

Psalm 138

I give thanks to you with all my heart, Lord.[a]
I sing your praise before all other gods.
2 I bow toward your holy temple
and thank your name
for your loyal love and faithfulness
because you have made your name and word
greater than everything else.[b]
3 On the day I cried out, you answered me.
You encouraged me with inner strength.[c]
4 Let all the earth's rulers give thanks to you, Lord,
when they hear what you say.
5 Let them sing about the Lord's ways
because the Lord's glory is so great!
6 Even though the Lord is high,
he can still see the lowly,
but God keeps his distance from the arrogant.
7 Whenever I am in deep trouble,
you make me live again;
you send your power against my enemies' wrath;
you save me with your strong hand.
8 The Lord will do all this for my sake.
Your faithful love lasts forever, Lord!
Don't let go of what your hands
have made.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

6 What I mean is this: the one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop.

7 Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. 8 God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. 9 As it is written, He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever. [a]

10 The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness. 11 You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. 12 Your ministry of this service to God's people isn't only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God. 13 They will give honor to God for your obedience to your confession of Christ's gospel. They will do this because this service provides evidence of your obedience, and because of your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone. 14 They will also pray for you, and they will care deeply for you because of the outstanding grace that God has given to you. 15 Thank God for his gift that words can't describe!

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

This week I was watching new episodes of *Whose Line Is It Anyway*, an improv comedy show that puts comedians into situations built to create the absurd. One of the sketches asked the comedians to share *Something Strange for a Pastor to Say*. The one that caught my attention, and perhaps received the most laughter, was when one would-be pastor stood before a fictional congregation and said, “We will no longer be taking donations.” Uproarious applause ensued. We don’t need to hear this to know that there’s a stereotype out there that churches talk too much about money.

Now, to be sure, some pastors have abused the Gospel and God’s call to truth when it comes to money. Creflo Dollar, a televangelist and pastor of World Changers

International, recently asked everyone watching his program to donate \$300 each – not to create jobs for unemployed people, not to foster sustainable food programs so no one would go hungry – but so that he could buy a new Gulfstream G650 Jet, which costs a measly \$65 million. Now Creflo's not the only one; he rather joins the ranks of many other Christian leaders who've taken Jesus' teaching on money and perverted them into simple accumulation of wealth, selfish hoarding of stuff, of gaining riches, and often these people are preying on the poorest and most vulnerable people among us.

Too frequently, Christians respond to these abuses by avoiding the topic of money altogether. But you don't end abuse by ignoring it. We can't avoid talking about money. If we do that, the only message of God and money that people hear comes in this version that seems to both worship money and abuses people in need instead of

giving them a new chance at life. If we don't speak God's truth that money is a gift from God under our care and meant to serve holy purposes, then who will?

“Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work.” So, let's begin here with a very clear conviction. Coercion into giving is sin. If someone's forcing you to give with promises of health or wealth, or even worse, threats of God's abandonment or hatred, that's sin, and it's simply not a Christian way to view money. It turns money into God rather than seeing money as a tool for God's use, as a divine gift for God's people and purposes.

Instead, we hear a simple yet profound exhortation: **the condition of our heart is tied to the location of our money.**

Hear that again. The condition of our heart is shaped by where we spend, place, and give the resources in our care. And yes, these resources are just in our care, for remember that scripture reminds us that what we have comes from God – not just our money, but our time, our talents, our skills, our relationships, our passions – all resources come from God to help meet our needs, and the needs of the whole world. For instance, analysts say there's something like \$75 trillion dollars in the world. If we put that to work feeding people, we could feed everyone in the world enough to be full every day for 4.5 years. And that doesn't count the resources of food stuffs that already exist, the products we could continue to grow sustainably to continue feeding one another. Logistically, there's enough in this world for everyone to thrive.

Our problem with money is that we've believed the lie told to us that there isn't enough, that resources are scarce, that for us to have what we need that others must go without, that for us live others must struggle, if not die. And make no mistake: those are lies. It doesn't have to be this way. We've just come to believe that we can't do anything about it, or more heinously, that it's not our responsibility to do something about it. That's where 2nd Corinthians just undercuts our expectations of how the world works and what our responsibility is in it.

Paul tells us that, because God shares these many gifts with us, we've not only got all that we need, but that we're able to provide for every kind of good work through these God-given gifts. For every problem that exists in the world, God's already given us the resources to responds to those needs, to overcome those obstacles, to reveal God's goodness in the face of evil. Now, this doesn't necessarily

mean that God gives us the solutions that we want – God doesn't intend to make us all billionaires – but instead gives us what the world needs to thrive. Like all the money and food in the world, though, the question is how we use those gifts, whether we put the things we receive from God toward life-giving purposes.

That's why Paul says everyone should give what we've decided in our hearts. This isn't just a reference to a rational process where you've counted a budget and decided what you're able to give. No. No. No. For Paul, our heart is where our passions, our commitments, our very identity lies. Giving where we've decided in our hearts is a phrase meant to reorient our money toward the things that matter most to us. Again, **the condition of our heart is tied to the location of our money.** That's why giving under compulsion isn't really giving at all.

So let me say clearly, and maybe the council might fire me for this, but I'll take the risk: If you don't care about something, don't pay for it and don't give to it, and that includes the work of this congregation. If you don't want your heart to be here, don't give your money here, because there's a powerful tie between where you put that money and how you come to care for things. Jesus wasn't kidding when he said where your heart is, there your treasure will also be. Money and passion are deeply tied to one another. Where you put your money doesn't just reveal where your heart is, but the more you put your money into something, the more your heart tends to go there, the more you tend to love it.

Michelle and I, even before we were married, committed to giving away at least 10% of everything we earned, not because we had a lot of money – trust me, when we started this process, we didn't; our favorite meal

was nachos in a microwave and we had to do dishes in a bathtub because we didn't have a kitchen – but we started this process because we wanted to develop generous hearts before we started making any money. We wanted to love the church and other charitable causes more than anything else we put money towards, and we've continued to give more than 10% now that we're both making money. Now, I'm not bragging here, and if it seems that way, please forgive me. I just think it's important for y'all to know that I'm not asking you to do something I'm not willing to do. It's bad leadership for me to assume y'all should give if I'm not giving. And surely I'm not asking you for hundreds of dollars so I can buy a jet. We want to lead the way in giving by giving, not receiving. We want to love God and God's work in the world more than anything that receives our attention. Through this process of giving, we've discovered firsthand

that the condition of our heart is tied to the location of our money.

What God tells us about money is that it matters, and that we're cheerful givers when we put our money, and time, and skills, and all other resources to use where we want our hearts to be. Notice that it's not always the same thing as where our hearts are. My heart is often consumed with the success of sports teams, of the latest musical instruments, with things that are new and shiny and just nice. And there's nothing inherently wrong with them, unless we willingly give our hearts to them. Then we make them our God's, and our hearts, once cheerful, are now consumed with things that can't truly hold our hearts, that disappoint us in just baffling ways. Trust me, I'm a Cleveland Browns fan. I know what disappointment feels like when I give my heart in hopes for victory that always ends in defeat.

But seriously, think about it this way. Rick and Kay Warren, known for writing the Purpose Driven Life and Purpose Driven Marriage, amongst other best sellers, have made millions of dollars off of their books. Knowing that how they used their money would shape their hearts, they chose to become reverse tithers. Tithing is giving away 10% and keeping 90%, so Rick and Kay decided to give away 90% of what they make, and keep only 10%. That's a powerful witness. On the flipside, think also of the widow who Jesus encountered one day at the temple, who had only a penny left to her name. She decided that, not knowing her future, she wanted her heart to be with God and so she gave the only money she had left. From the profoundly wealthy and deeply poor, we all can use our money in ways that bring our hearts closer to God.

Now, I'm not pretending that this is easy, especially when we've developed lives and expectations around how

to live, and what a good life looks like. So this week I have another challenge for you. Each of us spend money on stuff that we don't need or spend time doing stuff we don't need to do. Some of us do that more, and others do that less. Maybe it's the daily coffee or soda at the grocery store. Maybe it's the latest phone model or game system when ours works just fine. Maybe it's hours on our phones or in front of TVs or sleeping the day away. Are these places really where we want our hearts to be?

The challenge is this. Do without those things, and put that money or time that you would have otherwise spent to someplace where you want your heart to be. And just to show you how serious I am about this, if you'd rather give your money to Lutheran Disaster Response to help flood victims in West Virginia, or Lutheran World Relief to help with international crises, or Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to help people fleeing violence and oppression, or

New River Valley Community Services to help families right here in our area, or Radford Pound Pals to care for abandoned animals, or any other good work where you want your heart to be, then go for it! God's at work in our church, in these organizations I've mentioned, and across the world. You don't need to give here, or only here, for your heart to come closer to God's heart. If you want your heart to be somewhere because God is at work there, give to it. Money. Time. Skills. Talents. Efforts. Even your voice, speaking on behalf of the good work that's happening can be a gift that we all too rarely give.

In short, friends, we don't become cheerful givers overnight. We learn, we reshape our hearts, by practicing, by learning to become generous, by changing first our habits so that our hearts to align with God's heart. My promise to you is this. We will continue to talk about stewardship, not because we're begging for more money,

but because how we use our money reflects the status of our hearts and how close they are to God. This is our opportunity to redeem the church's relationship to money, not demanding it for jets, but using it to connect our hearts with the heart of Christ. That's worth all the money in the world, and evermore. Amen.