

II Corinthians 9:6 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Dear Christian Friends,

Last Sunday, I began with a picture of me crouching in a dark garage, jumping out and scaring the living daylights out of my daughter Michelle. Yes, Michelle was a bit angry, but “she got over it.” I related that to Cain being so very angry with his brother because God had accepted Abel’s firstfruit offering but rejected Cain’s less than firstfruit gift. In Genesis 4, God warned Cain that sin was crouching at the door of his heart, and he needed to resist. We explored three values of Biblical stewardship last week, the values of intentional giving, regular giving, and generous giving.

Today, I begin with two pictures of harvest, one sparing and one bountiful. The first is a memory I have of a field of flax my dad had planted back in the 60’s on our North Dakota farm. My dad’s first desire was to plant oats or wheat, but as the rains kept coming and the planting kept getting delayed, he ended up planting flax. The crop ended up being so sparse, so sparing, that Dad debated whether it was worth combining or not. The end of that story is that we ended up just ploughing it under.

The other picture is from this past Wednesday, as I drove on old highway 14 past the ethanol plant, I counted in excess of 15 semis lined up with additional ones pulling in one right after another. (I asked my son in law how busy that ethanol plant could get, and he estimated there have been times when there were five rows with ten semi in each row, each trailer holding close to a thousand bushels of corn) Even as we gather for worship this morning, we are in the midst of yet one more bountiful harvest, praise be to God. In Holy Scripture, from beginning to end, the theme of planting seeds refers to the preaching and the teaching of God’s Word. The theme of harvesting refers to people believing and being called and gathered into the Christian faith.

Today, in the context of the seasons of planting and harvesting, we explore three more values of stewardship, firstfruit giving, proportionate giving, and cheerful giving.

Page #4 is a picture of a thankful person putting first things first. (Firstfruits)

Moses writes, “When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell there.

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Firstfruit giving begins, of course, with the God of this universe, Who sent his firstborn and his beloved Son from heaven above to earth below, He sent His firstborn and His precious Child all the way to a little hill outside of Jerusalem, where He was crucified, dead and buried, He sent His firstborn and His pure as the driven snow Son to be blasphemed and ridiculed and beaten and bruised and whipped and cursed and tortured, so that our sins could be forgiven, our guilt could be sent away, our punishment could be put on another.

In the Old Testament, it was the firstfruits of the harvest that God commanded to be brought as an offering, it was the best of the lambs and the calves that were to be sacrificed on the altar, so that the sins of the people could be forgiven, their guilt could be sent away, they punishment could be put on another.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who wake up every morning thankful to God and determined to put first things first on behalf of their neighbors. Thankful to God they are for the forgiveness of their sins and determined they are to help their loved ones know the peace that only Jesus Christ can give. Thankful to God they are for comfortable homes and bank accounts and pension plans and medical care and so much more and determined they are to care for those near and far who struggle even to enjoy the basics of life. Thankful to God they are for so many blessings received, and determined they are to bring a firstfruit offering into the house of God in support of all that the Holy Spirit is doing in their midst.

Page #5 is a picture of a red-faced man caught in the act of robbery repenting of his stinginess. (Proportionate giving)

Malachi paints this picture, **“Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you? In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.**

This part of Malachi had to be written because of our human nature. When the Jews went to their flocks to pick out the sacrifice for their God, they were forgetting that God was watching. They were reasoning to themselves that since God made everything and owns everything, what difference does it make what I give him or if I give him anything at all. Some of them were bringing in blind animals or crippled animals that were going to die anyway.

God’s reply was about as angry as a reply can be. His response to left-over offerings was to cry out that someone needed to shut the temple doors. God would rather have no offering than anything less than a firstfruit offering. The glory of His Name was at stake, and He

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accused the people who were bringing crippled and injured and diseased animals of robbery. By not bringing a tithe, they were robbing God and were under a curse He went on to issue a challenge. Bring a tithe into my storehouse, just try it, just test me out, and see if I don't open up the floodgates of heaven and pour out so many blessings you won't have enough room.

Dear friends in Christ, the Bible calls us to proportional giving. In Old Testament times, the command was for the people of God to give ten percent, a tithe. In New Testament times, we present tithing not so much as a rule to follow, but as a goal to work towards. The language of the New Testament is always to give in proportion to blessings received.

The kingdom of God is like a red-faced man caught in the act of stealing from his children's college fund to pay for his gambling losses. He is as sorry as he can be for his selfishness, he begs as hard as he know how for a second chance, he vows to change his ways.

The kingdom of God is like a red-faced church member who realizes he has been bringing a left over offering into the sanctuary. He's as sorry as he can be, he asks God for forgiveness, he is determined from that day forward to give in proportion to blessings received.

Page #6 is a picture of a cheerful widow loved by God. (Cheerful giving)

Jesus paints this picture of a woman who had just come and put in two small copper coins, a penny, in the temple treasury, **“Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on....And St. Paul adds, Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.**

The scene of Mark 12 is Jesus spending His last moments in the temple. Surprisingly he spent those moments sitting in the court of the women, where the offerings were deposited into 13 trumpet shaped receptacles. Of course Jesus doesn't just watch people like we watch people, He was reading the hearts of those who were worshiping and giving. Many rich people were giving much. Jesus didn't comment on whether their gifts were welcome or needed. What He did want His disciples and us to note is that our gifts are acceptable only if they come from hearts filled with love and trust.

What the woman gave was very little in comparison with what the rich gave. It amounted to a fraction of a penny. In our day, what the woman gave would be equivalent to a dollar or so. In the eyes of Jesus, the gift was not tiny. It was more than all the others. The others gave a bit of their excess, she gave all that she had. She gave as an act of worship. She gave with a heart that was full of faith and of absolute trust..

This event is particularly thrilling because we know the rest of the story. This was Jesus' last visit to the temple. From here he went forward to offer himself - all that he was and is

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he offered on the cross to pay the price we could not pay. To make the contribution we could not make. As you well know. On Good Friday he paid the entire debt and in that hour he became even poorer than this poor widow.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who live their days knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are loved by God. One of their favorite Bible verses is *Proverbs 15:15, All the days of the oppressed are miserable, but a cheerful heart has a continual feast.* Their cheerfulness depends not so much on the circumstances of life but on the inheritance they have received by virtue of the death and resurrection of their savior. Their cheerfulness depends not so much on their own achievements or prosperity, but on the simple truth that the grace of God has swept over their souls, and His mercies are new every morning.

If an artist were to paint a portrait of these Biblical givers, page #1 would be of a thankful person putting first things first. Page #2 would be a red-faced man repenting of his stinginess. Page #3 would be of a cheerful woman who knows she is loved by God.