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2 Corinthians 9:1-8
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Conduits, Not Containers

In keeping with the spirit of our *Celebration Sunday* next Sunday, I'd like to share with you a brief theology of offering.

It arises out of a simple premise: Why you give is every bit as important as what you give.

And, lest you think I'm only talking about money, let me hasten to say that what we have to offer God, is a lot more than money.

We have time and talent and energy and the creative gift of imagination.

In many ways, giving money is the easiest part. I can't tell you how many times someone has said to me, "I can't be there to help, but I'll be glad to send you a check." And I appreciate that!

But, sadly, the truth is, one of the quickest ways to get someone off our backs is to make a financial contribution.

So, yes, when I talk about a theology of offering, I am talking about money, but I also want us to think about everything we have to offer, not just money ... and the underlying question to it all is simply, why?

Why would you contribute a significant portion of your precious time and limited resources to the church (or to some favorite organization or charity)?

Only as you're clear about that, do you stand a good chance of becoming what Paul calls, "a cheerful giver."

This theology of offering comes from an article written by Dr. Philip McLarty and consists of three cardinal points, and the first is this:

All that we have and all that we are belong to God. We have nothing to offer except what God has entrusted to us. I think that makes sense, don't you?

Job said it best: *"Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."* (Job 1:21)

Several years ago, there was a clergy study group, and they were working on the *Parable of the Wicked Tenants* (our Gospel text for this morning).

To recap, the parable talks about a wealthy landowner who leases his vineyard to tenant farmers but, when he sends a servant to collect the rent, they beat the servant and send him home empty-handed.

This happens more than once. Finally, he sends his son to collect the rent, and they not only beat him, they put him to death.

You see, the tenants weren't satisfied to profit off the landowner's vineyard; they wanted to be the landowners themselves.

In the end, you could say that they got what was coming to them and, it wasn't the vineyard ... it was the landowner's wrath.

One of the pastors suggested that a good title for a sermon on this parable would be, "It's mine, and you can't have it!"

I almost titled my sermon that, but I didn't want to scare anyone!

But, that's the way we're likely to feel when we lose sight of God's sovereignty over our lives: It's mine, and you can't have it ... unless I say so. I'm in charge, I'm in control.

The truth is everything belongs to God – not only our property, but our health and vitality, our days on this earth, even our ability to accomplish the goals we set and the motivation to set them in the first place.

We are not owners, but stewards of what God has entrusted to us.

William How got it right when he penned the words: *We give Thee but Thine own, whate'er the gift may be; All that we have is Thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from Thee.*

And in case you didn't notice, that was the hymn we sang just prior to the offering!

This may be a bitter pill for you to swallow, but I'm here to tell you: It's not yours. It's God's. All that you have and all that you are – it belongs to God.

Once you're straight on this, you're free to move to the second point:

Our offering to God is but a response to God's prior offering to us – the countless blessings we've received – and, most especially, the offering of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

The Apostle John says in his first letter, "We love him, because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

In much the same way, we give because God has first given to us.

The story is told of a father took his little boy to a baseball game. On the way into the stands, he bought a package of peanuts and gave them to his son.

As the game got underway, he asked if he could have a peanut.

The little boy clutched the bag tightly and said, "No! They're mine!"

The father said, "O.K., I was just hoping you'd want to share."

The little boy thought for a moment, then held out the bag and said, "You can have some, Dad."

The father took a peanut and put his arm around his son and said, "You know, it's really not about peanuts; it's about us doing things together and sharing what we have with each other."

Here's how it is: God gives to us, and we give to others.

We're to be conduits of God's grace and love and, as long as we understand ourselves to be conduits, not containers, the blessings flow freely.

In fact, the more we give, the more we have to give. You can never out-give God.

It's when you start hoarding and stop giving ... when you start thinking of your assets as that which you've earned, or that which you deserve, and that which you need to hold on to ... that the problems begin.

I said this before, but it bears repeating: God not only gives us what we have, God gives us the ability and the motivation to have it.

Sure, it takes a lot of hard work to get ahead. It takes effort on our part and perseverance and the willingness to make sacrifices, but these are all part of the gift.

In school, it's the students who study hard to make good grades who benefit the most. It's the employee who works hard for a promotion who gains the respect of his peers.

If everything were given to us on a silver platter, we wouldn't appreciate it. It's only when we do our part that we're fulfilled.

The problem is, having put in the time and effort to succeed, we make the mistake of thinking that the fruits of success are ours to enjoy, not God's gifts to share with others.

Only as you make the connection between your resources and God's blessings will you ever be free to give gifts to others without resentment or expecting a gift in return.

Murdolph Walker was the shop teacher at East Chambers High School in Winnie, Texas. He was one those handymen who could do just about anything.

Consequently, teachers were always taking advantage of him. They'd ask him to make a coat rack for their classroom, or build a bookcase, or repair a broken desk.

No matter, he'd find some way to oblige. He always said yes, and he always said it with a smile.

And when the job was done and the teacher said thank you, he had a stock answer. He'd say, "Don't thank me, thank the man upstairs."

"Don't thank me, thank the man upstairs." That's the spirit of someone who knows the One from whom all blessings flow.

When that spirit lives in you, then you're able to go on to the third point of our little theology of offering, and that is:

The proper attitude for offering our gifts to God is not guilt or fear or any form of obligation or coercion, but humility, gratitude and an abiding sense of joy.

Over the years, I've heard well-meaning saints say some pretty dangerous things about why we ought to support the church. Here's one example:

"Now folks, we all know it takes a lot of money to keep the doors of the church open, and there are only so many of us, so it's important for everyone to do his part."

Of course, this is your basic country club approach: You add up all the expenses and divide them by the number of members, and you have what each one is expected to pay.

There's nothing wrong with it. It's just that this is not what it means to make an offering to God.

Neither is this, spoken by another well-meaning saint, who stood before the congregation with arms on his hips, elbows out, and said:

"Now I know that there are some of you sitting out there today who aren't paying your fair share, and you know perfectly well who you are!"

This is the guilt and shame-on-you approach, and it has nothing to do with making an offering to the Lord.

What you give to the church ought to be given of your own free will and not forced in any way.

The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians when he asked them to make an offering to aid the church in Jerusalem,

"Let each man give according as he has determined in his heart; not grudgingly, or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:6-8)

We talked about that last week, but it is good to reinforce it.

Let's be clear: There's no charge for membership in the church of Jesus Christ.

We don't pay dues. We're not assessed for our share of the expenses. We're not taxed in any way. (well, there is the per capita!)

We don't take even up a collection. Did you know that? We receive an offering.

There's a big difference:

A collection is a means of passing the hat to raise money; an offering is a means of praising God to show our appreciation for God's countless blessings.

A church treasurer said it best, when he wrote in his letter to the congregation,

"As we approach this important time in the life of our church, may we remember why we give: We give out of love and gratitude to God and out of love for each other."

Let's wrap it up this way: Why we give our money, our time, our talent, our creative energies is every bit as important what we give.

A theology of offering can help us be clear about why we give what we give. It is as simple as 1-2-3, and I invite you to make it yours, if it makes sense to you:

1. All that we have and all that we are belong to God. We have nothing to offer except what God has already entrusted to us.

2. Our offering to God is but a response to what God has given to us – the countless blessings we've received – and, most especially, the offering of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. So that ...

3. The proper attitude for offering our gifts to God is not guilt or fear or any form of obligation or coercion, but humility, gratitude and an abiding sense of joy.

If this is your motivation for giving, you're certain to feel good about it, and what's more, you're in for a real blessing.

I heard about a new book this week entitled, What Kind of World Do You Want? by Jim Lord. Jim Lord is a well-respected name in the field of fund-raising.

He's helped colleges and universities and non-profit organizations all over the world raise money for capital improvements and humanitarian goals.

Early on he discovered a fundamental principle that shaped his success: People and organizations – even whole countries – work best when they're driven by ideals.

He lists any number of examples: The eradication of smallpox, women's right to vote, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the invention of the Internet, to mention only a few of the biggies.

Each began with a tiny seed of idealistic thinking. He says, "Beneath the critical veneer of modern life lies a deep hidden reservoir of idealism."

So, instead of taking inventory of all the things we need and all the problems we're going to fix, Jim Lord would have us focus on the highlights:

What most stands out when you think about all the things we've done over the past year?

Was it a particular worship service, mission project, fellowship luncheon, work day?

What sorts of things do we do that make you want to come back for more?

What fuels your passion?

What would most like to do to strengthen the church in the coming year?

What would stir in you the most excitement about inviting others to join you?

We'll dedicate our pledges next Sunday. Before you fill out your pledge card, ask yourself,

- What is my dream for the church?
- What is God calling us to do and be?
- What most excites me about the future of this congregation?
- Would I most like to contribute to show my gratitude for the ways in which God has blessed me?

Remember the little boy and his father at the baseball game? The same holds true for us:

It's really not about peanuts; it's about doing things together and sharing what we have to the glory of God.

Amen!

Please join me in the unison “Stewardship Prayer” as printed on the back of your bulletin:

STEWARDSHIP PRAYER

My church is composed of people like me.

I help make it what it is.

It will be friendly, if I am.

It will be holy, if I am.

Its pews will be filled, if I help fill them.

It will do great work, if I work.

It will be prayerful if I pray.

It will make generous gifts to many causes, if I am a generous giver.

It will bring others into worship, if I invite and bring them in.

It will be a place of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, of compassion, charity, and mercy ...

... if I, who make it what it is, am filled with these same things.

Therefore, with the help of God, I now dedicate myself to the task of being all the things that I want my church to be.