



January 20-22, 2024

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

4th Stewardship Sermon: Joyful Generosity: Regular & Intentional

1. It's a blessing for God's church 2. It's a blessing for every giver

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 more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and have more than enough. 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 the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Philippians 4: 14-20

Dear fellow believers in Christ,

What sermon topics are difficult or even uncomfortable to hear? Maybe it's a sermon on human sexuality or the important roles of men and women. Those are topics that fools, angels, and yes, even church leaders fear to tread. But, don't worry. We'll save those topics for another day. Instead, our sermon focus is how God has joyfully made every one of us His Christian stewards. A steward is simply a manager of God's blessings. Technically speaking, we don't own a thing. God owns everything. Psalm 24:1 sums it up perfectly: ***The earth is the LORD's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.*** And God generously shares His blessings with us. And in His Holy Word, He teaches Christian believers to carefully manage His blessings and to generously share those blessings with Him and His people. After all, we came into this world with nothing and we will leave this world with nothing. Guided by the Holy Spirit, every Christian believer is a steward who wisely manages our time, talents, and treasures to bring God glory every day. And that's a topic that just might be hard to hear because so often we like to think of it as our money: our wallets and purses, our saving accounts and retirement funds, our dollars and cents. But, it's all really his and He has a right to tell us how to use it. Let me be clear: St. Paul's Lutheran Church isn't about money. We're about Jesus Christ and him crucified. Our entire St. Paul's ministry is about urgently and passionately sharing the saving name of Jesus with every man, woman and child because eternity is coming, sooner than we think. We willingly proclaim God's Law which clearly shows how our sins have separated us from God eternally. And we willingly proclaim the Gospel, which shows us the good news how God's Son, Jesus Christ has rescued us from all our sins on the cross not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and his innocent sufferings and death. The Gospel is free – but it does cost real money to keep the lights on, the parking lot plowed, and the furnace working. It costs real money to pay our workers, to train those workers, and to send missionaries around the world to carry God's Word to places where we can't go. Jesus

himself talked about how to use our money. Maybe you knew that out of all His teachings, Jesus talked more about money than any other subject. He knew that either we would control our money or our money would control us. Martin Luther once said this about the subject: ***there are three conversions of the Christian: the conversion of the heart, the mind, and the purse. And of these three, it may well be that we moderns find the conversion of the purse the most difficult.*** It's been almost 500 years since the time of Luther, but not much has changed – only God converts us so let's connect with God's Word to help us grow in the Grace of giving.

As we conclude our St. Paul's Stewardship series: Joyful Generosity, let's focus on this final stewardship principle: Regular and Intentional. As we take a closer look at Philippians, chapter 4, we'll hear how when we give back to God regularly and intentionally, it's a real blessing for God's church. And it's a blessing for every giver.

By now, you've probably realized that your St. Paul's pastors have never told you exactly how much you should give in your church offerings. Not even once. It's amazing that in the New Testament, God makes every gift voluntary. But, that doesn't make it easy. In the Old Testament, God commanded his people to give 10% of their income to the LORD, calling it the tithe. They didn't have to even think about it. Instead, they knew exactly how much they should give.

So why didn't God make it easy for us? In love, God lets us choose what percent of our income we give back to him. And that's not easy. I would love to stand up here and tell you I give every dollar I make to the LORD. But, like you, God wants me to take care of my family's needs and pay taxes. Why didn't God just make it easy and demand 10% of our income like he did in the Old Testament? The reason is, when we count all our blessings, wrestle in our hearts, and regularly pray about our giving, God gets more than our money. God gets our hearts in joyful thanksgiving and praise.

One of the reasons Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians was to thank them for the generous mission dollars. You can't help but compare the Philippian congregation in the north of Greece with the Corinthian congregation in the south. What a contrast. The Philippians were poor and the Corinthians were rich. The Bible tells us the surprising truth that the poor Philippians gave money to the needy believers in Jerusalem beyond what they were able. We're told they ***begged for the opportunity to give and "their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity"*** (2 Corinthians 8:2). The Corinthians said they were going to give an offering, but they just never got around to it.

What was the difference?. It seems like the Corinthians had good intentions, but the Philippians were intentional. What I mean to say is that the Corinthians were excited to give, but they never sat down and planned how they were going to get it done.

Has that ever happened to you? Take reading our Bibles, for example. We know it's important. It's the most important thing we can do. But, do you have a plan? If we fail to plan, then we plan to fail. And even if we have a plan, has your plan ever gone to the

wayside like mine so that we go a whole week without reading the Bible? It's not easy to have a good plan and the discipline to carry it out, is it? Why is that? We need to remember we're constantly fighting against our selfish sinful nature and the devil who doesn't want us to listen to God.

The same is true of our joyful generosity. Do we have a plan of how much of our income we want to give the LORD? Have we ever actually written it down? Do we use 10% of our income as a good start to give church offerings? Have we ever set aside the best of our income first before paying our bills, instead of last? I'm sure you'll say it with me: God be merciful to me a sinner.

How thankful we are that God doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. Where we've been stingy, God's been generous. Where we've been inconsistent, God's been faithful and regular. Jesus made up for all our selfish sins, free of charge. And He doesn't stop there. His mercies are new every morning. His forgiveness and care to us is regular and intentional and that's why we can always trust in Him.

We can trust God enough to be generous in our church offerings, instead of giving him the bare minimum. We don't HAVE to give, we GET to give. It's a real privilege to give offerings. Think about it: when we give like the Philippians, we simply reflect God's grace back to Him. And in turn, we become a real blessing to God's church. Paul explains it this way: 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 more than once when I was in need.*** Want more Joyful Generosity? Give like the Philippians – give regularly and intentionally.

And when we give like that, we end up being the blessed ones. Paul ends our sermon reading this way: ¹⁷ ***Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.*** ¹⁸ ***I have received full payment and have more than enough. 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 the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*** ²⁰ ***To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*** So, let's ask a good Lutheran question here: what does all this mean? It's simple. When we give to God as a sacrifice, not looking for anything in return, not trying to earn God's favor, every giver is blessed.

Look at it this way: a grandma may go all out to buy birthday gifts for her grandkids that they really want and really need. In a week or two, her grandchildren might send notes in the mail to thank her for her gifts. There might be silly stick drawings or words that are scrawled and misspelled. Yet, she takes those heartfelt expressions which are hardly a thing of beauty, and puts them on her refrigerator or some other prominent place. And when the grandkids visit her house, they can see how grandma accepted their thanks with joy. My point is this: our church giving is noticed by God Himself. If

God had a refrigerator, then he'd pin every one of our offering envelopes to his refrigerator so he could look at them every day. Our gifts of thanks to God give him great joy. Ever think of it that way before? That's why the Bible tells us it's more blessed to give than to receive. Be proud of your church giving and be generous.

Finally, it might be helpful if we didn't think so much of giving church offerings to St. Paul's, but giving to Jesus. Every check we write, every dollar we give, every online giving transaction we make, we give to our Savior and His work. Thank you for joining me in Joyful Generosity as we give to Jesus here at St. Paul's regularly and intentionally. Martin Luther once said: "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing is worth nothing." With Jesus Christ first and foremost in our minds, we never need to be afraid of any sermon topic. And in Christ, we can find Joyful Generosity. Amen.