

Please take out your bulletins and look under the budget update portion. You will see that we are \$10,000 behind in our giving for 2019. \$10,000! What are we going to do?? Here's an idea. Let's not panic. In fact, I can honestly say that I have never been concerned about the finances of our church. When I first started in 2001, our annual budget was \$60,000 and you could practically write out the whole budget on a post-it note. I wasn't worried then and I haven't been worried since. Let me explain why I'm not concerned.

First, note that we are \$10,000 behind on our budget, not our expenses. Every year that I can remember we have spent less than our budget, so we are not really \$10,000 in the hole.

Second, we have been here before. In October of 2018 we were \$12,000 behind on our budgeted giving and we ended the year almost even.

The third reason I'm not worried is because your generosity has allowed us to build up a decent reserve in the event of any shortfall. We have a fund for replacing equipment. We have a fund for building repairs. We have a large fund for staff needs. Things would have to get really bad for us to be in any kind of real financial trouble. If we stopped adding to our savings funds we would easily meet our budget. It's obviously good to save up and plan for the future, but it's not a matter of financial stability.

The fourth and most important reason I'm not worried is because God is in control. If he wants this church to take a financial death spiral, then so be it. And if he wants to bless us and keep ministry moving forward, then that will happen

So if I'm not worried about finances, why would I preach on giving? Why not just trust God and keep quiet about money? Money and possessions are issues of the heart and discipleship. How we make money, spend money and give money are absolutely fundamental to our faith and walk with God. So whether we have a slight deficit in our budget or an enormous surplus, this topic is vital to our spiritual growth.

You can accuse me of a lot of things, but you certainly can't accuse me of preaching on giving too much. I haven't preached on the topic in a few years and I haven't done a series on the topic in about fourteen years. You can accuse our church of a lot of things, but you certainly can't accuse our church of asking for money too often or passing the offering plate too often. As you know, our church doesn't even own offering plates. When a special group like Koinonia comes we always scramble around looking for baskets or something we can use to take an offering for them. If anything, you could masker a case that we don't preach about or talk about money and giving nearly enough.

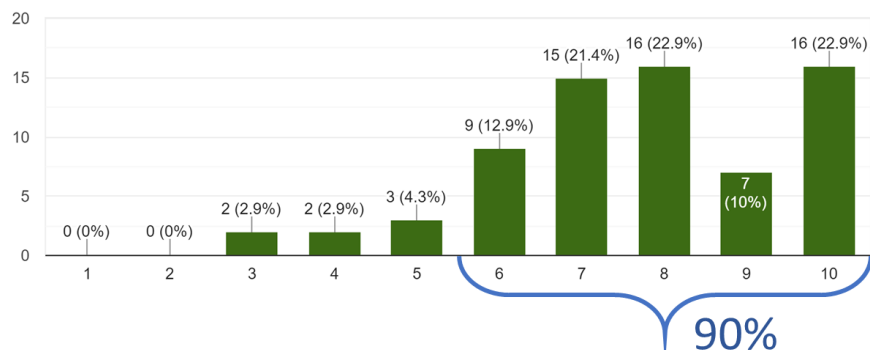
So given the fact that we don't preach on giving very often or talk about giving very often, I really do feel like we are trusting God to supply what our church needs. So what follows for the next few weeks is not a plea for funds. What follows is not a cry of panic whatsoever. What follows for the next few weeks is a deep dive into God's word to discover and remind ourselves of the relationship between money and possessions and our faith in Jesus. It's never about money. It's always about being a disciple of Jesus.

Speaking of discipleship, Seth and I are enjoying going over the results of our EQUIP survey. We really appreciate everyone who took the time to complete the survey. We are already seeing multiple ways we can make use of the results for the benefit of our church body. As Seth announced earlier, we plan to share all of the results with you at the next EQUIP meeting on Monday December 2. Two of the questions from the survey are related to the topic of giving. Here's the first question.

I understand that God "owns" everything and this is reflected in the way I manage what God has entrusted to me.

"I understand that God owns everything"

BELIEF

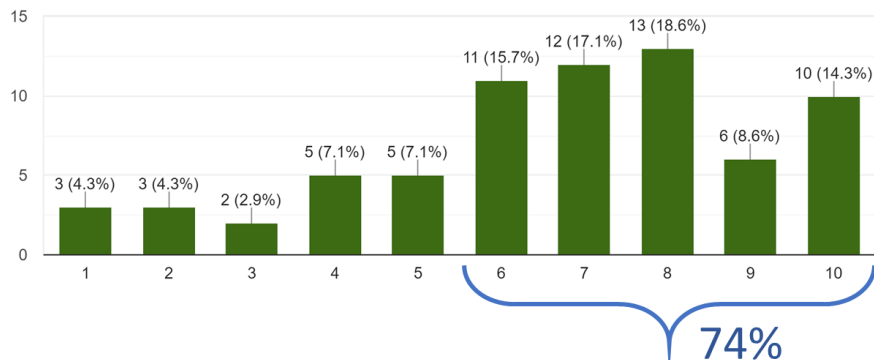


That is a very encouraging result, wouldn't you agree? 90% of people replied with a "6" or more. It seems that our church body has a very good handle on the topic of stewardship. And since this is true, it should follow that this will be reflected in our giving habits. Which leads us to the second question.

I am sacrificial, joyful and generous in my financial giving.

“I am sacrificial
in my giving.”

BEHAVIOR



Now this is interesting. On this question only 74% of respondents said that they feel sacrificial in their giving. Of course it all depends on how you answer the question, doesn't it? I'm pretty sure that if you answered "5" or "6", you don't feel very generous. A case could be made that even a "7" answer is not a confident reply. You could argue that somewhere between 40% and 50% of our folks do not consider themselves to be generous givers. But even if you used 6-10, there is a discrepancy between these two questions. In the first question only 90% were in the top half but the second question only 74% were in the top half.

First of all, I appreciate the honesty represented here. This is why the survey was completely anonymous. Also I want to remind you that the pastors and elders never know what anyone gives at Grace. So we have double anonymity here. The survey was anonymous and the giving itself in anonymous.

I think the reason for the discrepancy is due to the fact that the first question is about our belief and the second question is about our behavior. In other words, we say that we believe that God owns everything, but our behavior does not demonstrate our belief to the same extent. Your beliefs determine your behavior. Or you could say that your behavior betrays your belief. If your behavior does not line up with your belief, guess what? You really don't believe the thing you say you believe. Now there's not an enormous discrepancy between the two questions but there is enough of a discrepancy to see it clearly.

This is a great example of why we wanted to do the EQUIP survey so we could discover things like this. What this tells me is that we have not done a sufficient job equipping you all. On one hand, we are not responsible for the behavior of everyone who attends our church. Ultimately, you are responsible for your own walk with the Lord. But on the other hand, as shepherds we are responsible for what happens within the church. Are we properly equipping people? Do we have programs and pathways that allow for people to grow? And in this case, have we effectively connected the dots between the truth that God owns everything and our personal habits of generosity? This is where I choose to land, that I need to take responsibility for presenting this truth in love and letting God do his work in each of our hearts. When it comes to the result of this question or any of them, we never want to say to you, "Hey, what's the matta with you?!" But instead ask, "What's the matta with us? How can we all be better equipped for good works?" Also, you should know that most of the survey was very encouraging!

One final word of warning before we jump into this topic. If you land in the bottom half this survey, I don't want you to be discouraged. God can teach us and change our hearts. On the other

side of the spectrum, if you landed in the top half of the survey, please don't allow pride to sneak in just because you are more generous than some. It is very encouraging to know that overall we have a generous church body. However, I encourage you to be willing to be stretched even further. Maybe he wants to move you from a six to an eight or from a six to a ten. Please be open to what the Lord might teach you in the next few weeks.

With all of that in mind, let's dig into our text in 2 Corinthians. Our primary texts will be 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ²for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—⁵and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

1. Grace always precedes giving.

Verse 7 is going to be the theme for this whole series. *But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.* But the word grace also appears in the very first verse. *We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.* . Even before he gets into the topic of giving, Paul gives us our first principle—Grace always precedes giving.

To understand this passage properly, we have to enter into the story between Paul and two churches. In this section of his letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to be generous, and he did it by using the example of the church in Macedonia. There was something very special about these Macedonian believers and Paul wanted the Corinthians to know about them. As we read, the Macedonian believers were great givers, but they were able to give generously because grace had been generously poured into their lives.

This is always the correct order of events. First, grace is poured into our lives through the gospel and then grace comes out of our lives. We love because he first loved us. And never the other way around. And being generous with your money is just one of the ways this is supposed to happen.

I love how Jesus expressed this in Luke chapter six. “Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38). Now it might sound like the order is reversed here, right? “Give and it will be given to you.” Ripped out of its context it sort of sounds like the prosperity gospel. If you give our first then you will get back a lot more. But if you jump down a few verses we can see the true context.

“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil” (Luke 6:43-45).

Do you see the context? Good trees produce good fruit because they have been made good. A good tree is abiding in Christ. A good tree has been smothered in God’s grace, that’s the only reason they are good trees and can bear good fruit. With that in mind, now let’s back up to verse 38.

“Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”

This is a picture of God’s grace. It’s a picture of our lives as a large basket. The grace of God has been poured into our lives to such a degree that it was pressed down so that the container could fit more of it. If that weren’t enough, the basket was shaken so the contents would settle deeper into the basket. It wasn’t enough that his grace was pressed down into our lives. It wasn’t enough that it was shaken so more grace could be squeezed in. But then that same grace was running over. God’s grace so poured into our lives that there was no way we could possibly contain it. It was way more than enough. It was a super abundant amount of grace. In Ephesians 1 Paul calls it “lavish grace.” It’s so much more than we need.

This is why God’s grace always precedes our giving. We love because he first loved us. He lavishly poured his saving grace into our lives and the proper response is that we would excel in the grace of giving. If not, maybe it is because you haven’t understood and experienced the grace of Jesus Christ. When grace has been poured into your life the natural thing would be for that grace to spill out of your life. If you have been given the miracle saving grace, then it makes sense that this should directly impact our generosity. The Bible makes it very clear that “our money” doesn’t belong to us anyway. We are nothing more than managers of all of God’s resources. Did you in any way earn the grace that was given to you? Most definitely not. Do you own the possessions? No, every possession and every last dollar you have is an act of grace.

I think this is where the intersection of belief and behavior goes astray. As a church we have said that we believe that God owns everything. Nothing actually belongs to us because we are merely stewards of what has been entrusted to us. Grace has been lavishly poured out on every believer. So then it’s our job as elders to connect those dots together if you haven’t already done so. If our behavior, in this case our generosity, does not match our belief—that God own everything and lavish grace has been poured into our lives, then we really don’t believe it, do we?

Let’s say you were running the R.G LeTourneau Foundation. Remember him, the rags to riches genius inventor who gave away 90% of his income to the Lord and his work? When he died, there was \$40 million in his foundation. Now you are the chairman of the LeTourneau Foundation tasked with the responsibility of giving away one million dollars every year. First of all, wouldn’t that be fun? I think that would be such a blast. A heavy responsibility, yes, but also

an absolute blast to bless people and ministries with those gifts. As chairman of the LeTourneau Foundation, would you ever consider writing a check to yourself? I love it when someone at church asks me who a check should be written to. It might be for missions or for Operation Christmas Child and they don't know exactly to whom to address the check. My answer is always, "Make it out to Rich Maurer, that's M-A-U-R-E-R. Don't forget the middle R."

That's not my money, is it? if you were running the LeTourneau Foundation, that's not your money, is it? The money in your bank accounts is not your money, is it? Now I realize that it's a little messier than this, isn't it? To steal from the LeTourneau Foundation could land you in prison but you can't really steal from your own bank account, right? Well even that's not completely clear, because the Lord said differently through the prophet Malachi.

Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house (Malachi 3:8-10).

We're not going to get into a tithe debate right now. Whenever the topic of giving is taught, there is inevitable question that arises: do we tithe on the gross or the net income? I'll get to topic eventually but let's catch the significance of what the Lord spoke to Malachi. It's quite simple, really. Because they did not give the tithe of the firstfruits to God, this was equivalent to robbing God. Now again, lay aside the idea of a tithe. Don't concern yourself with the 10% number, just focus on the giving itself. They were not honoring the Lord by giving him the firstfruits. They were not recognizing God as Creator, Sustainer and Provider. Because they did not do so, it was as if they were stealing from God. Therefore, an absence of generosity is stealing from God. In effect this means that you can steal from your own bank account if you do not honor God through your generosity.

Does God need our tithes and offerings? If you only read certain parts of the Bible you might think so. You might think that tithes, firstfruits and sacrifices somehow sustain God. That if you don't bring these to him, he will suffer loss in some way. But that is a purely pagan idea—that God needs us. The Bible is very clear that the opposite is true.

I will not accept a bull from your house
or goats from your folds.
For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:9-10)

God doesn't need our tithes and offerings. God did not need Israel's sacrifices, but he did want their hearts and he does want our heart. It's always been about the heart and money is one of the keys to our heart. Grace always precedes giving. If you realize it is all by grace, generosity will come easy. If you think it is of your own doing, generosity will be very difficult.

Has God poured lavish grace into your life? If yes, are you excelling in the grace of giving?

Rich Maurer

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