a sense of obligation. We take a certain excitement in providing gifts for those we love and, sometimes, we may give them things for no reason at all. Such giving is not particularly practical. The point is not what the person needs or whether they will use the gift in a manner that we find acceptable; the point is simply expressing our devotion through an offering of love. Giving to the church as an act of worship is not geared specifically to meeting budget needs. We do have an obligation, a duty to support our church's life and mission, but giving as an act of worship takes us beyond duty to delight.

The Bible is filled with instances of such giving. In the book of Genesis, after Noah exits the ark the first thing he does is build an altar and offer sacrifices to God. Later patriarch Jacob experiences God's presence in a dream and, not knowing what else to do, he sets up a stone and pours oil over the top of it. The consistent point seems to be that when people are struck by the goodness of God, they naturally want to give something to God: they don't always know how to do that, but they

want to do it...These people who had been touched by the goodness of God wanted to worship God, and they did that by taking something that belonged to them and giving it to God in the only way they knew how.

Turning to the New Testament, we see the story of the Magi bringing their gifts to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus. These mysterious visitors from the east travel a great distance for no other purpose than to worship the one who has been born “King of the Jews.” When they arrive, they kneel down before him and offer him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And then they go home. The Bible says nothing at all about the practical value of these gifts, about what Joseph and Mary do with the gold, much less the frankincense or the myrrh. The Bible is only interested in telling us that the Magi make such offerings—they give of their treasures in a pure act of worship that expresses their devotion to the newborn Messiah.

On a different occasion, Jesus encounters someone who does decide that the best way of showing devotion to God is by helping the poor. Zacchaeus, the rich tax collector, is so inspired by his visit with Jesus that he announces he will give half of his wealth to the poor. This account makes for an interesting comparison with another story in which Jesus tells a man to sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor. The man in the latter story is unable to do what Jesus suggests and he goes away sad, disappointing both himself and Jesus. Why would Jesus tell one rich man that he ought to give up all his possessions and then be delighted with another rich man who offers to give up only half?

Perhaps the answer is to be found in the person's motivation. The one man wants to know what he *should* do, and Jesus tells him he should give up all. With Zacchaeus, however, the questions of what one *should* do never comes up; he wants to give away half his fortune and Jesus is pleased with his heartfelt generosity.

The common theme in these and many other Biblical stories is that the focus is not on giving as an obligation but on giving as an act of worship. Perhaps the Magi should have been concerned with what the Holy couple would do with the gold, frankincense and myrrh. Perhaps Zacchaeus should have given away all of his wealth. Yet all of these persons are praised by Jesus and presented in the Bible as examples of faithful stewardship. Why? Because they offer their treasures, gifts from God to be sure, in a spirit of devotion and adoration, as the gifts of glad and generous hearts that have been touched by God's love.

...I once served as a Pastor in a congregation where the people wanted me to visit all of the "inactive members" and see if we could get some of them to come back to church. I came up with a list of fifty families and decided that I would visit one family each week for a year. I guess I wasn't very good at this because I didn't persuade too many people to come back to church. But I sure did hear some stories.

I heard lots of reasons why people had quit coming to church. Some of the inactive members had complaints about the liturgy or about church politics or about personal conflicts within the congregation. Some of them thought the church had gotten too liberal, or that it wasn't contemporary

enough, or that the services were boring, or that the programs we offered didn't meet their needs.

I tried to find a common denominator and eventually I did. All of the people I visited told me in one way or another that they had quit coming to church because they weren't "getting out of it" whatever it was that they thought they should get out of it. People had different ideas with regard to what they thought the church should do for them, but all of the inactive members agreed that, whatever that was, the church had failed to do what they thought it should do for them.

This surprised me. When I was a child and my family went to church on Sunday morning, my mother used to tell us, "We are going to worship God." I'm not sure if it even occurred to me that I was supposed to get anything out of it. Certainly, that wasn't the reason we went. I didn't know very much about church or about what it all meant, but even at a very young age I knew that it wasn't about me—at least, it wasn't *all* about me. These people didn't come from all over town Sunday after Sunday just to get together and meet my needs. No. They came to worship God.

And now that I am a lot older, I have discovered something else. When people do this—when they come to worship God—something wonderful happens. They invariably discover that they are much more likely to get something out of the experience than if they had come for any other reason. I don't know why this is—maybe God just has a sense of irony (to go with God's sense of humor). Or maybe the point is that *one of*

*our greatest needs is to worship God.* We don't always know this, but it is true nevertheless, and when we quit focusing on ourselves and focus instead on worshipping the God who is so good to us, one of our deepest needs is met. We just didn't know, perhaps, that that was what we needed.

So, worship is essential to faith. But I have also said that sacrifice is essential to worship. Why is that? Because worship, almost by definition, is the opposite of self-centeredness. When we worship God, we make God, rather than ourselves, the center of our devotion. Doing this always involves some element of self-denial or sacrifice, giving up something that we value, giving up attention on *our* wants and our needs in order to focus on God.

(Break)

People give money for all sorts of reasons, but the good news of biblical stewardship is that we are encouraged to give out of glad and generous hearts, motivated by God's love for us and our sincere love of God. If we give out of a sense of compulsion, motivated by guilt or shame, or out of self-interest, in order to win praise or gain influence, there is a good chance that we will end up feeling used. We may think that our generosity has not been fully appreciated or we may wonder whether the money we gave has been put to the best possible use. But giving that is grounded in the good news of biblical stewardship never leaves us with those hollow emotions. When we give cheerfully, as an act of worship, the very act of giving moves us to lose interest in ourselves

and to devote ourselves to God; we may care about how the money that we give is used but that isn't the *reason* we give it. We may appreciate having our gifts acknowledged, but that isn't *why* we give them. In some mysterious way, such giving—motivated only by our love for God and God's love for us—ends up meeting our *own* deepest spiritual needs and is intensely satisfying. I have never known anyone to give their money in such a way and later regret it.

Indeed, there is something basic about such giving that goes beyond the expectations of any particular religion. In his book, "Stewards of God", Milo Kauffman relates the story of a poor Hindu in Nepal who brought the last of his rice as an offering to his god. A neighbor told him, "You must not do that. You have to live." His answer was, "No, I don't have to live. But I do have to worship."

At some level, this man was experiencing the same truth as the widow Jesus met in the temple, in Mark Chapter 12. To be perfectly honest, I am a little troubled by both stories because, on a common sense level, I don't know if it's really a good idea for poor men and women to give their last bowls of rice or only copper coins, or Social Security checks for that matter, to religious causes. I think that maybe I would have told the widow to keep her coins and the Hindu man to keep his rice. But on another level, one that is less invested in "common sense", I do understand the motivation: For those who make the discovery, *worship* is what makes life worthwhile.