

“How-to’s of Covenant Life: Presence –Treasure to God”

September 21, 2014

Fall series

Maybe you’ve heard of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge? Some of you have done it! On Facebook, you’ve probably seen someone get ice-cold water dumped on them! The idea is that you either take the ice water bath for a small donation or donate at least \$100 to ALS if you don’t want to get wet and cold. At the end of summer, \$100 million had been raised for ALS - \$31 million in one month alone! And it all started with a guy named Peter Frates in Boston.

Of course, it’s a wonderful cause. I’ve known folks who have suffered with ALS, and I can’t wait for researchers to figure out how they might stop it. But many people have commented on the phenomenon of giving around the challenge. It’s an impulse, a one-time gift. How do we encourage people to become more consistent in their giving? The need for research dollars for ALS and other diseases continues, so what now?

This is a sermon about giving - specifically about giving money. And yes, giving isn’t just about money. We have many gifts to offer. We’ve just focused on spiritual gifts - God-given and used by God for the common good, for the building of the Kingdom. But when it comes to giving in the church, we’ve shyed away from talking about it. Jesus didn’t, though.

Scholars estimate that 10% of the Gospels center on money and possessions. My guess is that most of us have dealt with money at some point in the last 24 hours. You went to the store. You paid a bill. You got your offering ready. You gave your kid a quarter for helping with a chore.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is essentially a fundraising letter. Paul is asking a group of largely Gentile Christians to give so that their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters in Judea who have experienced drought and famine can have what they need. This letter is an appeal for money - maybe the first one! - and for Christians to support others in need and build unity in the church. Apparently it was the Corinthians who said they wanted to give, but they hadn’t done so well at following through. Paul reminds them of their commitment and of the need. And he tells them how their giving will make a difference - how it will give God glory!

Somehow we’ve lost the edge when it comes to talking about money. I hope the video today made all of us sit up and listen. When we viewed it

as a planning team, there was trepidation because it's pretty clear and "in your face." We were challenged, too. Even as we listened, Dirk Fuller said, "maybe it should say, 'God wants his money back!'" There's perspective!

When we talk about gifts in the context of our covenant life together, we have to start at the foundation of what we believe about God. God is the great Giver. God's nature is to give and provide. What we have belongs to God. Sometimes we're so focused on how we feel about giving that we forget about God's goodness, God's grace, God's gifts. Grace is a free gift. There's nothing we can do to earn it, deserve it, work for it. It just simply is. We live in it every day, and we're called to share it every day. We're able to earn money because of God's gifts to us. What we earn, save, and give belongs to God.

It really is a change in perspective for us. We live in a consumer culture. And yet, God calls us to be stewards, managers, caretakers of God's gifts. And God's desire is that we offer our gifts back to God. We use the tithe as the basis for giving, and it makes all the difference for me to picture a tithe. It's so easy to get caught up in what we don't have rather than seeing what we do have and what God entrusts to us.

Maybe it sounds overwhelming when God asks for 10%, but when we think that 90% is what we then care for and use for ourselves, that's a powerful image! I want one of your ten Skittles. You take the other nine. You're in charge of that!

And we should remember, too, that the tithe is a beginning place. I know not everyone is at the point of tithing. And yet the idea that we might give to God first - not last - is a challenge. I've always been so blessed to hear people speak of their own practices around giving and tithing - not because they're trying to show off - but because it's a witness to God's faithfulness. That's what it's about! I've never heard anyone say that they were sorry they took that step.

Does God receive our first and our best? Or does God receive what's left? Is giving a priority? In the Old Testament, the offering goes to the Temple, and in the New Testament, it goes to the church. But all of it is intended to support God's Kingdom and intentional ministry - intentional presence in the world. How might you and I take Paul's words to heart - to give cheerfully - not because the church needs it, but because we're confident in God's faithfulness and we want to respond to God?

We pray for the Kingdom of God to come even now, and we know that money is necessary for that to happen. We can't function without it. We can't maintain a building in order to house ministry without it. We can't compensate staff without it. We can't support ministry without it. We can't support missionaries - those who are far away and those who are serving right in our community.

When we talk about covenant, we're also talking about a relationship. Paul is clear that God's desire is not that we give because we feel like to we have to. God doesn't want us to give mumbling under our breath or feeling like it's a burden (though it should be a sacrifice). This is about our relationship with God. Tithing and working up to tithing is a part of our relationship with God. Just like prayer, just like our presence, our giving money is a part of nurturing that relationship. We give as a response to God's love. We honor and glorify God through our giving.

Giving changes us. We know just from being around people that though we're living in a time when people have more than ever before, at least in this country, that they aren't any happier. Someone said, "Money can't buy happiness, but generosity can."

When we give to God and to our families, friends, neighbors, and others who are in need—our hearts are filled with joy. They are enlarged by the very act of giving. When we give generously, we become more generous.

Where does Paul get that "cheerful giver" language from? One scholar says that the word is actually to give with hilarity. Did Paul know that by giving we really do feel good? That's not the reason we give, but it's a by-product. Does God love when we get to that point? Maybe it's then that we know that God is in control. Maybe we finally feel the truth we claim - that we can't out-give God and that God is faithful and will provide.

When we offer our gifts, we feel good. That's a part of growing in grace. Giving is a spiritual discipline. Giving matters to our spiritual growth. Giving is foundational to who God is and to who we can become in Christ. Giving is the example of Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave..."

The most important part is that we're giving consistently, freely, joyfully, gladly, graciously. We give out of love and gratitude for God's love and work in us. We give not because the church needs money or because

we have to, but because we believe deeply that God is the One who gives to us, and we want to offer gifts back to him. And it should be a sacrifice. We should notice it. Take a step in giving consistently. God understands where you are, and God will help you.

If giving changes us, then it giving changes the church. Giving is between you and God, and yet we rely on one another to make those commitments. We're in this together. When we say that we'll support the church with our gifts, it's a promise that we'll give money to the church in proportion to our income. We take time to offer our gifts when we gather because it's a response to God's grace. However you give, that time is important because it reminds all of us that ultimately God is the giver, and we're called to respond to God's gifts in tangible ways.

Why give? Because God is the ultimate giver. Because we love God. Because giving really is an act of faith. It is a spiritual discipline. The more we give, the better we understand giving. The more we give, the more we understand the transformation that God works in us. We aren't dependent on wealth, but on God.

Friends, I pray that our giving really does give God the glory and praise that God is due. As we thank God for so many blessings, may we be transformed. May we give our treasure to God willingly, consistently, and cheerfully.

Thanks be to God. Amen!