

Cheerful Giving

Reformation Sunday / Stewardship Emphasis Sunday

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 Galatians 6:7-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
October 27, 2024

Today being **Reformation Sunday**, I did something this week I haven't done in a very long time. I pulled out my two-volume set of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the final version written in the 1550s, to do a little light reading.

John Calvin was just 8 years old when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses on the Wittenberg (Germany) church door in 1517. They were critiques of the Roman Catholic Church of which Luther was a part, as a monk. This action is effectively known as the start of the **Protestant Reformation**. Calvin, born in France, ended up in Geneva, Switzerland, where he tweaked Luther's theology enough to break away and form what is known as the **Reformed Tradition**. We Presbyterians find our roots in this tradition, and a bit later through the work of John Knox in Scotland. For a while, Knox was a student of Calvin's in Geneva.

This also being **Stewardship Emphasis Sunday**, I wanted to know more specifically what Calvin has to say about the giving of our time, talents, and financial resources.

Here's Calvin's basic premise on stewardship: We are not our own, rather we are God's. Therefore, all we are and all we have are from God and belong to God. Our giving, then, flows from the understanding that **we are stewards – responsible and accountable caretakers and managers – of that which belongs to God.** We give, then, out of our gratitude for that which God has blessed us.

Calvin says the following about our talents, "We must remember, that the **talents** with which God has favored us, are not excellences originating from ourselves, but **free gifts of God.**" For those of you keeping track, that is from Book III, Chapter VII, Paragraph IV (or, III; vii; 4).

In the next paragraph he writes, "But the Scripture leads us to this, admonishes us, that whatever favors we obtain from the Lord, **we are entrusted with them** on this condition, that they should be **applied to the common benefit** of the Church; and that, therefore, the legitimate use of all God's favors, is **a liberal and kind communication of them to others.**" Calvin follows with, "...**all blessings we enjoy are Divine deposits**, [I love that phrase] **committed to our trust on this condition, that they should be dispensed for the benefit of our neighbors.**" In effect, that instructs the purpose of our Outreach & Mission ministry efforts.

Then, Calvin also says this about stewardship. "...whatever God has conferred on us, which enables us to assist our neighbor, we are the stewards of it and **must one day render an account of our stewardship**; and the only right dispensation of what has been committed to us, is that which is **regulated by the law of love.**"

So there you have it. **It is out of love – love for God and love for neighbor – that we give back a portion of our time, abilities, and finances. All given for the common good.** If anyone asks, that is what Presbyterianism has to say about good stewardship.

With that as our theological and practical foundation, what else can we say about stewardship? There are three points I want to make. First. **Being a generous person is an important foundational spiritual discipline and practice. Generosity is a choice and can become a way of life.** And as with any spiritual discipline, its purpose is to not only live according to the values taught and modeled by Jesus, but also as a means to draw closer to God. When we give of ourselves, and I'm referring as much or more so to the giving of our time and abilities as to financial resources, we often do experience a very real sense of the Presence of the Divine working in and through our lives. That's why **volunteerism, in all aspects of our lives, is actually a form of spiritual growth.**

This is related to the second point I want to make about good stewardship. **Our stewardship conversation should not begin with the church's need to receive, but rather with our individual need to give.** Yes, the church needs your generous giving (your loaves and fishes) in order to fulfill our mission and ministry. And **the proposed budget for next year is a reflection of our mission and ministry priorities – which in itself, then, makes our budget a spiritual document of what we hope to accomplish in the year ahead to further the kin-dom of God in our midst.**

As you have heard, in order to move away from a deficit budget to a balanced one, we will need a 15% increase in giving. While we fully realize that may not be possible for everyone, I will be increasing my pledge by 15% as a commitment to our ministry efforts. **I encourage you to do what you can.** Saying that, whether we're talking about the church or not, **there is an innate human need to give and to contribute to the well-being of the whole.** For it is in giving that we reflect our care and compassion for the people and needs around us. This rightly shifts the primary emphasis of stewardship away from simple fundraising once a year in order to meet our proposed budget for next year, to an act of conscious, cheerful, and disciplined generosity.

Perhaps you've noticed that during our offering each Sunday, it does *not* state in the worship bulletin, "We will now collect this morning's tithes and offerings." Instead, and there is theological intentionality behind what it does state, "In gratitude to God, let us dedicate our pledges and offerings." Do you hear the difference? In the first, there is the act of the church taking and collecting – something is pulled away in order to benefit the church. In the second, the church receives and embraces a gift from those who freely give it. And all this is done in and through our gratitude to God. So again, our generosity can become a way of life.

The third point I want to make today is that **the theology of good stewardship is the church's antidote to some of the greatest temptations of our age: materialism, consumerism, and acquisition.** The apostle Paul writes in his second letter to the church in Corinth, "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8). This should prod each of us to ask of ourselves: **Don't I really have enough so that I may share abundantly?** This, in turn, helps us to differentiate between what we truly need, and what we simply want. Which leads back to that age-old question: **How much is enough?**

I don't know about you and your home, but when I look around my house I realize I have acquired more than enough – sometimes much more than enough. (I have some pottery I'd like to show you.) It makes me wonder, **what could have been accomplished, who could have been ministered to if more of our time, talents, and financial resources had been redirected away from ourselves and towards others?**

Therefore, in summary, sharing abundantly, as an act of good stewardship, is indeed a spiritual discipline and practice – both in how we respond to the goodness of God, and to our call to minister to others, including to each other. It reminds us of our need to give and contribute, to be a generous people. And it acts as a corrective to the temptation to acquire more stuff, simply because we can.

And following the admonition of the apostle Paul, may our giving be cheerful. John Calvin would be pleased.

Amen.

Resources:

Rev. Karl Travis, "On Why The Stewardship Conversation is Necessary, Now More Than Ever"