

Joyful Generosity: God First! My Best!

A sermon based on 1 Corinthians 16:1-2.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week, as we began our stewardship sermon series on “Joyful Generosity,” you learned one important truth...no matter how much you have, no matter what you have...you have enough. You have it all...an abundance. You are rich in the grace of God, who has gone even beyond that grace in Jesus to give you everything you have and everything you are today. And that means you are wealthier even than the richest American ever – again, J.D. Rockefeller – with his hundreds of billions of dollars...who, in his generosity, gave away hundreds of millions of dollars...quite a bit of seed money, if you can recall. Joyful generosity!

Now I know, you might be thinking, “I don’t have hundreds of billions of dollars.” Well, why not? What have you been doing? Just kidding! Of course we don’t have three hundred billion dollars. Not even a hundred million! Yet, God today has some very practical giving advice for all of us, no matter where we’re at. It starts with what Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, **“Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.”**

Paul was in the middle of collecting a big offering for the people in Jerusalem...kind of like a mission offering. He wanted all the congregations to participate, so he shared some of the most practical giving advice in the Bible. He said: **“On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income.”**

Now, if you can believe it, we’re going to spend the whole sermon just talking about that one verse! The first words to jump out at me are, **“Each one of you should set aside a sum of money.”** How many people were to participate in the offering? **“Each one of you.”** You know, the way the IRS works today, you can earn quite a bit of money before you’re expected to pay income taxes. That’s not the way God works. Giving to God isn’t just for the rich or well-off. It’s for **“each one of you.”** Every single person has been blessed by God with something. So, every single person has something to give, including **“each one of you!”**

Here’s how: **“On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money.”** Sometimes you hear the excuse, “If I give my money to God, I won’t have anything left!” God doesn’t ask you to give everything to him, nor does he expect it, like we saw with the widow in our gospel who gave her two copper coins – everything she had. What he does ask you, though, is to give to him first. God knows you’re not J.D. Rockefeller with hundreds of billions of dollars. He knows that you need money for lots of things. That’s why he gives you money! God doesn’t ask you for all, but he does ask you for first. On the first day of the week, before everything else, the Christians were to set a sum of money aside for God. God loves to hear people say, “You first!”

In the Bible there’s a concept called “firstfruits.” Firstfruits giving was one of God’s commands to the Israelites. When they started harvesting their crops, they gave the first crops to God. They didn’t give all their crops to God, but they said, “You first!” When new animals were born, they didn’t sacrifice them all to God, but they always gave God the firstborn, like Abel in our first lesson. “You first!” Even when a

firstborn child was born, they obviously didn't offer their child, but they gave a special offering for that first child. "You first!" Not all, but first! What was the whole point of firstfruits? It made them trust in God. Even after a long winter, they gave the first grain to God. More would come. They trusted in God. "You first!"

Do you know why God says, "First." How many of you have a lot of money left at the end of a pay period? I'm guessing I'm not the only one who doesn't. "God first" easily becomes "God gets what's left!" When you talk to a financial planner about retirement, what does he/she recommend? Pay yourself first! Take some off the top and put it in your retirement account. That's the only way it's going to happen, because if you don't do it first, how much is going to be left? You first!

That's how God asks us to give. For us today, it might not be every Sunday, but with every blessing, God wants us to say back to him, "You first!" When your check gets deposited in the bank, say to God, "You first!" Before the bills. Before the mortgage. Even before the IRA. "You first!" Earlier we recited together God's promise: **"Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine"** (Proverbs 3:9-10). God doesn't ask you to give him everything. He asks you to trust him enough to give to him first.

Well, does that describe your life? Do you say to God with a smile, "You first!" Or do all the other things we feel we need overwhelm us—the house payment, the car payment, the school payment, the clothes, the bills? And then, without realizing it, what's left? I had a professor who would often talk about the "tyranny of the urgent." The seemingly "urgent" things in life easily push out the important things in life. God doesn't ask for all. He asks for the first. Are you willing to say to God, "You first"?

Do you like leftovers? I really do, except for a couple things, like leftover taco salad. Meat, sauce, cheese, lettuce, chips—all together: so good! The leftovers—not so much. We've learned you have to eat it all the first day. Old lettuce and soggy chips and once melted cheese all stuck together—it's the same stuff, same ingredients, but it just isn't the same. What is it we're offering God? "You first" or "Here's the leftovers"? Even if, in the end, it might be the same stuff, it's not the same. "You first" and "leftovers" are a world apart.

Friends, what's amazing is that God is the one Father who never gives us leftovers. Remember how I said God commanded his people to give the firstfruits? That's exactly what God has done for you and me. God gave us his firstborn. He gave us Jesus. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"** (John 3:16). A confirmation student asked, "If Jesus was innocent, why did he die?" That's a good question! Jesus died because he put you first. For every time I've put me first, Jesus said, "You first!" when he died to forgive my sins on the cross. God invented the phrase "You first!" God has put you and me first, even when it came to his own Son. So how can we not say to God, "You first!"

"You first." But how much? That's the other big question, right? How much should I give to put God first? Here's what God says: **"On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money"**—now here's the key—**"in keeping with his income."** Did you notice? God doesn't give a number, because every person is different. He doesn't want us to compare. He doesn't want us to give what someone else gives. He wants us to look at what he's given us and give in keeping with our

income. So how much? Give your best, in keeping with what you have. It's going to be different for each of us, but the attitude is the same. God first. My best.

I want you to imagine a scenario. What if you went to the bank to get a mortgage for a new house...let's say \$200,000. What if the banker looked at your salary and your credit and finally said, "I'll give you \$200,000 on one condition: You have to pay me back whatever you want." What would you say? I'd probably say, "Did I say I needed \$200,000? I meant to say \$500,000!" Would you ever say, "What? You want me to pay back some of what you gave me? This isn't fair!" No, I think you'd say, "This is a pretty cool bank! This is way more than I deserve! I want to give back my best." Isn't that the way it is with God?

Let's think a little more about that phrase "***in keeping with his income.***" God is a big believer in percentage giving. In the Old Testament, he gave his people a percent—ten percent or a "tithe." That was the law for the Israelites. Ten percent of crops, herds, fruit, everything. They were to look at what God had given them and give back ten percent. Some churches demand ten percent today. The problem is that tithe is part of God's Old Testament laws meant just for the Old Testament Israelites. If a church demands ten percent today, it should also have daily sacrifices, celebrate the Sabbath, not eat pork, because all those laws go together. Today God doesn't demand ten percent, but he still tells us to give a percent "***in keeping with his income.***"

When we hear we don't have to give ten percent anymore, there's often a problem. A lady asked a pastor if his church demands that people give ten percent. He said, "No!" She replied, "Good, because I don't want to give ten percent. Who wants to give ten percent to God? I have a lot of other things I want to spend my money on!" When we hear we don't have to give ten percent, do we often think the same? "Now I don't have to give much at all!" That's our sinful nature talking. That's not faith! God doesn't force us to give a certain percent. Instead, he says, "Give your best from your heart." The truth is, if you don't want to give, don't give at all. God doesn't want your money without your heart.

But I know God has your heart. You love Jesus. You want to give back to God. So how much? Remember this: "God first. My best." I can't tell you what your best is, other than that God wants you to think percentages. He wants you to look at everything he has given you and decide what percent you want to give back to him. That means our offerings will change. Sometimes our incomes go up. Sometimes they go down. So will our offerings to God. If you don't know where to start, try using that ten percent as a guide. If you make \$50,000 a year, ten percent would be about \$100 a week. If you make \$100,000, it'd be \$200 a week. If you make \$20,000, it'd be \$40 a week. Could you give that much? Could you give more than that? Could that be something you can work your way up to? I'm not telling you that's what you must give. But I want you to think about it. What's my percentage right now? And does that put God first? Is that my best?

Next week, we'll hear about King David's best ...spoiler, it was five billion dollars. The widow in our gospel...her best was two little coins. People mocked her, but when Jesus saw her, he praised her in front of everyone. She gave a few pennies. David gave five billion dollars. In God's sight, they both gave exactly the same! That's what makes God's way of giving offerings so great. He doesn't want you to compare yourself to anyone else. He doesn't hold everyone to the same standard, because he has

blessed us all in different ways. He just reminds us every person has been blessed. Everyone has something to give. God first. My best.

I want to finish by sharing with you a really cool connection in the Bible. I told you about this practice of “firstfruits.” The first of everything always went to God. There was also a special Festival of Firstfruits at the beginning of their harvest season. When the first sheaves of grain began to ripen in the spring, they were to take them to the temple during Passover week on the day after the Sabbath—on a Sunday. They couldn’t eat those first heads of grain. They were God’s—the firstfruits. They gave those to God and trusted more would follow.

Do you know what big event happened on Firstfruits Sunday? Easter! Jesus rose from the dead on the Sunday after the Passover. As Jesus was rising from the dead, all Jerusalem was filled with people bringing their firstfruits to God. Here’s what God says about it: ***“For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”*** Remember the whole point of firstfruits? When you see the firstfruits, you trust more will follow. So why did Jesus rise from the dead on Firstfruits Sunday? When you see Jesus rise, you know more will follow. Everyone who believes in him—me, you. We have a great God—a great God who has put us first in every way. So, we joyfully say back to God, “You first. My best.” Amen.