

SECOND READING: Jeremiah 31:31-34 pg 735 OT

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,^[a] says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

This is the word of the Lord.

FIRST READING: 2 Corinthians 9:6-10 pg 183 NT

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ 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. ⁹ As it is written,

“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness^[b] endures forever.”

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

This is the word of the Lord.

*“One Heart, One Soul, One Gift. Pt 1”

As you know, we’re in the time of the year sometimes called stewardship season, a time when we especially consider our response to God’s goodness with pledges of time, talent and treasure to God’s church. For this reason, we read a passage that is a classic stewardship text, that from the 9th chapter of Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth. *To remind you of the context...Paul was writing to the believers there, just as he had written to believers in several other churches, to ask them to consider giving to the poor in the Jerusalem church. He was hoping to be able to hand-deliver a large donation to assist the saints in Jerusalem in their dire straits. He sent this letter via Titus, ahead of his actual visit to Corinth, because he wanted to give the people time to consider his appeal, to realize that what he was asking was the most natural of all things.

As I considered Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians this week, I also was reminded of an experience that CS Lewis had. *C.S. Lewis was going through a most difficult time, and a friend of his offered his sympathies, but Lewis responded that he was actually joyful, despite all the pain. He was, in fact, “*OVERWHELMED by joy*”. His friend responded, “Well, others can scoff, but I know how hard you’ve been praying; and now, it seems, God is answering your prayers.” Lewis said, **“That’s not why I pray, though. I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn’t change God, but praying changes me.”*¹ (pause)

It seems to me that good stewardship, gratefully responding to God’s gifts to us, is much like this...it simply flows out of us, flows because we can’t help but respond by giving back, by eagerly and responsibly caring for God’s church and God’s world with our whole selves...our time, our talent and our treasure. Let’s consider this a bit further.

*I know that it’s a little foreign to be thinking of stewardship in this way because we’re very used in this culture to direct marketing campaigns and fundraisers. We’re so often enticed to give with a promise of reward, with the promise of getting something in return. If we give at

¹ C.S. Lewis. <https://storiesforpreaching.com/prayer-changes-me/> (accessed 11-2-17).

level 1, we will get a T-shirt, Level 2, we get an autographed book or a DVD, and if we give at level 3, we will have our name on a plaque or in the Golden Givers club or maybe on a building.² I've actually heard of some CHURCHES using this fundraising technique for their stewardship emphasis. Members who pledge over a certain amount get their name in a leather book which is displayed on the Church's chancel steps.³ The problem is that what subtly undergirds this method is the question,* "what's the benefit for the giver?" It plays to people's sense of prestige and their need for glorification rather than God's.

Now, certainly fundraising is at times needed. Money and volunteerism is necessary to do good all over our world, and both must be raised or good in many cases will not be done. * *But unlike the little girl who was selling some candy bars, and, when asked what the purpose of her organization was, said "Oh...well, we make money and then spend it,"*⁴...unlike this, our purpose, as members of Christ's church, is to respond to God's generous love with our lives. At the core of things, even the purchase of new toys for the FPC nursery or a new AC for the Narthex, or coffee for fellowship, or gas for the mower, or the spending of time to pack backpacks, or the use of talents to sing in the choir or balance the books...*at the core of **all** things, **WE** are gathered together as a community of **God's people to gratefully respond to what God has done and is doing.**

When Paul addressed the church at Corinth, he was not appealing to their obligation, or need for self-satisfaction, or prestige, or sympathy---in short, not on something people do---but instead he **WAS** focusing on **what God had done and their response to it.**⁵ (*pause*) * In essence, he first asked them to consider the gifts God had given them. These included, 1. the **claim on them as children, as children of Almighty God,** with a 2. **purpose of playing a role in the divine plan** Wow! (i.e. ministering in **God's** name),⁶ and 3. to do so via an **abundance of blessings**, enough of everything to easily share. Paul said, "*And God is able to provide you*

² Thom Lamb. "Grace Notes" Grace Presbyterian Church, Nov. 2017.

³ Robert Elder. Sermon: "Not as an Exaction". In: W. G. Carter, ed., "Speaking of Stewardship" (Louisville: Geneva Press; 1998), 66.

⁴ Robert Elder.

⁵ Robert Elder.

⁶ Tom Wright. *Paul for Everyone. 2 Corinthians.* (Louisville: WJKP; 2004), 102.

with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work...He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.”(vss 8,10)

He went on ask them to consider their response to this divine generosity. Paul said, “*Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*” (vs 7) *He appealed to the Corinthians to search their hearts and give as they were led. In the ancient world, the heart was the place of all knowledge, thought, and reflection. It was the place where the whole person experienced the full weight of hope, sorrow, anxiety, fear, and joy. It still is the place that is considered the deepest and most authentic part of our being, the center of who we are and will become. *In the text from Jeremiah 31, the human heart is where God has written what really counts, “*I will put my law within them,*” the Lord says, “*and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*” A person who searches their heart, quietly and attentively, will be able to there deeply meet God. And a person who searches their heart will be compelled not by an outside source, but by an inner force to cheerfully give of themselves for the service of God in the world.

Friends, as we together (together for that is what it will require)... as we together prayerfully consider our pledges for 2018, let’s search our hearts and take stock of what God has given us. *Let’s know 1. God’s claim on us...let’s feel the movement of the divine finger on our hearts as God writes, “*I am your God, and you are mine,*”⁷...let’s consider what it really means to be sometimes wayward sons and daughters and feel God’s arms around our necks and hear God say, “All I have is yours!” (pause) * Let’s also 2. know our purpose, our role in the divine plan, by looking down at that little vulnerable baby in the manger, the one looking up at us, by listening to the cry of the man on the cross, looking out over the world that HE created, by breathing in the sweet smell of spring flowers in the tomb’s garden, as his feet first step into the sunlight, and by FEELING THE IMPORT OF HIS WORDS, quietly uttered over smoking fish

⁷ Terry Chapman. “*The Heart of the Matter*”. In: WG. Carter, ed., “*Speaking of Stewardship*” (Louisville: Geneva Press; 1998), 51.

on that beach...“Feed my Sheep”. (pause) *And let’s 3. realize our abundant, God-given blessings...our families, our health, our planet, our freedoms, our church.

*Let’s search our hearts for these things and give as we are led, friends. We will no doubt find that ultimately, what God has done and is doing, compels our free and complete response of gratitude, as free and complete as God love is for us. And we will find ourselves speaking C.S. Lewis’ words on prayer, now on giving! **“We give back because we can't help ourselves. We give because we're helpless. We give because the need flows out of us all the time, waking and sleeping. Giving doesn't change God, giving changes us.”*⁸ Brothers and sisters, let’s not be reluctant but cheerful givers...overwhelmed by Joy. To God be the glory. Amen.

⁸ Thom Lamb