



BIG
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Devotional Guide

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Dear Friends in Christ,

The Lord has graciously given us the opportunity to meditate during the next four weeks on some key stewardship texts in preparation for our BIG Capital Stewardship Campaign. There is so much richness and wonder in Scripture regarding Christian stewardship that it is virtually impossible for a pastor to adequately share all that richness and wonder with you in a few 20 minute sermons. Therefore, our leadership team has provided you with this series of short devotions that you can read and meditate on daily. These devotions were originally written by Rev. Bradley Cusson, an LCMS Pastor from California, and published by Capital Funding Services. His powerful, personal stories are included in each devotional, but I have tried to personalize them for Gloria Dei's BIG Campaign, where and when appropriate.

Since the primary focus of our BIG Capital Stewardship Campaign is on our stewardship of money (as opposed to time and abilities), the devotions lean in this direction. This is not meant to detract from, or deemphasize our stewardship in other areas.

My prayer and expectation is that, as each of us meditates on these texts daily, God, the Holy Spirit, will work in each of us all that is pleasing in His will with respect to this special time in the ministry of our congregation. Join me in praying that God will do BIG things through us as we seek to grow in Christ.

In His Service,

Pastor Dan Schepmann

Pastor Dan Schepmann

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Stepping Out of the Boat

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," He said, "why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:29-31)

Have you ever been in a storm in the middle of the ocean? It must be absolutely terrifying! Perhaps this is why it never ceases to amaze me that Peter actually got out of the boat in the middle of a storm, believing that he could walk on the water! I mean, this was real water and a real, violent, storm, on a real lake—and Peter had a real life that he could really lose! How could he do this? You know the answer. He kept his eyes on Jesus—and Jesus beckoned him "to come." Oh, I know, when Peter looked away and became frightened of the wind and waves, he soon began to sink. But in Peter's weakness, Jesus came to the rescue and saved him...I believe, so that he could walk on the water again, albeit in a different way, different place, and different time.

I believe that here, at the beginning of our BIG stewardship campaign, Jesus is inviting us to step out of the safety of the boat and onto the water to grow by faith in our lives through courageous generosity. The vision before us is not just about debt reduction or even growing our ministry. Though these are wonderful, worthy, and needed goals, the vision is that through this emphasis God might have HIS way with each of us in our lives of stewardship.

Do you see the "storm" into which we are stepping—those things that we immediately begin to fear when we talk about our lives of stewardship, even though we have nothing to fear? Oh, the wind and the waves are real—bills to pay, families to take care of, emergencies to prepare for, retirement to consider. Yet Jesus is bidding each of us to perhaps go where we have never gone before in our lives of stewardship. It may well be scary and frightening. Yet, our Savior says "come."

And we can trust Him.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, send me Your Holy Spirit in extra measure, I pray, that I may be empowered by faith and trust in You to "step out of the boat" in my stewardship life. In the next few weeks, through Your Word and by the power of Your Holy Spirit, work in me and in each of my brothers and sisters in Christ at church Your good and perfect will. I pray in the name of Jesus who gave up His life for me that I might live in Him every day and forever. Amen!

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The Gift of Giving

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches . . . Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. (2 Corinthians 8:1, 4)

Rev. Cusson shared the following story. He wrote, "It was just a garage sale. Yet, we placed a great deal of ourselves on that garage driveway. You see, we were moving, and we knew we had to travel as light as possible. My wife's sister came over in the morning, and while the two of them were talking in the kitchen, I was outside 'managing sales.' One family came by with three young children. They reminded me of what our family was like just a few years earlier. The older sister (about 8 years old) really liked an educational toy that my daughter had loved and for which we had paid a price we didn't think we could afford at the time. On seeing the price tag (I think it was \$5), the young couple—again reminding me of my wife and I when we were a younger—said, 'No,' to their daughter. What a joy it was—really a gift to me—that I could give this little girl the toy which my daughter had so enjoyed and to assure her parents it was 'okay.'

"And so it went that day. I think I probably gave more stuff away to kids than I sold. But it was a gift to me. Do you know what I mean? Towards the end of the day, a very dear neighbor came by—one who had done many things for us through the years for which I never felt I had found a proper way to show my appreciation—and asked how much I wanted for my tool box that had fit onto the back of my truck. I cannot tell you the great joy I experienced as I lifted that thing up and took it to his garage, telling him how I could finally express my thanks to him for his wonderful friendship and kindness to us through the years. Once again, it was a gift to me."

In the Bible verses for today's devotion—and throughout this section of God's Word—Christian giving (joyful, willing, proportional, first-fruits, and sacrificial) is pictured as a wonderful gift which God gives to us, His people. The Macedonian Christians certainly experienced it that way, for we are told that, "entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints."

We shouldn't be surprised by their desires to be generous. Even those who are not Christians recognize the good feelings experienced by those who give to others. But to plead for the privilege to give—not waiting for the appeal to come in the mail or the plea to come from the pulpit—but instead to seek out opportunities to help build the kingdom, and then to deny your own wants to make it happen—that is the gift of Christian giving. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" —and where your heart is, there goes your treasure. The Macedonians gave out of the gratitude of their hearts, where they stored all that Christ had given to them. They didn't give for earthly goodness, but for eternal consequences: so that others might have life in Jesus! This is now our privilege in our BIG capital stewardship campaign—the privilege of giving God's gifts to this generation and to the generations who will follow!

Yet, our sinful nature would deny all these things and would keep us from the blessing of Christian giving. Thanks be to God! He sends us the Holy Spirit and through His Word works in us His will in this area of our lives—to work within us the gift of Christian giving.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for working in us the gift of Christian giving. Send us Your Holy Spirit in extra measure that we might live and grow in this gift. Amen!

Joy Trumps All

Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. (2 Corinthians 8:2)

Pastor Cusson recalled the time of his wife's 50th birthday. It was fast approaching. Since his daughter (and oldest child) wasn't home to help him and his boys think of an appropriate present, it was up to the "men" in the family. This was not good, he thought. Yet, one of his boys came up with, among other things, the idea that they would get her 50 roses and present them to her on her birthday. They knew they had "done good." It was one of those gifts that his wife never expected, and the surprised look on her face was...well, you know. The gift was for his wife, but the joy it brought him and his sons would last for their lifetimes. Such is the joy of giving!

It was a tough time in the lives of the Macedonian Christians. They were experiencing "severe trial"—perhaps even the physical affliction (perhaps even to death) of Roman persecution. Extreme poverty was also their lot, probably because no one would hire them or allow them to be involved in the marketplace because they were Christians. How did they respond? It would have been easy to talk about what they could not do. It would have been easy to talk about improving their situation before they could help others. It would have been easy to give reasons—all of which would have been true—why they could not give. Yet, our text tells us that out of these things, together with overflowing joy, came a rich generosity in giving. What was this joy? It was the pure joy of salvation, of having received the overflowing love of Jesus and being able to share the love of Jesus to others in palpable ways. This joy of giving the love of Jesus in concrete ways—trumped all, even severe trial and extreme poverty.

Severe trial! Extreme poverty! Each of us in some way is experiencing these things right now. Each of us can list a host of reasons why we cannot give beyond what we are giving now, whether it is a gift of time, abilities, or money. We have so many demands placed on us, so many uncertainties about what the future will bring, and so little time, energy, and resources for ourselves and our families. The stresses and challenges of our lives threaten to rob us of our joy and cripple our attempts to "step out in faith." Where is the power to help us?

It is in Jesus Christ, the Gift long expected, who, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross and won for us the gift of salvation. "Have no anxiety about anything," wrote Paul, instead, "rejoice!" Rejoice in the promise of forgiveness and of life eternal! That's how the Macedonians approached their giving. They had the "peace of God that passes all understanding" coupled with the overflowing joy of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior! Today, right now, rejoice in all that Jesus has given you, is giving you daily, and will give you in His overflowing love. Rejoice that in Christ you have all things, so that His love might powerfully flow out of you in a life of Christian giving. Let your joy—and the living in it—be your starting point, your power source for "stepping out in faith" in our campaign.

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, restore to me the joy of Your salvation. Send me Your Holy Spirit through Your Word in extra measure this day, that I might live in the overflowing joy of giving. Amen.

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Matter of the Heart

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. . . . And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. (2 Corinthians 8:3, 5)

Do you recall an aunt or an uncle? Pastor Cusson remembered his Uncle Hib. Perhaps his story will strike a note in your heart too. He wrote, "My Uncle Hib was a doctor—a kidney specialist. I remember this because he always told us to drink lots of water. He was also a very kind, gentle, and Christian man. His three oldest sons were about 10 years older than I was, but I remember as a child that when they would come for a visit, it was a great time.

"The story goes that Uncle Hib's two oldest sons—Pete and Jim—who, by this time were also young doctors, came to him wanting to borrow some money to make and market a hospital bed they had developed for the burn victims they treated. Uncle Hib, believing in his sons and in the project, without hesitation loaned them all the money they had requested. However, the project did not get going as quickly as planned, and about 10 months later, they again approached their father for another loan. What they found out was that Uncle Hib had not only used his savings to help them, but also had quietly cashed in his retirement accounts, as well as taking a second loan on his home. Quite simply, he had no more to give them because he had already given them beyond what he could afford! His sons were amazed, but, thank God, the new amount of money they needed was not great, and they were able somehow to get it. Today, because of the generosity of their father and his willingness to give beyond what he was able, his sons are multi-millionaires and many thousands of burn victims have been helped by a bed that would never have been developed."

Proportionate, percentage giving—the Bible talks about it a lot. The Christian is told to give as God has blessed him with the Old Testament tithe (10%) held up as a starting point (not a law) for our consideration as we determine how the Lord is leading us to give. That's what makes this text so profound. "They gave as much as they were able and even beyond what they were able." Apparently this grace—this gift from God—of giving manifested itself in this way. The Macedonian Christians gave more than they were able. I don't know about you, but this can be down right scary; do you know what I mean? Yet, have you ever been there? With a child? A spouse? A sibling? A friend? A great need of anyone who was hurting?

Have you ever been in that place where you gave more than you were able? How did it feel? Was there a freedom to it? A joy? How were you able to do it? With the Corinthian Christians, the Bible tells us "they gave themselves first to the Lord." That is, it was only through their living relationship with God through Jesus Christ that they could "give beyond their means." Was it the same with you? Was the power to give beyond your means based in a relationship?

Through Pastor Cusson's Uncle Hib's ability to give beyond his means out of the love relationship he had with his sons, great things, the extent of which was totally unforeseen, occurred. Through our ability to give beyond our means out of the love relationship we have in Jesus, great things, the extent of which is also totally unforeseen, can and will occur. May God, the Holy Spirit, work just such a faith relationship in Jesus in each of us!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me to see in Your great sacrifice on the cross the greatest proof that great good can come as You empower us to live in joyful sacrifice. Amen!

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. (2 Corinthians 8:6)

There is a Peanuts cartoon that has been run so many times year after year that it is easily the most famous. Lucy is holding a football so that Charlie Brown can kick-off. Charlie Brown is expressing his doubt that Lucy won't yet again yank the ball away at the last moment. Yet, after Lucy promises one more time that she won't do this, Charlie Brown believes her, runs up to kick the ball . . . and Lucy promptly yanks it away, with the result that Charlie Brown ends up flat on his back yet again. What is it that Charlie Brown doesn't get? Easy! "Actions speak louder than words." That's it. "Actions speak louder than words."

Why do we need to be reminded of this? It is because of our sinfulness. It is why Lucy doesn't live by her word—and we can relate to it. It is why these wonderful Corinthian Christians who had made a commitment had to be reminded to complete "this ACT of grace" by lifting up the example of their brothers and sisters at Macedonia who "through great trial, poverty, and joy had been led to give in rich generosity;" "had pleaded for the privilege of giving;" and had been led to give "themselves first to the Lord," and then "beyond their ability."

God willing, the Holy Spirit has been working in our hearts through these devotions to create within us convictions, attitudes, and intentions to do just as the Macedonian Christians did. Now it's our turn to take action. "Actions speak louder than words." Even though some excellent, unique, and timely ideas for giving might be presented through our capital stewardship campaign, they will do us no good unless we act on them. Once again, "actions speak louder than words."

God didn't just talk about saving us. NO, he took ACTION, and, "when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Galatians 4:4-5a). And he hasn't stopped working, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." (Philippians 2:13). Actions do speak louder than words. And the God who acted once and for all for us on the cross is the one who is at work in us, enabling us in our Christian giving not only to will but to act according to His good purpose!

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, You know my sinfulness. You know my temptation to have the greatest intentions in my Christian giving yet to never quite get around to acting on them. Help me not only to hear Your words but to keep them—and act on them in my life of stewardship. Amen!

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See That You Excel . . . In This Grace of Giving

But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us— see that you also excel in this grace of giving. (2 Corinthians 8:7)

Did you have a favorite coach when you were younger? Maybe you can in some way related to Rev. Cusson as he recalls Coach Mitch. He recalled him in this way. "He was an assistant coach for the football team I played on when I was thirteen years old. He had played for the New York Giants. He was intense, loud, tough, demanding, unmoving, a real . . . coach. Among other things, I played offensive guard. One evening practice, Coach Mitch decided that he was going to teach the offensive line how to 'pull,' a technique which enables an offensive lineman to move laterally much quicker and faster. At first, the coach began working with the entire offensive line, but soon his attention was totally on me. For over 30 minutes, he made me do the technique over and over and over again, faster and faster and faster, always demanding that I do it better, quicker, faster. Even as I became exhausted and frustrated to the point of tears, the coach did not let up. If anything he became more intense and demanding. As the team gathered around us ready to do practice-ending sprints, he had some of the better players jump in and go 'live' against me, over and over again, for close to 30 minutes beyond when practice normally ended. As I trudged off the field beyond exhausted and not a little angry, I saw that my dad had been watching the practice. I thought, 'Boy, I bet my dad is really ticked off at this coach.' But the only thing my dad said to me was, 'That coach must really think a lot of you.'"

Our loving Heavenly Father thinks a lot of us. He thinks a lot of you. God declares that all of us who have been born again into life with God through faith in Christ are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). He declares that we are "a kingdom and priests" (Rev. 1:6). He declares that Jesus is the "vine" and we are the "branches," and we are to "bear much fruit" (John 15:5). He declares that we "are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph.2: 10). He declares that "anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these" (John 14:12). Through faith in Jesus Christ, the very image of God is being restored in us (Col. 3:10). The Holy Spirit has made His home within us, empowering us to live in Him (Phil. 2:13; John 14). Our loving Heavenly Father thinks a lot of us. He thinks a lot of you. This is why he says to us, "See that you excel in this grace of giving."

Oh, I know that this may sound scary. I know that our sinful nature would tempt us to rebel against this command. Yet, because of who we are in Christ, our Heavenly Father knows that we can do this. Indeed, it is what he has created us in Jesus Christ to do! We may experience a great struggle in our journey toward recognizing what role God has planned for us in this stewardship emphasis, but sometimes personal struggle is the only way we get beyond what we think we can accomplish to what we can accomplish in Christ. May each of us humble ourselves and receive the work of God in us during this special time!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for thinking so much of me. Show me how You would have me "excel in this grace of giving" during our stewardship emphasis and work in me the ability and heart to do it. Amen!

You Matter

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:8-9)

This text is startling! God says that he wants to test the sincerity of the Corinthian Christians' love by comparing it to the earnestness of others. Imagine if someone in the church would want to do this to us? To you? We would (probably) be incensed. How dare anyone do this! Yet, this text and the principle behind it stand. The question then becomes, "What are we to do with this text?" Are we to ignore it? Forget it? Throw it out? How are we to use it? And what is God's message to us here?

It seems to me that the key to understanding this text and applying it to our lives is to pause and to understand anew God's heart towards us. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." (John 3:17). God is for you—for each one of us. He wants the best for you—for each one of us. He is not out to embarrass you—or any of us—to put us down, or to make us feel inferior. No, God loves us. Yet, he is also out to empower each of us to "excel in this grace of giving." It seems to me that what God is lovingly saying in this text is, "you matter—every single one of you matters." "Test yourself. Look at others for good examples. Struggle with it. Wrestle with it. Grow. You matter." Your Heavenly Father desires that you and I "excel in this grace of giving."

One of the most disturbing statistics with respect to Christian stewardship is that, in most congregations, only 20% of the members practice financial Christian stewardship. My prayer is that God would use these words to make that statistic 100% here at Gloria Dei. For this gift is for each one of us!

What is the greatest example—and therefore the greatest motivation—for Christian Giving? You know. It's our Savior, Jesus, who, "even though he was rich became poor at the cross, that we might be rich through life in him!"

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, when I read the words of this text, help me to remember Your heart toward me. And remembering, help me to do what they say that I too might "excel in this grace of giving." Help me to see as gifts those examples in the faith to whom I can compare myself. For I know that by Your grace, I matter, and what I do matters. Amen!

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Faith

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. (Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.) (Hebrews 11:8, 1)

Rev. Cusson recalls his relationship with his brother in this way. "My brother, with whom I remain very close, is four years older than me. Growing up, we did everything together—or rather, he led and I followed. I remember when I was 8 years old, the family was vacationing at Yosemite. One morning he informed me we were going to 'hike to the falls,' a round-trip hike of 12 miles up a pretty good incline. So, the next day we did it, leaving very early in the morning and arriving back at the campsite just about the time the sun set. What I remember most about that day was following my brother—to the point of almost putting my foot in the footprint he had just vacated. You see, I was so short that I couldn't see very far ahead or where we were going. I just trusted he knew the way. Faith. So it went our whole lives. When we went hiking, Steve led the way, and I followed. Faith.

"Until one backpacking trip when I was about 18 years old. We woke up on the second morning with snow covering us in what soon became a raging blizzard. As we were trying to hike out that day, when we were on top of this ridge and the wind and snow were at their fiercest, my brother, whom I was, of course, following, suddenly stopped. Turning around and walking towards me, he said, 'Which way do you think we ought to go? I can't find the trail.'"

In the verse above, Abraham was called to follow God (physically getting up and leaving his native land and people) "even though he did not know where he was going." He just had to trust God's heart toward him and that God could and would bring him to a good and wonderful place. Perhaps this is a good definition of faith, what do you think?

In our BIG capital stewardship program, our vision is that our loving God would graciously have His way with each one of us in our lives of Christian stewardship. Through His Word, by His Spirit, we pray that he would take each of us where only he can see, perhaps to places we have never been. This is scary—especially considering how God tends to challenge us to grow. It takes faith. This is why these devotions are being written—to get us deeper into His Word. We are called to follow Him in our lives of Christian giving as His Word and Spirit guide us. Only as we trust Him—believe in Him—can we begin to do this... to "get out of the boat," so to speak. So it was with Abraham and Noah, Moses and Rahab—and all true believers who have gone before us. Can you trust Him? A blood-soaked cross and an empty tomb, together with His promise, "I will be with you always to the end of the age," suggest you can. What do you think?

Let's remind ourselves that God is greater than anyone's brother. He will never turn around and say, "Which way do you think we ought to go?" As he guides us in our lives of stewardship, we can rest assured that he always knows the way, because only he knows where he is taking us. All we need do is to confidently follow Him. And that's stepping out in faith!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, as You come to me by Your Spirit through Your Word in these days, give me such a faith that I might trust Your guiding hand. Work Your way with me in my life of Christian stewardship to Your glory and my good. Amen!

Eyes on the Prize

*So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.
(2 Corinthians 9:5)*

Were you ever a runner in school? Pastor Cusson's recalls his junior year in college. He wrote, "I really got into running—and I found myself especially wanting to run sprints faster and faster and faster. It just so happened that the time of day I was free to do my sprint work was when the college track team was out on the track. The sprinters were some really 'cool' guys. And they honestly wanted to help me get faster. (I think it's a sprinter thing.) Well, amid all the different advice they gave me, one thing still stands out: 'You've got to keep your head up. If you drop your head all your energy goes down. You've got to point your energy where you want to go. You've got to keep your eyes on the prize.' And they were right. My times were incredibly faster when I kept my head up with my eye square on the prize, running as straight a race as possible with all my energy pointing to the place I wanted to go. The Bible says much the same thing with respect to our salvation. In Hebrews, we are told to 'run the straight race' and to 'keep our eyes on Jesus.'"

One of the lessons from 2 Corinthians is that our loving Heavenly Father would guide us in the same way with respect to our stewardship. Paul is urging the Corinthian Christians to "finish the arrangements for the generous gift . . . so it will be ready as a gift and not as one grudgingly given." It is as if St. Paul is saying, "Keep your eyes on the prize. Focus on the task at hand. Let your Lord have His way with you. Get all the 'nuts and bolts' things done with respect to working it out in your life. Let His Word have its way with you as you wrestle with its meaning in your life. Get it done. Make your decisions—decisions you can joyfully embrace and rejoice in because, by grace through faith, you have 'kept your eye on the prize' and followed through to be ready when the time came." Interestingly, these words are written before, not after, a section in the text which talks about "sowing generously." It is as if Paul is saying, "Keep your head up, run the straight race as you let the following words from God guide you." As we look to give joyfully, proportionally, sacrificially, and meaningfully from the heart, as we work to figure out what this means in our lives and how we will go about doing it, as we search the Scriptures to guide us and empower us, it is a comfort, is it not, that God Himself would be pleased? For through these things we "keep our eyes on the prize" as we look to step out in faith as God would guide us.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, when I am tempted to doubt the value of the study, work, and effort in this stewardship emphasis, help me to "keep my eyes on the prize," and trust that through these things You will work to have Your way with each of us in our lives of stewardship to Your glory and our great good. I ask this in the name of Jesus, the Author and Perfector of my faith. Amen!

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This Gift is For All—And All of Us Together

Then the whole Israelite community withdrew from Moses' presence, and everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the Lord for the work on the Tent of Meeting [The Tabernacle]. . . .

. . . All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the Lord free will offerings for all the work. (Exodus 35:20-21, 29)

If you get a chance, take your Bible and read Exodus 35:20-36:7 from which our devotion verses are taken. As you read, you will see two themes interwoven. The first is indicated by the repetition of the word "willing." Over and over again, it is stated that all those who were WILLING (and whose HEART moved them) brought a love offering to the Lord. The second is indicated by the breakdown of who is giving and what they are giving (which is only what they have available to give). It talks about men and women, from leaders to those who could spin the goat's hair. It talks about craftsmen, designers, weavers, and the construction workers who would build the Tabernacle. It talks about gifts of gold, silver, and bronze as well as fine linen, olive oil, incense, and goat's hair. God gave to EACH ONE a willing heart and provided the means for EACH ONE to give a meaningful love offering for the building of the Tabernacle. To me the message is clear: God wants all of us to have the privilege of contributing to the mission.

This is the vision we have been given in our BIG capital stewardship program. Just as our Heavenly Father gave His gifts to each one of His ancient people so that each one might know the joy of giving lovingly to Him, so too He has given His gifts to each one of us. We give from what God has given to us—certainly from the riches of who we are in Christ Jesus—but also from the ability and means He has given each of us as the God of all creation. Our prayer is that He would create in each of us, by His Spirit through His Word, a willing heart to bring our love offering to Him, so that each one of us—and all of us together—might experience this "grace of giving."

God wants to give to each of us a willing heart . . . and the means to express it. He gives to each of us as He wills, according to His wisdom. BUT we all get to participate! We all get to be a part of something none of us could do alone. We, all together, are blessed! Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I pray that You would work in me a willing heart that I might be led to give to You lovingly and meaningfully from what You alone have given to me. Help me to see that I matter to You as You give me this privilege to give sacrificially. I pray this in the name of Jesus, who gave everything for me. Amen!

More Than Enough

And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. So all the skilled craftsmen who were doing all the work on the sanctuary left their work and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded to be done."

... And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work. (Exodus 36:3b-7)

"Make me, Lord, a dreamer for Your kingdom. Plant in my heart heavenly desires. Grant faith that can say, 'impossibilities shall be!' and vision lest a world should perish, not knowing Thee." (From "Make Me, Lord, A Dreamer," by Chris Bowater.)

Read the text from Exodus one more time. I love this picture! God's people (each of them moved by a willing heart) gave so generously that they had "to be restrained" from giving more! Moses even had to issue an order! "No one is to bring anything more." "We don't want any more gold, silver, bronze, olive oil, or whatever!" When I read this text, I always get a picture in my mind of Moses out in front of the people with his arms out as if he is stopping a stampede saying, "No more. Take it back. No more." And then, I immediately begin to wonder—to dream, really, "Could this happen today? Could God do it again in His people? Could He empower His people to all together come forth with such a love offering of time, abilities, and money, that there would be an over-abundance to accomplish all the ministry tasks before us? Is God capable of this ... with us ... with you ... with me?"

What do you think?

God works "impossibilities" through His giving. "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). Through the giving of Jesus—an offering given out of pure love—our loving God worked the "impossibility" of saving us, giving us eternal life through faith in Jesus. If He can do this, working life where there was only death, surely He can and will work just such another "impossibility," working such stewardship hearts in us that together we give to Him all that is needed—and more, an overabundance—for the work of His kingdom in this place.

The ministry and the challenge are right before us. The Clear Lake area will continue to experience tremendous growth. More and more people need to hear about Jesus and His great love for them and for all. The mission is right in front of us! Lord, make me a dreamer for Your kingdom! And empower me—and all of us together—to act accordingly!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, You know how easily I become "earthbound," limiting any possibilities I see for Your kingdom. Lord, make me instead a dreamer for Your kingdom. Help us all together see the vision of You having Your way with each one of us in our lives of stewardship and empower us to dream what this will mean for Your kingdom work in this place. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen!

believe. invest. grow.

God's Principle of Sowing and Reaping

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:6-7)

You reap what you sow. This is a principle that God seems to have built into our very existence. If you study hard, work hard, practice hard, you will (almost always) be better off than if you don't. It's just the way it is. It's almost a "natural law," but not quite.

In the text above, God reveals to us that it works the same way in our lives of stewardship. We will reap what we sow; that is, we will harvest from our stewardship life just what we put into it. Now some have taken this to mean, "If I give money to God, He will in return give me lots more money." But that's not what this says. It says simply, "The harvest will be in direct proportion to the sowing." This means just what it says. But think about what this means! As we give of our time, abilities and money to the work of the kingdom, the harvest will be in direct proportion to this! This is exciting! This is a real gift of God! This is meant to make us cheerful givers!

There is one instance where this "universal principle" of reaping what you sow is broken. You know where it is? It is with Jesus. Because of our sin, all that we deserve to reap is death, hell, and destruction. But thanks be to God, Jesus came and took our place—He reaped what we sowed—and in its place gave us life in Him. Only by building on this one grace-filled exception to the principle can we sow generously in our lives of stewardship as God has blessed us in Jesus.

There was a seminary professor, who is now with the Lord, who wrote the excerpts that constitute the following prayer. Would you pray it with me?

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, inspire us, Your people, to see the kingdom tasks You lay before us. Prevent us from losing our enthusiasm, vision, or commitment. Root out indifference from our hearts. Through Your Word and Sacraments, kindle in us a burning zeal for the souls of people. Demonstrate to us the straight, clear line connecting stewardship and effective work in Your kingdom. Empower us to believe Your Word, be excited at the possibility, and act on Your Word, "What you sow, that is what you will reap." Amen!

God Will Do His Part (#1)

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written, "He has scattered abroad His gifts to the poor; His righteousness endures forever." (2 Corinthians 9:8-9)

Did you ever have a plan that didn't quite work out? Pastor Cusson learned how true this can be. He wrote, "Upon high school graduation, the plan was for me to move down to Newport Beach with a couple of my friends, get a job, go to school, and play football at Orange Coast College, a very respected Junior College. It was all working out fine, until the grocery store I worked at said they would not let me work the shorter hours once the football season started. Well, I struggled with it. I quit the job and continued playing while I looked for another job to get me through, but to no avail. Being rather independent, it never entered my mind that the coach would do something for me, so I simply walked into the coach's office and told him I had to quit. I started back at the store the next day. Years later, a friend of mine took an Athletic Training course taught by the coach. On a whim, my friend mentioned my name to him. Amazingly, the coach remembered me and said, 'He should never have quit. Why did he?' Upon hearing the reason, he said, 'Why didn't he tell us? We get jobs for kids all the time! We could easily have provided a job for him!'"

God will provide. Do you know this? Do you believe it? Perhaps one of the greatest barriers we have to living lives of Christian stewardship is the fear that, somehow, we won't have enough. But God does not call us to be paupers. Rather, He calls us to be managers—stewards—of all He has given us. Yet, it seems to me that what often drives our stewardship decision making is not a firm trust in the provision of God, but rather doubt—unbelief, if you will—that God will indeed provide both for us and through us for the work of His kingdom. If this is true for you, read through the above text one more time. It really is a powerful promise. It says simply that by grace (God's undeserved love showered down upon us) "in all things at all times" we will have all that we need. Quite a promise! And why is this so? So that we might abound in every good work in our lives of stewardship'

One more thing: Our text says God scatters "His gifts to the poor" (those who are in physical want and need). Spiritually, the poor are also you and I. Each of us was born into the abject poverty of sin, totally cut off from the riches of life with God. But thanks be to God, Jesus became poor for us that we might be rich in Him! If He did this "while we were still His enemies," how much more will He provide us with all we need "so that we might abound in every good work" in our lives of Christian stewardship!

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, Thank You for showering us with all the gifts of salvation through Your death and resurrection. Empower us also to trust Your promise of provision in our lives of stewardship and to act on it. In Your name we pray. Amen.

believe. invest. grow.

God Will Do His Part (#2)

*Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.
(2 Corinthians 9:10-11)*

In the early 1900's, William Borden, the heir to the Borden dairy family fortune, was already a millionaire. Upon graduation from Yale University, his parents sent him on a trip around the world for his graduation present. As Borden traveled through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, he felt a growing burden for the world's hurting people. He was appalled at the desperate needs of people and wrote letter to his parents, announcing that he was going to devote his life to missionary service. Because of his sold out commitment to help others, he gave up all the pleasures of his position and economic advantages at his disposal, to pursue this endeavor. And so, in his bible, as a teenager, he wrote these two words, "No reserves."

Upon graduation from Yale, he enrolled into Princeton, received his theological degree, and decided to take a one-way trip to Egypt to serve as a missionary. Leaving family and fortune behind, he set sail across the Atlantic, and he wrote two more words in his bible, "No retreats."

He arrived in Cairo to learn Arabic, full of anticipation and eagerness for the great challenge. He immersed himself in the task at hand. But within a few days, 25-year-old Borden contracted spinal meningitis and within a month, he was dead. When the news of his death reached his parents, of course, everyone was shocked! A biographer wrote these words about him: "It seems that a wave of sorrow went around the world, for William Borden not only gave up his wealth, but himself in a way, so joyous and so natural, that it was manifestly a privilege rather than a sacrifice." In terms of human logic, the death of such a promising young man was such a waste, but that was not William's perspective. During the last fleeting days of his life, with labored handwriting, he had penned two last words. "No regrets."

Was Borden's life a waste? Not from God's perspective. God used his life and death to call thousands and thousands of young men and women to leave all they had and give their lives to reach the nations with the Gospel. God did greater things through Borden's story than He may have ever done with his life in Egypt.

Six words, folks. "No reserves." "No retreats." "No regrets." Those are six words of people who have been captured by the biblical principles of Christian stewardship. God's grace changes hearts and transforms lives. Where is God calling you to be generous? We tend to retreat from the things that are hard. When we look back over time, may it be also said of us, "No reserves." "No retreats." "No regrets."

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, Thank You for making each of us rich in the riches of Christ, our Savior. Open our eyes—every single one of us—so to trust in Your provision of body, soul, mind, and spirit and in Your promise to "supply and increase our store of "seed," that we might boldly give generously, on every occasion, as Your Spirit leads us. Amen.

Treasure

(Jesus said) Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

A strange thing happens to some people. The more God blesses them the more they gradually drift farther and farther away from God and His people. No matter how we try to encourage them to return to the Lord and the church, sometimes they reply, "Don't talk to us anymore. The church is just after our money." For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Rondi Barber, the all-pro running back on the New York Giants declared that he would retire from professional football at the end of his current year, even though he was at the top of his game and was leaving 10-20 million dollars "on the table." He said there were other things he wanted to pursue in life. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The words from a choral piece titled, "Thank You," tell the story of a person who dreams that he goes to heaven and a friend of his is there with him. As they are standing there a young man comes up to his friend and says, "You taught my Sunday school when I was only eight and through that Jesus came into my heart." The song continues in this vein with one person after another coming up to the friend and thanking him for his actions, for the money he gave to support a missionary, for all the ways—largely unnoticed when he was alive—he shared Christ. Finally, he looks up, and as people are approaching him "as far as the eye could see," Jesus puts His arm around him and says, "My child, look around you, great is your reward."

What is it that you treasure in life? What are those things that are most important, those things that you live for? Jesus knows that what we treasure will determine where our heart is. And He wants our heart! For our sake! This is why he advises us to store up treasures in heaven. Because as we do this—as we more and more focus our time, abilities, and money on the work of the kingdom of God, this—and the people for whom Christ died—become more and more important in our lives, to our greater good!

In our BIG capital campaign stewardship process, our vision is that our loving God by His Spirit through His Word will lead each of us to joyfully, willingly, proportionally, and sacrificially step out in faith in our lives of stewardship. One way He would do this is to have us examine what we truly treasure and make adjustments through repentance and faith, as need be. He doesn't because He needs what we have, but rather, where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. Our loving God is calling each of us to ask ourselves, "Where is my treasure!" Because Christ treasured us, it led Him to the action of the cross. Once again, He is our life . . . and our example!

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, send me the Holy Spirit in extra measure, that my heart might be right, treasuring only that which is true treasure, and that my actions reflect my heart.
Amen.

believe. invest. grow.

You Can't Have It Both Ways

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24)

A number of years ago there was a TV program—a western—that was a take off on the idea of “the fastest draw in the west.” In every episode, an older man who portrayed the father of another adult actor would say, “This here is the second fastest gun in the west...and yer lookin’ at the fastest. No brag, just fact.” “No brag, just fact.” This is how I kind of look at this text. Jesus is saying, “This is the way it is... no ifs, ands, or buts. No one can serve two masters. It simply can’t be done. It’s just the way it is. You cannot serve both God and money.”

But my goodness, have I ever tried to drift back and forth on this one! Do you know what I mean? “Sacrificial giving? That’s for everyone else. It’s not really possible for me right now. I’ve got responsibilities! Proportional giving? Well, I just don’t think that way! First-fruits giving? How do I know I’ll have enough left at the end? Thoughtful, meaningful, reflective giving? Approaching God in prayer with respect to my use of time, abilities, and money in kingdom work? It’s a nice idea, but it’s just not practical for me! Who knows what the future holds? Joyful, willing giving? How do I do that? I don’t have enough time, abilities and money as it is!” Yes, you know what I mean. We try to move back and forth between two opinions.

We act as James 1:7 reminds us, “like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.”

Yet, in this text, it is as if Jesus is saying, “What makes you think you are different from anyone else? No one, no one, no one, including you, can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money.”

So let’s give up trying. Let’s instead focus on Jesus, who didn’t drift back and forth in the least even though He had to go the way of the cross. Let’s focus on Jesus who became poor at the cross so that we might be rich. Let’s focus on Jesus who never wavered in His mission to rescue us from sin and hell even though it cost Him His life. Let’s joyfully focus on Jesus and who we are in Him. Let us pray that God, our Heavenly Father, would empower us to cling by faith to Christ alone and live our lives willingly and boldly for Him alone! Let us focus on the promises of God as He would spur us on in this grace of giving. “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion” (2 Cor. 9:11). And again, “Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Lk. 6:38).

Have you noticed the toughest place to be in life is when you’re not sure what to do? When you are wavering between one thing and another? By the power of the Holy Spirit as He comes to us through this Word of God, let us put our double mindedness behind us. No one can serve two masters. No one can serve both God and money. So let us serve Christ alone with every cent we have, every moment that we breathe, and every ability we have been given . . . especially in the work of the kingdom!

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, thank You for being single minded about my salvation. Help me to serve You alone with all the riches of body and soul that You have showered down upon me. Amen!

Therefore ... (# 1)

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:57-58)

Do you ever wonder what the word "therefore" in scripture is there for? The "therefore" in our text points to some of the most glorious proclamations in the entire Bible of our resurrection victory in Christ.

BECAUSE "we shall not all sleep, but we will all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (v. 51, 52)

BECAUSE "the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed" (v. 52)

BECAUSE "death has been swallowed upon in victory" (v. 54)

BECAUSE God "gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 56)

THEREFORE (and listen to the stewardship message here), "stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

As you anticipate stepping out in faith, with respect to our stewardship lives in the kingdom, it is important to remember that some of the strongest stewardship words in the Bible are built squarely on the complete victory over death in Jesus Christ. Today, it might be good to just meditate on, and rejoice in this victory upon which our lives of stewardship are built. Death has been swallowed up in victory! Therefore, stand firm! Your labor in the Lord is not ever in vain. It will never come tumbling down. For the Christ's resurrection victory stands sure!" Praise God!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, I thank You for the resurrection victory that is sure and certain for me through my Savior, Jesus Christ. Send me the Holy Spirit in extra measure, I pray, through Your Word, that I might boldly build my stewardship life on the rock-solid "brick wall" of Jesus and His resurrection victory I have in Him, and in whose name I pray. Amen!

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Therefore . . . (#2)

Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up. (1 Corinthians 16:1-2a)

Pastor Cusson wrote about his first paper route. "I first had a paper route when I was in the third grade. I remember that I had 175 papers to deliver 6 days a week. And I had to make collections. It cost \$1.75 a month to take the paper. After I paid the paper company a certain amount, the rest was mine. This taught me a lot. It taught me I had to have a plan. I soon knew who was going to be home—and when—to make my collections. Mom didn't raise no fool. It taught me I'd better make sure I had a system not to lose quarters, since I received 3 quarters for every dollar bill. It also taught me that if you just make it a part of what you do to save money, it mysteriously increases until you have enough to buy a car not all that many years later. I gave myself 5 dollars a month. The rest went into the bank. (But, of course, part of the plan was the extra paper I gave the donut shop every day so I got a free donut daily, the extra paper I gave the burrito place every day for 2 free burritos per week, and the extra paper I gave the A&W stand every day for two free root beer floats per week, but that's another story, albeit a very tasty one.)"

In our chosen text, Paul tells the Christians in Corinth every Sunday to, "set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up." Proportional giving! As God had given to them, they were to give to others. This took a little thought and a little planning. It seems to me that's the way God wanted it. In one way, it was nothing new. The idea was expressed in the Old Testament command, or "the tithe." But now there was no prescribed amount; one's giving was simply as one received "according to his income." This is a model for us, both in our week-to-week giving towards the daily work of the church, as well as with respect to our 3-year commitment to BIG. It seems to me God is saying to us in this text. "Think about it. Plan it through. If it is to be meaningful and faith-broadening, it should be something that you really plan for and think about." Some grow in their stewardship life, beginning at 3 or 4% per year and then, and discover they cannot out-give God, so they gradually increase it beyond 10%. Planning—and working the plan—can be a tool of God as He grows us. Once again, remembering that the vision for our capital stewardship program is for God to have His way with each one of us in our lives of Christian stewardship. It is my prayer that our loving, Heavenly Father would show each of us what this idea of "proportionate giving as God has given to you" means in each of our lives as we wrestle, pray, and plan for it.

Oh, one more thing! This devotional is titled, "Therefore . . . (#2)," remember? Since we also know that there were no chapter or verse markings in the original Greek New Testament, this idea of "proportionate giving as God has given to you" is built on the same wondrous proclamation of our sure and certain resurrection victory in Jesus as was yesterday's devotion. It is as if our Lord is saying, "When you are trying to figure out how much I have given to you, here is a pretty good place to start; with the victory over death and eternal resurrection victory that I give you in Jesus." Smile, you cannot out give God!

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, thank You for the resurrection victory that You give me through Your death and resurrection. Guide me so that I might reflect proportionately all that You have given to me and lead me to respond accordingly in the grace of giving. Amen!

Finish the Work

And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter. . . . Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. (2 Corinthians 8:10a, 11, 12)

Do you ever have the problem of "following through" on things . . . seeing things through to the finish? I have to admit that I do. I have it all mapped out and decided in my head that it's going to get done because it surely is worthwhile and should get done . . . but it doesn't. Do you know what I mean? I'm sure you do. We all have good intentions, but our sinful nature gets in the way and we let opportunities slip away. That phone call to a friend or loved one, that birthday card or note of sympathy, that commitment we made to our spouse, child, or parent—or to our church.

On the other hand, when, by God's grace, we do follow through on our good intentions, what a blessing it is! What a gift we give ourselves and the other! You know what I mean here, too, don't you? It's the joy of giving!

In our text, Paul, writing the very Word of God to the Corinthian Christians, is saying "here is my advice on this matter of giving—finish the work." It is as if God is saying, "Do it willingly, according to your means (proportionately), and joyfully, but finish the work. You have been taught and led by the Holy Spirit through the Word. You have thought about it and prayed about it. You have expressed your willingness to give joyfully, generously, and sacrificially. Now do it! Finish the work!"

Our loving Heavenly Father, who knows us better than we know ourselves, is gently saying to us, "I know your heart. I know the decisions you have made there in willingness and joyfulness. But I also know your weakness because of sin. So don't delay. Finish now. Do it. You'll be glad you did!"

One again, our greatest example is our Savior. The Bible says, "For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, scorning its shame." Jesus never wavered on the road to the cross. He saw it through; He finished the task once and for all. "It is finished." Why did He do this? For you, the joy set before Him!

May each of us also find joy in the grace of Christian giving, reflecting the joy of our Savior! May we, like our Savior, follow through and finish well!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank You for finishing well for me in my place. By the Work of the Holy Spirit as He comes to me through His Word for today, empower me also to finish well as I look to make my sacrificial commitment. Amen.

believe. invest. grow.

Test Me and See

"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 you will not have room enough for it." (Malachi 3:10)

Gary Hart was a United States senator from Colorado who also happened to be running for President of the United States. At the height of his campaigning, amidst some rumors about extra-marital affairs, he "threw down the gauntlet" to the press, denying that he was or ever had been involved with other women, and challenging them to prove him a liar. He made a solemn promise to the voters of the country that he was telling the truth. The press took up the challenge and, within a short time, not only had strong proof of past indiscretions, but also solid proof—including pictures—of an ongoing one. Gary Hart's promises could not stand up to the crucible of close examination.

Honestly, could any of our promises stand up completely? Whether because of sin, circumstances or weakness we simply don't really know if we will be able to keep all the promises we make. When "life" happens unexpectedly our well-intentioned promises can't always come to fruition. We live in a world of unforeseen events, suddenly throwing lives into upheaval. It is a broken world, where nothing is for sure, and seemingly no promise is absolute.

However, the above text is different. It is a promise from God. In it, He says to His Old Testament people, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse (the Old Testament commanded 10%), test me in this, and I will pour out the blessings of heaven upon you so that what you have will overflow." What does this absolute promise mean for us today? Many, many Christians who humbly have practiced Christian stewardship give witness that as they gave more and more to the work of the Lord, they had more and more to give. However, to say that it has worked this way monetarily 100% of the time in the lives of Christians is not a true reflection of reality. Faithful Christian stewards, too, have lost jobs and/or benefits, have suffered setbacks in the stock market or other investments, and have seen their earning curtailed by poor health or disaster. What, then, does this promise of God mean for us today as we look to making sacrificial gifts?

First of all, we can trust it! God—the all powerful and all knowing God—keeps His promises. A bloody cross and an empty tomb forever shout to us of this truth! Secondly, we can live by it. While we no longer live under the law of the tithe, our God continues to guide our lives of stewardship, as we have seen, through His Word. (Give joyfully, willingly, proportionately, sacrificially—and finish the work!) This promise, applied to us, says simply that as we sincerely follow His Word and guidance in our lives of stewardship, He will continue to pour out the blessings of heaven in body and soul upon us in His way and in His time, to our ultimate good. He calls us to walk by faith here. The cross and the empty tomb say we can trust Him—and live like it! You can believe it!

Prayer: O Holy Spirit, my Comforter, give to me such a faith that I may joyfully cling to God's promises, and live by faith my life of Christian stewardship. Amen!

Today

(King David is speaking) With all my resources I have provided for the temple of my God. . . . Now, who is willing to consecrate himself today to the Lord? . . . O Lord, our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you. . . . I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you. (1 Chronicles 29:2a, 5b, 16, 17)

"Today"—it is a rather powerful word in the Bible. "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb.3:7-8a) . . . Believe! "Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today." (Heb.3:13a). "This is the day the LORD has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it!" (Psalm 118:24). In each instance, it is a blessing to be part of that "today."

In our text, David is recognizing a very important "today." He is rejoicing that, on this day, he and all the people of Israel are being given the opportunity to bring offerings to the Lord for the building of the temple. No one—not one—of God's people is being left out here. After stepping forward with his own generous offering, he cries out, "who is willing to consecrate himself today to the Lord (and, in joyful response to God's abundant love and blessing, willingly bring a gift)?" He was celebrating that he and his people could willingly, joyfully, proportionately and sacrificially give to the Lord to whom all things belonged and from whom they had received all things. What a joy it was to be a part of that wonderful day! It was a day of worship! It was a day of rejoicing and of celebration! It was a great day!

Our Commitment Celebration Sunday is a special day in our lives together in Christ. It is a special "today" of which we are privileged to be a part. We will come together in worship at the Commitment Celebration, to make our special commitments (to be given over 3 years) toward our capital stewardship campaign. Just as King David and all the people came together to willingly and joyfully give to the Lord (and then give God the glory), we too may respond as David's words describe, "willingly," and with "integrity" and "honest intent"—and then give God the glory. Then this "today" will be our day of rejoicing, celebration, and commitment to the God who gives us every blessing in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, I thank You that I am able to be a part of this wondrous "today" that You have given to us here at church. Give me integrity and a joyful heart. Lead me to give willingly, with honest intent, and always mindful of all that you have done for me in Christ Jesus, in whose most wonderful Name I pray. Amen!

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Steward

What do you have that you did not receive? (1 Corinthians 4:7b)

Do you remember your sophomore year in high school? Here's what Pastor Cusson remembers. "It had been kind of a rough year. A year earlier my dad lost his job when the company for which he worked for over 20 years was sold and moved. He had such a hard time finding another job that he and I painted together during the summer. Now the stewardship visitors from church had dropped by to talk to Mom and Dad. After they left, having heard just enough of the conversation to know what was talked about, I approached my father in the yard, kind of indignantly flying to his defense. (How dare they come by now and ask for money!) My dad just looked at me with a real peace in his eyes and said softly, "Brad, everything we have is the Lord's. It's all His. He gives us everything. We just kind of use it for awhile." And then he said, "I would give everything to Him. He can have it all."

As Christians, we know that every second of life is a gift from God, created and sustained by Him alone. Every ability we have is woven into the life which He has given us; and every dime we possess is simply a gift from the providential hand of God. It is He that has given us health, abilities, and opportunities; and through these has provided for us financially. Of course, the greatest gift is the life eternal we have through faith in Jesus Christ! Indeed, what do we have that we have not been given?

The word steward means "one who manages the property, goods, or money of another." We Christians know that everything we are and have has been given to us by our Heavenly Father. We own none of it. Since everything has been given to us and, of ourselves, we own nothing, our proper response as Christian Stewards is to look on all of life as something we manage to the glory of God! This means that every moment, every ability, every dime, is to be used for God's glory. It also means that every second we live, every ability we use, and every dime we spend, is sanctified or made holy as we use it joyfully to God's glory. In short, the Stewardship life is the Christian life. This is why it says in Romans 12, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

How can we begin to do this? Listen to God's promise in Christ from Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all [on the cross]—how will He not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" We can trust that our Heavenly Father, who has provided all things for us, will continue to provide all we need. It is as sure as the blood-soaked cross and the empty tomb. With this assurance, we are enabled in joy to live our whole lives to the glory of God in Christian stewardship!

Prayer: O Holy Spirit, through Your Word, enrich my faith, I pray, and let me never doubt the certainty of my Heavenly Father's provision for me, but rather joyfully use all I am and have for His glory! In Jesus Name I pray. Amen!

Time

Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:12)
My times are in your hand. (Psalm 31:15a)

Life is short. Every second of life is a gift to be lived to its fullest.

This reality is the basis for the stewardship of time. As Christians, we know that the best way not to waste one precious second of the life God has given to us is to strive to live every moment to His glory. So, as husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons, and daughters, students and workers, friends and neighbors, citizens and church members—and in every other calling of our lives, we look to use our time to God's glory! At work or recreation, in our occupation or avocation, our hope is to use every second to God's glory! In all things, we take as our example Jesus, who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28b). This is the stewardship of life! It is the best way to live!

Certainly, a portion of the stewardship of our time is lived within the ministry of the church and our calling to be a part of it. When the writer to the Hebrews says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing," he is speaking to the stewardship of our time within the church. So it was with the early Christians, who "devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). This was stewardship of time! It was a good use of time when "they met together in their homes," in addition to worshiping together in the temple courts. When they were called upon to love one another, to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, or build up one another in the faith, they were being instructed on how to spend their time as brothers and sisters and fellow disciples in Christ.

So it remains today. May God lead and guide you to step out in faith boldly and commit a sacrificial amount of your time for the work of the kingdom. Start with Sunday worship. No one can bring to the fellowship what you do. Bible Study is also a good use of your time. So are children's ministry, music ministry, choir, small group ministry, and a host of other ministry opportunities. May God lead you as you humble yourself before Him as the Giver of life—of time—to each of us!

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, in the fullness of time, You came to suffer and die for me. Help me to use every moment of my life to Your glory. Especially guide me as I look to give my time to meaningful ministry in Your name. Amen!

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Abilities

Just as each one of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. (Romans 12:4-6a)

Ever try to repair your own car? Pastor Cusson did. Here's what he wrote. "Did you ever see the publication, "How to Work on Your Volkswagen for the Complete Idiot?" I was in college, money was tight, and I decided that I was going to start doing my own tune-up work on my Volkswagen, even though I never had "much luck" working on cars. So I bought the book, drove up to my parent's house, and got started. It went like clockwork. Check. Check. Check. Check. Done! Now to start it up! Three hours later, I finally called a friend of mine who was a "whiz" at car mechanics (and who would later open up his own shop) who gladly came over and, within 15 minutes, found and fixed the problem."

Abilities! We all have abilities. But none of us is good at everything. Our Lord, in His infinite wisdom, has woven all of society together through this one reality. He has interconnected all of us because we all need one another, each of us doing those things which we have the ability to do. This is why Martin Luther would write that the baker, farmer, judge, and teacher are only masks of God, for through these callings, and many others, it is God caring for all. The Christian, knowing this, is therefore led joyfully to use all the abilities and talents they possess serving his neighbor to the glory of God. This is Christian Stewardship with respect to the abilities that God has given us. This is why the Christian continues to evaluate where he especially can use his gifts, talents, and abilities for the good of his neighbor to the glory of God. What are some of the abilities God has given you? Where do these abilities intersect with a human need? Here is where we can especially focus on Christian Stewardship!

God has also gifted the people of His Church with many abilities. Again, we all have abilities. But none of us is good at everything. Where do your abilities lie? Where can you use them in the mission of Gloria Dei? It is important to reflect on the reality that your talents, gifts, and abilities might be given to the Church through an idea, comment, thought, or action that you alone would share or take at that moment with another Christian—or perhaps a visitor who is not yet a Christian—to whom ONLY YOU can effectively minister.

The Church is like a body, Paul tells us. We are all members. God has made each of us a part of Christ's body for a reason! He has given each of us gifts and abilities. May He guide each of us in using our abilities, gifts, and talents in this ministry which He has given us all together! Even as we look to use all our abilities to His glory every day, so too may we look to use our abilities in His service, within the Church, for in this way we reflect God's great service to us in Christ Jesus!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, You have gifted me with many abilities and talents with which to serve others. Help me always to use them to Your glory every moment of my life. Help me especially to see how and where I can use them to serve You in Your church. Help my service reflect the great service which Jesus gave to me on the cross. Amen!

Money

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. (2 Corinthians 9:6)

How do we manage the money God has given us? First, we can look to use every cent with which we are entrusted to His glory! Certainly, He would have us provide for ourselves and for those whom we love. Certainly, He would have us use our money for godly recreation, for hobbies, for school, to enjoy the arts, and in a thousand other ways besides the necessities of life. But just as certainly, He would have us give to the truly needy and hurting. And He would have us give a meaningful portion of the money He has entrusted to us in the weekly support of the mission and ministry of the Church.

Throughout this emphasis and in these devotions, we have focused on God's guidance with respect to the stewardship of our money within the Church. His will is that we should give willingly, joyfully, proportionately, generously, and sacrificially. Certainly, the Old Testament tithe is also a guideline for us. Yet, as we approach our Commitment Celebration Sunday, I think it is most instructive to return to the words above from 2 Corinthians. As we support the day to day mission of our church and through it our church body, it is good to remind ourselves that in this ministry also, "What we sow, that is what we shall reap." Many might think this is a promise that good things will come our way if we give, and they won't come if we don't. And while this is absolutely true in God's way and in God's time through God's work in Christ (give and it will be given to you), the great promise of this verse is that to the extent we give to the ministry, to that extent we shall see a harvest. As God gives us faith to believe this, may we joyfully respond!

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, You are the perfect example of One who sowed generously and reaped generously through Your death and resurrection. Send me the Holy Spirit, I pray, that He might lead me to a place of generous and joyful giving that I may know the joy of sowing—and reaping—generously. Amen!

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Promises

Make vows to the Lord your God and fulfill them. (Psalm 76:11)

Promises are powerful. Promises are the foundation of every relationship we have. In fact, they are the glue that holds all the relationships of society (and therefore society itself) together. When a man and woman are married, they make promises one to the other to "love and to cherish until death do us part." Christians, of course make this promise before God. Most people go to work with the promise that they will be paid for their work. If they did not believe the promise, most would not go to work. Students study hard because there is a promise attached to it—they will learn what they need to know and will get a good grade in the class. I put gasoline in my car today. I trusted it was gas and not water. Otherwise, I would not have done it. There is absolutely no value in the paper we call money, other than a promise from the United States Government. We trust that if we put our money into the bank, they will allow us to draw it back out.

Some people may question why we make pledges/promises to God on Commitment Celebration Sunday. It's because promises are powerful. Promises are the foundation of every relationship we have. In fact, they are at the foundation of our most important relationship: our relationship with God. A promise broken in the Garden of Eden broke the relationship God had established with us. Yet, God did not turn His face from us, but made to Eve the first of many promises foretelling a restored relationship between God and His people. Every promise of salvation made, He kept in Christ, who gave himself for us on the cross, died and rose again. As St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, God "has restored our relationship with Him through Christ . . . In other words, God was using Christ to restore His relationship with humanity" (2 Cor. 5: 18a, 19— GOD'S WORD®). When we were baptized by water and the Spirit into the life, death, and resurrection of God's Son, we were sealed in the fulfillment of that promise accomplished in Christ. When we approach the Lord's Table, we are united in the promise of forgiveness received. The relationship between us and God has been restored, and nothing can separate us from His love. When we make a promise to God, we are responding to all the promises He has made—and kept—in Jesus. When by His Word and Spirit, He leads us to step forward and make promises to Him, He is really calling each one of us to a deeper and greater relationship in Him.

This Sunday we will make our stewardship commitments to the BIG campaign. As we make our stewardship promises to God, our faith and our relationship with Him will be strengthened to our great good. In short, through making such promises to our God and by walking in the promises He makes to us, we are daily called to a deeper relationship with God in Christ. So, this Sunday, let us, each one of us, make vows (promises) to the Lord, our God, and fulfill them! May God give—and each of us receive—this gift.

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, help me see this opportunity of making a stewardship promise to You as a call to an ever stronger relationship with You who are the resurrection and the life! Amen!

O Give Thanks!

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever! (Psalm 107:1)

One great blessing that has been given to each of us is to be a part of the family of Gloria Dei. What if we spent a whole week focusing on the blessings that are ours together in the church? Think of the people that God has brought together at Gloria Dei. Think of the kind, caring hearts and acts that are characteristic of our church family! Think of the deep understanding of the grace of God in Christ Jesus that seems to joyously overflow from us every time we worship or come together. Think of the love that abounds among us. Think of the special place of mission in which God has put us. See the opportunities to step out powerfully in ministry in our community with the sure, certain, and strong power of the Good News of Jesus Christ (itself yet another blessing showered down upon us). Think about the privilege – and blessing – of being a part of this ministry. Think of that blessing here at church, which is close to your heart, whatever it may be. As we think about these blessings, and a host of others, that are ours as the family of believers in this place, it seems we cannot help but raise our voice with the psalmist, "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love endures forever!"

This Sunday we will humbly come before our Lord and make promises, expressing our desire to use the money He has entrusted to us, to support the exciting ongoing mission and ministry of our congregation and beyond. Heeding God's Word to us, let us respond joyfully, willingly, proportionately and sacrificially for the good of the kingdom, for our great good, and to the glory of God!

May God help us, as we grow through our courageous generosity, when we gather this Sunday for our BIG Commitment Celebration Sunday!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, send me Your Holy Spirit in such measure that, seeing what a great blessing it is to be a part of Your Church, her people and her mission, I might be moved joyfully, willingly, proportionately, and sacrificially to commit to this mission and its people. Amen!

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