

I LOVE MY CHURCH – WEEK 4 – GIVING – Acts 4:32-35
Pastor Jon Haakana

INTRODUCTION

My thanks to our drama team this evening/morning – they did a great job! Yes, brothers and sisters in Christ, it's going to be one of THOSE sermons. We are looking at our giving to church today. But, we aren't going to talk about what the Bible says regarding how much we should give – a tithe in the OT, and firstfruits giving in the NT. We aren't going to talk about how our offerings specifically fund our ministries here and beyond these walls. While it is true that we give TO a specific need, budgeted items, or requests, we want to continually stress that motivation for giving springs FROM what God has first done in our lives—his steadfast love shown in the sacrifice of Jesus and his overwhelming grace towards us. Christ lived, died and rose again, that we may live to the fullest, here and into eternity. So, whatever we do as a Christian should be in response to all that God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

Instead, today we are going to talk about our attitude in giving to our church. We are in the midst of a series that looks at ways we can truly love our church. If we truly love our church it will affect our attitudes and actions towards each other, the ways in which we serve God and His church and our community, and it will affect our attitude about WHY we support our church with our time and our offerings.

We know that we should give money to the church. We know that as stewards we are giving back a portion of what God has first given to us. We know that we can develop an attitude of gratitude because of God's grace in Jesus, and that this gratitude may lead to a life of generosity. But we also may ask, "WHY should I give to the church?" Our Scripture reading today gives us a glimpse of the reason why.

TRANSFORMED

The book of Acts paints a picture of the early church. It is clear in this picture that something dramatic had happened in the lives of the early Christians.

The early Christians were a diverse group of people. The first converts to Christianity, according to the second chapter, came from all over the known world. The early Christians were various nationalities, colors, sizes, shapes, religious backgrounds and political persuasions. Yet, the writer of the Book of Acts, Luke, observes in this passage that, "The full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul." Though a

diverse group of people, the early Christians were deeply united. Having all been touched by God's grace, they had one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. The truths that brought them together were greater than the forces that divided them.

The early Christians also saw all of their "possessions" as gifts. Luke writes that, "No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own." This was truly a work of the Holy Spirit. The concept of "mine and "yours" seem deeply imbedded in our DNA. One of the first words children say (without coaching) is "mine." The early Christians had a dramatically different perspective—everything they had was a gift. Because possessions were a gift, there was no "mine", or "yours", there was only "ours."

How do you truly look at your income, investments and possessions? Are they things to claim as your own, or are they gifts from a gracious God, given to be invested not only on our families and households, but your church family, the community, and those in need as well. Do you give in grateful response to how God has transformed your life, or as an obligation or even an afterthought?

SACRIFICIAL GIVING

The level of giving by the early Christians was amazing. They didn't simply drop extra change in the offering plate. They didn't even pay a lot of attention to the age-old guideline of a tithe. Luke writes that, "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them."

Now, the homes they sold were not their summer cottages or their RV's. The homes were their primary residence and the selling of their homes necessitated a dramatic shift in their life style. Likewise the lands that were sold were not useless pieces of swamp or desert landscape. The lands were income producing lands.

Luke does not intimate that the depth of one's faith or the validity of one's Christianity can be measured by amount one gives. He is only noting that an encounter with the living Christ and being overwhelmed by God's love and grace made a radical difference in the lives of the early Christians. No one was forced to give sacrificially. The early Christian Church was not some cult where the leader demanded all of his followers to become poor so that he (or she) could become rich. Those who sold their homes and lands did so of their own volition because of what had happened in their lives.

It is here that we need to indicate that not everyone in this new church sold all of their belongings. In chapter 5 there is the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They sold a piece of land and claimed they had brought all the proceeds to the Apostles, when in reality they held back a portion for themselves. The point is not that they didn't bring everything to the church, but they had claimed one thing, and did another – they lied. Theirs was a story of sinful attitudes. They claimed an attitude of generosity, but carried out an attitude of selfishness.

In January of 1997 a mystery was solved that had baffled people for nearly a decade. Someone was giving away millions of dollars! The recipients didn't know why the gifts came or how to ask for more. But still the money drizzled in, to universities, hospitals and service groups around the globe, paid in cashier's checks and accompanied by word that the giver wished to remain anonymous. The giver, it turns out, was Charles Feeney, a 66 year-old businessman from New Jersey. Forbes magazine had listed Feeney, the owner of a duty-free shop conglomerate, as one of the 400 richest Americans. But then it was discovered that Feeney's wealth was only 1% of what Forbes thought it was. How could they be so far off in their projections? For years, Feeney had quietly been giving it away. Over \$4 billion in all. Feeney is known as a "shabby:" dresser who flies coach, wears a \$5 watch and doesn't even own a house or a car. The richest 1% of Americans give only 2% of their annual gross income to charity. And yet Charles Feeney managed to give away 99% of all he had without anyone knowing. What would possibly lead him to do that? Since he won't give interviews, all we can figure is that he has a perspective on this life that few people have.

We truly have reason to give from a grateful heart. Though undeserved, God has given us His all in Jesus. All we are, and all we have come because Jesus died for us and rose again to make us heirs of His lavish and amazing kingdom.

So, we need to release the grip on our possessions, thinking that they are ours to give. We need be faithful and truthful from our hearts. Because the truth is, it's not ours. It never was. It's God's—and we're the bank. He invests with us and hopes to see a good return on His investment. And His measurement for that good return is how we love others with what we have. Release your grip. It's not yours. This is as hard a sermon for me to hear as it is for you. Trust me.

GIVEN TO THE CHURCH

When the early Christians gave, Luke notes that they “laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” This is to say that they gave their gifts to the church and the church dispersed their gifts.

Many religions encourage their followers to give to the poor. Such activities are considered good. Of course Jesus encouraged his followers to give to the poor, also. But, Jesus made the act of giving more meaningful. Jesus taught that demonstrating one’s love for the poor by ministering to their needs was also an act of a loving God.

The combined gifts of the early Christians were able to do much more than their individual gifts.

We combine our gifts as members of Mount Olive so that we can accomplish our mission of “living to love people to Christ.” Together we are able to impact this community of faith, the city of Anoka and wherever God leads, in a more significant way than we can separately. Not only do our gifts touch lives in the city of Anoka, but also in our state, nation, and around the world.

CONCLUSION

We are different people. That doesn’t mean that we wear weird clothes or carry Bibles wherever we go. It does mean that our lives have been touched with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have been given a new life, a new perspective on life, and a new reason for living. Because of these changes we spend our time for God’s glory, use our talents in service to others, and give sacrificially to reach people and change lives with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We love our church!

Amen.