

Portrait of a Biblical Giver: Part I
First in a Two Part Series on Stewardship
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Genesis 4:1-7, Hebrews 11:1-4, II Cor 8:1-7 Luke 12:32-34

- **For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Luke 12:34**

Dear friends in Christ,

One of my favorite things to do when our beautiful and much treasured daughter Michelle was growing up was to scare her. I know that sounds mean, but it was all in good fun. Two episodes come to mind.

The first was when she was a high school athlete, and we were in Mankato at Bethany College for a basketball camp. It was a nice summer evening, we stopped at a gas station, she had her car window rolled down, and as I washed the windshield, I splashed her with some water, and then proceeded to hustle inside to pay. I could see that she was getting ready to pay me back, and so I arranged with the clerk at the counter to watch for Michelle starting to splash me back, and at just the right time, the clerk would with a booming voice shout out over the microphone, “Young lady, please do not be spraying water on your father!” (It worked out perfectly)

Even more fun I had one night as I crouched in our dark garage, and just as Michelle came walking around the car, I jumped out at her and scared her so badly she jumped in the air and almost started hyperventilating. (If it sounds like I am a bit of a troublemaker in my family life, I suppose I am)

Even more of a troublemaker in our family life here at St. Paul Lutheran is our own sinful nature. Listen again to the portrait God paints for Cain who is so very angry that God regarded with favor his brother’s offering but not his. **“Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.**

In other words, God was warning Cain that sin was like a dangerous beast crouching at the door of his heart, even as God gently offered to help Cain deal with his anger before it grew into something more. We know how that story didn’t end well at all. If that story were to be told with pictures, it would end with these three pages, first a picture of Cain killing Abel in cold blood, secondly, a picture of God sentencing Cain to spend the rest of his life as a restless wanderer, and finally a picture of God giving a frightened Cain a sign that reassured him that his life would be spared.

Three pictures I offer you today on the subject of stewardship under the theme, “A Portrait of a Biblical Giver, Part I.” Three pages, three pictures which will focus on three values of stewardship, the value of being intentional, the value of being regular, and the value of being generous.

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Page #1 is a picture of a person of faith who plans out his giving, in response to God carrying out His plan of salvation at the cross.

Being intentional in one's giving means developing a plan for your giving and then following through with that plan. Paul writes it this way to the Corinthians, **“The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion.”**

If you have to give as you have made up your mind then you have to have made up your mind. To be intentional means to make up your mind, to develop a plan for giving, and then to “walk the walk” as you turn that plan into action.

The best reason to give isn't so much because the church needs your money or because the bills need to be paid or because you're a nice person or because you want to do your fair share. The best reason to be intentional in your giving is that God developed a plan to save us sorry sinners, and He carried out that plan. The best reason to be intentional in your giving is that before you were ever born, God already loved you, He knit you together in your mother's womb as quilters carefully put together a quilt, your Father in heaven sent His beloved Son to be crucified and dead and buried for you, Jesus died and rose up again with intentions of you spending eternity with Him.

The Genesis 4 account of Cain giving an offering that was not acceptable to God and Abel giving in a way that was acceptable doesn't really give us a clear explanation of why God favored one offering but not another. Some scholars suggest that Cain just sort of grabbed some of the fruits of the land on the way out of the house without really thinking about it and that Abel brought the firstfruits of his flock after giving it careful consideration. The language seems to indicate that Cain gave more out of a sense of duty rather than a gift of love for His God

In any case, the New Testament clarifies the difference between Abel and Cain and why God favored the one brother's act of worship over the other. Abel acted in faith, and Cain did not. The Bible makes it clear that without faith it is impossible to please God, or to say it another way, the only good works accepted by God are those done by faith in Jesus as Savior.

Cain was like those of us who call ourselves Christian, but all too often we really don't want to take the time or expend the effort to actually walk the walk. Of course, Cain made matters worse when he refused to see the error of his ways. He made matters worse when he wallowed in his anger and instead of doing battle with sinful desire he allowed for it to be in charge.

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The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who face the same choice Cain faced. The choice of wallowing in our feelings and our emotions or looking in the mirror every day and examining our hearts. The choice of going to bed angry or getting on our knees and confessing our sins. The choice of planning out in a thoughtful manner the stewardship of our time and talents and treasure or just sort of coasting along, just sort of letting life happen to us. As Doris Day would say, “whatever will be will be, que sera sera.”

Page #2 is a picture of a person of faith who gives regularly, in response to God daily and richly providing for all of his needs. To be regular in giving means to establish a pattern in your giving, and to follow that pattern. Paul said it this way, **“On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come.”**

In Bible times it was common for workers to receive their pay every day. In the parable of the generous landowner, all the workers lined up to be paid. In our day, of course, we receive income in a different way, perhaps on a weekly or monthly basis. But the Biblical principle remains the same. To be intentional about giving is to have a plan, to be regular is to follow that plan.

The best reason to be regular in giving away in a firstfruit and proportional way, is not because the church has regular bills and obligations, the best reason is that God daily and richly forgives our sins. This comes under the category of Second Article blessings. At the heart of Christianity is that Jesus has paid the price for all of our sins, and through the means of grace, He keeps on delivering that forgiveness into our souls. Christ died, not as Abel died by the violence of his brother’s sin, but willingly, for us.

In addition to Second Article blessings, we also have our First Article Blessings. To use Martin Luther language, God has given me body and soul, eyes, ears, and all our members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who have daily choices to make. They have a choice of taking their blessings for granted or receiving them in thanksgiving. They have the choice of being content in their sinful desires or actively doing battle with them. They have the choice of being complacent in the face of temptation or regularly repenting. They have the choice of following a plan of regularly giving or stumbling into the ditch of responding to God’s grace in haphazard fashion.

Page #3 is a picture of a person of faith who gives generously, even as he resists the desire to be self-centered. According to the author Charles Lane in his book, “Ask, Thank, Tell,” generosity is the most basic of stewardship values. And yet research shows that in mainstream Lutheran Church bodies, the average member gives between 1 and 2 % of

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income to his church. Not to be harsh about it, but statistics like that would suggest that if one's treasure isn't with Jesus, if one's treasure is somewhere else, then that person's heart is likely elsewhere, as well. As it was true in Cain's heart that there was this massive struggle between sinful desire crouching at his door and the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, so will it also be true in our hearts

In II Corinthians 8, Paul makes it clear that the culture of generosity begins with the grace of God that is received into the hearts of redeemed sinners. Listen to these words of encouragement, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.

It seems as though the culture of generosity was alive and well in the churches of Macedonia. This morning I invite you to think about how blessed we have all been by the example of generous people in our lives. I think of my dad who was generous with his hard work ethic and my mom who was generous with her tender and kind and prayerful manner. I think of my wife who has been generous with her patience and her forgiveness and I think of my inlaws who would spend their vacations watching our children and giving and serving. In congregations I have served, I think of countless members who have given and served and volunteered sacrificially and cheerfully and passionately out of a love for Christ and His Church.

In closing, I paint for you a portrait of Biblical givers. It is a congregation of believers full of folks who wake up every morning grateful for all of the grace and all of the mercy and all of the forgiveness and all of the treasure and all of the time and all of the talents they have been given. Over time, the Spirit of God has worked in their hearts a faith that wants most of all to bear fruit. They live a day at a time, understanding that God is the Owner, they are the stewards, and of stewards, it is required that they be faithful. With that in mind, their giving and their serving is intentional, it is regular, and it is generous.