

“But Seriously...Your Money or Your Life”

2 Corinthians 9:6-15(NRSV)

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 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. As it is written,

“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness^l endures forever.”

He 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. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 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, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Why do we have to have stewardship month? It's a terrible necessity, especially for first-timer! It's November – It's time for an abundant Harvest and Thanksgiving. I want to talk about gratitude.

In 1789, in a sermon titled, “The Unity of the Divine Being,” John Wesley, said that true religion is “right tempers towards God and man... It is, in two words, gratitude to our Creator and supreme Benefactor, and benevolence to our neighbor as ourselves.”

Wesley added that “Gratitude toward our Creator cannot but produce benevolence to our fellow creatures.” -- If we're truly grateful, we can't help but love our neighbor.

In today's scripture reading, Paul tells us right off the bat that no one was ever a loser for being too generous. Giving, Paul tells us, is like sowing seed. Our Guardians of the Garden know firsthand what that means – and we hate hearing this – but you get out of something what you put into it. If you plant one flower seed you get one flower. But if you scatter your whole yard with wild-flower seeds you'll never get rid of them!

But the rewards in the bible are never material rewards, are they? Here are at least three non-material ways in which our giving makes us rich:

We will be rich in love... we will be rich in friends.... We will be rich in help. My grandfather, Frank, died when I was a baby. They say he never said a mean thing about anyone, never cursed, and apparently couldn't hold a job very well. He was a farmer, a salesman, and an elevator operator that I know of...but everyone loved Frank. Mom said that when Frank died he had the biggest funeral that Mahomet, Illinois had ever seen. If we have been helpful to our friends and neighbors, when the time comes that we need help, we will have it abundantly.

Paul also tells us that God will supply all that we need to give – both the substance and the spirit. Paul says we will be all sufficient, “always having enough of everything,” he writes, and the Greek work he uses is *autarkeia*. This isn't just a word that describes some kind of material wealth. According to Dr William Barclay, *autarkeia* is a word favored by the ancient Stoic philosophers. It means, **1)** a perfect condition of life in which no aid or support is needed ...**2)** sufficiency of the necessities of life ...**3)** a state of contentment.

It means independence. It describes a person who has learned to need very little.... And the less one needs the more one is able to give.

It's an amazing concept that makes no sense: The more Jesus I have, the less Brad I am, the less of everything else I need, the more I can give my life – which isn't mine -- to others. That keeps me sober by the way – service to others.

How many of you remember the story of King Midas? King Midas is a greedy king who is visited one day by a mysterious stranger who grants him his wish that everything he touches would turn to gold. He learns his lesson the hard way when the flowers in the garden turn cold and rigid, he begins to starve when his food turns to gold... finally his daughter -- his only child... is turned to gold as well. When visitor reappears and offers him the opportunity to return to his old self, he gladly accepts and becomes a wiser and better king.

Now, when we give, we see the Midas touch in reverse. God turns our gold into comfort and truth, a voice proclaiming the good news;

God turns our giving into healing for the sick; food for the hungry and shoes and warm clothing for people who don't have any. We bring our money to the church so that God can transform it into something truly valuable.

We bring our gifts to the church because the church – locally and all over the world – the church can do something as a whole that none of us can do alone.

Psalm 116:12-13 says, *"How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord."*

I think I know just how the psalmist feels....If you read the whole psalm you will find out that God saved him. Just like God saved me! And what a great question! We should all ask God that on a regular basis. How can I repay you Lord? One good way I can repay the Lord is by supporting the church, whether it is the greater church or my local church – it doesn't matter. Because the cup the psalmist is taking about – the cup of salvation is one that is overflowing with abundant life. And he doesn't lift up the cup like he's making a toast – Cheers, God! Salut! He's lifting it, I think, the way we lift a loved one in prayer – keeping them in our hearts.

What is abundance? Jesus said He came so we could have life and have it "abundantly." What did He mean? I think have abundant life since I got sober and began a relationship with Jesus Christ through the church. That doesn't mean that I have abundant stuff.... That means that in my abundant life, that my worst day with Jesus is still better than my best day without Him. And for me that's thanks to God and to the church.

It's about enjoyment and appreciation – gratitude -- for the life God gave me. It's about a freedom that I never had before. Because of this freedom, I am free to give – I WANT to give. Don't assume that what I give comes just out of my bank account you know. It is given out of my time and my talents... and my bank account! It is given out of my heart, my mind, and my strength... I'm committed to God.

I want to give all that I am to God, and one of the best ways to do that is to give to the body of Christ, the church, and to the work of the Kingdom. When I have less stuff I give less stuff, but that doesn't stop me from pledging all that I am in every other way.

It was a quiet morning. I don't remember what day of the week it was – all of my days back then were pretty much the same. The TV was turned on, the phone was

turned off. The door was locked and the window shades were drawn, as if that little studio apartment wasn't dark enough... It had been a garage that had been transformed into a mother-in-law's cottage behind the main house.

The neighborhood was old enough that the trees had grown quite large and provided a canopy of shade over the driveway leading to the door – a cool green tunnel of 24-hour twilight in the moist Florida heat – it reminded me of the bat cave. I thought it was cool....at first. But it became like a self-imposed prison cell, becoming a real life metaphor for the prison that alcohol and drugs had become for me.

I sat in the dark apartment, sipping on my last 16 oz tallboy can of malt liquor -- trying to drink myself sober I always said – waiting for the shakes to die down and the sweats to dry up so I could walk to the store and spend my last 2 bucks on another 4-pack.... somehow every day I managed to have a “last 2 bucks...” -- There I was...unemployed and unemployable, just waiting for the eviction notice, because the rent was due and all I had was my last 8 quarters, when suddenly – in one brief moment of clarity I knew that something had to change. And I didn't just think it – I knew it. Deep down, I realized I was missing something and right then I knew what it was -- Choir....of all things, I was missing singing in the choir.

I had been on and off the wagon for years by this time; inpatient 28-day treatment 3x, outpatient treatment – which didn't work at all because I would stop for cocktails on my way there and on my way home so they asked me not to come back... – just a few months earlier I had gone back to church and rediscovered the joy I felt when I sang in the choir... But I was not convinced that Christianity -- or Church of any kind -- was the answer. I was resigned to a life of 12 step meetings, and none too happy about it.

In that one moment of clear thinking, I got down on my knees – I actually did! -- How cliché -- Kneeling at the edge of my bed, “Take my life,” I begged. And what I meant was ‘kill me now’ because if this was what Life was about, I didn't want any part of it – thank you very much!

Well, apparently God heard something else.... I said “Take my Life,” ... God heard me giving my life over to my Creator. Careful what you pray for....

And you've heard people say not to make deals with God, right? But that day I did. In my desperation I said, "Fix this and I will seriously look into this whole 'Jesus' thing." I struck a bargain with God and this time I meant it.

...and suddenly – absolutely nothing happened. No lightning, no thunder, Hell didn't freeze over – I don't think it did, anyway – my heart was not strangely warmed, nothing happened.

But I'll tell you something else that didn't happen: I didn't walk down to the convenience store to spend my last 2 bucks on beer. Instead, I went to the AA club and I sat there. I sat there all day, shaking and sweating, and I talked to recovering alcoholics.... and I went to every meeting they had... and I continued to show up and I sat there all day for weeks. And after a couple of weeks I was able to go back to choir practice and they were genuinely happy to see me! I felt like Sally field when she got her 2nd Oscar for "Places in the Heart – "They liked me! They really liked me!" And I wasn't used to that, and I could hardly believe it....

That's a long windy story, and probably TMI as the kids say...too much information! But this is too important. The point is, after growing up in the church, in the choir, and spending over 25 years away from the church, with my back turned on God, the church was still there.....for me.....just like God was still there for me. I don't have the words – I don't think anyone does...to tell you how grateful I am on this stewardship Sunday morning, that somebody gave –

I don't think my mom ever had the words to describe how thankful she was that somebody pledged – because of their pledge, the church was there for me. Because somebody gave, I made it to nearly 51, sober, grateful, and serving God.

And that is why we have to have stewardship month.

Amen