

The Spirit of Giving

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 1st Sunday of Advent, December 2, 1990. Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Today is Stewardship Sunday. At the conclusion of our service we'll commission the men and women who'll be responsible for seeing the Pony Express saddle bags are passed on to the members of our church. Sometime this afternoon you'll receive a saddle bag. Hopefully, you'll fill in your estimate of giving card, replace it in the saddle bag, and then deliver it to the next person on the run.

Before I encourage you to be generous in your estimate of giving I want you to know how much I thank God for you. In this morning's Epistle lesson we heard what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth. "I give thanks to my God always for you...." I can say that just as well about you.

Let me get more specific about why I thank God for you.

1. I thank God for our seminary intern Ted Ludwig whose ministry is made possible through your tithes and offerings. A few weeks after Ted got here he helped to organize and plan, with the help of a lot of members, a meeting at the Townsends for the 6th graders entering the junior high youth group. Sixteen 6th graders showed up at that meeting. I was amazed. A few weeks later I attended a junior high youth group meeting at the Terry's where there were 26 junior kids there, most of them from our church. Now, with the help of the Parent's Support Group Ted is trying to develop on-going high-school youth leadership.

But Ted doesn't just work with youth. Not long after Ted arrived I took him to see Ruth Williams. A beautiful pastoral relationship developed and deepened with Ruth and her family in her last months before her death. I

thank God for how Ted has been able to minister to that family and many others. For example, when Ted heard that Betty Snodgrass was moving over to the Woods at Oxford Manor he organized a brigade of people to help her move. There are many other things I could say about how your gifts have strengthen the testimony of Christ among us through Ted.

2. I thank God for our church secretary, Anne Terry, whose ministry is made possible through your tithes and offerings. Anne is really an assistant minister. She knows everybody in the church and in the community. She has a love for them that they can immediately feel. She often tells me of people who may need a pastoral visit from me. She's a counselor and friend to so many. The work she does as church secretary is a real evangelical ministry.

3. I thank God for you because of the ministry of music you make possible by your tithes and offerings. Anne Harlan and Jackie Stauch have been ministers of music in this church for over forty years. One morning we had a visitor in the worship service from Baltimore. About 40 or 50 youth had participated that morning in the various choirs. The visitor remarked as he went out, "When I think of the size of Oxford, I'm just amazed at the quality of the music ministry of your church."

4. I thank God for you because of the Christian Education ministry that you've made possible through your tithes and offerings. We began our Sunday School this Fall with nearly 160 in attendance. Your giving has made it possible to buy Bibles and Christian Education resources for all these people. Your giving made it possible for our church to send more people to Camp Donegal this past summer than any other church in our Presbytery except for one church of over a thousand members.

5. I thank God for you because you make it possible for me to minister to you and this community. Without your tithes and offerings to support my

ministry my wife and kids and I would be standing out in front of the Octorara hotel with tin cups. But through your gifts I'm able to do what I enjoy doing most.

6. I thank God for our mission beyond ourselves. I thank God that we're part of a church that bears witness to Jesus Christ throughout the United States and around the world. The testimony of Christ has been strengthened around the world through your mission giving. I was thrilled to be present at the General Assembly worship service where so many new missionaries were commissioned to carry the Good News of Christ around the world in word and deed.

I could go on and on listing the many reasons why I thank God for you but time doesn't allow. But I want you to listen again to what St Paul wrote. "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift." Paul was most grateful to God for what God had given them and for how God had enriched them so that they were not lacking.

As you think about your estimate of giving think of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus. Think of how, in every way you've been enriched in Christ. There are many ways we express our gratitude for God's grace in Jesus Christ and for all the ways God has enriched us--for example, through our worship of God, through our involvement in the life of the community-- but also through our tithes and offerings. Our tithes and offerings are one way we express our gratitude for God's grace. Because through those tithes and offerings others are given the opportunity to know of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ.

As you think about how you can express your gratitude towards God for his grace and love let me offer the following exhortations--

1. I'd exhort you to give 10% of your income to the work of the Lord. Personally, I base my tithe on my effective salary before taxes and social security are taken out. I don't consider taxes and social security charitable giving. Most of it's for services that benefit me and my family. Now it's no secret what my effective salary is since it's listed in your annual reports. It includes my salary, my manse allowance and utilities. I add all that up and that's my effective salary on which I base my tithe. I feel that I don't have any right to use that ^{time} money on myself ^{or my family}.

2. I'd exhort you to give off the top, not off the bottom. The very first check I write out when I get paid is to the church. By giving off the top you're making a confession of faith that God has first priority in your life.

3. I'd exhort you to give proportionally. Don't be legalistic about tithing. I know of a man who made \$20,000 one year and tithed \$2,000. The next year he got a new job which paid \$40,000. He thought, "Last year I was able to live on \$18,000. I don't really need an extra \$20,000." So he tithed on the first \$20,000 and gave half of the second \$20,000 away and still felt like he was way ahead.

4. Finally, I'd exhort you to remember that all that we have belongs to God. Not only our money, but our families, our time, our energy, our intelligence, our abilities, our very lives. All that we are and have belong to God. God has freely given us all things, including Christ and with Christ, forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. Our response to God is not a response of obligation but of gratitude.