

## Lives Compelled by Love -- *Love and Giving: The Practice*

1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9

Today, we are going to consider how financial stewardship is a natural part of our discipleship. For the last two weeks, we've seen that, when we place our faith in the one who died for us, we discover that, as Pastor Chuck said last Sunday, we begin to have a "desire" to give to the work of God in this world. As the Apostle Paul said in 2 Cor 5:14, when we experience that Jesus died for us, then what compels or directs our lives is the love of Christ. And, one part of our lives compelled by Christ's love is our financial giving.

Even though that is true, I am nonetheless aware of the fact that talking about money makes some church people uncomfortable. "Why", you might ask. Well, some churchgoers have more debts than income and wonder, "How can I respond right now to a message about financial giving? I have no money." Maybe even more than that, people become fidgety about sermons on giving because they have concerns about how churches and non-profit organizations spend money."

Maybe you've heard the story of a long-time church member who always criticized the annual church budget. He went to the microphone at the annual congregational meeting and said, "We're spending far too much money on things we don't need! Like these chandeliers that are listed in the budget. They're way too expensive. I've asked a lot of people and haven't spoken to a one who likes them. And, I've heard that no one in our church can pay them. And, what we need around here is some more lights!"

So, although I know that giving is not the most popular sermon topic, I still feel it is very important for me as your Sr. Pastor to let you know that the consistent message of the Bible is that a part of your growth in Christ is learning how God would have you utilize whatever financial resources the Lord has entrusted to you.

The Bible provides some very practical teaching about how we should engage in giving in 1 Cor 16 and 2 Cor 8-9. This will be the 3<sup>rd</sup> message in a row about stewardship. In the 1<sup>st</sup>, I looked **at the picture** of what love-compelled giving looks like, i.e., like the way a group of poor churches in Macedonia gave. Then, **last week, Pastor Chuck spoke of the perspective** the Bible provides about giving as he focused on two words: 1) the **desire** to give that knowing Jesus should produce and 2) the **equality** within the family that should characterize a church as we give to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today, I'll seek to boil down the Bible's teaching in 1 & 2 Corinthians about how we actually **practice** financial stewardship. Let's look today at **Practical Principles for Generous and Joy-Filled Stewardship**.

1. **Pattern** – **Develop a way of life of giving that is consistent with the life of Jesus.** *You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...* (2 Cor 8:9).

When Jesus called people to repent of our sins and then believe in him as Savior, he most often described the life that this launches is one of "following", following Jesus. It's thereby clear that, when we become Christians we are not to go back to the same way of life we were living before we came to know him. In other words, when you place your faith in Jesus, you are born again in such a way that you begin to have a new way of life, one that includes how you use your time, talents, and treasures. All that you are and have should now bring glory to God. **The way we use our money is a part of that new way of life. What does it look like?**

Our new way of life starts with ongoing, intentional commitments of all that we are and have to the Lord. Note again the testimony of the poor church people in Macedonia: *In the midst of their extreme poverty, the Macedonian churches gave themselves first to the Lord...* (**2 Cor 8:2,5**). I encourage you to do the same. When it comes to your financial giving, start where the Macedonians did, i.e., take time to remember what Jesus did for you when he gave his life for your sins. Then, in response, pray, **"Lord you gave all for me. Today, I recommit all I am and have to you."**

This is what Henri Nouwen called "the discipline of gratitude", in his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. He wrote, *"Take care never to forget that all we have is a gracious gift of God, undeserved and unearned; that we never forget that God is the source of every good and perfect gift, and those gifts are to be used for his glory and the extension of his kingdom; that we never forget that with blessing comes responsibility, i.e., the obligation of faithful obedience."*

Do that, and then ask, "Lord, how would you have me to give to your work?"

For us to be faithful in our giving, I've found that most of us need to develop a habit or rhythm in our stewardship. Note how the Bible encourages that in **1 Cor 16:2** – *"On the first day of every week, each one of*

*you should set aside a sum of money...*” I know that not everyone can develop that same pattern. Some of you have incomes that you receive irregularly – as is the case for real estate agents, musicians and actors, etc. For those whose income is like that, you may have to develop a different rhythm or pattern. Perhaps you can develop a pattern of setting aside a portion of what comes in when it actually does come in. However, most people can establish some kind of regularity in giving. We all need patterns of life in our discipleship – including matters like prayer, personal devotions and giving.

The point is that regular giving encourages faithfulness. It also enables your church to plan for ministry. This kind of consistent giving also should help mitigate in a church what may feel at times like unending begging and appeals. Note the *"so that"* in **1 Cor 16:4**: *"so that when I come no appeals will have to be made."*

And, as I mentioned to you in my message two weeks ago, developing a way of life like this will be a powerful testimony to your friends, children and grandchildren of how real and life-changing your experience of Jesus is. It will be a practical demonstration of how following Jesus changes every part of your life. **When people see that God has touched your pocketbook, they'll know he has touched your heart.**

2. **Prioritized** – Give first to and through your local church family; then, as God prompts. *Be generous on every occasion, and then through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God* (2 Cor 9:11).

There is a theological truth that undergirds the whole of the teaching about stewardship in our passages today. If you don't grasp it, you'll miss much of what the Bible says about giving. The truth is this: **When we come to faith in Jesus, we are necessarily made a part of God's global and eternal family.** We belong to one another. Therefore, when one part of God's family is hurting or lacking, the rest of the family will hurt too. More than that, family members should help the family members who are hurting. That's what good families do. Right?

So, back in the 1<sup>st</sup> C, when the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem hurt, then their brothers and sisters in Macedonia felt their pain and gave sacrificially to help. And, the Apostle Paul insisted, the local church family located in Corinth should have done the same. I believe that, for us, the same principle applies. When we hear of our brothers and sisters being persecuted or in need around the world, we should seek God in prayer to determine how we might stand with them and support them. And, I'm convinced that this same principle has application to us as a local church family caring for one another.

However, as you know, the needs that arise both in our local church family and in our global church family are often enormous. On our own, we find it hard to know which things we should prioritize in our giving. But, the pattern of the Scriptures is that the local church family should seek God together to prioritize how what is given should be used. We do that here at LAC as I spoke about two weeks ago. Notice today how Paul put it in **2 Cor 9:11**: *"Through us, your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."*

So, based on this and on the larger teaching of Scripture, your local church family should be the first-focus of your financial giving. The work of God should happen primarily through our local churches who seek God together and then prioritize the ministries the Lord would have us support together at this time.

But, listen carefully: When I say, "Give first to the local church family...", I do not mean that there is no place for you to give to other ministries or to individuals that go beyond what the church family has identified as priorities. But, that should be second-level stewardship after you have given to your local church family.

3. **Proportionate** – Give generously but always in keeping with God's provision. *Give according to your means* (2 Cor 8:11b).

See also **1 Cor 9:2**, *"Set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income."* And again, in **2 Cor 8:12** – *"Your gift is acceptable according to what you have, not to what you do not have."*

You may know that in many, many churches throughout history, God has provided for his work through a discipline we call tithing. That, of course, facilitates proportionate giving. Based on many OT texts, followers of Jesus have dedicated 10% of their income to God's work. Some ask, "On the gross or on the net?" I must confess that I'm not sure. I think this kind of question is to be determined in relationship with God. In fact, this might be something that you should talk and pray about with your small group.

You can read about tithing in OT passages like Leviticus 27:30ff. and Malachi 3. When we come to the NT days, some Christians seemed to feel that 10% was too little. They felt that all they had belonged to God. So, in places like the early chapters of Acts, we have Christians bringing everything they owned to the church. That never seemed to work out well in the long run and by the 2nd C, you begin to see a pattern of tithing re-developing.

Now, in my opinion, 10% is best used as a guideline in your giving. For people who are newer to church life, the teaching about tithing sometimes seems overwhelming. But those who have engaged in the discipline for a long time speak almost unanimously of the practicality and blessing of that discipline of tithing.

And, let me add this: Sometimes, you may find yourself in situations in which have few financial resources that you can give – even though you may have the desire. What I have learned over the years is that, even in those times, you may find a way to give something. That’s what the poor Macedonians did. That’s what the widow did whom Jesus commended in **Luke 21:1-3** -- “*Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and he saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites. So, he said, ‘Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all...’*”

But, **I know there may be times when you may find you don’t even have a mite. All you have is debt.** Because of the two messages Pastor Chuck and I have given on stewardship, I’ve had three people in our church come to me about what to do in those times. I’ll boil those three talks into one so that you won’t know whom those persons might be. Being currently in debt or in bankruptcy, they said, “These messages about giving have touched me deeply. But, right now, at best, I can only give something like a widow’s mite. But, as Pastor Chuck said last Sunday, I have a deep desire to give. Do you think the Lord would be pleased if, in this season, my giving would largely be my service?” I told them, “Yes! Absolutely, yes!”

Those talks led me to ask our pastors and church leaders where our greatest opportunities for giving through service now are. And, the answer I’ve gotten is that we have many places to serve in our church family. But, if you really want to make a difference here at LAC now, the greatest opportunity may be in the discipleship of our children and students. So, if you sense in your heart that deep desire to give but you cannot give financially right now, please go to the table in our lobby after the service today. We will have people there who will be able to tell you a variety of ways that you may give through serving.

I hope the point is clear: **We should give generously and sacrificially in ways proportionate to our resources.**

4. **Perceptive** – **Be wise about how the gift is used and distributed.** *We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this generous gift (2 Cor 8:20-21).*

The Bible teaches that donors should take care that the money we give is wisely and properly distributed. The Apostle Paul called the churches to select trusted people to accompany those who carried the gift and to hold one another accountable for how the gift is used. This, of course, is the beauty of giving to a local church. Churches can still err, of course, but each member has a much better opportunity to check on the proper use and distribution of funds than we do with much of our other giving. I’ll simply say that the Bible’s teaching about keeping a close watch on how the money given is used is wise. To do otherwise is pure foolishness as history has so frequently documented.

So, the various churches who gave to the relief fund chose a man named Titus to accompany Paul to make sure that all was done in an honorable fashion. Why-- because Paul was dishonest? No, because distribution of money has always been a matter that draws people’s criticism. Paul’s words in **2 Cor 8:21** are words to the wise – “*We are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of people.*”

That is what we are seeking to do here at LAC too.

5. **Purposeful** – **Be guided by careful and prayerful consideration.** *Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give (2 Cor 9:7).*

The phrase, “*decided in your heart*”, implies careful deliberation. In other words, good stewardship involves more than simply pulling a bill out of the wallet when the plate is passed. Christian giving isn’t impulsive or casual. It’s a matter of thoughtful prayer and, as my first point said, of giving ourselves first to the Lord. We need God’s wisdom for giving just like we need his wisdom for every other area of our lives. We certainly have the ability to squander the resources God entrusts to us. So, wise Christian stewards should

prayerfully consider "in our hearts" how God would have his resources to be stewarded. Once we have done that, then we should give. Joyfully, willingly and generously give. Then we will see how God does what he does, i.e., takes temporary things like money and uses them for his glory.

We saw it last week in our church services, didn't we? 42 years ago, we sent out Malcom and Barbara Collins to an unreached people group in Kenya. We as a church family have given financially to them and their ministry for 42 years! They came home with the testimony of a people who have come to Jesus and now have the Bible in their own language. Malcom told me, "Now that the Bible is in their language, people are coming in significant numbers to Jesus out of Islam." And, he wept! And we rejoiced.

That and so many other things are a part of what happens when we give to and through our local church family. If we all will learn apply these biblical principles to our giving and to teach them to future generations, we'll have many more of those stories. And, the Sr. Pastor at LAC may never have to send out another letter or email reminding people to give. We will have all we need to do what God has called us to do.

And, it will all be – to God's glory alone.