

Serve: How we Give

June 24, 2018 - Jonathan Pugh

I was chosen to bring one of the least popular sermons that can be preached in many of our American churches. If you have been around churches for some length of time, you will notice that pastor ever advertises that he is going to preach a sermon on giving. People tend to feel like they are going to receive a guilt trip, they are going to have a huge burden hung around their necks, and consequently, they are going to stay away.

I don't blame people for staying away, because in my gut I usually have the same reaction. Why would someone want to listen to a half an hour of a pastor paid by a church telling people why they should give to a church so that he can keep getting paid? To complicate matters further, there are a lot of lies about giving that have circulated around, you may have heard some of these.

- 1) God really needs my money
- 2) My giving doesn't matter
- 3) God's not happy with anything less than 10% of my income
- 4) God can't bless me if I don't give
- 5) Giving pays off God/gets him off my back
- 6) 10% of my income belongs to God
- 7) My giving plants a seed that guarantees God will pay me back with increase

What saddens me about the way that many Christians talk about giving is that it has come to be thought of as some sort massive burden of guilt and shame. All of these lies about giving are intended in one form or another to manipulate people into giving. While some of these lies may succeed in getting people to give sometimes, they ultimately fail because they push people away from church or give them a false picture of what it is like to live with God. The interesting thing is that I have never met a single person who goes to church and loves church, but would tell you that they don't want to give. Yet most talking about giving is focused on why to give.

2 Corinthians 9:7 says that God loves a cheerful giver.

My goal today is to take away any notion that giving should be done out of sense of guilt or obligation to give to the church. The title of the sermon is not how to get people to feel bad about giving, but assuming you are excited about what God is doing through His church, I want to give you tools so that you can begin to learn to give in such a way that giving is a joy instead of a burden.

In order to do that, we are going to explore a couple principles that are present in both the old and new testaments of the Bible. It's important for you to know that we are talking about *Principles* because those are necessary to understand how the Old Testament has authority over our lives today. The OT was written primarily to the people of Israel who were under the old covenant that God gave to Moses. Today we live under the new covenant that was given to us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ by the apostles after Jesus' resurrection. We are not Israelites and are not bound today by the law God gave Moses, but we can see principles at play that help us to understand how God intends life to be joyful for Christians in following Him.

I want you to turn first to Exodus 13:1-2.

Here is a perfect illustration of the principle of the first fruits in the Bible. The principle of first fruits goes like this: Giving to God is not the same as paying income taxes. With income taxes, you count up how much money you profit over the course of a year, then after you have that money in hand you give Uncle Sam and the State of North Carolina their cut....or what they say belongs to them. When you give according to first fruits, however, you are giving the first and the best in *anticipation* of what is to follow.

So in an economy where everyone kept livestock, the first fruit looked this: When a goat or a sheep produces offspring, the first livestock born from a mother would be offered to God as a sacrifice. This included the firstborn of work animals and people. God demands our first. Now, obviously you wouldn't sacrifice a person or a donkey, so God built into the law a method where people and work animals could be redeemed by sacrificing another animal whose purpose was to be sacrificed.

If you were Ethan Lineberger and your income was grains or fruits, the first fruit offering would occur at the beginning of harvest. It was often thought that the best of the harvest was the first of it. So the first batch of what your farm produced every season would be brought to God in anticipation that he would continue to provide for you a good harvest.

Now, this poses a question for us. Why would God demand firstfruits? Does he need meat or fruit lest he starve? If that is true, wouldn't the last fruits be just as good as the firstfruits?

We have a ministry here at Venture called Firstfruits. It is designed to give people with special needs a place of worship on the first Sunday of every month. It's completely run by volunteers to pour into and love on those individuals....and they all say they receive more blessing than they give. Firstfruits is a very fitting title, however, because God tells his people where these first fruit offerings are supposed to go- the Levites (who don't own land because they serve in worship), the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. In particular, God is always showing special concern for the three-legged stool of the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. He always says "how you treat them is how you treat me."

Giving the firstfruits was intended to continually remind the Israelites of their story. They were refugee slaves who had been rescued by God and given a food, wealth, land, and a relationship with God. Giving was part of their new identity.

So when the first fruit offering was given, it was really an act of faith. God was molding his people spiritually by teaching them a couple of lessons:

- 1) Everything I have was given to me by God
- 2) God gets the first and the best because EVERYTHING belongs to HIM.
- 3) God gives me things so that I can use them to accomplish the work that is close to HIS heart....which is to worship Him by caring for those who can't care for themselves.

The second principle that I want to draw your attention toward is the principle of the Sabbath. Now you may be looking at me saying "I thought Sabbath was when granny would scold me for working or playing ball on Sunday afternoon instead of going to church and joining the family for lunch. You are talking about giving. Giving requires that I work in order to have something to give. Now you are talking to me about resting. What in the world does Sabbath have to do with giving?"

Remember, we are not talking simply about the act of giving. We are talking about the type of life that God prescribes so that we can give with the right attitudes and the right motives. We've already learned that God doesn't need my money....I need God's money. It all belongs to him and he chooses to share some with me so that I can in turn share in the work of ministry that is close to his heart.

If God is using firstfruits to teach us to trust Him, he is also using the principle of the Sabbath to teach us that God expects us to work hard, but at the end of the day our livelihood is not because we worked hard, but because God chose to bless us.

Read with me Exodus 20:8-11

Now Exodus 23:10-12

Now read Deuteronomy 15:1-11

For a person observing the Law of Moses, Sabbath formed the foundational basis for the week, the seasons, and the year. As people went about their lives all week, they should be focused on the coming Sabbath when they could rest and spend an extended time hearing from God. The festivals would be times to enjoy life, friends, family, and rest in the goodness of what God had done.

We have this idea in modern America that because of technology, we are spending less and less and less of our time doing actual manual labor for the things that we need to survive. If I were to do a poll of the number of people here whose jobs revolve around operating machines or working indoors behind a computer, there would be more people raise their hands than at any time in human history. We think that because our work is not typically backbreaking, that we don't need to concentrate on a Sabbath day perhaps as much as we used to.

The concept of Sabbath is more needed in our culture today than ever before. Most of us live hectic lives where we never have a minute that is not consumed by some activity or somewhere we have to be. When we do slow down, most of us are spending way too much time looking at our televisions or smart phones and ignoring the gifts of God with which we are surrounded. How many times in the past week did you take time to sit around a table with your family and enjoy a meal together? Many people would argue that one reason for the increase in mental health problems that we see all over America is that we as a culture have done away with needing to create cycles of times and places where we work hard, but then our minds are disengaged from the demands of life....meaning disengaged from work, disengaged from activities, disengaged from screens...and we can mentally rest and focus on actually enjoying the gifts of God.

The Sabbath year was a very interesting concept that was related to this way of life that involved slowing down and focusing on God. We even see it in our laws today. When a person owes a debt that can't be repaid, there is typically a seventh year in which creditors cannot sue or ding your credit to force you to repay the debt. It is either written off or forgiving.

The whole idea of Sabbath is that we are created to be free people. Circumstances would happen in life where people fall into poverty and have to sell themselves or some of their critical goods to pay off a debt. The Sabbath was to remind God's people that slavery is not their destiny and that freedom is a big deal to God. The Sabbath year forced people to be mindful of those whose lives were not as good as their own....servants, debtors, landless poor, and even animals. The land would lie fallow, but still produce for the poor as a reminder that it was God who provides everything we have, not our own brilliance and hard work.

A Sabbath-centric life seems to fly in the face of the modern American dream. We are usually told to work as hard as you can, as long as you can, to get as much as you can, and then to spend that money as fast you can to replay the cycle all over.

Where, might I ask you, is there a place for God and justice in that version of modern life?

God did not create us to be slaves. That means slaves to our jobs, slaves to our bosses, slaves to sports, slaves to hobbies, slaves to sin, slaves to drugs, slaves to entertainment, slaves to social media, slaves to consumer-driven lifestyles.

Life apart from God seems meaningless and absurd. It is a continual cycle of heartache, pain, suffering, and death. The French philosopher Albert Camus wrote a book entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which he states that the only fundamental question for humans to answer is why we should not commit suicide. His hero is the Greek mythology figure Sisyphus who cheats death, but is punished by being forced to roll a rock up a hill for eternity while having it roll back down and having to start all over again. For Camus, the absurdity of life is what gives it meaning.....it's a very depressing outlook.

The idea of Sabbath is meant to break into the mundane, oppressive, and depressing cycle of life. We are not created to merely survive, but we are created for a relationship with God, to do his creative and just work, and for our destiny to feast with him and enjoy the work of His labor. In order to join God in His work, he invites us to give.....to forgive debts, to bless other people, to break the chains of the oppress, and to simply rest in knowing that God has already taken care of everything we need.

Now like all good things of God, by the time Jesus came on the scene the religious leaders had found a way to pervert God's beautiful gift of Sabbath into something that created more burden than freedom in the lives of the people. In one instance, these Pharisees saw Jesus' disciples picking heads of grain to eat as they were walking, because they were hungry. The Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of sinning because they broke a ridiculous religious rule that was in direct contradiction with the very reason that God had instituted the Sabbath in the first place. Jesus response directed people right back to God's perfect design and intention.

In Mark 2:27-28 He says "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

The old Mosaic law had been fulfilled and given meaning. Sabbath in our lives is a gifted opportunity to rest from our labor, quiet our souls to listen to God, and by breaking the cycle of consumerism, we can begin to trust that God has provided for us everything that we need with enough to share with others. Jesus placed meeting human needs over a meaningless ritual observance.

So what does all of this have to do with giving?

The ability to take a day every week to rest from our labors, to enjoy each other, to worship God, and to give as part of that worship are all generous gifts of God. A life lived with God is a life in which we are removing ourselves from the rat race. Our lives don't depend on us, they depend on God. He provides for us...he gives jobs, health, family, peace, and wealth....It's not ours, it's His. We can rest because we have a heavenly daddy who told us to rest and that he would continue to care for us. Likewise, we can give because we have a heavenly daddy who said to give and that he would continue to care for us even though we don't have what we gave available to ourselves anymore.

Giving is important not because God needs your money, but because you need the opportunity to learn to trust Him.

Remember when I told you that we are dealing with principles. These principles are important because they point us to the greater truth of the Gospel. In Hebrews 4 we are told that the Sabbath that was pictured in the Old Testament is actually there to make us hunger for a complete and total rest that can only be found through faith in Jesus Christ. We can try to fill our lives up with everything under the sun... careers, money, politics, activities, church, travel, family, drugs, hobbies, technology..... but we will never ever find rest or satisfaction for our souls in any of those things. Only by trusting in what Christ has already done to rescue us can we ever begin to have enough faith to believe that the sustenance of our everyday lives are in the hands of God.

This is the heart that is necessary to give.

Denny Emmons- "God's grace extended to you should generate generosity in you"

When we begin to understand that our eternal destiny is to receive a gift that we could have never purchased on our own, something is sparked that triggers us to desire to be as generous to God as He has been to us.

We can begin to understand that everything we have and everything we are belongs to Him. And because we love God we will want to give to the things that are close to God's heart.

So for the practicalities of giving, I am going to give you a few principles.

- 1) Saying yes to one thing requires that you say no to five things

Another way of saying this is that you will never be able to be as generous as you desire to be until you make a budget and live by it.

- 2) The most generous people are people who plan to be generous.

Austin told us a few weeks ago to be eager for good works. This means that we structure our time, our family life, and our finances to have something available for good works.

- 3) A simpler life is a more fulfilling life.

People who are generous givers always tell me that they are far more fulfilled by giving than they are on the toys/clothes/vacations that they could have bought for themselves.

4) Joy is a more powerful motivation than guilt.

Many people feel guilty that what they are able to give is not enough. This type of guilt will never produce fruit. If your goal is to give 10% of your income, but you are only able to give away 1%, then the worst thing in the world would be to not give the 1% and continue to beat yourself up over not being able to give. Giving is an act of grace. That means that when we give out of right motives, God is never upset with our giving. If you are able to give \$5, give that. It's an important gift in that God will use the joy you get from participating in his work to motivate you to do what is necessary to give more.