

*“Generosity & Property”*

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 29, 2017

First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

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Cartoon in The New Yorker magazine: Pastor standing in a church pulpit says, *“I will now be cherry picking from the Book of Deuteronomy.”*

Deuteronomy 14: 22-29

*<sup>22</sup> Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. <sup>23</sup> In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.*

*<sup>24</sup> But if, when the Lord your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the Lord your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, <sup>25</sup> then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; <sup>26</sup> spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together. <sup>27</sup> As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you.*

*<sup>28</sup> Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; <sup>29</sup> the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.*

## Deuteronomy 26: 1-3

*When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, 2 you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.*

*3 You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us."*

### ***Generosity & Property***

I recently visited a local retirement home to preside at a Christian worship service.

One of the retirees pulled me aside to share his experience

of having just gone to a movie theater.

He said it had been fifty years since he had done so.

After buying a ticket, he stopped at the concession stand.

When the attendant told him the cost of popcorn and a Coke, he said,

*"The last time I came to the movies, popcorn was only 15 cents."*

"Well, sir," the attendant replied with a grin,

*"Tonight, you are really going to enjoy yourself. We have sound now."*

In the worship that day at the retirement home,

I shared with the congregation the basics of what I use in premarital counseling,  
and asked for their wisdom on what to add or enhance.

The subjects included conflict resolution, money matters, communication,  
common denominators, aspirations, communication,  
sexuality, intimacy, and, you guessed it, communication.

My, when we talked about human sexuality, marital intimacy, and fidelity,  
you should have seen their eyes pop.

I invited the experienced congregation to contribute marital dos and don'ts.

Their insights were precious and profound.

They identified what they saw as the biggest challenge

that divides and distracts couples and families of all shapes and sizes  
from realizing their true potential, an issue of concern  
that led some into deep disagreements: money.

Money. Property. Things. Stuff. Resources.

Money matters can bring folks together or drive them apart.

We fuss and fight over how we spend it, save it, give it away,

the choices we make, the purpose and meaning of our resources,  
and what to do when the money gets tight.

As Billy Joel sang about Brenda and Eddie,

*“They started to fight when the money got tight,  
and they just didn't count on the tears.”*

We see the same challenges and issues played out on a larger scale

when the arena is bigger and the spotlight hotter,  
whether in a church – and our story is typical across the country –  
or in a school PTA or the local city commission or on the national stage.

Money matters can divide...or unite.

The question of money as “my property” and faithful stewardship is ever before us.

Do you think of the property that you possess, that's at your disposal,  
that you are responsible for, as your own?

Do you possess your resources, or do they possess you?

To whom do you give credit for having anything at all?

Have you ever considered that the property – money, goods, resources –  
in your domain, in your control, at your disposal,  
is that which God has bestowed upon you to be a steward of,  
to be a caretaker of, to be responsible for the greater good?

### ***Generosity & Property***

They say that a woman had a heart attack.

She was rushed to the hospital, and placed in ICU to recover.

She could receive little company;

her family and pastor were instructed to keep her calm.

However, while she was in ICU her rich uncle died and left her a million dollars.

Her family wondered how to break the news to her with the least amount of excitement.

They decided to ask her preacher if he would possibly tell her the news quietly.

The preacher went in, sat by her side, and gradually led up to the question,

*“Say, what would you do if you inherited a million dollars?”*

She said, *“I would give God all the glory, and then donate half to our church.”*

The preacher dropped dead.

Generosity and property go well together;

it all starts with giving glory and following the One Who Creates.

Generosity as a way of life, of being, is a gift of God.

God's generosity stands on its own, independent of our actions or desires or wants.

God's generosity is not contingent on our actions or inaction, deeds or misdeeds.

God's generosity is not given based on merit; it cannot be earned.

God's generosity isn't earned, can't be lost, and doesn't end.

It's not based on right behavior that is addressed,

or wrongs that need to be redressed,  
murmurings that reveal degrees of stress,  
or harmful behavior that needs to be confessed.

God's generosity grows exponentially, accretes, accumulates, accelerates.

Christ's Church is a living example of the accretion of God's generosity.

Accretion is defined

as an increase by natural growth or by gradual external addition;  
as growth in size or extent.

God's generosity begets a generous spirit, which in turn increases gratitude,

which fosters grace upon grace.

As love is shared and expressed and made real, the Body of Christ expands and evolves.

As the Church of Jesus Christ,

we have the capacity and responsibility  
to bring God's generosity to bear in our everyday lives,  
including with how we use the gifts we are given.

In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, he said:

*"The power of God is at work in us.*

*And by the power of God at work within us,*

*God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,*

*and in the process and the product all Glory is to be given to Jesus Christ,  
who has chosen to work in and through the Church today  
and to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”*

Paul points out that God is doing amazing things through you,

and surely God will support and provide  
what is pleasing in the eyes of the Lord.

*“God can accomplish abundantly more than we can ask or imagine.”*

Don't ever sell yourself short,

or shortchange what God in Christ can do through you,  
especially when it comes to letting God's generosity come alive  
in you and me and all of us together.

### ***Generosity & Property***

They say that a stranger walked into a church office on a weekday morning.

When the secretary greeted him, he asked, *“I need to see that hog of a preacher.”*

She said, *“He is not a hog. How can you say such a thing?”*

He said, *“Well, I'm here to donate \$75,000 to the church.”*

She said, *“Oh, that smelly pig. The little porker will be right with you.”*

Are you like me, wanting, seeking, planning, hoping

for the use of money and resources to make a difference in the world  
while at the same time providing daily provisions and a retirement plan?

Is this too much to ask?

For spiritual guidance we turn to the Scriptures.

The Bible addresses this in both the Old and the New Testament.

In Deuteronomy we are reminded to tithe a portion of our resources.

*“Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field.*

*In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose*

*as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine,  
and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock,  
so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.”*

The word fear may also be translated respect:

we do so out of respect of the Lord, who provides.

Out of respect, awe, and gratitude, we joyfully tithe a portion of our resources

for the care of God’s temple and the whole people of God.

These teachings in Deuteronomy were set down 30 centuries ago,

yet money and property remain a substantive issue for the Christian journey.

In Jesus’ teachings He acknowledges that money is a real issue in our faith journey.

Jesus spoke more about money and possessions

than about any other subject except the kingdom of God.

Of the 38 recorded parables of Jesus, 16 are about money and possessions.

Jesus said, *“Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.”*

Wherever we invest our resources is where we invest our passion.

For the people of God, giving is not charity or dues paying.

Giving does not happen

because of a financial campaign or a fund raiser, a sermon or a slogan.

Giving is not an itemized deduction of Schedule A of Form 1040.

Giving is responsible living in light of God's amazing grace.

A Christian gives her or his offerings in response to the question,

*“What is my responsibility in recognition of God's goodness to me?”*

### ***Generosity & Property***

You may know the curious tale about the two mice who were out for a stroll.

Suddenly, they were surprised by an alley cat.

Just as the cat prepared to pounce upon his breakfast, one of the mice *barked*.

The barking so startled the cat he turned and fled.

Whereupon the mouse who barked turned to his companion and said,

*“In times like these, it is always nice to know a second language.”*

Tithing, my friends, may be a new language to many people, including church members.

The people of God need to hear either for the first time

or simply to be reminded of the authentic guidelines around tithing  
-- not as a legalistic rule or as a rung on the ladder to sainthood.

Tithing, joyful giving of a portion of our resources, enables transformation.

Herbert Miller, a Disciple teacher and church leader, once wrote:

*“The primary aim of stewardship development is not to finance*

*the church's annual operating budget but to change lives.”*

Tithing changes lives. Period.



Tithing is at the essence, the crux of God's economics.

We are talking about money and property, yes.

What we're really talking about the miracle of human transformation.

Tithing and giving generously

in grateful response to God's grace  
is not something we think about  
just as the offering plate is about to be passed;  
tithing is a positive way of life.

My father, the Rev. George E. Calvert, taught me and our home congregation,

the Church of the Living Hope, to give the first hours of work each week to God.

Try it, and see if your attitude at work

and productivity and collegial relationships don't improve.

Give the first tithe of your time and effort in a relationship to God,

and see how that impacts your friendship.

Tithe your first thoughts of a new day,

and see if your daylight hours aren't brighter.

Let us understand the theology of giving by tithing as a call to growth.

The language of tithing is not the language of final arrival, but of growth.

If you and I give what we gave last year, we will give less than we did last year.

If we give what we gave ten years ago, we're giving about half of what we gave then.

Experience has shown us that, with the help of God,

it is possible to give more than any accountant, financial advisor,

or retirement planner might suggest, and the Lord does provide.

In our giving and practice of generosity,

we discover daily that God fulfills God's promises.

### ***Generosity & Property***

Dr. Anthony Campolo is a speaker, author, sociologist, pastor, social activist  
and passionate follower of Jesus!

He is a  
n American Baptist who has a  
Pentecostal  
fervor.  
He  
discerned recently in his long career

that there is no place for homophobia in the church or in society.  
Within the last couple years,  
Campolo came out in favor of gay marriage, equal rights,  
and the ordination of homosexuals.

For this stand he was shunned by many of his lifelong friends.

And then he discovered that there are many, many more of us

who perceive that when God says to love and affirm all people, all means all.

There is a delightful story of that Tony Campolo tells

of being invited to speak at a meeting of 300 women.

The president of the women's organization read aloud a letter from a missionary.

In the moving letter, the missionary expressed a dire need of \$4,000

to take care of an emergency that had cropped up.

The president then said, "*We need to pray that God will provide the resources to meet the need of this missionary. Brother Campolo, will you please pray for us?*"

Tony Campolo said, “No.”

*“I beg your pardon,” she said.*

*“No, I won’t pray for that.*

*I believe that God has already provided the resources,  
and that all we need to do is give.*

*Tell you what I’m going to do.*

*I’m going to step up to this table  
and [place upon it] every bit of cash I have in my pocket.*

*If all of you will do the same thing,*

*I think God has already provided the resources.”*

The president of the organization chuckled a little bit, and said,

*“Well, I guess we get the point. Brother Campolo is trying to teach us  
that we all need to give sacrificially.”*

Campolo said, *“No, that is not what I am trying to teach.*

*I’m teaching that God has already provided for this missionary.  
All we need to do is give it.  
Here, I’m going to put down all of my money I have with me.”*

He placed \$15 on the table, then looked at the president.

She opened her purse and took out all her cash, which was around \$40,

and put it on the table.

One by one the 299 remaining women got up and put cash on the table.

When the money was counted, they had oversubscribed the \$4,000 needed.

Tony Campolo said, *“Now, here [before us is] the lesson.*

*God always supplies for our needs, and [God] supplied for this missionary, too.*

*The only problem was we were keeping it for ourselves.*

*Now let's pray, [giving thanks for God's] provision."*

### ***Generosity & Property***

We give thanks for God's providence, and we give thanks for your generosity of the property, time and talent and treasure that has been entrusted to you.

We give thanks that we have been given a mighty calling,

and together we are living into the Great Commission.

Not only can we do and be all things in the name of Christ,

God accomplishes abundantly more than we ask or imagine.

All the time, talent and treasure necessary to accomplish God's promise is right here.

The Lord does provide, and chooses to do so through us for a mighty purpose.

This is our hope.

The world belongs to those who give it the greatest hope.

May our living, giving, and forgiving reflect such a hope.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*