

Title: “*The Most Difficult Stewardship Question - The Grace of a Cheerful Giver*”

Text: 2 Corinthians 9:6 and 7

Date: October 19, 2025

Preacher: Rev. Eddie Bellis

I remember my grandmother’s garden. The planting season coincided with our high school’s spring break, and I would visit her home. When we planted, we started in the early morning, and she’d walk out with a tin bucket of different seed packets and pour them out into her shriveled, arthritic hands. I remember her pouring them into my hands, too.

These seeds were tiny, dry things that didn’t look like much of anything. She’d kneel and press them into the dark soil. She would invite me to do the same with my row. For most of the day, we repeated this process multiple times as we planted approximately five acres of freshly tilled, deeply enriched NC soil. We would take a break for lunch and sit on the small bench at one end of the garden, looking at what we had planted and also what we still had to plant in the fertile soil. We did this all day until we were finished.

As we came to the end of our day and after the last seed was planted, with our backs aching a bit and our hands tired, she would stretch out the sore spots and say, “Eddie, that was a good day. Now we wait.”

I remember asking her, “Ma-ma (that’s what we called her), how do you know they’ll grow?”

She smiled that knowing, wise smile, the kind you only get from years of trusting mysteries bigger than yourself. She said, “Oh, I don’t. But Eddie, this I do know. They won’t grow in the packet.”

Our writer, the Apostle Paul, must’ve known something about that same mystery that my grandmother knew when he wrote to the Corinthian church. He says,

*“The one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly,
and the one who sows bountifully will 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.”*

Now, we’ve all heard that verse before, haven’t we? And sometimes it gets used like an investment slogan - “Give more, get more.” But is that what Paul is doing with his congregation? Was he giving them an EF Hutton moment? No, Paul isn’t talking about profit, is he? He’s talking about something quite different. Something that requires more effort than consulting our financial advisor. He is encouraging the church’s participation. He is talking about involvement!

He’s reminding the church that giving isn’t a transaction. There is something more going on here. Yes, there is a giver and a receiver, but the focus of church giving is different — it’s a *trust*. It’s a way of saying through its witness and service that, “We believe in a God who provides.”

A friend once asked me, “What’s the toughest question in stewardship?” I offered him some quick answers. I thought it might be. *How much should I give? How much do you want or need? I thought of the step up” chart on the back of the stewardship card, which wanted me to consider “Can I afford to give more this year?”*

After giving him what I thought were the correct answers, he gently shook his head. He said, “Eddie, the most challenging question isn’t about the amount. It isn’t about a chart or even math at all. Stewardship, to me, is this: **Who owns what I have?**”

You see, as long as we think we own it — our house, our car, our paycheck, and even our time — stewardship season, the pledge card, and our offerings feel like a loss. When we give a hundred dollars, we feel like we are missing “Uncle Ben” when his face appears in the offering plate. Our giving feels like a subtraction from our bank accounts and our wallets. We count the dollars, we count the hours, we count the possessions, and we wonder if we’ll have enough left for us.

My friend’s challenge, in asking me his difficult question, made me look deeper at my own life and giving. His question and subsequent answer completely changed my view of stewardship. I began to realize that maybe everything already belongs to God, and something strange happens. Perhaps I should stop guarding the seed packet so tightly. Perhaps, my Ma-ma was right in inviting me to plant with her and open my hand and scatter the seed in the ground. I plant not because I’m careless or haphazard in my faith, but because I’m grateful that I have any seed at all. And I am entrusted with that seed to share with others and leave the rest up to God.

Maybe that when I plant, when we plant together, we are doing something so powerful that if we don’t stop for a moment at the end of the day and stretch, we miss that every act of stewardship begins with a confession. Every time we write a check, use the QR code, or donate, we are doing something powerful with our act of giving. We are saying, “Nothing I have is mine, and none of it is meant to stay with me.” Friends, that confession is not a guilt statement; that’s a freedom statement. It’s the moment when faith loosens our grip on what we thought was ours alone.

My mentor and teacher, Fred Craddock, used to tell about a small church that was taking up an offering. A man whispered to the usher, “You know, I don’t have any cash.”

The usher smiled and said, “That’s all right — God’s after the man, not the money.”

That’s it, my friends. Maybe, just maybe, that’s the answer to the most challenging question of stewardship. **Does God have me? (Does God have all of me?)**

Once that question settles in, the rest gets a lot easier. Our stewardship campaign slogan, “Entrusted to Act,” comes alive through our pledges. Because the problem isn’t that the church wants our money. God does not see this as simply a transaction. What does God want? Friends, God wants our hearts. And hearts, once given, tend to carry everything else along with them.

When God has your heart, the checkbook and the calendar follow quietly in its wake.

I think Paul said it best. Right before our short passage today, Paul offers up something radical for us to consider. He says, “*You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.*” (2 Corinthians 9:11) Paul is saying, “Now we wait!”

When we give ourselves away, we find ourselves giving back something so much greater than what we gave — only more deeply, lightly, and freely. That’s the miracle. That’s the gospel behind the pledge card.

So maybe stewardship’s “toughest question” isn’t “How much should I give?” Perhaps the real question for us to consider is, “**How much of me does God have?**”

And maybe (perhaps) when that question is planted in our souls — when our gratitude finally outweighs fear of the scarcity of the first question— then the giving becomes something else entirely. We do not owe a duty. We offer our pledge, not dues, to membership. But our giving comes from joy because we know our Creator is in charge of the growth of the seeds we plant.

One more thing to note. Corinth wasn't an easy congregation. Like us in Williamson County, they were blessed with abundance, but unlike us, they were divided over how to share it. Some had more than enough; others, not much at all. Sound familiar? We might not be Corinth, but we understand those tensions.

And so, Paul doesn't guilt them into giving. Notice he doesn't pull rank. Instead, he uses the language of the farm. He uses the language of patience and trust, of sowing for a future, reaping something that is more than we ever thought possible, and abundance in our joy, as well as thanksgiving that the table is truly not our own.

It's the language of faith, not fear. Because to give is to trust that what we place in the ground will grow — even when we can't see it yet. That's why Paul says, "God loves a cheerful giver." Now, that word *cheerful*—in Greek it's *hilaros*—and although it does not mean *hilarious*, I don't think laughter and joy in our giving is excluded.

Maybe we imagine that? God loves a *hilarious* giver—someone so full of grace and gratitude that giving becomes a kind of joyful laughter. Not because we have so much, but because we've discovered that *God's grace* is more than enough.

And here's the good news for us in Franklin. At First Presbyterian, I've seen that kind of joy in you. I've seen it in our Mountain Top mission volunteers, in the desserts we bring on Wednesday, in the gift bags our children offer our guests on Sundays, and in the prayers we offer for one another. We give not because someone twisted our arm, but because somewhere deep down we know—grace only works when it's given away.

Somehow, this church learned the holy humor of generosity. You've joined the laughter of God, the cheerful giver of all.

Earlier, I offered that generosity is not a financial act; our giving is a theological confession. When we give, we're confessing. What are we saying? We are simply saying, "I believe in resurrection." We're saying that what appears to be a loss will become life. We're saying that grace (time, treasures, and talents) planted in the ground will bear fruit for God's kingdom.

And friends, that's not just about money, it's about time, mercy, forgiveness, attention, compassion. It's about sowing love in a world that's still learning how to trust it will grow.

So maybe there is a question for us to consider this stewardship season. Perhaps it is not about the pledge, but something more profound and different. Maybe our question this morning is: What are we still keeping in the packet? What gifts, what time, what grace, what mercy are we holding onto—afraid to plant?

Maybe it's time to trust the mystery again. To open our hands, scatter the seed, and laugh along with the God who never stops giving. Because somewhere between the giving and the growing, you might hear it too— the sound of divine laughter. The laughter of the One who loves a cheerful giver. Can you listen for it? Can you hear it? I can! Amen.