

Growing Through Giving

2 Corinthians 9:6-11

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Wesley J. Gabel

When I was growing up, I witnessed the rare event of my mother pulling out genuine silverware. The silverware required special care, and I didn't see it even once a year. In hosting the President of the United States, I might see it. Her silverware was devoted exclusively to very rare and important events. Its use announced that something unusual and important was unfolding. Her use of the silverware is very close in meaning to *consecration*. When we *consecrate* something, we set it apart for sacred or holy purposes.

Aaron was a common man. Although he experienced common challenges, concerns and frailties, he was set apart for sacred purposes to represent God to the people and the people to God. As a part of his *consecration*, he was given some clothing that also was set apart, *consecrated*, for use only in certain, uncommon ways. The clothes he wore at special times signaled to those around him that something holy and revealing was unfolding. Like my mother's silverware it broadcast importance.

Similarly, the temple, though built by human hands, was constructed in a prescribed way; and then through a special means, it was consecrated or devoted for divine purposes that God might be honored and revealed among humanity. The temple was not a common building. It had purposes of special importance.

This morning we celebrate Consecration Sunday so that the goodness and greatness of God may be revealed among us and through us. **Today, we covenant with God and devote a portion of our income to special, sacred purposes. We will consecrate a portion of what God gives us so that God might be revealed to our world.**

Each January I focus on principles of life and financial management, but today I want to talk about giving that reveals God and grows us. I want to explore three aspects of sacred giving that forms us as disciples of Jesus.

The first is passionate giving. God is a passionate giver. You are his created children, and this world was formed with you in mind. All that you see, the rain, the sunshine, the mountains and seas, the creatures of the earth, the splendid flowers of the earth, are gifts for your joy and blessing. Even your body is God's gift. God's gifts to us express his passion for us. You are the child of a passionate giver. No wonder Paul writes:

You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves the person who gives cheerfully. (2 Corinthians 9:7, NLT)

Have you parents ever forced your children to share something and then watched them cry? Don't you feel better, even proud, when your child offers to share without prompting... and with a smile? Your feeling about this didn't evolve. It came from your Creator, from your Father in heaven. There's pleasure in generosity, great pleasure! It's in your blood, your DNA, your design as children of the Heavenly Father.

Passionate giving is fueled by love and faith. We give generously to bless those we love. We give in faith that it will make a difference. Jesus taught that our hearts follow our treasures. Our hearts grow in love and faith as we give. The converse is also true.

The Prophet Malachi confronted the people of Israel with desecrating God's name in their worship. Their giving was not consecration but desecration. Malachi declared:

"You have said terrible things about me," says the LORD. "But you say, 'What do you mean? How have we spoken against you?' "You have said, 'What's the use of serving God? What have we gained by obeying his commands or by trying to show the LORD Almighty that we are sorry for our sins? From now on we will say, "Blessed are the arrogant." For those who do evil get rich, and those who dare God to punish them go free of harm.'" (Malachi 3:13-15, NLT)

This is the message of skimpy giving. Malachi pointed to the leftovers the people gave God in their worship. They didn't sacrifice their best animals. They gave the lamb or animal for which they had little use. Instead of returning a tenth of their income, they found ways to look like they believed and gave less. Their gifts did not reveal the importance, goodness or greatness of their heavenly Father. Their actions suggested that God's words and God's favor are of little value.

Passionate giving both believes and loves God. It thrills over the love of God. It trusts God's nature and word. It believes that God will make a difference with each gift. The gifts will have an uncommon and special effect that reveals the goodness and greatness of God.

Sacred giving, giving that is holy, that explicitly reveals and responds to the nature of God, *is proportional giving*. It is **proportional to what you receive** and **proportional to what you believe**. Paul wrote:

Give whatever you can according to what you have. If you are really eager to give, it isn't important how much you are able to give. God wants you to give what you have, not what you don't have. (2 Corinthians 8:11-13, NLT)

Our giving reveals God's blessings on us. It also reveals our poverty in possessions or in spirit. When we are eager to give, we are walking in both the culture and Spirit of our Heavenly Father. We are living like our Lord and Master, Jesus. We are growing like him. God's giving to us reveals his greatness and love. Our giving to God reveals our blessings and who is raising us as children, who is coaching us, what spirit dominates our hearts. Our devoting a proportion of our income to God's use is like my Mom's silverware. It broadcasts that *we* are involved in something of special significance. Something incredibly important is unfolding.

We witness sacred and proportional giving in the life of Abraham. Abraham led 318 men from his household to rescue his nephew Lot and Lot's neighbors from an invading army. They were hopelessly outnumbered, but God gave them a stunning victory. A kingly priest came and

blessed Abraham, and Abraham tithed the plunder, giving it to God through that priest. Why did Abraham do it? He was not asked. There was no law. It was in his heart. God gave him the victory and the wealth so he joyfully returned to God a tenth in honor of God's work and blessing. Abraham's grandson Jacob had swindled his brother Esau and fled from his home. Exhausted in his journey, he found a place to sleep. There God showed him in a dream the doorway of heaven where humanity is blessed or cursed. Jacob made a covenant with God, after he awoke, to tithe everything God would put in his hands, if God would bless and protect him. Jacob did this because his heart found hope in God. God made this partnership with Jacob a covenant with his descendants, through the Law of Moses. The tithe or ten percent is a covenant of partnership with God. It is a covenant of hope. Why was 10 percent in Abraham's heart? Why was 10 percent in Jacob's mind? Why did God instruct Moses to require 10 percent? The Bible never says. However, it becomes apparent in the Bible that 10 percent is a test of faith and a particularly generous gift as income grows.

As non-Jewish believers, many pastors hesitate to talk much about the tithe. They note that Jesus spoke little about it to his Jewish audience. They are concerned that we impose law on you believers rather than celebrate the grace of Christ. Jesus taught that he himself is the fulfillment of God's law. When his Spirit lives in you and directs you, the law of God is written in your nature and expressed in your actions. Jesus called people to walk with him in the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. He called his followers to leverage all their time, energy, abilities, possessions and resources to fulfilling God's will on this earth. How does the tithe fit with Jesus' vision? Certainly, we are not responding with the faith and love of Jesus, if we give less than a tithe, are we? Paul wrote:

Remember this — a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. (2 Corinthians 9:6, NLT)

The issue when you give in proportion to your income and in proportion to your faith is whether God's love or Satan's doubts dominate your vision and actions. On the back of the sermon insert is a tool to help you assess your heart and faith. What does your income and giving say about God? Would Malachi's words apply? What does it say about who is coaching you? Are you growing in faith and love?

Sacred giving is also *planned giving*. Paul advised the Corinthians believers:

On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income... (1 Corinthians 16:2, NIV)

Paul advised them to set aside the money so that they would not be caught unable to give what they want to give. Planned giving helps us give more. It helps us manage our resources so that what we want to give doesn't disappear into other things. Planned giving helps us give in a way that truly honors God.

Did you know the average church member, who signs a pledge, gives twice as much as the ones who don't? The Estimate of Giving Card, which you will be handed shortly, is a tool to help you target your giving so you can better manage your finances for the glory of God. The average church member, who pledges in proportion to income, gives three times more than those who don't pledge.

On this Consecration Sunday will you act in a way that grows your heart and life in the Spirit of Jesus? Do you know your income and what proportion is devoted especially to his honor? What proportion is consecrated and holy, not for common purposes? Is your life all about being Jesus' apprentice on earth? What does your income and giving reveal about God's love and the trustworthiness of his word and promises?