

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Philippians 4:10-20)

Make a Sacrifice for God

I want to begin by making a disclaimer this morning: this sermon was not planned as a response to last Sunday's voters meeting. It's based on one of the appointed readings for today, the seventh Sunday after Pentecost. But having said all that, there's no way that I can preach on the words that St. Paul wrote to the Philippian congregation without referring to what happened at our voters meeting. At that meeting, on the second vote, we approved the budget that the council recommended by only one vote. And I departed from my usual policy of not voting in order to break that tie. That budget prompted a long and difficult discussion about our church's finances. As unpleasant as that was, it was a necessary thing for us to do. It makes me glad that God ran things in such a way that this morning we have a great stewardship text before us. Today Paul is talking about gifts given by ordinary Christians to support the spread of the gospel. He calls those gifts "fragrant offerings." He's using the language of Old Testament sacrifices because all of our offerings are a kind of sacrifice. Everything that we do for God and everything that we give to God is a kind of sacrifice. In the end, the Bible tells us to make our whole lives living sacrifices. How much more the offerings we bring! So, my friends, I want to encourage you this morning: **make a sacrifice for God.**

I.

But what does that mean? Lots of preachers who say that mean "give til it hurts." I wonder how many of us don't automatically think in those terms? Certainly, there is even an element of truth to it. Is a gift that costs me nothing a sacrifice? Is a gift that's easy to give because it has no effect on me personally a true sacrifice? I think the word implies giving up something for God. But there is another side to it. From God's perspective, the cost of the sacrifice is not the first concern. The first concern is why we give it. The richest gift on earth could be meaningless to God. You could empty your retirement funds and clean out your bank accounts and give it all to the church and still not please God with your sacrifice. God measures sacrifices by a different standard. **Make a sacrifice for God – give him a willing gift.**

In our text for today, St. Paul is responding to a gift that the congregation in Philippi gave to him while he was in prison. And he speaks very carefully because he doesn't want his "thank you" to sound like a request for more money. But notice that he never mentions an amount. He certainly gives us the impression that the gift was generous, but he doesn't say how much it actually was.

That's because the reason that they gave was far more important to Paul than how much they gave. Why did they give this generous gift? Because they knew he was in need. Paul was not in a jail cell when he wrote these words. He was in a rented house chained to a guard and he was allowed visitors. The book of Acts tells us that for two full years he preached the gospel to all who came to him. But in that house, he had to pay for his food. He probably didn't have a lot of cash on him when he came to Rome because he had spent the two previous years in real prison. It was gifts of people like the Philippians that enabled him to preach and teach there for those two full years. The Philippians identified a need and gave to it. Now, the reason why we give should be more than a need. It should come from the gospel. But explaining the needs that we have in our

congregation and in the ministries our congregation supports is perfectly acceptable, as long as we don't descend into maudlin emotional appeals that leave the gospel behind and wrench people's emotions to give til it hurts.

Note how Paul speaks of their giving. After he founded their congregation several years earlier, persecution drove him out and he went on to Thessalonica. Already then, the church in Philippi sent him financial support again and again. In fact, Paul notes that when even they didn't send him gifts, they still wanted to but they didn't have the opportunity. That congregation wanted to support Paul's ministry. They didn't get tired of the appeals. They didn't groan and say, "All he ever talks about is money." They didn't look down at their shoes and try not make eye contact with the preacher because they were ashamed of how little they had given and they had no intention of giving any more. They wanted to support the preaching of the gospel. When the gift came from willing hearts, it was generous. It was a true sacrifice to God.

And notice that Paul calls a gift that was given to him to buy food and clothes while he was preaching a sacrifice to God. We don't give our offering to the church. We give it to the Lord or it is not a sacrifice. And how much we give is less important than our attitude. If you have to stick a crowbar in your wallet to give something to the Lord, is that wallet your God? The people of Philippi didn't worship their wallets. They worshipped God and they gave because they wanted to be part of spreading the gospel. They were willing and that made them generous.

Now, generous means different things in different circumstances. For a person who makes minimum wage or who lives on social security, ten or fifteen dollars a week is probably generous. For a person who makes a lot more, a hundred dollars a week might not be generous. How many of us have two incomes or more in our households? Do we think about what a generous offering in our circumstance really would be? How many of us give more to the Lord than we pay for our cell phone? Or cable TV? Or internet connection? How many of us plan our giving at all? And how many of us pay everything else first and then give God what we can afford? None of that is being generous to God. None of it reflects the willing heart God is looking for.

If those questions make us uncomfortable, is it because we don't like talking about money or because they expose the sin and greed of our hearts? Are you a part of the problem here at Peace? There is a part of every sinful heart that worships money, that is unwilling to let go of our money, even to support the work of the Lord. That's just sin. Too often the church in America today goes begging in the richest society of Christians in history. We need to recognize this sin is every bit as serious as adultery or violence or substance abuse. It earns hell like all those sins do.

That's why we are so blessed to have a church, because this is the place where God forgives us. This is the place where God tells us that all our sin is wiped away by the blood of Christ. Jesus alone, of all the people who ever lived, gave himself totally to God. Every one of his monetary gifts was generous, even though he had almost nothing to give. But his heart was always willing and he gave freely of all that he had. He did that for us. He did that so that God can look at us and see us as perfectly generous, just like Jesus was. Jesus died and he paid for all the times that we didn't want to part with our money, for all the times we were stingy because we wanted to spend that money on something else, for all the times that we chose not to hear the fact that our congregation is struggling and underpaying it's workers, and not contributing to the support of the synod and HVL and even sticking hard working people with late payments instead of giving what we owe on time. Jesus paid for all that sin. When he rose, God announced that it was erased from his record book. If you still need to hear it, let me say it to you now: as your pastor, I forgive you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Your sin – even your sin of being cheap in your offerings – is gone forever.

Does that make you feel better? I hope so. God loves you and he has thrown your sin away. God has given you Jesus himself and eternal life and blessing with him. Now, as a forgiven, free child of God, he calls you to reexamine your attitude toward giving. The only way that your heart can be willing is if your gift comes from your joy in Christ. You know what? You have to grow in giving. Day by day, we have to learn to adopt attitudes that line up with what God says. That's why we need sermons like this, even though they're hard to hear. Growing begins by being willing. It begins by deciding that you will examine how God has provided for you, and as a blood bought child of God, you will make a conscious choice to give to him a part of those blessings. Then you will choose to be glad that you gave it.

II.

A willing heart is a heart that gives from faith. You cannot give joyfully to the Lord unless you rejoice in being forgiven. So you come here to hear the gospel. Understand that God does mean you when he says that you are forgiven. When he lifts the chains of hell off of your heart, that's when you are full of a desire to serve him. That faith is the key ingredient to all real sacrifices. No unbeliever can bring a true sacrifice to God, not even if he gives all that he has to our church. You are the people of God. **Make a sacrifice for God – give him a gift of faith.**

It really isn't about giving til it hurts. It's about a joyful response to God's love. Paul said that the Philippians had wanted to support him but they didn't have the opportunity. But once they had that opportunity, they gave freely and generously. I once heard a presentation by a pastor who claimed that there are many wealthy WELS Lutherans who want to give more to the Lord, but they don't know what the needs are. Someone has to tell them. Do you believe that? There's a part of me that wants to say, "If that's true, give me their e-mail addresses!" But based on what Paul says here, there must be some truth to it. Is it true for you?

The answer is yes. God made you new in the gospel. That means that there is new man inside you who does want to do this work. That's part of God's gift to you. But he's opposed by that sinful nature, the old man. When you let that new man out, when you let him make financial decisions for you, you are going to make very different financial decisions than you would make if you only let the financial planner inside you work. Paul said, **"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. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."**

Did you hear the promise there? You can't outgive God. God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. In one sense, of course, we have to do the math when we plan our giving. We ask ourselves what God has given us. We pray and we choose a percentage that expresses our trust and our joy in him. But in another sense, we throw the math out the window. Our approach is not supposed to be, "Well, if we give this much to God, we can't have cable TV. If we give this much to God, we can't make our house payment. If we give this much to God, we won't eat. So how much pain will we accept?" That's the Old Man talking. He's the only one who's hurt by giving – even if we decide that we're going to give up one smart phone in our family because we want to give that money to the Lord. The new man still does it in joy.

You know what? God is going to give back more than you can imagine. God never asks you to give him all your income or to cripple yourself. But he does ask you to trust him. And he does make a promise: if you are generous with him, he will more than take care of you. Now, that doesn't mean that he's going to plant a money tree in your back yard. He may give you a different kind of gift. But he will provide all that you need. He will bless you beyond what you can imagine. He will watch over you until you reach eternal life. That is his promise to you. That promise is your motivation to give. Trust in him and bring a generous offering, not just today, but throughout the year, throughout your life. Be a part of the work here because it is a joy to do so. Amen.