

Pennies in the Fountain

2 Corinthians 9:6-11

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We're moving forward in our exciting study about the treasures of the transformed life. We've talked about preparation (priming the pump) and about committing to prayers (drawing water). Last week Tim talked about commitment to presence—jumping in with both feet, being active participants within a worshipping community.

Now we come to another important element of our growth in the Christian faith. This avenue opens us to God's richest blessings. Our study calls it *pennies in the fountain*. When you throw pennies into a fountain, you release them, you give them away.

I was reminded the other day about something that happened when I was very young. My older brother had gotten an initial ring. Mom was driving us home and as we went down the road I asked if I could look at Steve's ring. He handed it to me. I looked at it and then threw it out the window. I'm sure he yelled. Mom stopped the pickup and we went back to look for it, but never found it. I have no idea what possessed me to do that.

When we talk about giving money or releasing resources, we're not talking about throwing them out the window. We're talking about giving them to God, letting God direct how we use them, investing them in the work of God's kingdom through the church and other ministries.

Giving is an essential and vital aspect of the Christian life. God gives to us very generously. God didn't have to create a universe or a world or us—but he did. God didn't have to give us freedom to be in relationship with him—but he did. When we misused our freedom, God didn't have to come in Jesus Christ to redeem us—but he did.

Psalm 103 of how God gives:

Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your

desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (2-5)

Our whole concept of giving is based on how God gives to us. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Cor 9:15)—talking about God's giving himself to us in Jesus.

Giving is an integral part of the Christian faith because God is so generous to us. But God also expects us to pass on his blessings to others. God doesn't give to us so we can just take and keep for ourselves. He gives to us so we can pass along his blessings.

Jesus commanded: "Freely you have received; freely give" (Mt 10:8). Again, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians: "And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (9:8). We're enriched so we can give even more generously. When our gifts are given to others, those people will break out in thanksgiving to God.

Part of growing in the Christian faith and receiving all that God wants to give us is understanding that we can give with freedom from financial fear because of God's generosity.

Now, giving can be a very touchy and personal issue for some of us. So let's first ask *why* we should give. The Bible has many reasons to give. Let's look at three.

Number one, giving reminds us that God has given us everything we have. Last week in the town where I grew up, Nancy and I stayed with a couple. I've known the man all my life. He and my brother were close friends growing up. His family owned the drug store that was across the street from my dad's office. I spent a lot of time there. They called it a drug store, though they didn't have a pharmacy. But they sold all kinds of things. I remember one time going there to buy my mom a birthday present. I picked it out. Someone in the store wrapped it. Then I said, "Put it on Mom's account." So she paid for the gift I gave her! That's kind of like how we give to God.

The idea of stewardship is that we don't own or earn anything, but God gives it to us to be good stewards of it. Deuteronomy 6:11-12 warns, "When you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD...." Then Deuteronomy 8:17 says, "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth...." May we never begin to think, "Look what I've accomplished," but let's remember it's God who has given us all that we have and enjoy.

Look also at 1 Chronicles 29:14:

But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

The key understanding of stewardship is that we give because God has given us everything.

A second reason for giving is that it showcases where our priorities lie. The Bible says we're to seek God's kingdom first. How do we know that God is first in our lives? Giving is one way we demonstrate that God has first place in our priorities.

Deuteronomy 14:23 states that the purpose of tithing is "so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always." Remember what Jesus said: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6:21).

Where we spend our money, time, and energy indicates what's really first in our lives, what we really worship. "Wherever your treasure is, that's where your heart and thoughts will be." I want us all as people of God to demonstrate that God is our top priority by tithing and giving.

There's a powerful third reason for giving: It allows God a chance to prove himself. The amazing thing is that sometimes God actually wants us to put him to the test so he can demonstrate his generosity. Malachi 3:10 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.”

We’ve been talking about the treasures of the transformed life. God has more treasure than any of us can imagine! God will prove himself. God’s always faithful and he always provides. If we give generously, we won’t go without.

Another question we might have is, *how much should I give?* This is a question that every person has to answer individually.

The biblical standard for giving is the tithe, ten percent. Now, some people don’t understand the definition of a tithe. One Sunday an offering plate was passed. A little boy reached up, pulled off his necktie, and put it in the offering plate. His dad asked, “Why did you do that?” The boy replied, “Well, the pastor said to give our ties and offerings.”

A lot of folks don’t understand the word “tithe.” It just means 10 percent. Leviticus 27:30 clearly states: “A tithe/tenth of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD.” The Old Testament emphasizes tithing in several passages. Jesus also mentions it: “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God *a tenth* of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone” (Luke 11:42).

Remember this is about stewardship. What we give is all God’s anyway. Tithing is a means of recognizing that God has given me everything, that he’s the top priority in my life, and that I’m going to follow this biblical principle of giving.

Someone may be thinking, “I’m barely getting by on what I make. I’m one paycheck away from being homeless. I can barely pay my bills. How can I give up 10 percent of my income?” John Ed Matheson tells about a single mom in that situation. She hadn’t grown up with tithing or learning how to give. Her parents had given a token offering to the church each

week, and that was it. But she heard a sermon on tithing and felt God was telling her to tithe. So even though she had very little left over after paying her expenses each month, she began to tithe. Regardless of what other bills she had or other things she might want to do with her money, she wrote that check each week. After a few months, she noticed something strange. Even though her income hadn't increased and she hadn't reduced any of her expenses, she always had money in her checking account. Before, she sometimes bounced checks, now there was always enough. She said she didn't know how God did it, but things had changed for her.

One of the most liberating things in the lives of so many believers is when they come to the point that they say "God, I want you to be first in everything I do." One major place we do that is with our finances.

Giving is one of the keys to receiving the treasures of the transformed life. This reminds us that God has given us everything we have, it demonstrates that God has first place in our lives, and it gives God a chance to prove himself.

The Bible doesn't just teach giving 10 percent; it also teaches giving in proportion to what we've received. We're told, "Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you" (Deut 16:17).

One of the things that shuts down growth in Christian faith is that we're not willing to let go of our money. Remember the illustration of trapping monkeys? Someone drills a small hole in a gourd. Then they put seeds in it and stake it to the ground. The monkey wants the seeds and the hole is big enough for his hand to reach inside. But when he closes his fist around the seeds, it's too big to get it out. The monkey won't let go. He'll keep holding onto those seeds until he's captured (*Treasures* 201). Generous giving is a way for us to let go and be free.

We've talked about why we should give and how much we should give. Now, *what's our spirit or attitude when we give?* Don't make it just a mechanical thing, something we do only out of duty. The Bible speaks very clearly about attitude in giving. Quickly, here are three things that Scripture teaches about an attitude of giving.

We should give *willingly*. We're not to do it because the church is going to make us feel guilty. We're not to do it because we want to impress somebody. We're to give willingly and joyfully. The Bible says, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7).

Sometimes churches try to pressure people into giving. Sometimes people give out of guilt. Sometimes people believe they don't have an option. We all need to understand that the greatest joys in life come when we respond to how God has given to us by cheerfully and willingly returning God's tithe and giving gifts.

We should give *sacrificially*. In a quote in the *Treasures of the Transformed Life* book, C. S. Lewis said, "The only safe rule is to give more than we can spare." Remember the story in Mark 12 about sacrificial giving:

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on." (41-44)

You can imagine the disciples looking at him in amazement. They may have said something like, "You don't understand much about economics, do you? She didn't give the most; she gave the least." Then Jesus would've explained, "You might understand economics, but you don't understand people or the economy of God's kingdom. This woman gave all that she had. Others just gave a token out of their surplus."

2 Corinthians 8:3 says, "For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability." When we give more than we think we can afford, and we do it of our own free will, we open ourselves to all that God wants to do in and through us, blessing us both as individuals and as a church.

So we should give willingly and sacrificially. We should also give *expectantly*. Think about the amazing cycle we read about this past week: the more you give, the more joy you get out of life and the more you discover that you can't outgive God. Jesus said:

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you (Luke 6:38)

Now that's a powerful concept. But we need to realize that Jesus isn't teaching us to give so we can get. He's saying that overflowing blessings are a by-product of being generous.

At the heart of the treasures of transformed living and transformed giving is the truth that God wants us to experience the best that he has to give.

Giving is an important aspect of the Christian life. God's been very generous to us, and we give out of gratitude. We also give because God owns everything and giving reminds us of that. The portion we return to God reminds us that God owns it all. Giving demonstrates that God is first in our lives and provides him the opportunity to demonstrate his generosity. The standard for giving is the tithe, ten percent, and anything beyond that amount is a gift. We're to give cheerfully, sacrificially, and expectantly. And when you give, get ready because the windows of heaven are open, pouring out blessing on us. That's a wonderful invitation and promise that God gives us through his Word.