

## 5G: Giving Sunday, 9/25/22

Two weeks ago, we began our 5G sermon series with a reminder that gathering as the people of God is a nonnegotiable part of what it means for us to be an incarnational Church. While not everyone can gather physically, we can all do something to grow in our connection with God and the gathered community of faith.

This week, we're talking about giving, which is seldom a popular preaching topic. You may be tempted to tune out this morning for any number of reasons: You don't have any money; you've lost your job or your house; you're just a kid; you're on a fixed income; you feel that you're already giving enough; or you give through your service and witness instead of your money. I believe that if you stick with me instead of tuning out, God will still have something for you in this morning's message. These teachings are important, because they speak not only to what you do with whatever money you do have, but primarily to your attitude- whether you see it as your money to spend or hold onto as you see fit, or as God's money, given to you as a steward to multiply for the sake God's Kingdom, and especially for the sake of the least, the lost, and the left out. We can all grow closer to God and the community of God's people when we grow in our attitudes and actions around money and giving.

How many of you prepared a garden bed this spring and then never planted any seeds or bulbs in it? As silly as that sounds, I see plenty of garden beds in my neighborhood that give that appearance. Unless you panted something previously, you're not likely to wake up and find your garden full of fresh vegetables or flowers. Instead, what do they fill up with? That's right, weeds- in great abundance, and surprising variety.

The teaching from our first reading isn't especially surprising. Essentially, it's a variation of "you reap what you sow," and if you sow generously, your harvest will be generous. Never mind the realities of insects, drought, and hail! This is a generally true teaching in so many parts of our lives, and not just our giving. What's surprising isn't the teaching, but how often we ignore the truth and sow our seeds sparingly or reluctantly.

I think it's safe to say that at some point in our lives each of us has given to God's work out of a sense of duty or obligation. I know I have. And that's really not such a bad place to start. After all, before Jesus came upon the scene, that pretty much described the

state of things. Certainly, there were many, like the generous widow, who gave all that she had, joyfully and extravagantly. But before Jesus, we were living under the rules of the law. But then God stepped into creation in the person of Jesus and taught us that we are no longer to live as slaves to the law. The grace of Jesus has broken the shackles of the law- not so that we can flaunt the law, but so that we can live spirit-filled lives of joy. When Paul writes, “God loves a person who gives cheerfully<sup>1</sup>,” he means just this. Giving out of duty is a good starting point, but as we mature in our knowledge of Jesus, we allow the Holy Spirit to hold more and more sway over our hearts and our lives. And as we surrender more of our lives to Christ, we find ourselves finding joy in things that please the Spirit of Christ. Generosity in giving is one of those things.

If your attitude toward giving is now one of obligation, that’s ok. By all means please keep giving. But Jesus wants you to experience more. Giving to God’s work doesn’t have to be confining like a set of handcuffs, or burdensome like a millstone around your neck. Giving is designed to be joyful for followers of Jesus.

A quick word about what it means to be rich. Some people believe that God will fill your bank account and give you an extravagant lifestyle if only you’ll say the right prayers and give the right amount of money. That’s a sad misunderstanding of true wealth as the Bible describes it. God does faithfully provide for our material needs, but that which is in excess of our true need is designed to be shared with others. Paul said it quite clearly when he wrote that when we give cheerfully and generously, “Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.” The secret of the Super Rich in God’s Kingdom is that they are rich in generosity, not in accumulated luxury comforts.

Paul has much more to say to us about our wealth. Our second reading is from 1Timothy chapter 6. I’m reading in The Message paraphrase, beginning with verse 6. **{Read 1Timothy 6:6-12, 17-19 MSG}**

Something that’s sometimes overlooked in this and other Biblical teachings is that the rich aren’t being condemned for being rich. Rather, it’s the single-minded pursuit of wealth that’s problematic, or the hoarding of wealth without sharing it.

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<sup>1</sup> 2Corinthians 9:7. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

Which begs the question: Who are the rich? In this figure from 2021,<sup>2</sup> each little person on the right represents one percent of the world's population. The bar graph on the left represents the percent of the global wealth that each group of people enjoys. The most striking thing about this graph is that one percent of the people on this planet have almost half of the wealth of the world, while another 39% of the wealth is in the hands of just 11% of the people. Guess where those top 12% live? Right here in the United States. In fact, many if not most of us here fall within that top 12%. If you own a car and a home, if you have retirement savings or other investments, you might be surprised just how much wealth you do have. Even if you have only a decent used car, your wealth is still greater than that of 55% of the world's population. So, to summarize: We have met the wealthy, and the wealthy are us.

Many of you give joyfully and sacrificially to the work of the Lord through this church. Your faithfulness has seen us through a challenging time this year, and I thank you. Your generosity has exceeded our forecast for 2022, allowing us to make substantial headway toward finishing the year in a strong position financially.

This is what our giving looks like for 2022, through the end of August. The numbers on the bottom of each step are the average dollar amount of giving per month, while the numbers on top reflect the number of giving units making contributions to BUMC at that level in 2022. These numbers are through the end of August.

It's not surprising that we all give different dollar amounts. After all, together we experience a wide variety of life stages and economic means. What's important is not how much money you have or even how much money you're giving. Instead, I invite you to challenge yourself by locating where your giving falls on these stair steps and resolving to "step up," to grow by one step from where you are now.

Let's say you're one of our worshippers who makes no offering, so you're not even reflected on this chart. What would you have to do to arrange your life to allow you to take one step forward in your giving, from zero to something? Even one dollar a week, \$52 dollars a year, is something to get you started on the journey of joyful giving. And if you're

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/distribution-of-global-wealth-chart/>

already doing that but just dropping a dollar bill in the offering basket anonymously, I encourage you to put it in an offering envelop with your name on it. We'll send you quarterly giving statements to help stay on track with your giving plan.

Wherever you find yourself on this giving chart, what would it take for you to step up?

Whether you're ready to step up in your giving for 2023 or not, please do complete the Promise of Giving card that we mailed you. There are also extras in the lobby, and you can complete one online using our website. A promise to give is a sign of commitment, to God and to the people of this church. It's a helpful tool for you to form an intentional giving plan. And it's very helpful to our church leaders who are even now in the process of forming our 2023 church budget.

I encourage thinking about your giving as a percentage of what God is providing for you, because it's such a liberating means of grace. God never intended that we give back that which we never received. Lost your job or experienced some other life change? Just let us know. Until God provides for you in some new way, neither God nor the church expects you to give what you don't have, no matter what your promise of giving for the year.

Little is expected from those who receive little, although, correspondingly, much is expected of those who receive much. I wonder if God's system for giving is experienced as harder by those who have the most to give. Is that why the Rich Young Ruler went away sad?<sup>3</sup> Perhaps that's why Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!"<sup>4</sup>

Jana and I give through the Electronic Fund Transfer system, or EFT, whereby a monthly amount that we designate is automatically transferred from our bank account to the church's bank account. In 15 years of giving this way, we have not once experienced a problem with our giving. Some years we've adjusted our giving upwards, some years we've adjusted it downward, and some years we've left it the same, depending on how God has provided for us each year. You can enroll in the EFT program easily by completing the back side of the Promise of Giving cards that you received in the mail. You can also complete one

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 19:22. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 19:24. Ibid

online by visiting our website.

God's plan for giving is so simple- give the first portion of what God has given to us back to God for the work of building God's Kingdom on earth. When we give cheerfully, we enjoy a great harvest of generosity, which draws us closer to the heart of God and blesses the communities we live and serve in.

Please take some time now to reflect on attitudes and actions around giving. How could you "step up" in giving for 2023?



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