

## 2 Cor 9:6-15

*The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. <sup>7</sup> Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. <sup>8</sup> And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. <sup>9</sup> As it is written,*

*“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness<sup>[b]</sup> endures forever.”*

*<sup>10</sup> He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>11</sup> You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; <sup>12</sup> for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. <sup>13</sup> Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, <sup>14</sup> while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. <sup>15</sup> Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

## Psalm 8

*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.<sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;<sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?<sup>5</sup> Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.<sup>6</sup> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,<sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,<sup>8</sup> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

## ***“To God be the Glory” Part 1***

Well, it’s stewardship season. Probably not all of you felt your heart leap just now. And hearing a stewardship sermon feels a bit like getting that dreaded annual flu shot. I know. It is a hard topic, even for preachers. But it should not be. It runs at the very heart of who we are and whose we are. It is at the foundation of our relationship to God and should be something we are thinking about, living and breathing, not just in one season a year but every day of our lives. As Rev Karl Travis says, *“the stewardship conversation pits us spiritually between what we need and what we merely want, between a cultural push to acquire and a Gospel of giving up, between materialism and the God of whom the Psalmist bragged, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”*<sup>1</sup> Over the next several weeks, let’s have a meaningful stewardship conversation, why don’t we...beginning today at the beginning...with why we give?

It’s November now and an election year to boot, so fund-raising appeals are coming at us from all directions right now, aren’t they? That’s actually what the apostle Paul was doing in his letter to the church in Corinth. He was writing to encourage the people to make a generous offering for the distressed saints, the poor, in Jerusalem. And we assume that they did. But, you know, Paul didn’t use usual fund-raising techniques to persuade them. What did Paul use? I don’t believe he found it modeled in Marvin and Myrtle’s Public Relations and Advertising Firm did he? No. What technique Paul use?

First of all, Paul didn’t appeal to obligation or duty. No where do we find him saying, *“Everyone else is doing their share and so should you,”* or *“your name is on the roll, and you NEED do your part.”* He didn’t present stewardship as dues paying, being a loyal member of the service club. Nor did he appeal to people’s sense of prestige, encouraging them to be those who *“care enough to send the very best.”* No gold or silver levels. I don’t know about you but I’m glad Paul did not do this, since I don’t respond to it too well. It seems to me it that this technique lends itself to the sin of pride pretty quickly.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Travis. Sermon: *“Why the Stewardship Conversation is Necessary—Now, More than Ever”*. Delivered at the Grace Presbytery meeting on May 29, 2008.

Paul's approach also was not a kindling of family sentiment either. Not long ago, I was called by University of Nebraska Medical Center. I graduated from there, about a hundred years ago. A current student was on the other end of the phone. He told me his name and then spent some time talking about the exciting and new things the College of Pharmacy was hoping to do next year. As he spoke, I found myself reminiscing about my years as a student there. I thought of friendships, ones that anyone develops when you go through something like THAT together. And I remembered the donations by alums that helped me get through school on scholarship. I felt a connection to this young man. It was the kind of bond that the Church values as well because the relationships we have as brothers and sisters in Christ need to be cherished. But yet, Paul does not use this method as a stewardship appeal either, likely, I think, because he had in mind a very specific goal for the Corinthians this time, that of helping the poor in Jerusalem, not so much of investing in their own community. Regardless, Paul's approach was different.

Probably what was most noticeably different WAS Paul's avoidance of the detailed description of the suffering of the Jerusalem church. How significant was their destitution? What were their conditions? What kind of pain were they undergoing? And where are the pictures and personal interviews? I counted and just this last week, Mike and I received mailings from a good number of very worthy causes like Susan G Komen, American Parkinson's Association, and Paralyzed Veterans which detailed their very specific needs. This approach successfully moves compassionate hearts and opens wallets, right, or it would not be used so very much? However, Paul did not use it. Why do you think?

Well, maybe it's because when this approach is used in the Church as the beginning AND the end of the stewardship endeavor, as the end-all and sole approach, we err. *Repeat.* Of course, the specific needs of the church are real and need to be considered. Budgets and goals need to be made, and the congregation needs to hear about them and support them with our time, talent and treasure. This year, FPC particularly needs to fill our teams with working bodies. We need people to volunteer to do the work of the church...on the Property, Discipleship, Mission & Outreach teams and the Church Life and Worship Teams, and we

need to meet the rising costs for utilities, repairs, mission support, salaries. However, this is not the entire endeavor as it may be for charities. As Rev Travis observes, *“in this time of shrinking memberships, church schisms, untrustworthy leaders, and low institutional self esteem, the detailed report by the church, hat in hand, about the status of aging equipment and rising costs is hardly the stuff of joy, excitement and liberation.”* *“No, the church needs not be seen as more interested in the institution than in the people’s spiritual well beings.”*<sup>2</sup>

*An illustration: There were two men shipwrecked on a desert island. The first one paced the hot sand. “We’re going to die,” he said. “We’re shipwrecked with no food, no fresh water, and no way out.” The second relaxed beneath a palm tree. “There’s nothing to worry about,” he said. “I make \$100,000 a week.” Incredulous, the first man responded. “What good will your money do us here? There’s nothing to buy. How in the world can you be so relaxed?” The man replied, “I make \$100,000 a week, and I tithe. My pastor will find us.”*

Friends, Paul does not appeal for funds for the church in Jerusalem on the basis of obligation, prestige, family bonds or even specific needs. Instead, his point is clear, unmistakably clear... He says, *“the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully... God who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.”* Paul believed that the stewardship conversation SHOULD begin and end by emphasizing that through our giving, we can know the conscious joy of generous gratitude to God. As much as FPC needs our money, our time and talent, then, even more so do we, you and I, **need** to give our money, time and talent. Our souls need this. It is one of the mysteries of faith: we gain by giving, we find by losing.

How we gain is that we get an opportunity, we get the privilege, to utter an exuberant, excited, doxological proclamation that the God who set the planets in motion and put us in this abundant universe refuses to turn his back on us....or to close his hand. We belong to God. No

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Travis. Sermon: “Why the Stewardship Conversation...”we

matter what, in life and in death, we belong to our Creator and we are God's treasured children, forever. In awe, the psalmist wonders, "*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;<sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them*" Indeed, life has been breathed into us by the very one who made the moon and the stars, and despite our rebellion and ingratitude, this same One has given us a way to live lives which are new, forgiven and free. And he has done this at the cost of his own.

Friends, Paul boldly wrote that "God LOVES a cheerful giver," because when we even begin to understand these things, we step into the place where the stewardship conversation properly begins, into the generous heart of our selfless God, from where we might be compelled to do likewise. We step into the realm where we might utter, "to God be the glory" and from where God will multiply and enrich our generosity all the more, "providing us with every blessing in abundance."

*A husband and wife, who were traveling around the world, saw in Korea one day a boy pulling a crude plow in a field, while an old man held the plow handles and directed it through the rice paddy. "That's very curious," he remarked to the missionary who was their interpreter and guide. "I suppose they are very poor." "Yes," said the missionary. "That is the family of Chi Noui. When the church was built they were eager to give something, but they had no money, so they sold the only ox they had and gave the money to the church. This spring they are pulling the plow themselves." The husband and wife were silent for a long time. Then the wife said, "That was a real sacrifice." "Oh, no," the missionary said. "They do not see it that way." They thought it was fortunate they had an ox to sell." The two tourists returned home and said to their pastor, "we want to double our pledge and please give us some plow work to do. We never knew what gratitude or joy or real giving was about until now."<sup>3</sup>*

Brothers and sisters, today at the beginning of our stewardship conversation, the reason we give is because we NEED to. "*And God will enrich us in every way for our great generosity,*

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Andrews. Sermon: "*Where is Your Sadness?*". In: *Speaking of Stewardship*. William Carter, ed (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998), 77-80.

*which will overflow with our thanksgivings to God.”* To God then be the glory. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! Amen.