

Defined by Generosity

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Enough Series, Part 4 (Luke 6:38)

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church - Westridge

Human worship of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit began under the open the open sky around a pile of stones, probably at the top of a hill. These early people of God would take an animal from their herds and sacrifice its life at that spot. Or they would bear a bowl of grain from the harvest to the place. Then a fire would be kindled on the stones, and the animal or grain or both would be burned — a grand transmutation of that stuff of earth rising as a gift to God in heaven.

The Bible calls such sacrifice “a pleasing odor to the Lord.” Because who doesn't love the smell of a good barbecue? But of course, it's not that God fancies the smell of cooked people food — what was pleasing to God was the love, faith, and generosity of his people that caused sacrificial smoke to rise up to heaven.

God didn't love people burning stuff; God loved that his people loved him enough to burn their stuff. God loved that his people loved him enough to cost them something. This makes God happy. When we give generously, we bless the Lord.

Abraham's grandson Jacob, who set up one of these piles of stones at a place called Bethel, made a solemn vow in response to God's faithfulness. He prayed, “Of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth.”

Where such sacrifices weren't made as a free-will offering to the Lord, God commanded in the Law that they be made anyway, as a not-free-will offering. This is where the Biblical commandment of the tithe comes from, the tithe being the Law that one-tenth of everything be given over to God. In Leviticus they didn't have direct deposit — so that meant crops, fruits, oil, wine, and animals.

Why do you think God put the tithe in the law? Do you think it was because God was greedy for goats? Do you really think the same God who sent his Son to die on the Cross for us was greedy...for goats? God commanded the tithe because he knew it it was good for us and for our relationship with him. God was teaching us that giving is not just a result of our relationship with God. Rather, giving is an input into our relationship with God.

If we won't be generous to God, we won't be in love with God. And if we aren't in love with God, then we don't have the sort of relationship with him that God wants

us to have. We've sold ourselves short; we've gipped ourselves of great riches in the name of saving a few dollars. It's not worth it.

One of the remarkable things about those archetypal gifts to God, those sheep sacrificed on stones, is that there was no other purpose to them. The wind came and whipped the flames, the flesh burned, the smoke rose. But the gift of that sheep unto God fed no hungry people; it didn't pay the electric bill. It didn't buy markers for Sunday School, or Christmas gifts for children. There was no institutional vision or mission to which the gift was pledged — it was just the giver, the gift, and God.

In a way it's beautifully simple and honest...but I don't envy the priest who had the job of preaching that stewardship sermon 3500 years ago. Can't you imagine that after-service coffee conversation...

"Let me get this straight, Father, you want me to take one out of every 10 baby animals born in my herd, and 10% of my harvest, and just burn it?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"Because God said so and it's good for you."

"But then it will just be burned and gone."

"Yep."

"That seems wasteful."

"It's good for you."

"Is there anything else 'good for me' I should know about."

"Yep. You should come back next week. I've got a list of 10 more to talk about."

God has, 3000 years later, a slightly different plan for our gifts. Now, as always, we take what God has given us and give it back to him. What's different is that now we give it back in such a way that our gifts get to be a part of the work of the kingdom of God in the world. Which is awesome.

It also makes my job easier, because I get to remind you how your gift is going to transform the church and the community. Actually, today that's going to be Dennis' job; he's our treasurer at St. Andrew's and he is going to speak with you in just a moment.

But I want to remind you that we're not a social service organization with a weekly pep rally. We are the Church of God almighty, the body of his Son Jesus Christ, and blessed to be in a relationship of love, praise, and gratitude with God.

For many of you, the most straightforward, concrete step you could take to deepen your relationship with God is to increase your giving. You will draw closer to God if you make generosity a more important part of your life. Stephanie and I discovered this when we started tithing, and I'd love for you to test me on this point.

The Biblical standard of the tithe, 10% of your income, is still a good guideline; it is still one pleasing to God and I'll testify that it is good for your soul. If you can't get to a tithe right now, take a step, a step that is proportional to your income: 7%, 5%, 2%. Remember the lesson of the widow who Jesus watched put her two pennies in the Temple treasury and proclaimed her gift greater than all those large amounts put in by the rich. The lesson is that God views our gifts in proportion to what we have, not by the dollar figure. Since God grades proportionally, let us give proportionally. If you aren't where you want to be yet, well God understands where you are, and as you work towards having more room for generosity in your budget, God will help.

Can I be honest and practical here for a moment. I know that in a world of 401k's, annuities, Social Security, Medicare Part-B, automotive leases, high interest consumer debt, and mortgages, this is all hard and complicated. And how many of you have children, or maybe grandchildren, for which you bear some financial responsibility? So then you know that the effective cost of raising a child to adulthood is \$∞. I was talking with a guy my age, a lawyer, who makes around a quarter of a million dollars a year. And he was telling me that their financial planner told him and his wife they probably needed to save at least half his paycheck each month to pay for all they wanted to provide for their daughter and her education.

I have three kids of my own; I know this feeling, how it's impossible to ever feel like you have enough. I know how hard it is to give when every extra dollar is claimed by some need or opportunity we can provide for our children.

I'm also tearfully certain that the net result of those decisions will be children who grow up and do know know love of our Lord.

I'm not encouraging you to make a financial decision, but a faith decision. And not a faith decision based on the faith you have right now at this moment, but rather one based on the faith you want. The last verse of our gospel, the reason it was chosen for this day, begins "Give, and it will be given you." What will be given us is God.

I won't lie and tell you that if you give more richly, God will make you richer. We don't give of our stuff because we desire more stuff, we give because we desire God. Because, more than anything else, we know that we are his, and he is ours. When we are generous, our hearts become a little more like his, with more room for joy and love. Generosity isn't a burden; it's the blessing of figuring out who, and whose, we were made to be. Amen.