

I Love My Church **Here I Have the Freedom to Give God Heartfelt Gifts**

2 Corinthians 9:6-9

June 12, 2016

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines **ATTITUDE** as “the way you think and feel about someone or something, typically reflected in a person’s behavior.” What we think about a thing is often reflected in what we actually **DO**. In the case of our own attitude, it’s a little thing that makes a big difference.

Bad attitudes aren’t hard to spot. We usually wear our attitudes on our face. The growl or frown on our face is a sure-fire way to get the attention of those around us. Without even speaking a word we can make it crystal clear to others how we feel about a particular person or subject. The one with a bad attitude though rarely uses only body language to make others aware of their attitude. Words often follow. Complaining, Condemning, condescending words. Solomon in the book of Proverbs says, the speaking of a person with a bad attitude is “*like a scorching fire*” (Proverbs 16:27). Perhaps you’ve been burned a time or two by someone’s bad attitude.

A good attitude is even more powerful, but in a positive way. Listen to what Solomon says again, “*Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing for the bones*” (Proverbs 16:24).

Our attitude about a thing or a person is often reflected in what we actually **DO**.

Today, as we continue our sermon series, I LOVE MY CHURCH I want to spend a few minutes talking specifically about our attitude toward giving, toward stewardship, toward using the time, talents, and financial treasures that God has given to us in a way that is pleasing to him. More specifically, I’d like to talk to you about money.

While this may seem like a really sensitive subject, the Bible is not shy in discussing it frequently. There are plenty of verses that give a Christian practical instruction about our offerings. The Word tells us that our offerings should be **planned** and well-thought out. They should be **personal** (what I give is between me and God, or my family and God). They should be **proportional** to our income. God does not ask us to give him every dollar that we ever earn (though I suppose he’d have that right). Today I’d like to speak specifically about our attitude as we consider what to give back to God. What motivates us to give and how we feel about giving impacts what we actually give.

What should our attitude toward giving? Let’s start with what our attitude should not be. The Apostle Paul says, “*Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion.*”

Not reluctantly

There are forces at work inside of us and outside of us they affect our attitude towards giving. Paul says that we are not to give “reluctantly.” Reluctance is a force at work inside of us. Reluctance is an unwillingness to do a certain thing. In this case, Paul says we should not be unwilling to give to God. How reluctance manifest itself in a human heart? The words that Paul uses that are translated as “reluctantly” give us some clues. The words that are translated as “reluctantly” are “from sadness.” We should not give “from sadness.” What does it look like when someone gives “from sadness?” I suppose it

would go a little bit something like this. The offering plate comes around. You reach in your wallet or purse. You find only a \$20 bill. You want to give something. You hesitate a bit, your reluctant, but you put the 20 in the plate. As it passes you and moves to the next pew, you feel a tinge of sadness or sorrow because you start to imagine what you could have bought with the money you put in the plate. By putting that money in the plate you feel like you've **lost** something, not given it. That's giving "from sadness" or reluctantly.

Just thinking about that might stir up a whole other set up emotions and attitudes, because if your like me, as you think of your past experiences in giving your offering to God there were a whole lot of times that the attitude with which you gave your gift to God was an attitude of absolute reluctance. And now as you think about it, you feel a wave of guilt come over you because you recognize your sin. Guilt paralyzes. Guilt traps. Guilt imprisons. Until sin is confessed. *"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord"—and you forgave the guilt of my sin."* Psalm 32:3–5. What does God do when we confess our sins of giving reluctantly? He forgives!

Not out of compulsion

While reluctance is a force at work inside of us, the second attitude that Paul mentions, "giving out of compulsion" is a force that is at work outside of us. Giving "under compulsion" carries the meaning that there is pressure put on us from someone or something outside of us that would motivate our giving. There are some other English translations that help us understand these forces at work. One translates it "out of necessity" (HCSB); another "out of a sense of duty" (GNB). I've had some speak of it that way, as a sense of duty. There was a shut-in that I would visit at the last congregation that I served and whenever I would visit her and bring her the word and sacrament, as I left she'd always reach for her checkbook as she wrote out the check she'd say, "this is for church dues." Perhaps my favorite translation, while not what Paul says, but catches the meaning I think is that we should not give due to "arm twisting." We shouldn't need someone to twist our arm to give an offering back to God. It has happened quite often that the church, and I don't mean ours in particular, has used tried to compel God's people to give by doing an awful lot of arm-twisting. The church and it's leaders have tried to strike fear in people's hearts. And fear can be an awfully good motivator. If I'm afraid of my kids drowning, that's an awfully good motivator for me to teach them to swim or pay someone else to. Give to God or you will never get to heaven is an effective way to raise money, but it's an impossible way to achieve godly gifts. Gifts given with an attitude of compulsion, "I have to or else" (whatever the or else happens to be) are not usually god-pleasing gifts.

Has fear ever motivated you to give? Have you ever thought to yourself "If I don't give, St. John's is going to crumble to the ground?" Have you ever thought "If I do give, I'm afraid I won't have enough to provide for my family?" Those are real fears, aren't they? I've really had them too. But here's what I know and I want you to know to. **The Lord always provides.** If God wants the ministries we undertake at St. John's to continue, he will provide a way for us to keep going. And in reality, he doesn't need my contribution or yours to accomplish his purposes. Here's what else I know, If God has blessed me with a family to provide for (and he has) I don't need to be afraid that my gifts to God will take away my ability to provide for them. Find comfort in the words of the Psalmist who writes: *"I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsake or their children begging bread"* (Ps. 37:25). God always provides. As Paul says, *in all things and at all times God will give us all that we need.*

A Christians' Attitude is Marked by Generosity and Cheerfulness

So what should our attitude be? It should be marked by a generous spirit. Christians should be marked by generosity! King Solomon understood that. After he had built the temple, the place where God's people in the Old Testament worshipped God, he dedicated that temple to God with a 14-day celebration for which an offering was collected. This offering was not a collection of money *per se*, but one of animals for sacrifice. The offering totaled 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats, all of which were sacrificed to God. Why? Because Solomon understood generosity. He'd write in the book of Proverbs "*one man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed*" (Proverbs 11:24-25). He understood what Paul writes, "*The one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly.*" If you are planting seed, doing so sparingly thinking that you can save a few bucks by using less seed will only have themselves to blame when it comes time to harvest, because the harvest will be sparse too. But the reverse is true too, "*Those who sow generously will reap generously.*" Again Solomon in the Proverbs: "*Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be overflowing and your vats will brim over with new wine*" (Proverbs 3:9-10).

We can be generous with God because he's been generous with us. He has withheld nothing from us, but has given us everything that we have. Including, and especially, has he given us his Son. Talk about generous. And in return for God's generosity we have the freedom to give our heartfelt gifts back to God in return for his generosity to us. We have the opportunity and freedom to choose the amount that we have decided in our hearts to give. We do not have an option regarding the attitude with which we give them. Our attitude should be marked by generosity and cheerfulness. Heartfelt gifts are the kinds of gifts that please God. The attitude with which we give makes a big difference to God. We rejoice in the opportunity to support the preaching and teaching of God's Word. We respond to his love with generous and heartfelt gifts.

I love my church. Because I can preach this sermon, we can have a dialogue about these sensitive issues, I can give you all this godly encouragement to consider generous and cheerful giving and I do not have to be afraid of you being offended. And I won't hear — All that this church wants is my money. Because that's not how Christians feel. That doesn't characterize a Christian's attitude. And here at St. John's how we feel about something has an effect on what we actually do. Amen.