



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Giving as a Declaration of Praise

Isaiah 43.16-24

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Introduction

1. I once heard the head of a parachurch mission organization tell about time he spent traveling with a fund raiser for a Christian university. He said the man would work through Paul's teaching on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 and then continue through the chapter break to the first two verses of chapter 16, the verses that urged the Corinthians to give as they had prospered. The fundraiser would then say, "If Paul could tie giving to the greatness of the resurrection, I will make no apologies for talking about money."
2. In light of the entirety of God's word, it should not surprise us that Paul would make such a move. God has never been hesitant to talk about our money.
 - a. One writer contended that Jesus talked more about money than any other single subject (though not always about giving as we think of it) (see V. P. Black, *Rust as a Witness*).
 - b. Thinking more specifically, we cannot think about worship without also thinking about giving as a response to God; Isaiah 43.16-24 illustrates the connection.
3. To say it another way, the fact that the Bible connects giving with worship is the starting place for any study that we do on giving.

Body

- I. Parenthesis: Why Talk About Giving in Such a Generous Church?
 - A. A friend who preached in a larger metropolitan church once included this paragraph in his extra study notes for his annual budget sermon:

First, I want to thank you for the way you receive the budget sermon every year. I have preacher buddies who dread talking to their churches about the budget the way Chihuahuas dread going to the vet. They get all shaky and nervous, then they get irritable and mean. With you, the budget sermon is actually fun. Which leads me to the second thing I want to tell you.... Thank you for the way you worship God in your giving. The budget sermon is fun to write and preach because it is a joy to tell the generous where the money they give is going.
 - B. You are also a generous church, as our weekly contribution shows. Why preach on giving then? I think of three reasons.
 1. It is an important Bible subject, and needs occasional reviews (just as we do with love, repentance, baptism or grace!).

2. All should periodically examine their giving to see if it meets God's standards.
 - a) In a church with many who give much, it is possible to hide behind the largess of the well-off and never examine what we are doing.
 - b) The point is not necessarily to always ask for more (or to guilt trip those on fixed incomes, etc.), but to examine ourselves to see if we are pleasing God.
 3. That leads to the third reason: because the well-off should also examine themselves to see if they are giving by God's standards or man's.
 - a) We should never forget that God's standard for giving is presented in Jesus' observation of the widow who gave her two last coins (Mark 12.41-44).
 - b) What each should ask is how his/her giving compares with that widow's. In keeping with Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 16.2, that evaluation ought to be done proportionally: if that widow had what I have, what would she give to God?
- C. It may help to hear a story related years ago by B. B. Stevens in a bulletin article. He he told about a rural church whose treasurer resigned. The man who agreed to replace him ran the local cattle-auction ring. He said he would do the job on the conditions that no report would be forthcoming for a year and no questions were to be asked him for that year. Left with no other options, and knowing him to be honest, the rest of the group agreed. At the end of the year, the treasury was overflowing. When they asked how, the man told them that as they had done business with him, he had withheld 10% on their behalf and given it in their name. They never missed it.
- D. The treasurer's last statement adds an exclamation mark to the point: "Do you see what we could do for the Lord if all of us were willing to give even the first fruits of our labors to God who owns it anyway?"

II. Seeing God in Our Giving: Isaiah's Challenge.

- A. Our text helps us appreciate that point by focusing on God and our response to him.
1. Verses 16-21 continue the prophet's emphasis on what God was doing.
 - a) Notice the emphasis on the Lord (v 16) and the repetition of the first person pronoun.
 - b) Notice that God is never content to be a God of the past, but is always working in the present to do new things (see v 19).
 2. Verses 22-24 challenged Israel with the fact that they were not giving properly and so were not honoring God.
 - a) The Lord had done much, but had not really demanded much (23b).
 - b) But Israel did not really trust him and showed it by failing to present their offerings. "Yahweh expected to be called upon and counted upon, and to be served with visible, material, generous gifts. But Israel had been too 'worn out' to fulfill its liturgical obligations" (Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 60-61).
- B. Do not miss the context and challenge of these verses.
1. What had led them into captivity was idolatry, trusting something other than God.
 2. What continued to tempt them was what was tangible instead of God. We see that reflected in the times Isaiah noted the superiority of God to Babylonian deities (see chapter 41) and in his mockery of the futility of idols (chapter 44).
 3. Israel's stinginess was "a sign of the deadness of its heart in what should be the most precious of all relationships" (Paul Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 77, in Brueggemann, 61).

C. Our giving is a tangible statement of our allegiance.

1. "Worshiping God and giving is one of the most powerful ways of praising Him. Think about it; when we give we are literally letting go of one of the most influential idols in our culture because we trust the one, true God. Every time we give, we are making a profession of faith: 'Lord, I trust you more than this money to provide for my needs. I trust you more than this money to give my life meaning and significance. I trust you more than this money to add value to my life.'" (Jody Vickery, supplemental notes to his Budget Sermon, January 8, 2006, Campus church of Christ, Norcross, GA).
2. This focus on God is the beginning point for considering some practical lessons about giving, as taught by Paul.

III. Learning How to Give: Three Lessons from Paul.

A. First—and we cannot overemphasize this—we are giving to *God*.

1. Our speech sometimes makes us wonder.
 - a) We speak of giving to this congregation, or the elders, or to the work of this church, etc.
 - b) Biblically, however, giving has always been to God.
2. This was Paul's emphasis in 2 Corinthians 8.5. They had given themselves to God, not to the church or project; generous giving flowed naturally from that surrender.
3. Closely aligned with this, giving is not a "matter of convenience" (which is what comes out sometimes when we mean to talk about the placement of the offering in our worship service order), it's part of our worship and service generally (see 2 Cor 8.7 for one aspect of this focus).
4. In light of this, whether we think the money is used properly or well is a secondary matter. We give because it is an offering to God.¹

B. Second, the concept of a sacrifice should be retained as we give.

1. 2 Corinthians 8.1-3 shows us the model of this point.
2. But so does 1 Corinthians 16.2 with its focus on giving as we have been prospered.
3. We often hear people speak of giving a "portion." Given God's standard and preference for the unblemished first fruits in giving, I suggest we change our language to speak of giving a "proportion."
 - a) A corollary to this is that we should not be limited by a budget; instead our budgets ought to be dictated by what we give.²
 - b) Just as in ancient Israel, it's a matter of seeing what God is doing and what's possible, then seeing to match his excellence with our own.

C. Third, our giving should be planned, thought out in light of our gratitude and devotion to the Lord (see 2 Cor 8.10; 9.2).

¹ I do not intend by this statement to minimize the importance of using the offerings well. Nor do I intend to suggest that leaders should not be held accountable for its use, or that a spirit of simply going along should exist among a church's members where the finances are concerned. My interest is only in emphasizing that we are making *an offering to God*. Other matters of concern in the process are secondary at best.

² Our budget is calculated that way, but my concern here is different. I'm suggesting that we ask what we would see if we gave as sacrificially, giving in proportion to the widow in Mark 12. We might find that we would need to set a higher budget goal.

Conclusion

1. The test implied in the following story might help us evaluate where we are with regard to the grace of giving. It's the story of a little boy in Mexico who was saving his pesos to buy himself an artificial limb. But he refused to quit giving to the Lord because, he said, "I had rather go on crutches than see the Lord's church go on them." (Black, *Rust as a Witness* teacher book, 8).
2. He is the modern day widow and his crutches are her mites. As you consider your relationship with God today, ask yourself how your attitude and practice compares to theirs.

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