

II Corinthians 8:1-15
October 31, '10

"GENEROUS GRACE = GENEROUS GIVING"

(Before Scripture)

OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING IS TAKEN FROM PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN THE CITY OF CORINTH.

IT'S A PASSAGE THAT NEEDS TO BE EXPLAINED TO BE UNDERSTOOD.

PAUL HADN'T BEEN TO THE CHURCH IN CORINTH IN OVER A YEAR.

IN THE TIME THAT HAD PASSED SINCE HE WAS LAST THERE, ALL KINDS OF DIFFICULTIES HAD ARISEN IN THE CHURCH & PAUL'S AUTHORITY WAS BEING QUESTIONED.

ONE OF THE THINGS THAT HE HAD DONE WHEN HE WAS THERE IS ASK THE CORINTHIANS TO TAKE UP AN OFFERING FOR THE MOTHER CHURCH IN JERUSALEM.

THE CHURCH THERE WAS STRUGGLING & MANY OF THE PEOPLE WERE LIVING IN POVERTY.

THE CORINTHIANS HAD INITIALLY BEEN ENTHUSIASTIC BUT IN THE ENSUING YEAR, THAT ENTHUSIASM HAD WANED.

IN THIS LETTER, PAUL IS ENCOURAGING THEM TO REVIVE THEIR EXCITEMENT TO GIVE OF THEMSELVES ON BEHALF OF THE JERUSALEM CHRISTIANS.

HE TELLS THEM OF SOME OF THE OTHER CHURCHES IN MACEDONIA WHO HAD TAKEN UP OFFERINGS EVEN THOUGH THEY THEMSELVES WERE LIVING IN POVERTY.

HE TELLS THEM OF BELIEVERS WHO WERE LITERALLY BEGGING HIM FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO GIVE.

HE URGES THE CORINTHIANS TO FOLLOW SUIT.

LISTEN TO WHAT HE SAYS IN II CORINTHIANS 8:1-15.

(After Scripture)

I RAN ACROSS A BOOK RECENTLY THAT I FOUND VERY EXCITING.

THE AUTHORS PROVIDED INFORMATION ON A VERY BROAD SCALE THAT I'VE ALWAYS WONDERED ABOUT IN A MUCH MORE LIMITED WAY.

NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRY, I CAN NEVER COME TO THIS TIME OF YEAR – THE TIME WHEN WE GIVE THOUGHT TO OUR FINANCIAL GIVING TO THE CHURCH – WITHOUT ASKING THE "WHAT IF" QUESTION.

"WHAT IF EVERYONE IN THE CHURCH TITHED? WHAT IF EVERYONE IN THE CHURCH GAVE A TENTH OF THEIR INCOME TO THE LORD?"

WHILE SOME PEOPLE MAY FANTASIZE ABOUT WHAT THEY WOULD DO IF THEY WON THE LOTTERY, I FANTASIZE ABOUT WHAT WE WOULD DO HERE AT EASTMINSTER IF EVERYONE TITHED.

FRANKLY, I THINK MY FANTASY IS FAR MORE FUN.

WHAT I FOUND EXCITING IN THE BOOK I MENTIONED IS A FAIRLY RELIABLE SET OF STATISTICS ON THE CURRENT GIVING PRACTICES OF AMERICAN CHRISTIANS & THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE WORLD IF THOSE STATISTICS WERE CHANGED & AMERICAN CHRISTIANS BECAME TITHERS.

THEY PROVIDE PAGE AFTER PAGE AFTER PAGE OF POSSIBILITIES.

THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT OUR WORLD WOULD BE A QUITE DIFFERENT PLACE IF THAT WERE TO HAPPEN.

THAT BEARS OUT WHAT I HAVE ALWAYS CONCLUDED IN MY LIMITED FANTASY ABOUT A SINGLE CHURCH'S GIVING HABITS.

OUR WORLD – RIGHT HERE IN EVANSVILLE – WOULD BE A QUITE DIFFERENT PLACE.

BUT THINK ABOUT THAT.

IF EVANSVILLE WOULD BE A QUITE DIFFERENT PLACE IF A SINGLE CHURCH – EASTMINSTER – WOULD FIND ALL OF ITS MEMBERS TITHING – WHAT WOULD OUR COMMUNITY BE LIKE IF THAT WERE TO HAPPEN IN EVERY CHURCH IN EVANSVILLE?!

THE THOUGHT OF IT IS STAGGERING, ISN'T IT?!

THE PROGRAM WE'RE FOLLOWING THIS YEAR IN STEWARDSHIP IS CALLED "CONSECRATION SUNDAY."

A WHILE BACK, IN OUR NEWSLETTER, WE INTRODUCED THE PROGRAM & PROVIDED A DEFINITION OF "CONSECRATED."

IT SIMPLY MEANS "*A SOLEMN COMMITMENT OF YOUR LIFE OR YOUR TIME TO SOME CHERISHED PURPOSE.*"

WHEN YOU GIVE YOURSELF TO JESUS CHRIST, YOU ARE CONSECRATED – YOU HAVE MADE A SOLEMN COMMITMENT OF YOUR LIFE & YOUR TIME TO THE CHERISHED PURPOSE OF HIS CLAIM UPON YOU.

WE DISCOVERED, IN LOOKING AT THE CONSECRATION SUNDAY MODEL, THAT IT FITS VERY WELL INTO THINGS WE HAVE ALREADY BEEN DOING IN STEWARDSHIP.

IN FACT, IT FITS SO WELL, THAT YOU MAY NOT HAVE NOTICED THINGS BEING MUCH DIFFERENT THIS YEAR FROM YEARS PAST.

THE EMPHASIS IN CONSECRATION SUNDAY IS ON THE NEED OF THE GIVER TO GIVE FOR YOUR OWN SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT RATHER THAN ON THE CHURCH TO RECEIVE.

THAT'S SOMETHING WE'VE BEEN DOING FOR YEARS HERE AT EASTMINSTER.

WE WANT YOU TO ASK "*WHAT IS GOD CALLING ME TO DO?*" RATHER THAN "*WHAT DOES THE CHURCH NEED TO PAY ITS BILLS.*"

THERE ARE A COUPLE OF THINGS THAT ARE DIFFERENT IN OUR APPROACH THIS YEAR.

FIRST OF ALL, YOU WON'T RECEIVE A COMMITMENT CARD IN THE MAIL AS YOU HAVE TRADITIONALLY.

NEXT SUNDAY, ON CONSECRATION SUNDAY, YOU'LL RECEIVE YOUR CARD IN WORSHIP.

IT'S A SIMPLE WAY OF SAYING THAT OUR STEWARDSHIP IS PART OF OUR WORSHIP OF GOD RATHER THAN A FUND-RAISING TECHNIQUE.

WE'LL ALSO HAVE A GUEST PREACHER WITH US – THE REVEREND CHRIS ROSELAND, WHO WORKS FOR OUR DENOMINATION'S WORLD MISSION OFFICE.

CHRIS HAS BEEN LEADING US THROUGH THIS ENTIRE PROCESS & WHO BETTER TO DO THAT THAN SOMEONE WHO REGULARLY WORKS IN THE AREA OF MISSIONS.

SOMETHING ELSE THAT'S DIFFERENT THIS YEAR IS OUR LUNCHEON FOLLOWING WORSHIP NEXT SUNDAY WHERE WE'LL CELEBRATE THE RESULTS OF YOUR COMMITMENT IN THE YEAR AHEAD.

ONE OTHER THING THAT IS A BIT DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS APPROACH IS A GREATER EMPHASIS ON PERCENTAGE GIVING.

I STRONGLY URGE YOU TO THINK IN THOSE TERMS – NOT A DOLLAR AMOUNT BUT RATHER A PERCENTAGE.

I IMAGINE MOST OF YOU FOUND THE INFORMATION GARY VAN ZANDT SHARED IN WORSHIP LAST SUNDAY VERY INTRIGUING – THE STEPS CHART WITH THE NUMBER OF FAMILY UNITS ON EACH STEP.

WHAT WE'D LIKE TO ENCOURAGE YOU TO DO IS SIMPLY MOVE UP A STEP.

NO MATTER WHAT YOUR CURRENT GIVING IS, TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

LAST YEAR WHEN WE ENGAGED IN THE STUDY CALLED “UNBINDING YOUR HEART,” THERE WAS A GREAT EMPHASIS PLACED ON PRAYER.

I KNOW MANY OF YOU PUT FORTH A SINCERE EFFORT TO STRENGTHEN YOUR PRAYER LIFE & FOUND THAT TO BE A TREMENDOUSLY UPLIFTING & GROWING EXPERIENCE.

YOU FOUND THAT THE MORE YOU PRAYED, THE MORE YOU *WANTED* TO PRAY & THAT LIFE JUST SEEMED TO BE BETTER AS A RESULT OF CHANGES YOU MADE.

SOME OF YOU MAY HAVE GONE FROM NOT PRAYING AT ALL TO PRAYING ONCE A WEEK.

SOME OF YOU WHO PRAYED OCCASIONALLY, MADE IT A DAILY PRACTICE.

OTHERS WHO ALREADY HAD A HEALTHY PRAYER LIFE STRENGTHENED IT EVEN MORE.

YOU DISCOVERED THAT THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF PRAYING HAD A POWERFUL IMPACT ON YOUR LIFE.

I ASSURE YOU THE SAME WILL BE TRUE WITH YOUR GIVING HABITS.

NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE, IF YOU WILL MAKE A COMMITMENT TO TAKE YOUR GIVING TO THE NEXT LEVEL, YOU'LL DISCOVER THAT TO BE A DECISION THAT WILL RICHLY REWARD YOU.

AS OUR STEWARDSHIP TEAM FIRST CONSIDERED THE CONSECRATION SUNDAY MODEL, ONE OF THE THINGS WE WRESTLED WITH WAS WHETHER OR NOT TO FOLLOW IT COMPLETELY OR JUST USE IT AS A GUIDE.

YOU KNOW HOW THAT SORT OF THING WORKS.

YOU SEE A GOOD IDEA & YOU DECIDE TO USE IT, BUT NOT EXACTLY.

YOU DECIDE THERE ARE A FEW PLACES WHERE YOU'LL MAKE CHANGES THAT SEEM, TO YOU, TO FIT YOUR PARTICULAR SITUATION BETTER THAN WHAT'S BEEN SUGGESTED.

AS WE READ THROUGH THE MANUALS FOR CONSECRATION SUNDAY, OVER & OVER AGAIN IT SAYS TO FOLLOW THE PLAN EXACTLY AS IT'S LAID OUT.

WE DECIDED THAT'S WHAT WE'D DO.

THEY INCLUDE A “FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS” SECTION WITH EACH CHAPTER & IT ALMOST BECOMES HUMOROUS BECAUSE THEY KEEP SAYING THE SAME THING.

A QUESTION WILL BE – *“IS IT OKAY IF WE DO THIS INSTEAD OF THIS BECAUSE IN OUR CONGREGATION THAT SEEMS TO BE A BETTER WAY TO GO?”*

THE ANSWER WILL BE – *“NO. RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO DEVIATE FROM THE PLAN. WE’VE BEEN PERFECTING THIS PLAN FOR 25 YEARS AND IF WHAT YOU SUGGEST WOULD WORK MORE EFFECTIVELY, THAT’S WHAT WE’D TELL YOU TO DO. TRUST US – WE KNOW WHAT WE’RE TALKING ABOUT.”*

I THINK THERE’S AN INTERESTING PARALLEL HERE IN GOD’S PLAN FOR OUR LIVES.

WE DECIDED THAT WE WOULD FOLLOW “THE BOOK” TO THE LETTER IN WHAT WAS SUGGESTED BECAUSE THEY KNOW WHAT THEY’RE TALKING ABOUT & THEY KNOW WHAT WORKS BEST.

DOESN’T IT MAKE SENSE TO DO THE SAME WITH ANOTHER BOOK?

WHY NOT FOLLOW *GOD’S* BOOK TO THE LETTER BECAUSE GOD KNOWS WHAT HE’S TALKING ABOUT & HE KNOWS WHAT WORKS BEST.

THERE’S A REASON JESUS TALKED ABOUT MONEY MORE THAN HE TALKED ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE EXCEPT THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

THERE’S A REASON, PAUL ENCOURAGED HIS CHURCHES TO GIVE.

THERE’S A REASON THE PEOPLE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT WERE CALLED TO RETURN TO GOD A TENTH OF EVERYTHING THEY HAD.

IT’S BECAUSE LIFE WORKS BETTER WHEN WE FOLLOW GOD’S PLAN.

THERE’S A FASCINATING STORY ABOUT CLARE BOOTH LUCE WHO WAS ONCE OUR AMBASSADOR TO ITALY.

SHE WAS LIVING IN A BEAUTIFUL 17TH CENTURY ITALIAN VILLA, BUT SHE SOON BEGAN TO NOTICE THAT SHE WAS ALWAYS TIRED.

SHE LOST WEIGHT & SEEMED TO HAVE NO ENERGY.

SHE WENT TO THE DOCTOR & AFTER A NUMBER OF TESTS, IT WAS DISCOVERED THAT SHE WAS SUFFERING FROM ARSENIC POISONING.

EVERYONE ON HER STAFF WAS CHECKED OUT & IT WAS DETERMINED THAT EVERYONE COULD BE TRUSTED.

HOW IN THE WORLD WAS SHE BEING SLOWLY POISONED BY ARSENIC?

THE MYSTERY WAS FINALLY SOLVED.

IT WAS THE CEILING OF HER BEDROOM.

THERE WERE BEAUTIFUL DESIGNS OF ROSES, ORNATELY DONE IN PLASTER RELIEF, AND THEY WERE PAINTED WITH AN OLD PAINT THAT CONTAINED ARSENIC LEAD.

A FINE DUST FELL FROM THE ROSES, AND, COMPLETELY UNAWARE OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING, CLARE BOOTH LUCE WAS SLOWLY BEING POISONED IN HER BED FROM THE FINE DUST FALLING FROM THE ORNATE CEILING ROSES.

THAT CAN SERVE AS A PARABLE OF OUR LIVES.

COMPLETELY UNAWARE OF IT, WE ARE IN DANGER OF BEING POISONED BY THE ORNATE CULTURE & SOCIETY AROUND US.

OUR ATTITUDES, CONCEPTS & VALUES CAN BE ERODED & POISONED BY THE MATERIALISTIC VALUES OF THOSE AROUND US WITHOUT EVER BEING AWARE OF IT – UNTIL IT’S TOO LATE.

JESUS KNEW OF THIS POISONING & THAT’S WHY HE WARNED HIS FOLLOWERS OF THE DANGERS OF SUCCUMBING TO ITS LURE.

PAUL KNEW IT & ENCOURAGED THE PEOPLE OF HIS CHURCHES TO GIVE OF THEIR ABUNDANCE.

BEING CONSECRATED – COMMITTING YOUR LIFE, YOUR TIME, YOUR RESOURCES TO THE CAUSE OF JESUS CHRIST IS - LIKE THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER - SOMETHING FOR *YOUR* BENEFIT MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE’S.

IT ANSWERS THAT “WHAT IF...?” QUESTION IN THE MOST EXCITING WAY IMAGINABLE. AMEN.

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