

Give As You Have Been Given

Theme: The lavishness of our giving is in direct proportion to our experience of grace.

Text: Philippians 4:10-23

I hope you have had as much enjoyment and enrichment in the first six weeks of 2005 as I have had. Our focus as we have entered this year has been on the theme "Getting Healthier" in the spiritual realm. To assist us in this endeavor we have been using a phenomenal tool called the *Spiritual Health Planner*. Just as our physical fitness is a combination of rest, diet, and exercise, so our spiritual fitness must consist of worship, growth, and service.

This whole process can raise a disturbing question: Do we have a plan for our spiritual development? My guess is that most of us have a plan for our financial independence called retirement, we have a vocational plan for our advancement, we have plans for our kids' enrichment, and we may have a physical fitness plan we follow, but do we have a plan to grow our hearts and lives in the Lord? For some reason we tend to put the spiritual life in a separate category and think our spiritual growth should just happen by spontaneous combustion. I have found this process enlightening because it has caused me to zero in on one of the statements on page 7 that jumped off the page: Do I regularly and intentionally make space for God to show up? This is the focus of my growth plan.

This morning we conclude our 6 part series on "Getting Healthier", by looking at Paul's closing words to the Philippians, the letter we have been exploring together throughout this series. Interestingly enough, we have to wait to the end of this letter to see what it was that prompted Paul to write to the Philippians in the first place. In fact, the book of Philippians you might say is a really just lengthy "thank you" note. I finally sat down this last week to write my "thank you" notes for the Christmas gifts I received. Yes, I am a little slow, but I bet there are some of you that have me beat. As I contemplated what I would say in each note, I found myself saying thanks for the particular gift I received, such as a book, but even more I was thankful for the giver of the gift. The true gift was not the \$25 spent or the thought put into it, but the relationship that the gift represented.

In this last section of Paul's letter he is acknowledging that he has received their gift through their emissary of Epaphroditus, whom he earlier in the letter described as "my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier" (Phil. 2:25). Paul, you will recall, is under house arrest in Rome, chained to a member of Caesar's elite guard at all times, so he certainly would benefit from their evidently practical, if unspecified gift. Yet to Paul the gift is only representative of what their partnership has meant to him. It is interesting how Paul turns even his expression of gratitude into an occasion to reinforce some principles of giving. I

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want to tease out for you the principles of giving that I see. There is an overarching theme that ties these principles together: **The lavishness of our giving is in direct proportion to our experience of grace.**

Read Philippians 4:10-23

The lavishness of our giving is in direct proportion to our experience of grace.

1. The first principle of giving I see here is that **our giving follows our heart connections.** We give to causes and people with whom we are personally connected and that have touched our hearts. There is much in this text that tell us how the Philippians feel about Paul and why they have had a long term commitment to and support of his ministry. Paul begins this section with a personal expression of joy that they have reentered his life. *"I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it."* (v. 10) Apparently, there had been some interruption in contact with Paul, that was purely circumstantial. They have now reconnected. Paul knows that he is far more than a project to them. *"Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles or afflictions."* (v. 14) The word *share* is a form of *koinonia*, meaning what we have in common. They entered Paul's plight, currently imprisonment, and took it on as their own. They empathized with his deprivation to the point where they could not live without doing something to alleviate his circumstances.

This was not flash in the pan relationship. Approximately ten years had transpired from Paul's first visit to Philippi on the second missionary journey to the present date of AD. 61. *"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; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need."* There was connection right the start. We know from the books of Acts chapters 16 and 17, that Thessalonica was the community to which Paul went immediately following his time in Philippi. The Philippians had bonded with Paul and opened their hearts to him. They had entered into a long term partnership with Paul. They had staying power.

As I thought about the connection between the Philippians and Paul, my mind returned to an image that we often used when I was pastor of a former church. When our high school youth group was sent from our church on their annual week long Mexico mission trip at Easter, efforts were made to connect the students with the congregation. At the send-off worship service, the students who were a part of the Mexico team would go out among the congregation in the aisles. They distribute sheets with printed photos of them and prayer

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requests, to those in the congregation who would commit to pray for them during that week. Then we visualized a rope from the congregation tethered to each of the students. We asked, who would be willing to hold the rope for each of these missionaries that we are sent? Who is willing to be bound in prayer to the lives of these students? The Philippians were holding the rope for Paul and he was encouraged by their connection as only represented in the gift.

But note that Paul had very few partners of this sort. He says, "...not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only..." This leads me back to our overarching theme: *the lavishness of our giving is in direct proportion to our experience of grace*. The Philippians hearts were broken, graced by the life and ministry of Paul. They gave because they had been given to and drunk deeply through the grace evidenced in Paul's gospel.

In the summer of 1992 I led a mission trip to Romania. This was shortly after the fall of Ceucescu and the discovery of thousands of warehoused orphans, to the shock of the world. At the Holy Spirit's prompting, I believe, I invited a man named Hud to join the team. I didn't know what the Lord had in mind at the time nor did he. As we were about to enter an institutional orphanage for HIV positive cast-off children, Hud appeared to be a guarded and fearful man. All of us were aghast at the condition of the children. Spindly legs, scab riddled, malnourished. We held the weaker ones, and sat on the floor so that healthier ones could crawl up on our laps. Later that day, our team gathered on the beach of the Black Sea. Hud shared that he was terrified to let the pain of the kids lives into his being. Yet as we entered into prayer that day sitting on the black sand, Hud broke down. His sobs were convulsive and uncontrollable. He had allowed the pain of these children to penetrate his defenses. He was completely overwhelmed by the need of these love starved children. He heard the call, "Who will take care of them?" He saw in their eyes the question, "Are you the one?" "Are you the one who will follow through on your promise to help us?" From the broken hearted prayer in 1992 to the present day a Christian ministry called *The House of New Life* has grown to provide a loving, redemptive environment for these kids marked for death.

Hud is a perfect example of this first principle that Paul articulates: **our giving follows our heart's connections**. To the extent that we allow the need into our hearts, we are graced with God's compassion and we must give.

2. The second principle of giving Paul highlights is **our degree of giving is a reflection of the state of our hearts**. Giving has nothing to do with the size of our bank account or stock portfolio, it has to do with a heart captured by grace.

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Paul would have been a very poor fund raiser. No one would ever invite him to be the closer at end of the fund raising event. Closers use every technique possible to get us to part with our money. Success is measured solely by how much money has been brought in at the end of the day. For example, a pastor was looking for ways to get the congregation to give more money because the repairs to the church had exceeded expectations. On this particular Sunday there was a substitute organist. The substitute organist wanted to know what to play once the pastor had made his appeal to the congregation. The pastor gave the organist a copy of the service and said that he would have to come up with something after he had made the announcement about the finances. The pastor said, "Brothers and sisters, we are in great difficulty, the roof repairs were twice the estimated cost. We need \$20,000. Any of you who can pledge \$1000 or more, please stand up." At that moment, substitute organist played "The Star Spangled Banner." And that is how the substitute became the regular organist. The job of the fund raiser is to bring the money in.

On the other hand, here is what Paul would likely say at a fund raiser, "You know how much you give is not important to me. Frankly, the amount of the gift to me is not my concern. I have learned to be content whether I have a lot or little, so that is neither here nor there. What I delight in is that your giving is evidence of the grace of God at work in your heart." In v. 17 Paul says, "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account." There is a sense here in which Paul is almost rude by downplaying the benefit to his life that their gift had provided. In fact, Paul turns it all around and states that the importance of their gift is not what it did for him, but what it says about the grace of God at work in them.

Giving has little, if nothing, to do with how much you have. In fact, the Bible seems to indicate that there is almost an inverse relationship between wealth and generosity. In general, those who have much, give little proportionately. Those who have little, give much. Jesus was very suspicious about the power of money to demand its own devotion. We know that the Philippians had very little. Philippi was located in a region called Macedonia. Macedonia is north of modern day Greece. We know some about the state of poverty of these churches because Paul holds the generosity of the Macedonians up before the Corinthians as an example of the grace of God at work in their lives. Paul was taking up an offering for the mother church in Jerusalem from all the missionary churches he founded that owed their existence to this epicenter of Christianity. The believers in Jerusalem had fallen on hard times, because of persecution. In II Corinthians 8 we get the impression that Paul was not even going to mention this offering to the Macedonian churches because of "their extreme poverty."

Apparently, though, the Macedonian churches got wind of this offering, and they came to Paul, "pleading urgently for the favor of taking part in the relief of the

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saints (in Jerusalem)" (II Cor. 8:4) Who has ever heard of people literally begging for the opportunity to give their money away? "Don't you leave us out", they said. Paul had evidently made a judgment call that they were too poor and therefore did not want to add any burden to their lives. But he writes, "And now, brothers, I want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up to generosity. For I can testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability."

As little over a year ago, I received an email from one of our members, who appropriately chastised me for a remark I had made in worship. In an attempted to be sensitive to those who might have limited resources, I attempting to let them off the hook as we made our year end appeal. This member said essentially, "Don't demean my contribution. I may not have much, but that does not mean I don't want to contribute. I want to be apart of what God is doing here. Don't rob me of the joy of participating."

There is a dignity that comes with being able to give no matter the amount of one's means. Adele Calhoun, our Spiritual Formation Pastor, related to a story of amazing generosity that emerged from our GO Team to Ethiopia last year this very month. On world scale, Ethiopia is considered the second poorest country in the world. Adele and the 6 members of her team were ministering in a community called Debra-Ziet. The entire community had been invited to what turned into a day long worship service that lasted from 9AM-4PM. So I don't to hear any more complaints about the length of worship services. Some 1500-2000 people jammed into the hall and flowed out the doors listening to Adele preach and each of the women on the team share their testimony. At the end of the day, the church leaders insisted that they take up an offering for our team. Adele and the team were presented with a stack of one beer notes, the Ethiopian currency, that was the equivalent of \$85US dollars. Given the fact that the average person earns a dollar a day, this was an enormous sacrifice. Our team was horrified that these people who could barely feed themselves would be so free when they had so little. They insisted to Benny Yusuf, their host, that the church keep the money and invest in their own ministry. Benny said they would be very offended if our team did not take the gift, and in fact, it was elevating and dignifying for them to know they could give and not just receive.

When we freely give we know that we have been touched by the grace of God. John Piper writes that "grace is the overflow of joy in God which gladly meets the needs of others." This is why the apostle Paul says that giving which honors God should not be done reluctantly or under compulsion (a strong armed fund raiser), "for God loves a cheerful giver" (II Cor. 9:7) Commenting on this verse, Chuck Swindoll says that he can't understand why people look so serious when we pass the offering plates. Instead of looking grim and stoical, shouldn't there

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be some mirth as the music is played and the plates are passed. I think the offering should be accompanied by ripples of laughter. We might hear couples saying to each other, "Put it in the plate, honey. Isn't this great?" "Can you believe we get to do this?" Perhaps spontaneous applause might occur when the plates come back down the center aisle to be dedicated to God. After all the word cheerful here is literally the word "hilarious". "God loves a hilarious giver."

Paul is telling the Philippians that they can take pleasure in their giving. "I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent" (Phil. 4:18a). Paul's payment was their gift, but "even more" Paul's full payment was to see God's generosity manifested in their heart change. He goes on, "They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18b) This gift you have given is a credit to your account, and a pleasing aroma to the Lord. There is something deeply satisfying about the joy of giving. It has its own reward.

How would you assess where you are in your giving? Turn to page 9 in our *Spiritual Health Planner*. Bullets three and four give us a couple of data points to assess our spiritual state.

- I know what percent of my income I give to the church or the Lord's work.
- I want to grow into giving a tenth, or more, of my income to the Lord's work.

Thus far, to illustrate our main point that *lavishness of our giving is in direct proportion to our experience of grace*, Paul has given us two principles: *Our giving follows our heart connections* and *our giving is a reflection of the state of our hearts*.

3. The third and final principle is that **our giving is more than matched by God's supply**. Paul reminds the Philippians that just as they have met his needs, God will meet theirs. "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). The word translated "meet" is literally "fulfill" or "supply" all your needs. There is a storehouse of riches in God's economy so that as we give out of our supply, God is there refilling the supply line so that there is even more to give.

I love the story of the two brothers that illustrates well God's economy. "Two brothers shared a field and a mill. Each night they divided evenly the grain they had ground together during the day. Now the single brother thought to himself, 'It isn't fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for but my

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brother has children to feed.' So each night he secretly took some grain to his brother's grainery to see that he was never without. But the married brother said to himself, 'It really isn't fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he is old?' So every night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's grainery. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain mysteriously replenished each morning."

In God's economy the more we freely and cheerfully give, mysteriously there is more in the supply line to give. This is exactly where many of us get tripped up. We don't understand the math. Many of us would like to tithe, to commit a tenth of our income to the Lord's work, but when we take a tenth right off the top, it appears that we won't have enough to live off of. If I were to tell you that your first step toward financial freedom is to give your money away, you might think that I am crazy. I am sure if you told that to your accountant, he would say you were crazy. But it only seems crazy because we don't understand God's economics.

I will also tell you that the reason many of us don't have our financial in order is that we are not following God's order for our financial house. If we were to give cheerfully, writing as the first checks each month those that go to support the expansion of God's kingdom, we are taking our first steps to financial freedom. Some of us quite frankly can't afford not to share what we have. God honors the proper priorities and makes sure there is enough in the supply line. The old adage is true and I love it: **You can't out give God.** The more you give in faith, the more God will come behind you and fill the grainery so that the supply is there to meet your need and you have even more to give.

I am fond of the practice of giving known as the *faith promise*: The idea is *not* to give just what we can afford. Giving is not just a financial transaction based upon calculations. Instead of giving what we can afford, give what God can afford. A faith promise is to pray for what you sense God has led you to give which is beyond your current means by your human calculations. The question is, "Lord, what would you have me to give? What are you leading me to give by faith?" It should be sufficient enough stretch where you are saying to the Lord, "I don't know where this is going to come from and if you don't supply I don't know how it can happen, but I am going to believe by faith that you will supply it." Give what you don't have, believing that God has it. Jesus said, "Give and it shall be given to you."

In conclusion, let me ask you, how real is God in your life? Does God show up in unmistakable ways that might be called "God sightings"? I believe God has given us the gift of giving because it is a way for God to manifest himself in a tangible and concrete way. Money. Hard Cash. He has said essentially, "Put me to the

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test. See if I will come through." When we get out over our head by faith, we are saying essentially, "God, if you don't show up I am in trouble." When God's reputation is at stake, based upon a promise He has made, when the chance to literally see God at work, providing what we could never manufacture ourselves. Don't miss out on that opportunity.

This brings us right back to where we started. The theme that runs through this section of Scripture is that our lavishness of giving is in direct proportion to our experience of grace. Pray that God would touch you with the bounty of his grace so that you know as never before that you are a beloved child of God, and watch him pour that grace through you.

Our giving will follow our heart connections
Our giving will reflect our state of heart
Our giving will be more than matched by God's supply.