



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

A DIFFERENT ATTITUDE

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 15, 2012

A Generous People

We are faithfully lifting up our nation in prayer during this critical year of 2012, seeking God's mercy and blessing on it. Many of us feel that we have strayed from our roots, and have followed other countries (notably, many in Europe) down a dangerous path. But as concerned as we are about America, it's important to remember the great strengths and blessings our country still enjoys. Among our priceless assets: the USA is still a dramatically spiritual and generous nation. The raw statistics themselves confirm this underlying greatness.

- Last year American individuals (not corporations) contributed well over \$300 billion to charitable causes.
- Over one-third of those gifts went to support local congregations like this one (other large categories of gifts were to educational institutions, health care, the arts, and community charities); and all churches in America, unlike in Europe, are entirely supported by contributions, not by taxes.
- It's not just "the rich" who give; 65% of households with incomes of less than \$100,000 per year gave at least 1% of their income.
- In addition to financial contributions, 62 million Americans donated time to a nonprofit last year.
- Every weekend 44% of Americans attend a service of worship, and nearly two-thirds attend at least once per month (this compares to just 27% of people in Britain worshipping once a month, 4% in Sweden and 3% in Russia).

Our great desire, then, is not to *change* our country, but, rather, to *be who we are*, return to our roots, and build on our great strengths. And as I speak for a few minutes this morning in my annual reminder of the principles of Christian stewardship and giving, I know I don't need to tell you something new, or motivate you to do something contrary to your nature. This is a very giving church. You have supported the Lord's work generously, even sacrificially. All we need to do is to keep building on a solid foundation, keep being who we are, and renewing our dedication to the qualities that have brought us here.

A Lesson from Tom Sawyer

One of the hobbies I enjoy in my free time is recreational reading—exploring books for the enjoyment they bring. And occasionally it's been fun to go back and re-read one of the classics, seeing it through fresh eyes. A few years ago I picked up *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by the great American writer Mark Twain. I had been required to read it way back in a high school English class, but it was much more enjoyable the second time.

Early in the novel, young Tom (who lives in a small Mississippi River town on the American frontier) is given a job to do by his Aunt Polly: whitewashing the entire fence around their yard. Tom begins the task with absolutely no energy or enthusiasm. He listlessly fills his brush and slaps it on the first fence post. At this pace it will take him all day in the hot sun.

But then, Mark Twain says, "At this dark and hopeless moment an inspiration burst upon him." He decided to take a positive attitude towards his task. He began to work at his whitewashing like an artist on canvas, whistling and smiling, applying himself with gusto. Soon his buddy Ben Rogers came along. "Too bad you have to work today, Tom," Ben says. "Oh, I wouldn't call it work," Tom replied. "It's a privilege. After all, it's not every day a boy gets to whitewash a fence."

Well, that put it in a new light for Ben. "Say, Tom, could I whitewash with you for awhile?" Soon another friend came along and saw the eager artists, and he, too, wanted to join in. Before long half the

kids in town had taken their turn with the brushes, and the job was done quickly. What did Tom learn that day? He learned that our attitude towards something makes all the difference.

And, of course, it's true. If we look upon something we're doing as a grinding task or a burdensome duty, we'll hate it and resent it. But if we see something as a challenge or a privilege, the task will go quickly and pleasantly—and others will be able to tell the difference.

Today we're thinking about one particular aspect of the life of the Christian: giving a portion of our wealth and blessings back to the Lord to be used to support His work in the world and to help others. This is a part of life about which some people have developed a negative attitude. They may even feel a bit like Tom did when Aunt Polly first handed him a bucket. They undertake it with reluctance or dread, or try to avoid it completely.

If you've been part of a church for any length of time, you have likely encountered the repeated teachings and examples in the Bible of God's people being directed and motivated to give generously. Tithes and offerings and gifts were part of a life of faith in both the Old and New Testaments. There's nothing new I can add. I simply want to encourage you to look at this responsibility and calling with a different and fresh attitude—the way Tom Sawyer did.

The Reading from Scripture

And to help renew our conviction, let's read together a short portion from a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to a congregation of his friends in the Greek city of Philippi.

How I praise the Lord that you are concerned about me again. I know you have always been concerned for me, but you didn't have the chance to help me. ¹¹Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. ¹³For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.

¹⁴Even so, you have done well to share with me in my present difficulty.

¹⁵As you know, you Philippians were the only ones who gave me financial help when I first brought you the Good News and then traveled on from Macedonia. No other church did this. ¹⁶Even when I was in Thessalonica you sent help more than once. ¹⁷I don't say this because I want a gift from you. Rather, I want you to receive a reward for your kindness.

¹⁸At the moment I have all I need—and more! I am generously supplied with the gifts you sent me with Epaphroditus. They are a sweet-smelling sacrifice that is acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.

²⁰Now all glory to God our Father forever and ever! Amen.

Philippians 4:10-20 (NLT)

Here's a bit of background for what we've just read. This is a portion of a private letter. Paul is writing to his friends what is really an extended "thank you" note. These friends had sent a letter with a generous check enclosed. And their gift was literally a life-saver to Paul, because he was living under house arrest in Rome at the time (charged with the serious crime of being a follower of Christ!), and he wasn't able to earn a living to pay his bills. What a blessing their contribution had been. Paul has no doubt that it was God who put it on their hearts to do so, because Paul had never asked them for help. Clearly the Apostle was not a high-pressure, manipulative fund-raiser. I like his approach. When he had a need, he told God about it—and then trusted that He would provide through motivating other people to help.

Attitude Changers

As we look more carefully at what the Apostle has written here, I believe we can identify in this short passage four "Attitude Changers" for a life of joyful giving.

When I give to the Lord, I am really sending a “thank you” note to Him for all He has done for me. It’s a great joy to receive a “thank you” note. Several years ago Jeanne and I had an opportunity to give a substantial gift to our nephew—not for Christmas or a birthday or a graduation, but just because we wanted to do so. And he wrote us a wonderful and precious “thank you” note expressing his gratitude. It felt great to receive it. He didn’t have to do it. The gift would still have been his. But it was a wonderful plus that cemented our relationship.

Whenever I make a gift to the Lord’s work, I am sending a “thank you” note to Him for His unbelievable, costly and abundant gifts to me. He has not only provided for my material needs, He has given me life itself, my body, my family, my friends, decades of years to live on this amazing planet, and opportunities for pleasure and fulfillment and joy. What do I “owe” God? There is no calculator on earth that could compute the value of His gifts to me. I can’t possibly repay Him. But I can say thank you. And when each week a check is put in the offering plate for 10% of our income, my wife and I feel privileged to be able to say “thanks” in that tangible way.

When I give to the Lord, I am participating in building something beyond myself, something that will last forever. Our long-ago brothers and sisters in Philippi decided to give up some luxuries or to live a bit more frugally for a while so that they could send a generous gift to help Paul. In doing that, providing for his ministry, they literally helped change the world—because what Paul wrote in Philippians and in the other letters composed during his Roman imprisonment provide the central backbone for the New Testament. Our ancient friends have had the joy for over 1900 years now in heaven to see the fruit of their sacrificial contributions. The Kingdom of God, the Church, has prevailed and spread and grown around the world.

When we give today, we are likewise doing our part to sustain that enterprise, the Church, which has been in existence longer than any nation, any corporation, any academic institution or any other non-profit you can find in the world. America is less than 2½ centuries old;

the Red Cross was founded less than 150 years ago during the Civil War; Coca-Cola, the most widely-known consumer product in the world, was founded in just 1886. All of these great institutions are mere infants compared to the Church of Jesus Christ.

It's rather exciting and ennobling to think that what we do is investing in something that will never end. One summer day in 1705 a parish priest of a congregation in London's east end took a stroll, and came upon a large construction site. He walked over to some of the stone masons, laboring in the midday sun. "What are you doing?" he asked the first. Without looking up, he grunted, "I'm just cutting these stupid stones." He asked a second, who replied, "I'm just trying to earn a living to put bread on my family's table." Then he approached a third stonecutter and asked him what he was doing. Standing up tall and proud, he replied, "I am helping Sir Christopher Wren build St. Paul's Cathedral to the glory of God." Only one of them could see his real purpose.

When we give to God's work, we are investing in His Kingdom on earth. I don't know if this particular building will be around as long as St. Paul's Cathedral; certainly it's much smaller and more modest. But I do feel confident that, as we all continue to grow in our faith and give back to God from His abundance, this church will—for as far as we can see into the future—be a place where young people and young families of southwest can find a place to anchor their spiritual lives, where new residents and part-time guests can find the Word of God proclaimed faithfully, where members and friends can experience a loving family of Christian sisters and brothers to support them in the good times and the hard times. We are thus leaving behind a legacy for those who will follow in our footsteps.

When I give to the Lord I am worshiping Him. This is, of course, why our gifts are made to the Lord during our gathering to praise and honor Him. It's a part of how we express our love—just as when we pray and when we sing. Paul specifically in verse 18 calls the gifts from his friends "a sweet-smelling sacrifice that is acceptable to God

and pleases Him.” Remember the traditions that came down from the Old Testament. Prior to Christ’s coming, priests would stand by the great altar in the Temple of Jerusalem daily. People who came to worship God would present to the priests for their sacrifice various lambs or goats or doves. The stench of this ritual barbecue could be pretty offensive, so it was customary for the worshipers to also sprinkle on the altar some incense to make it all smell sweet and pleasing. Paul is saying that a gift presented to the Lord out of love and worship to Him is like a sweet-smelling sacrifice.

But there is one significant difference. The sacrifices offered in the Temple were entirely consumed. But the gifts given in the New Testament era, down to today, are not consumed or destroyed but multiplied. Like the ripple effect in a pond when a stone is lobbed into it, so our work here can ripple out to touch others and impact them—often in ways we will never know (but God knows). The poor worshiper in the Old Testament times had to watch his offering burned up in smoke and flames. We get to see our gifts turned into thrilling ministries.

When I give to the Lord, I am acting most like my Heavenly Father. Paul reminds us in verse 19 that the very nature of God is to give. His Father-heart prompts Him to meet our needs with abundance. He, of course, does not always give us everything we want. No wise father or mother would, lest their child be hopelessly spoiled and ungrateful and feel entitled. Sometimes God says “no” to our wants. Sometimes He wants us to learn patience, to keep asking and trusting, until the time is right for His answer. And sometimes He simply gives us more than we could ever ask or expect.

This is the life-experience of the Apostle Paul. He is very candid and open with us: it hasn’t always been easy for him. Sometimes he’s had abundance and other times the cupboard has been bare. Sometimes his stomach has been full and other times it has been empty. Yet his conclusion is unmistakable. He has learned to trust in the Lord whatever his outer circumstances. “For I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need,” he says (Philippians 4:13—one of

those “Tebow verses”). I love that verse, and it has given me great strength and encouragement when I needed it most.

But what has impacted me the most in this passage of Philippians is the insight that when I put aside my natural self-centeredness and desire to cling to what I have, and when I give generously of myself to others, I become most like God, my Heavenly Father. And deep inside every child there is a longing to be like their parent. When I was a kid, I loved to go into the yard while my father cut the grass, and I would push my little toy lawn mower while pretending to be like my dad. My sister would arrange her dolls and serve them on a little toy table, imitating my mother as she prepared our family’s dinner. Children love to imitate their parents. How much more should we as children of the Greatest Father want to imitate His giving heart!

The Biblical Perspective

These are four principles that can help us to see the charitable or “stewardship” dimension of the Christian life in a fresh, accurate and biblical way—that **when I give to the Lord**:

- ◆ I am sending a “thank you” note to Him for all He has done for me.
- ◆ I am participating in building something beyond myself, something that will last forever.
- ◆ I am worshiping Him.
- ◆ I am acting most like my Heavenly Father.

If there is anyone here who has struggled at times with feeling like supporting God’s work is an oppressive and disagreeable duty, I understand. There will always be temptations to think in that way. But the Bible provides an eye-opening perspective. A tight-fisted grip on the material things of the world doesn’t really satisfy our inner souls.

God made us to be spiritual creatures. We can use and enjoy our possessions, but we must not let ourselves be possessed by them. Regularly giving back to God a comparatively small portion is one of the best ways to guard our hearts against the captivity of materialism. ■

