

INTRODUCTION

Before I get started, I just remembered we are taking some friends out to lunch, and I'm out of cash. Can anyone help me? ... Will you loan me some money for lunch? "How much do you need?" How much do you have? "I've got \$100." Well, I guess I could get by with \$10. "Okay" On second thought, that won't be enough, can I have the whole \$100? "I guess so. When can you pay me back?" Well, would you be willing to just *give* me the money? "Do you think I'm an idiot?" No, but I know you're a nice guy. "Okay, because I like you, you can have the \$100." Thanks!

This month we're talking about getting plugged in. If you weren't here last Sunday, I hope you'll get the tape or CD about getting plugged in to a Sunday Morning Bible Study group.

Today, I want to share with you the joy of getting plugged in to support God's work through your financial gifts. If you are here for the first time, you're probably thinking, "I knew it! I pick one Sunday to come and the preacher speaks on giving money. Money, money, money, that's all they ever talk about at that church."

Well, truthfully, I only speak about giving one Sunday a year—I don't announce it in advance, because there are some folks who just don't want to hear about it. For the past few years, I've spoken on giving on Super Bowl Sunday. In case some of you have figured that out, I thought I'd confuse you by preaching on giving a Sunday early!

If you are a guest, this message is not directed toward you. We tell guests we don't expect you to make an offering. You may not be ready to make a financial gift to support this ministry because you don't know much about us yet. So this message is directed toward members and regular attendees of our church.

You may wonder, "Pastor, why are you teaching on giving? Are we short of funds here?" No, in fact, we just finished 2002 with a healthy budget surplus. We paid off the cost of this building last year (\$27 million), and we exceeded our World Mission Offering goal. We aren't in financial trouble.

The primary reason I talk about giving is *not* so you'll give your money, so our church can maintain our ministry. No, I teach what the Bible says about giving because I love you and I want you to discover the great joy that comes when you honor God with your income. I don't want you to miss out on the blessings God has for you.

These three "plugged in" messages are taken straight from the Old Testament book of Ezra. After almost a century of being exiled, the Jews returned to Jerusalem to find the city in ruins. They were spiritually unplugged. Ezra is a great story of how they plugged in to what God had for them. Today we'll learn that giving an offering was an important step in getting plugged in. The noun or verb form of "give an offering" or "sacrifice" appears ten times in these three verses. See if you can find them:

"After that they presented (1) the regular burnt offerings (2) , the New Moon sacrifices

(3) and the sacrifices (4) for all the appointed feasts of the Lord, as well as those brought (5) as freewill offerings (6) to the Lord. On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer (7) burnt offerings (8) to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord’s temple had not yet been laid. Then they gave (9) money to the masons and carpenters, and gave (10) food and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia.” (Ezra 3:5-7)

If you really want to receive ALL the blessings God has for you, you must understand and obey what the Bible says about giving. “Give” is a verb. Let’s attach four adverbs the Bible attaches to giving.

1. GIVE SACRIFICIALLY

When you read the word sacrifice in the Old Testament, you may think of animals slain on the altar. In biblical times, livestock was traded like money. A lamb or a bull may have been the most valuable thing a family owned. It was truly a sacrifice when they gave it to God. A sacrifice means giving God something so valuable that offering it will change your lifestyle. There is no such thing as a cheap sacrifice—it is always expensive.

In 1 Chronicles 21, when King David was looking for a place to build a temple, God directed him to buy the land Araunah the Jebusite was using as a threshing floor for his wheat. When King David offered to pay Araunah the full price, Araunah insisted he wanted to give it to David at no charge. Most of us would have jumped at the offer of free land, but David refused to accept the gift. Instead he said, “...I will not sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing.” (1 Chronicles 21:24) Then David paid the full price for the land that would be used to build the Temple. It’s not a sacrifice if it cost nothing. Many Christians only give on a level they can comfortably afford; they seldom make a real sacrifice.

Our culture can be better characterized by the word “selfish” rather than “sacrifice.” We are living in a material world, and we are all material people whether we like it or not. Eugene Peterson writes:

“The ‘arithmetic of affluence’ goes like this: If \$10 makes me happy, \$100 will make me 10 times happier and \$1,000 will make me ten times happier still. And it works in reverse too. Losing \$10 is a bummer, so if I lose \$1,000 I’ll be utterly miserable. A person who lives this way thinks, ‘How can I get more? I’ll do whatever I have to for more; I’ll bend rules, I’ll step on people, as long as I accumulate, for that will bring me pleasure!’ The promise of wealth or the threat of losing it can lead us to corruption, self-aggrandizement and the neglect of spiritual truth.”

When you sacrifice a material possession to God you demonstrate you love God more than your possession. When you really love someone, you don’t worry so much about “how much is this gift going to cost me?” Instead you consider, “how much is this gift going to bless the one who receives it?”

When I bought Cindy’s engagement ring almost 30 years ago, it cost more than I paid for my car

(which wasn’t much). But I wasn’t thinking about how much it cost—I was thinking about whether or not she would like it. I was willing to pay the price because I loved the one who would receive it. That’s why we give sacrificially.

A real sacrifice always gets Jesus’ attention. According to Mark 12, one day Jesus was sitting in the Temple watching people place their money into the offering box. He was silent as the wealthy people placed their large offerings in the box. But when a little widow slipped two small coins worth less than a penny, *that* got His attention. He gathered His disciples around Him and said, “Look guys, that woman has put in more than anyone else!” The disciples must have scratched their heads in confusion. Then Jesus said, “They gave out of their wealth—she put in all she had.” That’s the kind of sacrifice that gets Jesus attention. Have you ever made a gift to God that was a sacrifice that got Jesus’ attention?

2. GIVE SYSTEMATICALLY

We also read in Ezra three that the people gave the *regular* offering. That word means they gave with regularity—systematically. They didn’t just give when the mood struck them; there was a plan to their giving.

You may not be plugged in to God’s best because your giving is sporadic instead of systematic. You give one week, and then skip a few weeks. The Bible teaches the value of giving on a regular basis. When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth about taking an offering he said, “Now concerning the offering ... on the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income.” (1 Corinthians 16:1-2) That’s still a good plan.

Have you noticed your mortgage company wants you to send them money on a regular basis? God isn’t sending you bills, but He deserves more faithfulness than GMAC or Ford Credit Company. The Jews gave regularly because they always gave their firstfruits. Whenever a crop was ready for harvest, they always took the first and the best part of that crop and gave it to support the work of God. But today, many of God’s people don’t give Him their firstfruits—they give Him the leftovers. They pay all their bills, go out to watch a movie and eat, then stop by the stores to shop...and if there is any money left over they give some of it to God. You will never get in on God’s richest blessings if you occasionally give God your leftovers.

Throughout history, the *way* people give to God has changed. For instance, the Jews gave their grain, and their animals. In the New Testament believers gave their gold and silver coins. Over the last thirty years, I’ve seen our economic system change. During seminary, I worked at an airport in Louisville, Kentucky. On payday, I would go up to the accountant’s office and he would give me a pay envelope containing the cash for the hours I worked. In most of the churches I’ve served, I receive a check for my salary. I would endorse the check and go to the bank and deposit it. But I don’t receive a paycheck from Green Acres. In fact I haven’t gotten a paycheck in years. Instead, our business office deposits my salary into my bank account using an electronic transfer.

The way people give to God has changed, too. People used to give mostly cash for their offering, and then for years, they would write checks. Today, a growing number of people are conducting

their financial transactions using electronic banking. I’ve been paying all my bills by online banking for the last three years. I’ve been making my offering to Green Acres through an electronic transfer. Giving to God hasn’t really changed from the time the Jews would give their firstfruits to the Temple, but *how* we give has changed and it will keep on changing.

Green Acres is known as a forward thinking church. We are sometimes the first to do things differently. I like something Boyd Wall, one of our deacon officers said to me this week. He said, “Green Acres is an R&D church.” I laughed because in many ways we *are* a Research and Development Church.

Starting today, we are providing a new way for you to make an offering to God through our church. We are giving you the option of making your offering using an electronic giving form. You don’t need to have a computer or have online banking to use it. Many of you probably already use automatic drafts to pay some of your bills, so you know how it works. You are simply directing your bank to send Green Acres a regular offering. You choose the amount, and when you want the transfer to occur. The transfer will show up on your bank statement each month. If you want to use this service, just fill out the form and attach a voided check and bring it by our office, or mail it in. Of course, you can change or cancel the agreement anytime you choose.

I am going to use this service because it allows me to choose in advance I’m going to put God first in my financial life. I’m actually committing my tithe and offering to Him before I pay any other bill for the rest of this year. You may not like this idea, or you may not be ready for it, and that’s okay. You can continue to give using cash or a check. But if you choose to use this service, you are certain you aren’t giving God your leftovers—He’ll be getting your firstfruits.

This gives you a simple way to give systematically, regularly. Even if you are out of town, you are still making your offering. God is honored when you give Him your firstfruits, not your leftovers. There used to be a sweet lady in our church named Evelyn Phillips, who went to be with the Lord a couple of years ago. She had a tiny back yard, but she loved to grow tomatoes. I visited her several times and she knew I loved tomatoes. So for several years before she got too sick to garden, she would drop by my house when she picked her first tomatoes of the season. She would say, “Oh, Brother David, I wanted to bring you the firstfruits of my tomatoes.” At first, I tried to politely decline her offer, but she insisted she was doing it because she appreciated me. Of all the gifts I have received in my lifetime, I can’t think of anything that blessed and honored me more than Evelyn’s first tomatoes.

3. GIVE PROPORTIONATELY

In Ezra, the people did not all give the same amounts. The Old Testament stipulated different levels of giving based upon whether a person was rich or poor. What is a sacrifice for me may not be a sacrifice for you. What is a sacrifice for you may not be a sacrifice for the person beside you. That’s the miracle of God’s tithe, which means giving 10 percent to Him. A person who makes \$60,000 annually would give \$6,000 to God. A person who makes \$25,000 annually would give \$2,500 to God. According to God’s arithmetic the \$6,000 is equal to the \$2,500 gift.

A few months ago, I received a letter from a man who worked on our maintenance staff over 10 years ago. Of course, I'm not going to give you his name, but because of the way he wrote things in this letter, I think he wanted me to share it with you:

Please give to Pastor David Dykes, The reason I am writing this letter is to let you know that I am sending you this \$10 for a reason that I took \$5 from one of the rooms that I was cleaning up when I was working there. God knows that I did it and I was wondering if you could find it in your heart to forgive me for that mistake that I did. I took some money out of a basket in one of the rooms. I saw it and why I took it I don't know. It was God's and not mine. I am sorry that it took so long to let you know about a little thing like that—but it was a BIG THING to God—it was His not mine.

Please have it in your heart to forgive me, please. I know God forgives if you ask Him - and I have asked forgiveness of all my sins. The Bible says, "Thou shalt not steal." I did and I feel bad for what I did. Tell everybody that I said that I am sorry for what I did. I'm sorry I failed God at the time, but now I know what the Bible means about forgiving. May God greatly bless you all and take care of you all...

I wrote him back and told him God has forgiven him, and I have forgiven him and I would ask the church to forgive him. I thanked him for being so honest and for showing the courage it took to write that letter. Will you join me in forgiving this man for stealing \$5 of God's money?

This man realized he had stolen from God and he did something to correct it. How about you? God says, "You have robbed me in your tithes and offerings." Are you man enough or woman enough to do like this dear brother and do something about it?

In Malachi, God is carrying on a conversation with His people. In Malachi 3:9 God is brutally honest about a problem many people face. He says, "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me." But you ask, "How do we rob you?" "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse, because you are robbing me." But God never chastises us without giving us some positive direction. The solution is found in the next verse: "Bring the whole tithes (10 percent) into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." (Malachi 3:10)

The big question is not "should I tithe?" Your biggest question is, "Can I trust God's promise?" Can He be trusted? God promised Noah He would never destroy the world again with a flood, and He placed a rainbow in the sky as a sign of the covenant. Most of you probably believe God will keep His promise—there will never be another worldwide flood. But do you believe His promise in Malachi 3:10? This is the *only* place in all the Bible where I've found God invites us to put Him to the test. He says, "Go ahead, test me on this one. Try tithing and see if I won't open the floodgates of heaven and bless you."

Here's my annual challenge: If you aren't tithing, try it for at least a year. One year from now if you aren't experiencing a sweeter walk with God than before you started tithing, come and tell me. If God hasn't kept His promise to you, then I'll close this book, resign as pastor and never

preach again. Because if Malachi 3:10 isn’t true, then John 3:16 isn’t true either. So don’t take my challenge—take God’s. He says, “test me on this.”

Do you remember the guy I got the \$100 from at the beginning of the message? Do you think he was giving *his* money to me? Not really, because before the service I gave him the \$100 and told him I would ask for it back in the service. So he was simply giving back to me what was already mine. God does the same thing—but He only asks for you give Him 10 percent back.

Some people don’t tithe because they reason, “It’s *my* money, I *earned* it, I *worked* for it.” When actually, it’s *all* God’s money and He gave you some of it. We need to change the way we think and the way we talk. Would you say this with me? “It is not how much of MY MONEY I give to God, but how much of GOD’S MONEY I keep for myself.”

4. GIVE CHEERFULLY

We read in Ezra that in addition to all the regular offerings, the people gave a “freewill offering.” A tithe and several other offerings were mandatory for the Jews, but this freewill offering was one people gave over and above their tithe. It was an offering they gave gladly.

It’s always interesting to see the scowls on the faces when I talk about giving. But from up here I can also see the smiles and the heads nodding when I talk about tithing. Have you gotten to the place where giving to God just makes you laugh with joy? Sometimes people say, “Give ‘till it hurts.” I prefer, “give ‘till it tickles!”

The Bible says, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his HEART to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:6-7) Our finance office says, “God loves a cheerful giver, but we’ll accept cash from a grouch!” The word “cheerful” is the Greek word “*hilarion*” from which we get our word “hilarious.” When you fill out your Electronic giving form it should be so hilarious you break out laughing. I can’t believe I’m giving 10 percent of my monthly salary to God! I can barely pay my bills now! This is ridiculous!

The last chapter of Proverbs describes the characteristics of a godly woman, so many women aspire to be what’s called a “Proverbs 31 Woman.” But how many of you have ever heard of a Proverbs 30 Man? In the first verse of Proverbs 30, we learn his name is Agur. He has discovered the secret of contentment. In verse 7, he prayed, “God, I’m asking for two things before I die; don’t refuse me—Banish lies from my lips and liars from my presence. Give me enough food to live on, neither too much nor too little. If I’m too full, I might get independent, saying, ‘God? Who needs him?’ If I’m poor, I might steal and dishonor the name of my God.” (Proverbs 30:7-9 *The Message*)

God has promised you won’t starve. He is going to meet your needs. He never promised to meet your wants or your luxuries, but He will meet your needs. And the greatest need you possess is to have a relationship with Him. Proverbs 3:9 says to “honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all you produce.” Are you honoring God with your gifts? He also promised in 1

Samuel 2:30, “He who honors me, I will honor.”

You are part of something wonderful—at this moment, God is building some of the strongest, healthiest churches in history. It’s almost as if He is getting His bride dressed up for the groom to come get her. My gifts to God alone don’t amount to much, and your gifts by themselves may not add up to much either. But when all of us together honor God by sacrificially giving to Him, He is honored.

CONCLUSION

Once a king announced he was going to visit a certain village. The villagers were very excited, so they looked for a way to honor him. They decided they would serve the king and his entourage their very best wine. They placed a large clay pot in the city square and asked all the villagers to bring a cup of their finest wine and pour it into the pot. When everyone finished they would have a large amount of the finest wine to serve the king and his friends. One villager thought, “Since everyone is pouring their best wine into the pot, I can keep my wine and just pour in a cup of water, and no one will ever know.” So that’s what he did. When the king arrived they served him a cup of the wine collected from all the villagers. The king tasted it and said, “Why, this is nothing but water!” The king was *not* honored.

You may think, “What I give to God isn’t much. Besides, there are hundreds of other people in this church who are giving plenty to support this church, my gift will never be missed.” My friend, it’s not about giving money to support this church—it’s all about honoring God.

If you really want to plug in to God’s best for you this year, I encourage you to obey God and start honoring him by financially supporting His work.

OUTLINE

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2. GIVE SYSTEMATICALLY

“Now concerning the offering ... on the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income.” *1 Corinthians 16:1-2*

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“Bring the whole tithe (10%) into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.” *Malachi 3:10*

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If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes