

Kingdom Giving

From Training to Excellence

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Part I

“The Training Wheels of Giving”

The greatest risk my wife and I ever took was riding mules down into the bottomless abyss called the Grand Canyon. After we saddled up in the corral, the wrangler asked for questions. My hand shot up, *“Will Lightening [my mule’s name] respond to his name if there is any danger?”* With a cowboy drawl he answered, *“Sir, Lightening is so dumb he doesn’t even know he has a name.”* My fear heightened and my insecurity sank to a new low. The narrow switch-backed trails with no guard rails or safety nets were not for the faint-hearted. The experience was fun but only afterward! We survived never to do it again!

The easiest risk we ever took together, and still do to this day, was the vow we made shortly after our wedding. The vow was simply this: regardless of our income we would give 10% (a tithe) to the Lord, pay our bills and if money was left over we would buy groceries. Back in 1965 at Nyack College as 21-year olds with part-time jobs we dared to trust God. Little did we know that there would be times when the cupboard and refrigerator were empty with no money for groceries. There were no food banks or food stamps or credit cards. We had no parents or family nearby to run to for meals. But God kept his promise to *“bless the work of our hands”* (Deuteronomy 14:29) and *“...open the floodgate of heaven...”* (Malachi 3 6-10) by providing additional opportunities for work that came “out of thin air”. No explanation except God keeping his promises. We literally never missed a meal! We could say with David, *“While the lions hunger and thirst, those who seek the Lord lack no good thing”* (Psalm 34:10). What was an easy risk became no risk at all. It took far more trust to believe my mule, Lightening, would carry me safely in and out of the Grand Canyon than it does to trust in God to keep his promise to provide and care for us.

When we gave our first tithe to the Lord, we knew we could not afford to do so. We did not give it in fearful obedience. Nor did we give it *“reluctantly or under compulsion”* (II Corinthians 9: 7). And as I recall we didn’t give our tithe thoughtlessly or even joyfully. We simply gave it out of love and gratitude to the Lord. In our ignorance we “revered” God’s name and naively trusted his promise to provide our need of food if we had to. We gave expectantly.

Law and Grace

When we think of the tithe, we easily separate the Old and New Testaments by the words, Law and Grace--the law representing God’s holiness and moral absolutes. On the other hand, grace in the New Testament represents God’s undeserved love and kindness toward us. In doing so we mistakenly conclude that law is graceless and grace is lawless.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Our God is always holy and gracious. He is changeless.

God gave the law to Israel because he loved them so much he wanted to protect them from themselves. Without the law they would self-destruct.

i.e. I tell parents of toddlers, "When your little one wakes up every day, they believe it's their job to discover a new way to die. Because you love them, you will keep them from doing it!"

God refers to Israel as his children and the sheep of his pasture. Those two images sum it up. He loves them! He loves his children! He cares for his sheep!

The law is not graceless nor is grace lawless. This tension of law and grace sustains life and healthy relationships. Remove law and grace is corrupted. Remove grace and law becomes oppressive.

The major difference between old testament law and new testament grace is Christ. He said he came to fulfill the law, not abolish it. Later he would say, "I came to give my life as a ransom for many." By his death he became the last sacrifice for sin, replacing the system of animal sacrifices. By this he established a new covenant in his own blood. By his resurrection he gave us the certain hope of eternal life.

With this in mind, let's look closely at a very insightful summary of tithing. I want you to notice the grace of God—his love for us his children.

Deuteronomy 14:22-29

²² Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. ²³ Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and olive oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always. ²⁴ But if that place is too distant and you have been blessed by the LORD your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the LORD will choose to put his Name is so far away), ²⁵ then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose. ²⁶ Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice. ²⁷ And do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own. ²⁸ At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, ²⁹ so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Look more closely at how God expresses his grace. Let's begin at verses 28 & 29.

v. 29 – Bring your tithe so the Lord will bless the work of your hands. That's grace.

v.28 – Bring your tithes so your priests, foreigners, fatherless and widows can eat and be satisfied. That’s grace.

v. 23a – Bring your tithe to a place God will choose for his name. God was jealous for his name and reputation, so he would not let his children worship him in pagan temples. That’s grace.

v. 23b – Bring your tithe so that you may learn to revere the Lord your God always.

Three key words here: “learn”, “revere” and “always”. Randy Alcorn in his book, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, calls tithing the training-wheels of giving. Understand the meaning of these three Hebrew words in the giving of the tithe:

- The word “learn” means to see and know the particulars.
- The word “revere” means to polish or make glisten.
- The word “always” means continually and expertly.

How could we paraphrase this statement with accuracy? Here’s my best shot: When you tithe you make glisten every particular of God’s name expertly.

Is our God needy?

Does he need our loving devotion and worship?

Does he need our attention to feel good?

Does he need our money or tithe?

No, not at all! It is you and me who are needy. We need to love him and revere him continually. We need to give him the first and best of our income. Why? Because God knows our sinful, fallen condition and he knows if we fail to revere him continually we will forget him and chase after the worthless idols of this world. We will love our money more than we love him. When we tithe we remind ourselves of God’s love and care and faithful provision for our needs. Tithing is the training wheels of kingdom giving.

Now flash forward to the minor prophet Malachi and God’s triple-dog-dare regarding tithing. Notice God’s condemnation of Israel and his outrageous promise in Malachi 3:6-10

*⁶ "I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.⁷ Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'⁸ "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'
"In tithes and offerings. ⁹ You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. ¹⁰ 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 there will not be room
enough to store it.*

The Greater Context

Let's put this in the greater context. In the first two chapters of Malachi, God condemns the priests of Israel for allowing the people to bring their crippled, injured and diseased animals as sacrificial offerings to the Lord. These offerings were worthless. The people were disgracing God's name. At least three times in these chapters God refers to the greatness of his name among the nations. King David rightly said to Aranuah who was willing to give his threshing floor to David to build an altar to the Lord; *"No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord burnt offerings that cost me nothing"* (II Samuel 24).

Back to Malachi chapter 3. God condemns his children, Israel, for "robbing" him. Dr. Bob Alden, a former professor of mine says, "Israel was abusing God's generosity." I would add, they tarnished the name of God. They failed to "revere" him—to polish and make his name glisten.

So where are you in kingdom giving?

Are you giving to the Lord what costs you nothing?

Are your offerings a small donation that only makes you feel good?

Are you abusing God's generosity?

I challenge you to give a tithe and trust the God who has promised to open the floodgate of heaven to bless you outrageously!

Some would wrongly say, "Since tithing is not required of those under the grace of the New Testament, God's promise is null and void." These people have a flawed theology. They have missed a vital particular of God's name or nature. What is that?

God is Faithful to his Promises

During Israel's wilderness wandering an unusual encounter and conversation took place between God, Balaam and Balak (Numbers 22-24). God speaks five messages for Balaam to convey as oracles to Balak. Before the second oracle Balak asks Balaam, "What did the Lord say?" Balaam responds:

*"God is not human, that he should lie,
not a human being, that he should change his mind.*

Does he speak and then not act?

Does he promise and not fulfill?" Numbers 23:19

Fast-forward now to the apostolic letters to new Gentile believers in Corinth. Paul assures them the teachings they heard from Timothy, Silas and himself regarding the faithfulness of God were not contradictory. Paul writes,

"For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God."

(II Corinthians 1:20)

God is changeless. He is faithful to every word he has ever spoken. God and his word are eternal and inseparable and cannot be broken. One scholar put it this way. "It is as if God said Jesus Christ is my yes to every promise I have ever made." "Yes", here, is the strongest and most emphatic affirmation of a declaration.

Now, if followers of Christ have no difficulty believing this, why are many so dismissive of God's promise through his prophet Malachi to "open the floodgate of heaven" to bless those who tithe and "glisten" his name? I find it both amusing and sad that many of God's children cling to every Old Testament promise but argue against tithing which promises the Father's outrageous generosity. But, unfortunately, the love of money accompanied by ownership or greed or fear leads to unbelief in the Father's immutable promise. How many stories have never been written or spoken of God's faithfulness because of unbelief in his promise? Has God changed his mind or does the problem of unbelief reside in their hearts? This lonely promise is also "yes" in Christ! Unlike our earthly fathers, our heavenly Father is both the promise maker and promise keeper. He is changeless.

Why Tithing?

Why is tithing the training wheels of kingdom giving? In a simple and vital word, tithing lays the foundation of "faith" to manage well your heavenly Father's wealth. If you can't trust God by giving a tithe, you won't trust him for excellent giving. Furthermore, and most likely, you will live your Christian life giving small donations "that cost you nothing". In the words of Malachi 1, you'll offer "the crippled, injured and diseased animals" and tarnish the name and reputation of God. On a more personal level, you'll continue to appreciate your restaurant waiter or waitress, who does not love you and promises nothing, more than your heavenly Father who loves you infinitely and keeps all his promises to you. So, experience the "open floodgate affect" of tithing and grow deeper in faith and the great joy that follows.

I can't afford to tithe

You might be saying "I can't afford to tithe." That is true if you are abusing God's generosity. Most of us are probably squandering 10% of our income on needless things or pleasures. No doubt that is the place to begin.

Further Help on Tithing

If you desire to begin tithing as a regular offering to the Lord, you may have some real issues in your life to address and resolve. In the Apostle Paul's inspired letter to Pastor Timothy in Ephesus he wrote,

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (II Timothy 3:16-17)

Every follower of Christ needs constant "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training" to mature and keep growing in love and devotion to Him. Without structured personal money- management training or counseling, consider using the following on your own, if applicable.

A Spiritual Journey - First, foremost and above all else, make sure tithing is a spiritual journey that includes a heartfelt dependence on God's help and wisdom each day by His Spirit and His Word. Your financial training and correction may seem impossible to you, but "with God", anything is possible. In fact, God prefers to display his power in your weakness so He gets the glory, not you! He wants His story to be told by you.

Unhealthy Emotions - The love of money can drive us in many directions to the extremes of gambling to shop-a-holism or hoarding. God never intends that His wealth be used to entertain or secure or comfort us. He offers Himself as our joy, our fortress and our peace. The love of money is rebuked by Jesus (*Matthew 6:24*). Your only hope is to "flee and pursue" a love for God. (*I Timothy 6:11*)

Contentment and Budgeting - If tithing is a reminder of God's ownership of all we have, then wise management of the remaining 90% is needed. Contentment or satisfaction with what God provides (*Phil. 4:11*) should result in careful spending to meet our needs. To live contentedly within your means requires simple arithmetic, self-discipline and wisdom.

Marriage and Money - Money is a common problem in marriage. It can either be the cause of conflict or the symptom of a deep conflict. The listening ears and third voice of a wise counselor can be helpful as will the Spirit of God and His Word (See "The Heart of a Steward" at www.branchesinthevine.com). People with non-Christian spouses should seek the wise counsel of mature and respected church leaders.

Start Small - Log your spending each day for a month to discover wasteful spending. Many small expenditures like daily coffee, lunches and snacks can add up to hefty sums on an annual basis. If you add bigger than small expenditures including needless dinners out, entertainment and on-line shopping, you might be close to half a tithe.

Multiple Credit Card Debt - If you need financial freedom from multiple credit card debt, here are the best steps you can take:

Step 1 – Stop using all credit cards that carry debt on which you only make a minimum payment.

Step 2 – Add additional funds to the minimum payment on the card with the smallest balance.

Step 3 – When you pay off the card in Step 2, add the monthly amount you used to the minimum payment of the next smallest card balance to quickly pay it off.

Step 4 – Continue to the next card using the total monthly amount used in step 3. In time you will crush the amount of debt on the largest card balance.

As you eliminate each card debt you will hopefully break your spending habits and enjoy the achievement of financial freedom.

Credit Cards versus Cash - A credit card is a useful tool only if you use it wisely and pay off the full balance each month. It is best used for budgeted items and emergencies covered by your reserve savings. If you abuse the card you will pay far more for every item you purchase. Remember, when you purchase something on “sale”, you are “spending” not “saving”. Be sure to train your children with cash—better yet, cash they have earned.

Gradual Tithing - If it’s not possible to take the 10% plunge, start by committing to 2 or 3 percent of your take-home pay to the Lord. Then as you gain correction, add additional percent’s. God will bless as you move toward the tithe. Devote your heart to Him daily in gratitude and surrender. Ask for His help in times of temptation. Start and see what God will do! Put a ceiling on your lifestyle and turn a deaf ear to advertising and your shopaholic friends.

Create Margin - Margin means to build a cash reserve savings account for large emergencies rather than accruing large amounts of unsecured credit card debt. Sooner or later those big-ticket utility items will need repair or replacement. Out-of-pocket healthcare emergencies will happen as well. A reserve could also be used for additional giving (see Part II).

Part II

“Excellence in Kingdom Giving”

Why is tithing the training wheels of giving? Three outcomes in scripture. Number 1 – Tithing breaks our sinful grip of ownership and our dangerous misguided love of money (Deuteronomy 11). Number 2 – According to God’s own words, in tithing we “learn” to “revere” or make glisten “always” the “Name” and reputation of the Lord (Deuteronomy 14). Number 3 – In Malachi 3, by tithing we honor God in worship and trust his promise to provide for our needs. Tithing lays the foundation for our faith

that is needed to manage our Father's wealth. Tithing also prepares our faith for excellence in kingdom giving.

Before we look at this excellence in giving we must remember that the scriptures are not a "how to" manual. Rather, they are filled with teachings and real-life, real-time narratives in which we find truth and principles for stewarding God's wealth entrusted to each of us. These principles can be broadly applied in every generation and culture. Inspired and revealed truth is like that.

As we will see, excellence in Kingdom giving is not due to a natural generosity, but rather a grace or love given by God to financially support the advancement of his kingdom in significant ways. This grace exceeds the tithe but springs from its foundation of faith. Before we go to the scriptures, read our stories.

Our Story

Sharon and I were born and raised in very different places. She grew up near the Adirondacks in New York State with neighbors 3,000 feet away. I grew up in Detroit, Michigan, with neighbors 20 feet away. When I visited her home in the country I thought, "Nice place to visit, wouldn't want to live here!" Thankfully, she felt the same way about where she grew up. She loved the city.

What we did have in common were parents who came to faith in Christ as young adults and matured in Christ-likeness to become leaders in Alliance churches; one country and the other inner-city. They both tithed their income, her father a logger and my father a tool and die maker. Furthermore, they excelled in kingdom giving—giving above and beyond the tithe to advance God's kingdom in significant ways--from compassion ministries to supporting Alliance missionaries around the world proclaiming the gospel to unreached people groups.

As children we both were included in these kingdom-giving efforts. We filled out faith-promise pledge cards for Alliance missions. We heard the stories of furloughing missionaries. We saw the slides of third-world people who came to faith in Christ as Savior. We grew with the understanding that excellence in kingdom giving would lead to the establishment of national churches that would become autonomous sending-churches that would send missionaries. What seemed impossible came to pass. Six years ago we went to an Alliance church in Quito, Ecuador. Alliance missionaries are no longer there. The Ecuadorian churches are fully autonomous, educating their own pastors and sending missionaries.

Throughout 50 years of career ministry, we have witnessed millions of dollars given to compassion ministries, worldwide missions and church facility construction. We have personally participated and led churches in excellent kingdom giving. We witnessed huge amounts of money being given to fund these kingdom advances. So we know a few things because we've seen a few things!

Excellence in the Grace of Giving

The Apostle Paul was inspired by God's Spirit to challenge the house churches in Corinth to "...excel in the grace of giving." This excellence is for

every follower of Christ. No spiritual elitism here. You are a candidate for excellence. He wrote:

But since you [Corinthians] excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the Love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. (II Corinthians 8:7)

Where did this “grace of giving” originate? When did this love of Christ-like generosity start? Before we look at the context of Paul’s inspired challenge, let’s find its beginning.

In the upper room before his crucifixion, Jesus tells his followers:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:35)

It didn’t take long for this love or grace of generosity to appear in the fellowship of Christ-followers:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. (Acts 2:44-45)

As the church grew in Jerusalem through the proclamation of the gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ, so also did persecution of the church grow. Luke seemingly repeats Acts 2 with greater detail of their generosity:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sale and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet. (Acts 4:32-37)

Did you notice they lost their sense of ownership? “No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own.” This is huge. They lost their sense of ownership! Did you notice also the reason for their generosity in verse 33, “...God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all...”? Grace is a love without conditions. Now flash forward about 23 years to II Corinthians 8:7:

But since you [Corinthians] excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. (II Corinthians 8:7)

Now to understand the historical context of Paul's challenge here, we need to hear the back-stories of the three churches involved here: Jerusalem, Macedonia and Corinth.

Three Back-Stories

The first back-story is the economic status of the church in Jerusalem. Twenty-three years after Acts 2-4 the Jewish Christ-followers are suffering due to the convergence of famine, over-taxation and the returning of Jewish immigrants from the dispersion. To assist them, Paul challenges the Gentile churches on his missionary journeys to give a relief offering for the saints in Jerusalem.

The second back-story is the Corinthian house churches that Paul had already challenged to contribute to this relief offering for Jerusalem Christians. Corinth was an affluent metropolis, a port city in the center of the Mediterranean Sea. They were the first to promise to give to this offering. Unfortunately, news has reached Paul that they failed to keep their promise. We discover that it was Titus who tattled on them. Paul was embarrassed because he was telling other churches to do what the Corinthians promised to do (II Corinthians 9:1-2) and assumed they were doing it.

The third back-story is that of the Macedonian churches well north of Corinth. These Gentile Christ-followers there were experiencing persecution for their faith. Under Nero and the Roman occupation, Christians and Jews were never safe. These Macedonians were likely deprived of their livelihood. They had desperate needs of their own. Paul writes II Corinthians from Macedonia to exhort them to complete or fulfill their promise. He uses what he observed in the Macedonian churches to urge and encourage the Corinthians.

A God-Given Grace

Now let's discover what Paul observed among the Macedonians.

⁷...see that you [Corinthians] also excel in this grace of giving.

¹And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

(II Corinthians 8:7,1)

This grace of giving was given to the Macedonians from the Lord. This was not a friendship love based on conditions, but a Divine love that was unconditional. This grace or love of generous giving was not natural. Our

fallen nature is corrupted in many ways. We see it in our toddlers who refuse to share. We are proud, greedy and covetous by nature, or we share to get back and we give to control.

But Paul writes that the Macedonians experienced a Divine grace--the grace of giving. They had, as collective house churches, an encounter with God. He states in verse 5 how this happened.

⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.

Paul is telling the Corinthians, and us, that the Macedonians heard about the relief offering and responded on their own with no direction from him.

We have no evidence of a typical lament, "We can't afford to give; we have next-to-nothing ourselves. Let those rich Corinthians carry the water here."

We have no evidence of a typical warm-hearted response, "Let's have a fund-raising pig roast or bake sale!"

What evidence do we have? "They gave themselves first to the Lord." Someone stepped forward and said, "We must pray about this and seek God's will for us in this matter."

That's when the grace of giving was given. When we pray we humbly surrender our hearts to the God of countless graces--to the God whose grace or love changes everyone and everything--a powerful grace that is made perfect in our weakness. This excellence is God-given.

Divine Grace Changes Everything

The Macedonian response amazed the Apostle. What did Paul see with his own eyes regarding this grace of giving that God imparted? Look at verse 2.

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

When I see these three descriptions:

"severe trial"-persecution for their faith;

"over-flowing joy"-unhealthy denial of their circumstance;

"extreme poverty"-penny-less and power-less,

I see a recipe for "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die!" This is a recipe for disaster--spiritually and otherwise.

i.e. Sharon and I are big fans of The Great British Baking Show on public television. We like it for this reason. Baking is far different from cooking. Cooking is the combination of palatable foods. Baking, on the other hand, is the combination of unpalatable ingredients. Like yeast in a well-baked tasteless dough, God's grace brings an amazing result:

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

That's not supposed to happen! But God's grace changes everyone and everything and every circumstance it touches. "...rich generosity"--only God's grace can make that a reality! God's grace causes rich generosity to "well up"!

Here's the Apostle of grace, who writes about the graces of God on nearly every page of his letters to the churches, suddenly witnesses a grace he didn't see coming—a grace that empowers a "rich generosity". He's very excited as he goes on to see the particulars of this grace in verse 3.

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.

"They gave as much as they were able". Most likely it wasn't much, but they didn't cling to the little they had. They lost their sense of ownership! Then they believed God for what they didn't have. *"They gave even beyond their ability."*

How do we explain that except by the powerful grace of giving?

- Grace is always transformative.
- Grace makes the common uncommon.
- Grace makes the impossible possible.

i.e. Alison was 10 years old back in 1984, the oldest of our three growing and hungry children. That year our church-plant entered a capital campaign to raise \$300,000 in funds over 3 years to build our first facility, a worship center that would seat 200 worshipers, nurseries and offices. We didn't have one fund-raising supper, raffle or bake sale. The leadership challenged the congregation to pray and seek God's will over three questions:

1. *"Lord, what can I give out of my abundance?"*
2. *"Lord, what can I sacrifice to give?"*
3. *"Lord, what can I trust you to provide to give according to my faith?"*

Those three answers resulted in a three-year promise to give. For three years Sharon and I gave what we were able. But we waited 33 months for God to provide what we promised to give. During those 3 years we led Sharon's sister-in-law to Christ and when she suddenly passed away, Sharon became an heir. Her estate was finally probated 3 months before the 3 years of giving concluded. God provided for us to give a very large offering—one we desired and promised to give. We promised to give what we did not possess. The Macedonians gave beyond their ability. That is an amazing grace. Grace changes everyone and every circumstance it touches. God's grace is powerful in our weakness and changes everything!

The Apostle's Admission

In closing, notice Paul's honest and humble admission. He writes,

Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

And they exceeded our expectations. (verses 3b-5a)

What did Paul see in the Macedonians? He saw a deprived and desperate people who could have used a relief offering themselves. He looked at their circumstances and expected nothing or little. They had to plead with the Apostle to be included.

- Do you suffer with low expectations of God or yourself or others?
- Is your weakness, or poverty in this case, a prison of your soul?
- Or do you see your weakness as an opportunity for God's powerful grace?

The choice is yours. My hope for you is that you will always, "give yourself to the Lord first" in prayer when challenged to advance God's kingdom. When you experience God's grace for generous giving, you will want to do it again and again. It is always thrilling.

Three Abuses Remain

The grace of giving does not replace the tithe. The tithe maintains our foundation of faith to trust God for his provision in life's "ups and downs". The tithe sustains our "reverence" for the Lord's name and reputation in worship. The grace of giving exceeds the tithe and wells up in a "rich generosity" to advance God's kingdom and deepens our joy of partnership with Christ. However, while God's grace of giving is transformative, three abuses of God's generosity remain on the porch of our heart to tempt us. How do I know? If they are on my porch they are likely on yours. I'm on the same journey as you! We must always guard our souls.

The **first** potential abuse of God's generosity to you that threatens excellence in giving above the tithe is ownership of the remaining 90% after the tithe. The underlying heart causes of this abuse are pride and greed. If you feel proud and secure and desire more of what you have, you are no longer a steward but an owner who usurps the ownership of God the Father.

Beware—confess and renounce your ownership and renew your place as steward of everything. Guard your heart!

The **second** potential abuse of God's generosity to you that threatens excellence in giving above the tithe is consumer debt. The underlying heart causes are discontentment and covetousness. Contentment, as Paul explains in Philippians 3, is to "be satisfied with what God provides". If you claim to be a follower of Jesus, you must trust God alone to be the provider of your needs and not be imprisoned by debt on the things you covet.

Beware—confess and renounce your covetousness and discontentment and renew your contentment in Christ alone. Guard your heart!

The **third** potential abuse of God's generosity to you that threatens excellence in giving above the tithe is idolatry. The underlying heart causes are the love and power of money and its pleasures. Is it possible for true followers of Christ to live with a divided heart? Apparently the rogue preachers and followers of a prosperity theology believe so. Their desire to be rich is a natural sinful bent. Jesus renounced the divided heart in Matthew 6 and Paul describes the spiritual tragedies of such an attempt in II Timothy 6.

Beware—confess and renounce any misguided idolatrous love of money and renew your single-hearted love for God. Guard your heart!

Tithing and the grace of giving do not insulate our souls from compromise and abuse of God's generosity. We can even turn these good practices into idols—that's how vulnerable we are. In 1757 a young 22 year-old pastor, Robert Robinson, wrote the hymn, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing". In this refrain he nailed the weakness of our soul:

"Oh to grace how great a debtor,
Daily I'm constrained to be
Let Thy goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above."

- Does your heart need to be re-sealed in this matter of stewarding the Father's wealth?
- Are you fully supporting your local church body of Christ with your tithe?
- Do you experience the grace of giving to advance the kingdom of God and the mission of Christ in the world today?
- Would you like to?

Further Help on the Grace of Giving

The Greater Context - The context of II Corinthians 8:1-7 continues through II Corinthians 8:8-9:15. In this greater context you will find additional truths, understandings and wisdom regarding God's grace and kingdom giving. As steward of the Father's wealth these inspired words will "teach, correct, rebuke and train" you to become the "good and faithful" servant Jesus desires you to be. Read the context and return to it and be prepared to seize the opportunities to advance God's kingdom.

The Motivator of Kingdom Giving - The following quote from Dr. Scott Rodin's book, *"Stewards in the Kingdom"* is one I have used often when consulting with churches anticipating construction projects. It sums up well the role of God's Spirit when we pray regarding Kingdom giving.

"...Why then do we ask our donors to pray in consideration of their giving? Is this perhaps one more place where we have painted a Christian veneer over a wholly secular understanding of the motivation to give? Can we on the one hand believe we are responsible for the motivation of gifts and on the other hand ask our donors to make their giving a prayerful decision? Clearly we cannot hold these two positions simultaneously. We must either accept the worldly view that our role as fundraisers is to motivate, or we acknowledge the powerful role of the Holy Spirit through prayer that we ask of our donors and stop placing on our shoulders the responsibility to move people to give.

There is ample evidence in Scripture to show that all of the decisions in our lives should be influenced by the power of God's Spirit working in us. This work of guiding, directing and granting wisdom is the defining mark of the work of the Holy Spirit. Above we have seen the importance of giving in terms of our singular devotion to God alone. Again we must acknowledge here, in the loudest of voices, that giving is primarily a spiritual matter. Even more pointedly, giving is an act of obedient worship. If we ask our people to pray, we must conclude that the Holy Spirit is the one, true and only right motivator of gifts from our people. Once we have acknowledged and accepted that fact, our entire reason for existence changes radically. No longer are we tasked with motivating giving. No longer need we sweat over the exact right wording to push the right buttons of our donors or parishners...."

Three Expressions of the Grace of Giving - We discover in the scriptural narratives that the grace of giving seems to have a mix of expressions. Even the teaching portions are not meant to be rigid step by step religious methods. God can touch our hearts with the grace of giving in many ways. Three ways stand out. We can give out of our abundance or sacrifice or faith

in God to provide the offering we desire to give. These ways are often used to challenge God's people to respond to large and significant advances for his kingdom be it compassion, world evangelism or facility construction.

Giving by God's grace is always above and beyond the tithe and never a re-direction of the tithe, as that accomplishes little in the believer's spiritual growth. The church also suffers from the re-direction of the tithe.

Other Biblical Examples of "Rich Generosity" - Many narratives in both the Old and New Testament stand out as examples of God's grace and "rich generosity". Check these out:

Abraham - Genesis 22

Israel under Moses - Exodus 35-36:7

The widow of Zaraphath - I Kings 17

Israel under David - I Chronicles 29

Women who supported the Twelve - Luke 8:1-3

The Widow at the Temple - Luke 21:1-4

Mary - John 12:1-11

Joseph of Arimathea - Matthew 27:57-61

The Philippian Churches - Philippians 4:10-20

The Spiritual Gift of Giving - Those with the spiritual gift of giving, as I have observed, make giving a rhythm of their journey with Christ. They know how to give humbly and they are easily made aware of opportunity. Some have limited resources and give sacrificially while other Spirit-gifted givers humbly give out of their abundance. The Spirit of God looks only for a heart fully surrendered to him.