

Sermon Summary #22

Sacrificial Giving Smells Good to God! Philippians 4:14-23

There are over 2,300 references to finance and money in Scripture. Many would prefer that the Bible say nothing at all on the subject because any mention of it makes them feel uncomfortable. Some are uncomfortable because they feel *guilty* for not being generous and for having fallen far short in financial stewardship. Others feel uncomfortable because they think the only reason why a preacher would ever bring it up is when he wants to elevate his own personal standard of living.

Then there are those who are uncomfortable because they believe that among the topics you never talk about in public, such as politics and religion, money and how we spend it is right up there at the top of the list. In other words, for these people, it's *uncouth and undignified and a violation of personal boundaries* to talk about finances.

There's actually another sort of Christian who gets uncomfortable when money is mentioned. They aren't necessarily derelict in their stewardship of money. They aren't necessarily stingy or suspicious of leadership in the church. Their discomfort comes from a conviction that to speak of money is evidence of *a lack of faith*. If we simply had enough trust in God to provide, we wouldn't need to consider those hundreds and hundreds of Bible verses that talk about money. Whatever the church needs to thrive would simply flow in effortlessly and without fanfare.

Then, of course, there are a few people in the local church who aren't bothered at all or for any reason when money is mentioned. Their response is to say: "Bring it, brother! Preach it! Why have you waited so long and been so reluctant to speak on something so essential to Christian living?"

And that in itself raises a crucial question we need to address: *Is the subject of financial stewardship an essential element of Christian living?* Not optional, but essential. I can't imagine anyone who takes the Bible seriously saying: "No, it isn't." Let me pursue this point a bit further.

If you discovered that a close friend of yours, who professed to be a Christian, rarely if ever read the Bible and considered memorizing Scripture to be a waste of time, I take it for granted you would be concerned for them and would at the right time call them to account. Or perhaps they simply refused to share their faith with a non-Christian when given the opportunity. My hope is that you would challenge them regarding their overt disobedience to God's Word.

Would you not do the same thing if you discovered they were habitually lying and deceiving people? Would you not be concerned if it came to light that they were developing an emotional affair with a co-worker or if you heard them use profanity on a regular basis? What would be your response if it became evident they had largely stagnated in their relationship with Christ and had simply stopped growing, perhaps even reverting spiritually to old ways of sin and selfishness? Or maybe they've fallen prey to false doctrine and are espousing some novel idea that has no basis in the Bible.

I trust that all of us agree that these are matters of great concern and that they should be addressed. *So why do we put financial stewardship in a separate category and treat it as if it were an unmentionable topic?* Why does one's use of material resources get a free pass when these other issues, which are collectively referred to far less in Scripture than is money, are so openly talked about?

I suppose some may argue that there's something uniquely and intimately personal about money that puts it in a category unto itself. Really? More intimately personal than one's sex life or the way they speak about their spouse, or more personal and intimate than their prayer life or any other aspect of Christian experience?

The intriguing fact is that *most men will more readily talk with other men about their struggles with sex than they will their battle with materialism*. My goodness! If that doesn't shed some light on the nature of what we're dealing with today, nothing will.

Now, if I were going to address this subject in another context, perhaps in a third-world country, or in a church in downtown Manhattan, or in an Eastern European socialist setting, I might say things a bit differently. But here in OKC in 2013, I'm convinced that we approach the subject of financial stewardship in the Christian life the way we do, for two primary reasons. There are undoubtedly others, but let me highlight two.

First, our understanding of what we call "tithing" has a major impact on whether and how much we give as well as whether or not we believe giving is a biblical responsibility for every Christian. Let me explain.

Most of you know that I was raised as a Southern Baptist, and in the SBC nothing is more sacred than the concept of the "tithe" or the giving of 10% of one's income. I was taught this from my childhood and my parents were faithful tithers and thus, so too, were my sister and I. But as I studied the Scriptures I came to the conclusion that with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the New Covenant, under which Christians live, ***no specific percentage is mandated as the minimum or maximum of giving.*** [Please see the paper available at the Connect Counter, "Are Christians Obligated to Tithe?"]

The problem is that many conclude that if no specific percentage is mandated then giving itself isn't mandated. In other words, many, and I mean many, Christians have taken this truth and greatly, though quietly, rejoiced, using it as an excuse to give very little or nothing at all. You can almost hear them say: "Whew! That's a relief. God doesn't require a specific amount of my income. I guess that means we can buy that new house and go on that expensive vacation and I can finally purchase that new set of golf clubs."

Or they think: "Well, I guess this means giving isn't that important. If it were, God would have told us precisely how much to give. So, if I choose to give very little or perhaps even nothing at all, that's part of my freedom as a Christian who is no longer bound by OT law."

Trust me, that is precisely how people think. That is precisely how they *rationalize their stinginess*. That is precisely why ***throughout evangelical churches in America, the average Christian gives on average around 2.8% of their income to the local church.*** 2.8%!

People often ask me, "O.K., Sam; how much then *should* I give?" My response is two-fold.

I first ask, how much do you *want* to give? In light of what you know about the cross of Christ, in light of what you know about saving grace and heaven and the Holy Spirit and forgiveness and the beauty of Christ, in light of what you know about the reality of hell and the fact that people without Jesus Christ are going there, how much do you *want* to give?

If my first answer isn't adequate, I say: "Why don't you *start* with 10% and see where it might lead?" There's nothing especially sacred about 10%, but I think it's a great place to begin. "But Sam, I thought you said we *don't have* to give 10%." That's right, you don't. You actually have the tremendous privilege of giving more!

Second, our approach to financial stewardship has been warped and badly shaped by the flourishing in our churches of the prosperity gospel. The excessive self-indulgent lifestyle of certain so-called Christian leaders has put a sour taste in our souls when it comes to the subject of money and ministry in the local church.

Many are so offended by the shameless appeals for more and the endless round of offerings and the opulent lifestyle of those to whom the money is given that they find it almost impossible to think about the subject, much less speak about it. And thus they are upset when someone actually tries to present a biblical perspective on the issue of financial stewardship. In fact, this is precisely why I have to take so much time, as I now am, to justify even addressing the subject in a sermon!

Let me say one more thing and then we'll dive into Philipians 4. My dad was a banker for the first 35 years of his working life. He often said to me, "Give me five minutes in a man's checkbook and I'll tell you everything you need

to know about him. I'll tell you whether or not he loves God, his wife, and his children. I'll tell you whether or not he really believes the Bible. I'll tell you what he values and what he hates, what he believes and how he spends his time. I'll tell you whether he can be trusted or whether he lies; how he'll respond in a crisis and in times of ease." I use to think my dad was exaggerating, but no more.

When I asked him how he could be so certain of all this, he quoted to me Matthew 6:21 - "**Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**" His point was spot on target. Jesus is telling us that how one uses one's money and material resources will tell you everything you need to know about the character and conduct of the person, be they male or female, young or old.

A Reminder of the Context

It's been a few weeks since we were in Philippians 4, so let me briefly remind you of what is happening in this closing paragraph of the book.

What you and I are reading in Philippians 4:10-20, is Paul's handwritten "Thank You" note to the church at Philippi. Earlier in chapter one, verse five, Paul referred to the "partnership in the gospel" that the Philippian church had entered into with him. From the beginning of his ministry in Macedonia they had joined with him, not merely by praying for him or merely agreeing with his theology but also by supplying him with financial resources so he could do the work God had called him to do.

Most likely, the Philippians had entrusted to Epaphroditus the task of traveling from Philippi to Rome carrying with him the money they had contributed to support Paul in ministry. My guess is that Paul, upon coming to the conclusion of his letter, reached over and took the pen from Epaphroditus and insisted on writing this final paragraph in his own hand. Thus what we are reading is not only an explanation of his theology of financial stewardship but also a formal thanksgiving to them, together with an expression of his deep affection for them as his fellow-believers in Jesus.

Five Crucial Observations

(1) You will recall Paul's vigorous explanation in vv. 11-13 of his ability through Christ to live independently of external financial assistance, to spiritually thrive in both poverty and prosperity. But he doesn't want his comments to be misinterpreted, as if he were saying he is indifferent to what the Philippians had done for him. Although he is profoundly grateful for their generosity, he isn't dependent upon it.

Paul wants them to know that because of their financial gift they have come to "share" in his "trouble" (v. 14). The fact that they gave so much, so often, proves that when Paul hurt, they hurt. When he grieved, they grieved. ***Paul interprets their financial commitment as a deep and personal identification with him in his labors.*** This is similar to what we saw in 3 John 8 where those who support others in ministry become "fellow workers for the truth." It didn't matter that the Philippians were separated from Paul by more than 800 miles.

(2) The second thing I want you to consider is the remarkable fact that the Philippian church was only a few months old! These were brand new, baby Christians! Yet Paul says they had already embraced the responsibility of generous financial stewardship and had on several occasions sent a monetary gift to him (vv. 15-16).

This ought to forever put to rest the objection I often hear: "Well, we can't expect new Christians to give. They aren't mature enough. They don't understand enough of the Bible." Nonsense!

And we must never forget that when Paul refers to the incredible generosity of the "Macedonians" in 2 Corinthians 8-9, he's talking primarily about the church and Christians in Philippi (the churches in Thessalonica and Berea would also have been included). Listen again to what he said about them, as a way of encouraging the Corinthian Christians to give generously to the poverty-stricken saints in Jerusalem.

"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify,

and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us” (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

(3) My third observation relates to what Paul says in v. 17. He is clearly concerned that his eager acknowledgement of their generosity might be mistaken for a veiled request for more. So explains his true motivation in expressing his gratitude.

Paul’s point here is that *what really gets his spiritual juices flowing is not what he gets from their giving but what they gain!* Read that again: *“I seek the fruit that increases to your credit”* (v. 17b). Paul clearly regards their gift to him as a spiritual investment entered as a credit to their account, an investment that he envisions will pay them rich dividends.

But what precisely is the “fruit” that “increases” to their “credit”? If Paul is not saying that when Christians give, God promises to make them rich, what **is** he saying? What **is** the fruit that will come to them? I think he has several things in mind.

First, we are in fact told in Scripture that if we give we will get, but not in the sense promoted by advocates of the prosperity or health and wealth gospel. Paul says in 2 Cor. 9:6-11,

“The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. . . . He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God” (2 Corinthians 9:6-11).

God gives to those who give but not in order that they may become personally wealthy and hoard their money or squander it on excessive luxuries. *God gives to those who give so that those who give might be able to give even more!* We are **channels** and **conduits** of God’s generosity, not **reservoirs!**

Second, there is the approval and affirmation from God when he sees our sacrifice and generosity. God is *pleased* with gracious giving! This will be Paul’s point in v. 18b (“pleasing to God”).

Third, there is the fruit of increased joy that comes to the giver when he/she experiences partnership in spreading the gospel.

Fourth, there is the assurance that God will give them greater responsibilities and even more productive opportunities. In other words, God says: “Demonstrate to me that you are faithful in the small things and I will entrust more to you in even greater things.”

Fifth, part of the “fruit” is increased reward in heaven. If you think it is sinful to give with a view to gaining a heavenly reward, you haven’t listened closely to Jesus (see Matt. 6:3-4) or Paul (1 Timothy 6:18-19).

Sixth, there is also the fruit of enriched fellowship and intimacy with the ones to whom you give.

Seventh, there is finally the indescribable fruit that comes from knowing God is glorified when people give him thanks for your generosity.

(4) My fourth observation comes when Paul shifts his metaphors in v. 18. Before this he has used the terminology of banking and business, but now he employs the language of OT ritual sacrifice and the priesthood. And what he says in doing so is nothing short of shocking.

Most of you probably think of money as just that, money. It’s nothing more than a medium of exchange, a way of purchasing what you want. It hardly suggests anything spiritual in nature. But Paul begs to differ. When Christians

give generously and sacrificially to the work of ministry their gift is nothing less than *“a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God”* (v. 18).

During the time of the OT, God was portrayed as delighting in the smell of the sacrifices offered by Israel. When an offering was made it was to be burned on the altar, the smoke of which would rise to heaven as a pleasing aroma to God (see Exod. 29:18, 25, 41). My favorite smells growing up were those of fried pork chops on Saturday night, and the fragrance of freshly cut grass on a baseball field, and the mint from our back yard.

Paul wants you to picture God looking upon our offering boxes as you walk by, dropping in your contribution, or each time you sign up to give through automatic debit: “Sniff, sniff. Mmmm. I caught a whiff of that! Whew! Sweet!” Generous, sacrificial giving by Christians smells good to God! Reluctance to give, or even outright refusal to do so, also smells to God, but I won’t explain precisely how. I’ll leave it to your imagination.

But there’s more. He goes on to describe their financial gift as a “sacrifice” that is “acceptable and pleasing” to God (v. 18b). Just as in the OT Levitical sacrifices, where God was “satisfied” and “pleased” by the offerings of the people, so too his heart is warmed and filled with joy at the generosity of his people today.

How else can it be said? There is nothing mundane or merely material in sacrificial giving to the cause of Christ. It may not feel special to you (although it should). It may not smell good to you. But as we saw last week in 3 John, God says it is a “faithful” thing, a “beautiful” thing, an expression of “love,” as he also now here in Philippians 4 says it is a sweet-smelling aroma that makes God happy.

Dear friend, if knowing the effect on God of your generosity, not to mention knowing the immeasurable sacrifice Christ made to save you from eternal damnation, and you are still not stirred to regular and sacrificial giving, nothing else I can say will make a difference. You are the one who stands to lose the “fruit” that would otherwise abound to your account.

“But Sam, I’m so *afraid of poverty*. I’m terrified that if I give I won’t have enough to get by.” I know the fear you’re describing. Almost everyone does. And Paul knew it too. That’s why he says what he does in v. 19, which leads me to my final point.

(5) Paul deliberately repeats in v. 19 two words used in the previous verses. In v. 18 he said “I am well *supplied*.” Now in v. 19 he declares that God shall “*supply*” every need. Same word. Again, in v. 16 he referred to his “*needs*” being met by their gift. Now in v. 19 it is God who will supply every “*need*” of the Philippians, and every need of yours and mine.

I think Paul is telling us two things by this. He first wants us to understand that if we find in our hearts the desire to give, he will more than amply supply the resources to do it. You’ve heard the old saying, “You can’t out give God.” That’s his point. *You can’t give beyond God’s ability to provide you with what is needed*. He also wants us to know that the “every need” you and I have is also spiritual and emotional in nature. He’s talking not only about financial supply but also the strength and endurance and hope necessary to persevere in the face of hardship.

“But Sam, are you sure God really has enough to go around?” Well, let’s listen to what Paul says. He declares that God will supply us “according to his riches” in Christ Jesus. If I may be allowed to render this as I think Paul intended: *“God will gloriously supply every need of yours in proportion to his eternal and infinite riches in Jesus Christ.”* He doesn’t give “out of” his riches, as when a millionaire donates \$100 to a local charity. No, he gives “*according to*” his wealth, which is to say, on a scale befitting his wealth, in a manner that reflects how infinitely wealthy God is. Simply put, all our needs combined cannot even begin to plumb the depths of God’s infinite resources to meet them.

This assurance of God’s faithful supply is no justification for being lazy or disregarding God’s commands to be generous. Yes, God was taking care of Paul’s every need, and he will take care of ours. But how did he do it? He supplied Paul’s every need through the obedient, diligent, responsible, active, loving financial generosity provided by the Philippians! God uses people. He employs means. He doesn’t drop cash or coin from heaven. He uses us! Consider the privilege.