

Theme: Regular and Intentional

Text: Philippians 4:14-20 for 9/10/2017

14 Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. 17 Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. 18 I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. 19 And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

We have come to the last sermon in our “Joyful Generosity” series. If you’ve been here all six Sundays, I hope you have noticed that you were never told you how much you should give. It is amazing that in the New Testament Church God makes every gift completely voluntary. But that doesn’t make it easy, does it? In the Old Testament, God commanded his people to give ten percent of everything to the Lord. They didn’t have to think about how much they should give. They knew exactly what was expected of them.

So why doesn’t God make it easy for us in the New Testament Church? It’s nice that God lets us choose what percent of our income we are going to give. Yet, that’s not easy! I would love to give everything I have to the Lord, but God also wants me to provide for my family, pay my taxes, and give to the poor. Why didn’t God just make it easy and demand ten percent the way he did in the Old Testament? The reason is that when we wrestle in our hearts, and count our blessings, and think and pray about our giving, then God gets more from us than just our money. God gets our hearts in joyful thanksgiving and praise.

In this last sermon on joyful generosity, we want to look at the importance of our giving being INTENTIONAL and REGULAR. The congregation in Philippi was noted for that. In fact, one of the reasons Paul wrote this letter was to thank the Philippians for the gifts they had sent to support his work. You can’t help but compare the Philippians with the congregation at Corinth. The Corinthians were wealthy and the Philippians were poor. The Philippians gave to the needy saints in Jerusalem beyond their ability. They begged for the opportunity and Paul says, **“their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity”** (2 Corinthians 8:2). The Corinthians said they were going to give to this offering, but they just couldn’t seem to get it done.

What was the difference? While Corinthians had good intentions, the Philippians were intentional. The Corinthians were eager to do something, but they never planned how to get it done. Paul even shared a plan with them, which was to set aside part of their income every week. Yet they never got into the routine of planning what they would give and then regularly doing it.

And that is a weakness of the sinful nature we struggle with also, isn’t it? And the struggle to be intentional and regular can affect more than just our giving. For example: We

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know that intentionally and regularly reading our Bible is important. Yet if we don't plan on when, where, and what we are going to read each day, there is a good chance we will not succeed. We will only have good intentions. For the last two years we had a plan, but even with that plan in place, did you ever find you were not reading your Bible according to the plan? It's not easy to have a good plan and the discipline to carry it out. Why? Because we're not just fighting our sinful nature, we are also fighting the devil and this sinful world who don't want us to stay connected to the Word. All three will distract us any way they possibly can.

The same is true of our joyful generosity. Do you have a plan on how much you want to give to the Lord? Does your plan include not only how much, but when and how? Will you set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income before you start spending your income? Remember, you are fighting against your sinful nature, the world wants you to spend your money on it, and the devil doesn't want you to give to the Lord's work at all. The devil doesn't want God's church to have the resources it needs to carry out our Lord's work. Satan, the world, and your sinful nature will always be tempting you to spend more than you can afford and then have nothing left to give to the Lord. How often have we allowed ourselves to listen to those voices that work to distract us?

We can be thankful that God doesn't treat us as we so often have treated him. Where we have been stingy, God has been generous. Where we have been inconsistent, God has been absolutely faithful and regular. Did the sun come up this morning? Do we have food in our cupboards and clothes on our backs? Can any of us ever remember a time when there was absolutely no food to eat, or we had to go around naked? God has certainly been intentional and regular in providing for our bodies.

But God provides for more than just our bodies. Has God forgiven your sins today? Yes, he has. As Martin Luther explained the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed he said, "In this Christian Church [God] daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers." Do you believe this? Of course you do. You wouldn't be able to sleep at night if you didn't believe that God forgave all your sins in Jesus. God's mercies are new to you every morning! God's forgiveness to you is both intentional and regular, which is why you can trust in him and not be afraid.

When we give like the Philippians gave, our lives are reflecting God's abundant grace, his faithful and consistent grace. When we give in this way we become a blessing to God's church. As Paul said, **"Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need"** (vs. 14-16). Think of the impact the Philippians' regular gifts had on Paul's gospel ministry. Paul never asked for anything from the people to whom he was preaching. Paul often had to work making tents so he would have enough

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money to live on. The regular gifts the Philippians sent Paul gave him the opportunity to spend more of his time preaching the gospel.

Our church is blessed when we support the ministry of this congregation with our regular and intentional gifts. It's rather amazing that a congregation of believers our size receives almost \$150,000 in gifts every year for gospel ministry. Paul thanked the Philippians for their regular support of his ministry, and I want to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you. Not only are you a blessing to this church, but your intentional and regular giving is really a blessing to you as well.

Paul says in our text, **“Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God”** (vs. 17-18). What does Paul mean when he says he is looking for what can be credited to our account? When we give, we give out of thankful hearts. We are not looking for anything in return or trying to earn our salvation or God's favor. Our gifts are our grateful response to God's grace.

Maybe we can look at it this way. A grandmother might go all out to buy Christmas gifts that her grandchildren really want. Those grandchildren, in return, might send hand-made cards in the mail thanking her for those wonderful gifts. On the cards are stick person drawings and words that are scrawled and misspelled, yet she takes those heartfelt expressions of thanks, which are hardly a thing of beauty, and what does she do? She puts them on her refrigerator for everyone to see. When the grandchildren visit, they see that grandma accepted their thanks with joy.

Your gifts to God's ministry are noticed. If God had a refrigerator door and magnets, he would put your gifts on his refrigerator so he can look at them every day. Your gifts of thanks to God bring him tremendous pleasure. Paul says they are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. They are fruits of faith that God will credit to you as evidence of our faith on that Last Day.

There is another way in which you are blessed by your regular gifts. Paul writes, **“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus”** (v. 19). Why does Paul say “my God” and not “your God”? He says “my God” because Paul experienced in his life how God keeps his promises. Just before the verses of our text, he says that he had learned the secret of being content whether he had much or very little. Paul could do all things through Jesus, who gave him strength. He had personally experienced God providing for him in his life. Paul is confident that his fellow believers in Christ will experience God's gracious providing as well.

We heard a similar promise in the lesson from Malachi this morning. God says, **“Bring the whole tithe 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 there will not be room enough to store it’** (Malachi 3:10). If you wait until you have an abundance of money left over before you give

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to the Lord, which almost never happens, you will not experience the truth of these passages. You will only be giving God what you have left. God is not honored with leftovers! But if you are a regular and intentional giver, you will plan on setting aside a sum of money for the Lord every time you get paid. You are giving to the Lord before you know whether you will have enough left to pay the bills. Your gifts take priority over your bills and your savings and your retirement. God is honored by that kind of gift because you are trusting him to provide for your needs. That is a blessing. You get to see God's promises fulfilled in our life.

And he does fulfill those promises. When I left the business world to study for the ministry I took what amounted to about a \$55,000 cut in pay. I'll be honest, there were more than a few times when money was tight, yet we continued to give the same percentage of our income back to the Lord. And the Lord most certainly provided for us. We always had food to eat, clothes on our backs, and a roof over our heads. And in the end, God poured out so much blessing on us that we were able to pay for our children to attend not only Christian grade schools but also a Christian high school. Was it always easy trusting God to provide for us? No. Yet when we did we certainly experienced the gracious providing hand of God in our lives.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg of God's blessings. Paul says that God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. Life has been good, yet what we are waiting for in heaven will be even better! I pray that through your joyful generosity that you will be a blessing for your church. And may you also continue to experience God's gracious blessings being poured out in your life and on your soul. Amen.