

“The Giver and the Gift”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

October 11, 2009

**Text: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”
(II Corinthians 8:9)**

David Brooks, in a recent piece in the *New York Times*, speaks of what he calls “The Next Culture War.” In this article he speaks of some of the previous cultural wars that have been fought in this country: the argument over prayer in the public schools, evolution versus creationism, abortion and birth control, and a host of other social, political, and religious issues.

But, while we have been arguing about these issues, something has been happening that affects all of us. It is erosion in the country’s financial values.

Evidence of this shift of values is all around us. Some of the signs seem harmless. Most of the states in this country now have state-sponsored lotteries – government approved gambling that extracts its largest toll from the poor. Executives and hedge fund managers began bragging about compensation packages that would have been considered shameful a few years ago. Chain restaurants began supersizing everything on the menu from hamburgers to drinks, offering gigantic portions that would have been considered socially unacceptable to an earlier generation.

During the past few years personal debt has exploded. In the last year and a half we have shown some restraint in personal debt, but public debt is exploding. If Brooks is right, and there is a new cultural war, then our country is really facing the need for a moral revival.

I.

This morning I want to speak about stewardship and about the needs of our church for the year 2010. The subject of giving is not a foreign one to the Scripture. Both Old and New Testament stress the need for believers to respond to God in terms of giving of their financial resources for the work of the church.

In the passage that we read from Deuteronomy we find an ancient custom in Israel where each person was to gather the first fruit of the harvest and bring them to the Priests. In Paul’s

correspondence to the church at Corinth there is a section in II Corinthians where he speaks to the heart of Christian giving.

The immediate crisis to which Paul addresses this section of the Corinthian correspondence is a famine that had occurred in Jerusalem. The situation there was critical and Paul appeals to the church at Corinth to respond to the needs of their fellow Christians. In this letter Paul points to the church in Macedonia as an example of a group of Christians who have responded to the needs of the saints in Jerusalem and urges the Corinthian congregation to follow their lead.

In this section there are a number of principles that guide each one of us as we consider the matter of our gift to the church.

II.

The first and foremost principle that guides our giving is that it is Biblical. The Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments teaches direct, systematic, and proportionate giving. The Levitical Law required the giving of a tenth of all of one's increase, regardless of the nature of the resources. The prophet Malachi accused the people of robbing God by neglecting to bring their tithes and appealed to them to "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse." The Old Testament tithe was based on the conviction that God was the Creator and Owner of all things and that tenth was but a just return to God of that which God has entrusted to us.

Giving was never based on the idea that people could win God's favor. It was not superstition but stewardship. It was direct, systematic and proportionate giving. It was a conscientious attempt to return to God in gratitude for what God has given to us.

Giving in the Old and New Testament was always an act of worship. It sought to do as the Psalmist said, "Bring an offering and come into the courts of the almighty."

Jesus taught that a Christian's responsibility in every area of life is in proportion to one's ability to give. Jesus did not discuss the concept of the tithe, but he did tell the Pharisees that their tithing was no more than their duty and that their tithing did not excuse their neglect of the weightier matters of the law, "justice, mercy, and faith."

In the New Testament, giving is not a matter of legalism but of love. It is not the only way we respond to God's love, but it is an important one. Someone once observed that stewardship is more than the giving of one's money, but it is never less than that.

It was on this basis that Paul made his appeal to the Corinthians for an offering for the saints in Jerusalem: "Therefore you show to them, and before the churches, the proof of your love."

III.

There is another important principle in this passage in II Corinthians, and it is that giving to the church is personal. When Paul commends the Christians of Macedonia for their gift to the church in Jerusalem, he notes, "First, they gave themselves to the Lord."

The first mission of the church is not to attempt to get people to give. Our first mission is to challenge people to be engaged in the ministry of the church. When people give themselves to the ministry of Christ, one can be sure that their financial resources will follow. But apart from our giving of ourselves, the gift of money is certain to be hollow.

But, let's be honest for a minute. Giving is a controversial topic. Many people resent it. Some people say to me that they are able to give their time and their talents to the church but not their financial resources.

Now, serving the church with one's time and talents is a critical way of exercising one's commitment to Christ. But it is not enough.

Will Willimon, who for a number of years was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, once told of a time when the faculty was debating a proposal to renovate the Seminary chapel. The chapel had fallen into disrepair and an architectural designer had been asked to turn this bare room of fading carpet and broken furniture into a more fitting place of worship. Meaningful debate ended when one faculty member stood to raise the question: "With all the poverty and hunger that exists in the world, how can we, as Christians, justify spending \$50,000 to pretty up our chapel?"

Willimon rose to note that this individual faculty member failed to offer a similar ethical objection when the faculty salaries were raised each year, nor had Willimon heard this professor object when the faculty lounge had received an expensive makeover the year before. So Willimon made a motion that the faculty take all the salaries of all the senior faculty members, along with the dean and the associate dean, and give them to the poor.

Motion defeated.

When people are committed to Christ and to the work of Christ, they will undoubtedly give of their resources in a generous way.

IV.

A third principle that governs giving in a Presbyterian Church is that giving is to be direct, systematic, and proportional.

Proportional giving is central to our understanding of giving. We do not have "dues." We do not ask members of the congregation for a "fair share." We ask people to respond to what God has done for them in gratitude and thanksgiving and to give a portion of what they have received to the church of Christ.

Some people have the means to make very substantial pledges. Some can only pledge a small amount. But there is no required minimum and every pledge counts.

Over the years churches have devised a number of ways to raise money for the churches including car washes, Christmas tree sales, bingo parties, pancake suppers and a host of other things as well. As a result of the churches' attempt to raise money by various sources, a number of overtures have been sent over the years to the General Assembly of our church to give guidance to

the churches in the matter of giving. In 1952 such an overture was sent to the General Assembly by one of our Presbyteries asking for direction in this matter.

In response to this overture the General Assembly of our church affirmed what it had in 1888, 1891, and in 1916 – namely that giving to the church should be an act of worship and a means of grace.

The General Assembly advised against all other purposes to raise money and affirmed that “It is a privilege and duty, plainly enjoined in the Bible to make regular, weekly, systematic and proportionate offerings. This should be done as an exercise of grace and as an act of worship ...”

V.

A fourth principle that governs our stewardship is that the church that trains people in the stewardship of life and possessions helps them to grow spiritually. And that is the church’s business. It should lead women and men to an acknowledgement of Christ as Lord of their lives and to surrender themselves to Christ.

Growing Christians are healthy Christians. They will more gladly respond to the love of God, they will more gladly give themselves to the work of the church.

Our Lord Christ knew what was in the heart of a person. He knew that discipleship was never possible until people were willing to follow him wholeheartedly and without any reservation.

Jesus did not mince words. Following him was costly and there was no room for compromise. Some of the strongest words in the New Testament concern the high cost of following Jesus.

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” John Calvin summarized the Christian life as “denying one’s self.” Calvin understood that by nature we are all selfish people and the only way we can rid ourselves of this destructive tendency is to deny ourselves and follow Christ.

Jesus understood that fundamentally, life is about choices and commitment. “You cannot serve God and Mammon,” he said. On another occasion he spoke to a man who had sought to evade the demands of discipleship by saying that “No one having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

As we look to the year 2010, we know that we face extraordinary challenges. We are living in a city that is in the midst of one of the most severe financial crises in its history. Individuals have lost jobs. Families are uncertain about the future.

But, is there any one here who does not believe that the work of the church is more important in times like these than in other times?

Several weeks ago, when I was studying at Princeton Seminary, I came across an exhibit in the library celebrating the 200th anniversary of the church’s missionary efforts in China. One of the

earliest missionaries was a young man named Walter Macon Lowrie. He graduated from the seminary in 1840 and became a missionary to China. He was the son of a United States Senator. In 1847, when he was 27 years old, he was captured by a group of pirates and thrown overboard in the China Sea.

Here was a young man with a life of promise who willingly gave his life for the cause of Christ. It is not likely that any of us here today will be called to make that kind of sacrifice.

But we are all called to a life of sacrifice and following Christ. Are you willing to be counted among those who are called to live for Christ in this place?

Amen.