

Philippians 4:14-20

Joyful Generosity #6, November 19, 2017

Theme: Regular and Intentional

INJ Joyful Generosity has been a theme throughout this Fall, encouraging us to give thanks to God in everything, and also to give thanks to God in our congregation. There is an interesting contrast between God's people in the Old Testament and we in New Testament times. Back then, God told his people when and how much to give to him. He commanded ten percent and listed the types of sacrifices they could offer. In a way, that was easy: Follow the rules that are specifically laid out.

But now that Christ has come, God doesn't make us follow rules for our Joyful Generosity. He gives us freedom to thank him generously and proportionately and cheerfully, as a first fruit offering for his grace. Freedom doesn't make it easier, does it? Now we get to examine our motives and evaluate our actions constantly. Is Jesus at the center of it all? In that way God gets more than money from us; he gets our hearts!

Our hearts of faith give thanks to God in all things. Whatever we do, it is in service to our Savior. Paying taxes and supporting our family and doing what is required and having fun – with all of it we honor Jesus who has forgiven our sin. We are especially eager to give thanks to God at our congregation, where we hear the Word and receive the Sacraments. Today we consider that when we are intentional and regular with our offerings, God is praised. The congregation in Philippi was noted for intentional and regular giving. Such a pattern becomes a blessing to God's church.

One of the reasons that Paul wrote to the Philippians was to thank them for the gifts they had sent to support his mission work. Compare the Philippians with the congregation at Corinth. The Corinthians were wealthy and the Philippians were poor. The Philippians gave to the needy saints in Jerusalem beyond their ability. They begged for the opportunity and "their overflowing joy and their deep poverty overflowed into an abundance of their generosity." The Corinthians had said they were going to give to an offering, but they just didn't seem to get it done.

What was the difference? It seems that the Corinthians had good intentions, but the Philippians were more intentional. What I mean is that the Corinthians wanted to do something, but they never sat down and planned how they could get it done. Paul even shared a plan with them, which was to set aside part of their income on the first day of every week.

Yet they never got into the routine of planning what they would give and then regularly doing it.

Our sinful nature has the same issues, and not just with our offerings! One of the Reformation 500 emphases is Sola Scriptura: only the Bible. You want to read the Book of God's Grace! So how can you make it happen? You need to have a plan. It is a big book! If you don't have a plan on when and where and what you are going to read each day, you won't make it very far. Plan what you will read. A plan still needs determination to accomplish it. So you plan to read something each day, but then a whole week passes and you read nothing! How can that happen? You are fighting against your stubborn sinful nature. The devil doesn't want you to stay connected to the Word. He will distract you any way he possibly can.

The same is true of your Joyful Generosity. Do you have a plan for what you want to give to the Lord? Does your plan include not only how much, but when and how? Will you set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income? Will it be a first fruit gift? Remember that you are fighting against your sinful nature all the time, and the devil doesn't want you to give thanks to the Lord. The devil doesn't want God's church to have the resources it needs to do the Lord's work. He would rather have us cut corners than expand our gospel ministry. He is always tempting us to spend more than we can afford and then give less to the Lord.

We can be thankful that God doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. Where we have been stingy, God is generous. Where we have been inconsistent, God is faithful and regular. Did the sun come up this morning? God's mercies are new to us every morning! Did the farmers bring in a crop this fall? Has there ever been a fall when there was no crop? Has God put food on your table this week? I would challenge you to remember a time when there was no food to eat. God provides our daily bread!

More than that. Has God forgiven your sins today? He has. We confess in Martin Luther's explanation of the Third Article, "In this Christian Church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers." Do you believe this? "This is most certainly true." You wouldn't sleep at night if you didn't believe that God forgave all your sins in Jesus. God's mercies are indeed new every morning! God's forgiveness for you is both intentional and regular, which is why you can trust in him and not be afraid.

When you give your offerings intentionally and regularly, like the Philippians did, you are reflecting God's abundant and faithful grace. You have received his blessing in your life, and you, in turn, become a blessing to God's church. "Nevertheless, you did well by becoming partners with me in my affliction. You Philippians know that in the

beginning of your experience with the gospel, when I left Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. Even while I was in Thessalonica, you sent help more than once for my needs." The Philippians' regular gifts had a large impact on Paul's gospel ministry. He didn't have to ask for anything from the people to whom he was preaching. He supported himself meagerly by making tents. Regular gifts from the Philippians freed Paul to spend more of his time preaching the gospel.

Friends, your church is blessed when you support this ministry with your regular and intentional gifts. It always amazes me that we are able to do the large amount of ministry that is before us. We have had lean times, but we have supported our called workers. We have given our gifts to the Synod for worldwide work. Our God has been generous to us! We have been generous in our thanksgiving, too! Paul thanked the Philippians for their regular support of his ministry. Thank you for your generous and cheerful support of St. Luke's.

Not only is your church blessed through you, but the blessing also goes the other way. Your intentional and regular giving is a blessing that comes back to you. Paul says, "Not that I am seeking a gift, but I am seeking the fruit that adds to your account. I have ... received ... the things that came from you, a sweet-smelling fragrance, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God." What is God saying: "I am seeking the fruit that adds to your account"? We give from thankful hearts and we are not looking for anything in return. We are not trying to earn salvation or God's favor. Our gifts are our grateful response to God's grace. So how are they fruit that adds to our account?

Look at it this way: A grandmother might buy Christmas gifts for her grandchildren. The grandchildren might send cards back, thanking her for those gifts. My children drew their own cards. There were stick person drawings on the cards and words scrawled and misspelled, yet Granni took those heartfelt expressions of thanks, which were hardly a thing of beauty, and displayed them. When the grandchildren visited, they could see that Granni accepted their thanks with joy.

The point is that your gifts to God's ministry are noticed. If God had a refrigerator door and magnets, he would put your gifts there and look at them every day. Your gifts of thanks give God joy and great pleasure, for Paul says they are "a sweet smelling fragrance, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God." When we get to heaven, will we see our expressions of thanks stuck to God's refrigerator? The fruit of our faith adds to our account. People often say it is more blessed to give than to receive.

There is another way in which you are blessed by your regular gifts. Paul writes, "And my God will fully supply your every need, according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Why does Paul say "my God" and not "your God"? He says "my God" because he has experienced how God keeps his promises. Just before the verses of our text, he says that he had learned the secret of being content whether he had a lot or not much, because he could do all things through Jesus, who gave him strength. He had experienced personally God's love and care and he was confident that the Philippians would see it as well.

You heard a similar promise in the lesson from Malachi this morning: "'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.'" If you wait until you have an abundance of money left over in your checkbook before you give to the Lord (when does that happen?) you will not experience the truth of these passages. You will only be giving God what you have left over. God is not honored with leftovers!

But as a regular and intentional giver, you plan your gifts. Test God to meet all your needs! Be generous and proportionate. Does "regular" mean you fill the envelope each week and drop it in the plate? Or that you only use the ones that match with your pay period? Or that you use online bill pay and the check is mailed at the set time? Will you consider gifts from your estate or your investments in your will? How about your IRS refund? Can your insurance or property be gifted? It takes planning and preparation to do these things! God is honored when we plan to be regular and intentional with our gifts, because we do it from a heart of faith. The Lord has forgiven our sins! We have a Savior! Now we plan and act boldly, trusting him to provide for all our needs. That's Joyful Generosity.

God's promises are really the focus, aren't they? Not our gifts, but his. He sent his Son to die and rise again. He sends his Holy Spirit to us through the Word we hear and the Sacraments we receive. God is gracious and he is generous and he is faithful. We are clothed in his righteousness! We are heirs of heaven! Paul says that God will fully supply your every need, according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. He has done it, and he always will. I pray that God's blessings overflow to you as you are regular and intentional with your thanksgiving. You are a blessing to your church. God gives you blessing by your generosity. With Paul we exclaim: "Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever!" We give thanks to him with our Joyful Generosity. SDG Amen.