

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

There's a song that asks, "Have I told you lately that I love you?" Well, I'm wondering, have I told you lately that God loves you? Do you leave this church every week knowing that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord? No matter how many sins I preach about... No matter how much I urge you not to stay where you are spiritually but to grow and mature, it's vital that you grasp this truth: God's love continually surrounds you in Christ. It's as if you're walking around in a big bubble of God's grace and mercy. I may point out your spiritual shortcomings whenever appropriate, as a good pastor should, but when I look at you, I don't see nasty sinners. I see people washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. More importantly, so does our Lord.

In this context of God's grace, let's think about the offerings we bring to our Lord. I get spiritually excited whenever my wife and I plan how much offering we will bring to the Lord for the next year. It also thrills me whenever I hear that the Lord has led any of his people to be generous. \*By the way, I don't like to know what your offerings are. I don't ask, and I hope you won't tell me. I want to be blind to such things so I can stand before you, as today, and say without favoritism or prejudice toward anyone, "Let's look at what God says in the Bible about our giving." In other words, let's have some fun.

Consider Psalm 24:1. *The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.* Walk through your home later today, point at things, and say, "That's the Lord's. And that's the Lord's. And that belongs to him too." Now if it all belongs to God, it's not really yours, is it? That makes

you God's trustee. You get to make decisions about what happens to His stuff in your life. What a privilege! What a responsibility! Is that why you have the oil changed regularly in God's car and why you maintain the Lord's home that you live in? You're even careful with God's clothes that you wear. And those accounts at various financial institutions with your name on them: He owns them too. "So, Pastor, if God owns them, why he doesn't pay the taxes on them?" Well, actually he does. He pays the taxes through you. With the money God entrusts to you as God's trustee, you get to do all four things God wants done with his money: <sup>1</sup>feed and clothe your dependents, <sup>2</sup>pay taxes, <sup>3</sup>help to feed and clothe the needy, and <sup>4</sup>help to spread the good news about Jesus. Those four are what he expects each of us to do as his trustees.

Yes, it's wise to find legal ways to <sup>2</sup>pay the lowest possible taxes: but the Bible doesn't really say much about that, so neither should the church. We could talk about smart ways to stretch God's dollars as you <sup>1</sup>take care of your household and plan for the future: maybe we'll do a seminar on the wise use of money someday. We could talk about <sup>3</sup>taking care of the needy: in fact I urge you to remember those who need help. Every June we gather a Last Sunday Offering which helps local neighbors in need. Many of us give to various charities because we remember what Jesus said: when we help others, he counts that as us helping him. He is very pleased about it.

We could talk about those matters, but let's spend our time on <sup>4</sup>helping to spread the gospel. Many churches have preached: "You need to give because the church needs money. God needs money." But God never teaches this in the Bible. Back when people

brought offerings of goats and sheep and cattle instead of dollars, the Lord put it this way: *“I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is [already] mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills”* (Psalm 50:9-10). He’s God. If he needs something, he can say, “Let there be,” and it happens. He could say, “Let there be a pile of one hundred dollar bills in the middle of that St. John’s church building for spreading the gospel.” But instead he explains how happy it makes him when even one sinner repents. Then he basically says, “I want you to experience my joy with me. Help me spread the gospel through your offerings.” God could easily spread the gospel without us, but he wants to give us His joy. And it sure is joyful working with fellow believers to spread the gospel by our words and by our wallets so that other sinners can repent too.

God gives us so much that he figures we’re going to want to say, “Thank you, Lord!” Of course, we do this in our whole life through our attitudes, our tone of voice, our behaviors. But one of the ways we can quickly measure our thanks is by the offerings we bring to God’s house. On three occasions the Lord told his Old Testament people, *“No one is to appear before me empty-handed”* (Ex 23:15, 34:20, Dt 16:16). Psalm 96:8 says, *“Bring an offering and come into his courts”* (i.e. God’s house).

“But, Pastor, what about the poor? Do people ever stay away from God’s house because they are ashamed of how small their offering is?” Yes, but only because they are looking at themselves rather than the Lord. See, the Lord doesn’t need our money. He’s much less concerned about the amount of our offerings than the attitude behind our offerings. How can I be so sure? Consider

the poor widow (Mark 12:41-44). When she put in two small copper coins, let’s say two pennies, Jesus was just about doing back flips! And why? Because her heart was filled with trust: those two little coins were all she had to live on. “Is Jesus trying to teach us to give everything we have?” No, that would be wrong. He also expects us to <sup>2</sup>pay taxes, and <sup>1</sup>feed & clothe our households and <sup>3</sup>the poor. Jesus was excited because of her attitude. She didn’t fixate on, “If I give these two pennies as an offering to the Lord, I’m going to go hungry tonight.” Instead her attitude was something like: “The Lord gave me life. I trust him to figure out how to sustain my life.” ‘Not worrying when we give our offerings’ pleases the Lord.

Consider Cain and Abel. Cain murdered his brother Abel. But think back to how the mess started. Cain brought fruits and vegetables as an offering because as a farmer that’s what he had. As a shepherd Abel brought sheep because that’s what he had. But when Abel thought about what would make for a good offering to the Lord, he selected his best animals for the Lord, and the Lord looked with favor on Abel’s offering but not on Cain’s.

I love telling this story about visiting my brother years ago. He is a pastor. My brother came home from seeing one of his shut-ins. She had sent home some coins for my young nephew: 13 dimes. My brother poured them onto the coffee table and said, “Tony, let’s pick out the five shiniest dimes to give to Jesus on Sunday.” When we give, we want to give our best, just like my nephew, just like Abel.

One day the Lord took his people to task. You see, they had allowed some faulty

thinking into their minds. They thought, “When we take our sheep and cattle to the temple for sacrifice, the priest kills the animals and burns them up. Why should I kill the best breeding animals and be stuck with the leftovers. It makes more sense to take the blind and crippled animals to the temple and let them be burned up.” But the Lord was not pleased. He told them: “*When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor* [when it’s time to pay your taxes]! *Would he be pleased with you?*” (Malachi 1:8). If God were talking to people today, he might put it this way, “When you deal with the IRS, can you tell them, ‘Sorry, I can’t pay my taxes because I have a mortgage and two car loans’? The government knows people: that’s why it withholds taxes every pay period. The government doesn’t want to get to the end of the year and have a bunch of citizens saying, ‘We don’t have any leftovers to pay taxes with.’ So the government takes the first cut. Then the financial experts come along and tell us, ‘Pay yourself first,’ meaning set aside your savings next. Then they teach: ‘If your employer is willing to match what you put into your 401k, put in the full amount. Don’t leave free money on the table.’” So by the time Americans get around to deciding how much to give as an offering to spread the gospel, it can seem like so little is left. But our Lord says to us, his redeemed and dearly loved children, “I am almighty. I can take good care of you. Even after you pay your taxes and set aside some savings, add those amounts back in to the total before you decide how much of a firstfruit gift you’re going to bring me. Then I will bless you, and you’ll be able to live happily on the leftovers, spending them wisely.” “Uh, Lord, are you saying you

want me to put you first?” “Yes, in everything—and I will bless you. In fact, when you have to miss church one week, bring double your offering the week after. This pleases me, and I will bless you. I don’t need your money. But I do want to see that you’ve put me first, and I will bless you.”

Sometimes people ask me to tell them how much to give. Rather than specifying a dollar amount, I take them to 2 Corinthians 9:6. *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* This is farmer talk. You never hear a farmer say, “The almanac predicts it’s going to be a dry year. We better not waste seed. Let’s plant only half as much as usual.” No farmer would ever plant half the seed. The almanac might be wrong. If the weather turns out excellent for farming, the best a stingy farmer can get is only half a crop. You always plant generously. That’s the only way to get a big crop. The Holy Spirit gave this message when most of God’s people were farmers. Today we are wise to think of our offerings as seeds we plant into the fields of God’s kingdom. Hear God saying, “Give generously and expect a big crop.” Ok, but what’s the crop? More money? Not necessarily. The crop that God especially cares about is the souls who are reached or encouraged through the good news about Jesus.

“Okay, so the Lord wants me to be generous. But that still doesn’t tell me how many dollars to give.” Let’s go back to 2 Corinthians 9. *Let each of you give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* So cheerfully decide what percentage you are going to give to the Lord. Everywhere you look in the Bible,

when it talks about bringing offerings, it talks in terms of percentages. Start by figuring out what percent you're currently giving. I can show you the formula privately. Ask yourself, "Is this a generous offering?" For some people 5% might be a generous offering: it all depends on their circumstances. For others 15% might be a stingy offering: it all depends on their circumstances. Many Christians rob themselves of the joy of giving by not thinking about what "generous" means for them.

So what's generous? Let's say that a family unit has a nice household income of \$50,000. Let's say they have cheerfully decided in their hearts to give a firstfruit of 10% or \$5,000, about \$100 per week. They are content living on the leftovers of \$45,000. Now let's say someone in this same family unit discovers how to cure a certain kind of cancer using, oh, say, dandelions. From now on the family unit will have an annual income of \$500,000. A 10% firstfruit of that would be \$50,000. A nice gift, you say. Perhaps. But they were doing fine on \$45,000 before. Why not give the Lord 13% or 16 or 20? Sit down with the Lord and define 'generous' for you in your circumstances.

"Well what about when you retire or lose your job? When your income goes down, is it okay to bring a smaller offering?" Yes, but I still urge you to give on the basis of a percentage of income. It is permissible to raise or lower the percentage, depending on our circumstances. But whatever we do, let's give generously because our gracious God loves to give generously to us when he sees us being generous.

The New Testament Greek word for 'generous' literally means 'single-minded.'

A single-minded giver gives without thinking about anything else. No fear is present to say, "But if I give this away, I'll have less." No pride is there to say, "Look at me! I'm so generous." If we give without fear, our trust in the Lord will be blessed. If we give without pride, our humility will be blessed. Consider the promise made by the Lord in Malachi 3:10: *Bring the whole tithe into...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 you will not have room enough for it.* The Lord isn't necessarily promising you earthly wealth. But he is promising you countless blessings. Some may be material. Many will be spiritual. And when you are spiritual... when you are walking in step with the Holy Spirit, things fall into place for you. Many of you already know exactly what I mean. You tested God, as he wanted, and he kept his promise to you. The apostle Paul put it this way (2 Corinthians 9:8): *God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in all good works.* See how it works when we glorify God? THE JOY OF GIVING leads to THE GIVING OF JOY, which leads to the Joy of Giving, which leads to the Giving of Joy...

Have I told you lately that God loves you? He doesn't love you less if your offering is small or more if your offering is large. It works the other way around. God loves us in Christ. The more we know God's love, the more our hearts are ready to give him our whole life—how we work, how we eat, how we talk to others, how we give. Making our life about God is a joyful thing. It's a blessed thing. It pleases the God who is pleased with us because of Jesus. So let's always make our offerings all about Jesus.