

<sup>14</sup> Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. <sup>15</sup> Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; <sup>16</sup> for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. <sup>17</sup> Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup> And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. <sup>20</sup> To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

**“Joyful Generosity is intentional and regular.”**

This morning we’ve come to the last in our sermon series called “Joyful Generosity.” If you’ve been here all six Sundays, you will notice, I hope, that your pastors have never told you how much you should give. It is amazing that in the New Testament God makes every gift completely voluntary. But that doesn’t make it easy, does it? In the Old Testament, God commanded his people to give ten percent of their income to the Lord. They didn’t have to think about how much they should give. They knew exactly what was expected of them.

So why doesn’t God make it easy for us in the New Testament? God lets us choose what percent of our income we are going to give. That’s not easy! I would love to give everything I have to the Lord. But God also wants me to provide for my family and pay my taxes and give to the poor. Why didn’t God just make it easy and demand ten percent the way he did in the Old Testament? The reason is that when we wrestle in our hearts and count our blessings and have to think about this and pray about this, then God gets more from us than our money. God gets our hearts in joyful thanksgiving and praise.

In this last sermon on JOYFUL GENEROSITY, I want to talk to you about the importance of our giving being INTENTIONAL and REGULAR. The congregation in Philippi was noted for that.

**1. Intentional and regular is a blessing to God’s church**

One of the reasons that Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians was to thank them for the gifts they had sent his way to support his mission work. You can’t help but compare the Philippians with the congregation at Corinth. The Corinthians were wealthy and the Philippians were poor. The Philippians gave to the needy saints in Jerusalem beyond their ability. They begged for the opportunity and “their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity” (2 Corinthians 8:2). The Corinthians said they were going to give to this offering, but they just didn’t seem to get it done.

What was the difference? It seems that the Corinthians had good intentions, but the Philippians were more intentional. What I mean is that the Corinthians were eager to do something, but they never sat down and planned out how they were going to get it done. Paul even shared a plan with them, which was to set aside part of their income on the first day of every week. Yet they never got into the routine of planning what they would give and then regularly doing it.

Aren't we guilty of that same weakness of our sinful nature as well? Let me give you an example. You know that reading your Bible is important. It is the most important thing you can do every day. Do you have a plan? If you don't have a plan on when and where and what you are going to read each day, there is a good chance you will not succeed. You will only have good intentions. And even if you have a plan, has your plan ever gone by the wayside so that you have gone a whole week without reading your Bible? It's not easy to have a good plan and the discipline to carry it out. Why? Because you are fighting against your sinful nature and because the devil doesn't want you to stay connected to the Word. He will distract you any way he possibly can.

The same is true of your joyful generosity. Do you have a plan on how much of your income you want to give to the Lord? Does your plan include not only how much, but when and how? Will you set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income before you start spending for Christmas? Remember that you are fighting against your sinful nature all the time, and the devil doesn't want you to give to the Lord and his work. The devil doesn't want God's church to have the resources it needs to do the Lord's work. He would rather have us cut corners than expand our gospel ministry. So he will always be tempting you to spend more than you can afford and then have nothing when you have an opportunity to give to the Lord.

We can be thankful that God doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. Where we have been stingy, God has been generous. Where we have been inconsistent, God has been faithful and regular. Did the sun come up this morning? God's mercies are new to us every morning! Did the farmers bring in a crop this fall? Yes, and I would challenge our farmers to remember a fall when there was no crop. Has God put food on your table this week? I would challenge you to remember the time when there was no food to eat. I remember my mother telling how poor her family was during the Great Depression. Grandpa was trying to make ends meet on an 18 acre farm in southern Minnesota. But she said, "It seems we always had food to eat."

And has God forgiven your sins today? Yes he has. We confess in the explanation of the Third Article, "In this Christian Church he daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers." Do you believe this? Of course you believe this. You wouldn't be able to sleep at night if you didn't believe that God forgave all your sins in Jesus. God's mercies are new to you every morning! God's forgiveness for you is both intentional and regular, which is why you can trust in him and not be afraid.

When you give like the Philippians gave, you are reflecting God's abundant grace, his faithful grace, his consistent grace, in your life. You in turn become a blessing to God's church. **"Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. <sup>15</sup> Moreover, as you Philippians know, in**

**the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; <sup>16</sup> for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need.”**

Think of the impact that the Philippians' regular gifts had on Paul's gospel ministry. He never asked for anything from the people to whom he was preaching. He lived meagerly by making tents for a living. These regular gifts that the Philippians sent Paul gave him relief and freed him to spend more of his time preaching the gospel.

Friends, your church is blessed when you support the ministry of this congregation with your regular and intentional gifts. It always amazes me that a congregation of believers our size receives almost \$500,000 in gifts every year for gospel ministry. In thirty years that I have been in this church, I can never remember a day when salaries weren't paid or our mission commitment was neglected. Paul thanked the Philippians for their regular support of his ministry, and I want to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you. Not only are you a blessing to this church, but your intentional and regular giving is a blessing to you as well.

## **2. Intentional and regular is a blessing to the giver**

Paul says in our text: **“Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account.” <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.”** I struggled to understand this for a while. When we give, we give out of thankful hearts. We are not looking for anything in return. When we give, we are not trying to earn salvation or God's favor. Our gifts are our grateful response to God's grace.

Then what does Paul mean when he says they can be credited to our account? Maybe we can look at it this way. When my wife buys gifts for our grandchildren, she usually goes all out to choose something that they really want. In a week or two, we often get a card in the mail from the grandchildren thanking us for those gifts. There are stick person drawings on the card and words that are scrawled and misspelled. My wife takes those heartfelt expressions of thanks, which are hardly a thing of beauty, and pins them to the refrigerator or puts them in some other prominent place. When the grandchildren visit, they see that grandma accepted their thanks with joy.

The point is that your gifts to God's ministry are noticed. If God had a refrigerator door and magnets, then he would pin your gifts to his refrigerator so that he can look at them every day. Your gifts of thanks to God give him joy and great pleasure. Paul says they are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. Maybe, when you get to heaven, you will see your expressions of thanks pinned to God's refrigerator. That's what I think Paul means when he says that the Christian's gifts are credited to their account. That's why we say it is more blessed to give than it is to receive.

There is another way in which you are blessed by your regular gifts. Paul writes: **“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”** Why does Paul say, “my God” and not “your God?” He says “my God” because he has experienced in his life how God keeps his promises. Just before the verses of our text, he says that he had learned the secret of being content whether he was had a lot or not much at all, because he could do all things through Jesus, who gave him strength. He had experienced personally God’s providence in his life and he was confident that the Philippians would as well.

You heard a similar promise in the lesson from Malachi this morning. **“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”** (Malachi 3:10). If you wait until you have an abundance of money left over in your checkbook before you give to the Lord, which almost never happens, you will not experience the truth of these passages. You will only be giving God what you have left over. God is not honored with leftovers! But if you are a regular and intentional giver, you will plan on writing out a check on the first day of the week, or on the first and fifteenth of the month – because that’s when you get paid. You are giving to the Lord before you know that you will have enough left at the end of the week or the end of the month to meet your bills. Your gifts take priority over your bills and your savings and your retirement. God is honored by that kind of gift because you are trusting him to provide for your needs. That’s a blessing. You get to see God’s promises fulfilled in our life.

Sometimes you have to be as old as me to really appreciate this truth. From the time I was a teenager, I have given ten percent or more of my income to the Lord. No one said I had to do that, but I’ve always felt that if the people in the Old Testament could give that amount, so could I. I have to confess that there were times when we wondered how we would make ends meet at the end of the month. We had school tuition for six children and cars on the road and when my wife went shopping at CUB foods, she would come home with fourteen bags of groceries. Do you know how much cereal six children can eat in a week? But there was always enough. We felt like the widow in Elijah’s day whose flour and oil never ran out. Now we are ready for retirement, and we are so blessed. What a blessing to experience God’s promises come true in your lifetime!

And that’s just the tip of the iceberg of God’s blessings. Paul says that God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. A better translation may be “all his riches in glory.” Life has been good, and what we are waiting for in heaven will be better still! I pray that through your joyful generosity that you will be a blessing for your church, and that you will see God’s blessings in your life as well. Amen.