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Put Your Whole Self In - Gifts

Proverbs 11:24-25

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.

Matthew 6:19-21

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Over the past three weeks, we've been delving into our everyday acts of faithfulness, the ways we work to build God's kingdom here and now through our activities of prayer, being present, and works of service. We've seen how when we put our whole selves in to God's work through these channels, not only is our faith strengthened and deepened, but the ministry of the church is enhanced, helping us do together what we might never have achieved on our own. This week, we turn to the financial gifts that we offer and how we faithfully we live with our money and other financial resources in our lives.

Believe it or not, Jesus talked more about money than he did about love. We like to lift up the love verses because they make us feel good. It feels good to love, to give our love away freely, but to hear what Jesus said about money doesn't always make us feel good... in fact, it makes us uncomfortable. But why did Jesus talk so much about money and what we do with our money? He talked about it because he knew the power money has in our lives, for good or for evil. He knew that we rely on money, that we trust money for our security and wellbeing – even our identity - sometimes more than we rely on and trust in God. In our Gospel reading, Jesus reminds his followers of the power of money – that where we put our resources, our money, our hearts will follow. When Jesus said, "Where your treasure lies, there your heart will be also," he was reminding his followers that how we choose to spend our money reflects our values and what we hold dear. When we live our lives without being

intentional about allowing our faith to impact and influence our choices, we slip into an “all about us” mindset without even realizing it.

I want you all to think through where your money, finances, spending goes – housing, grocery bills, transportation, insurance, medical care, education, utilities, entertainment, going out to dinner, vacations, paying down accumulated debt... If our money goes where our heart goes, it goes to **our** house and **our** food, **our** education, **our** entertainment, **our** travel, **our** vacation, it's a whole lot of “**ours**.” Where and when in our budgets, in our list of financial priorities, does Jesus come in? Where does the mandate to share our resources, to feed the poor, to contribute to God's ministry in the church - where does that fall in the list of our financial priorities? Now don't give me wrong, my family operates the same as yours – we might not **want** to spend as much as we do on the basics, food, insurance and medical bills, some of that is a necessity. But where within our budgets do we make intentional choices to spend wisely, to save our resources, so that we might give more for God to work through our church?

John Wesley the founder of Methodism, preached a sermon about our relationship with money and how we are to be live faithfully with our financial resources. He said this, God calls us to earn all we can, save all we can, and give all we can. These three things build on each other... for you cannot really give all you can without first earning all you can and second saving all you can. I've heard people say, I'm giving all I can when the offering plate is passed... I just don't have much to give. That may be true, but if you're waiting until the collection plate is passed to begin thinking about what you are able to give back to God... you are not making giving to God's work a real priority in your life and budget. You're giving God your leftovers, rather than your first fruits.

In Wesley's first argument, he encourages us to use the gifts and graces that God has made within us to accumulate as much as we can. For Wesley, this has more to do with the quality and amount of work we're willing to do, than it does the type of job or level of your salary. He is careful to add qualifications to “earning more”... Our earning all we can should **never** be at the expense of someone else, causing harm to ourselves or our neighbor in body, mind, or spirit. Christians are to prosper in business by sheer diligence, by ingenuity and excellence in the use of their various skills, and by the superior quality of their work. Anything else violates the commandment to love your neighbor. So we work to bring in the financial resources that help us not only survive in this life, paying for those things that are necessary like housing, food, education, and medical care... But earning enough that there is extra.

Which leads us into the second point - save all you can. For Wesley, this doesn't just mean putting any extra money in our savings account. Saving all you can means being frugal. Making choices to spend less on something if possible. How many of us go out to dinner? How often? A meal prepared at our homes is usually significantly cheaper than a meal purchased at a restaurant. While some do not like to cook or say they do not have time to cook, there is a choice that goes along with eating out. How many of us go to Starbucks? Spending 4 to 6 dollars for a single coffee drink where you could brew a cup of coffee at your home for less than a dollar. Choices. When was the last time you really looked at your spending, your actual spending, to see where the money goes? How many times you stopped at a convenience store for a snack... How many times you stopped at

Starbucks for a drink... How many times you ate out when you could have eaten at home... Rarely are we as frugal as possible... we like the extras, the luxuries, the smell and shine of something new, as opposed to something used.

Wesley reminds us that the whole purpose of earning and saving all you can is so you may give all you can to support the most basic needs of those who lack the means for health and safety. Wesley insists that such giving is not a matter of charity but of duty. When we use our resources to indulge our desires instead of meeting the needs of the poor, we do not merely miss an opportunity to do good: he says we "rob God", taking what God has entrusted to our management and turning it from the purposes for which it was given.

So how much are we to give? What does God desire for and from us? The biblical mandate is the tithe, the first 10% of our income given for God's work in the lives of others through the ministry of the church. I know that sounds a lot for some, especially if you're used to putting \$5 or \$10, or even \$20 in the plate each week. I invite you each to take out a pen and paper, or a calculator on your phone and really calculate out 10% of what you make in a month... or once you have your household income amount, simply slide the decimal point to the left one spot. Is this possible for you? What would need to shift in your monthly budget for this biblical tithe to be your offering to God? If you are already there, are you able to stretch your generosity a little farther, going above and beyond for God's kingdom building?

In a minute, I'm going to invite each of us to reflect on the slips of paper in our bulletin about our current level of giving and our goals and possible pledge for next year, but before we do so, I want to remind us that we should give not out of obligation, but out of delight – out of joy, out of love, out of happiness and out of great anticipation of what God has in store for us. God loves a cheerful giver.

So be a cheerful giver! Be proud of what you are doing and how you are listening to God and living out God's call. Giving is not an obligation; it is an opportunity!

Pledging to God's work through the church is about something so much greater than our community, our building and our finances. It is about God's grace – grace unexpected – active and alive today. It is about celebrating a community that is vibrant and growing. It is about a vision for the future that is not quite clear yet. It is about transforming hearts and lives through the amazing ministries of our church – which we wouldn't be able to accomplish without your joyful generosity!

As we reflect on and pray about our pledge goals for the coming year, I pray that you may find joy in giving, and anticipate with hope God's kingdom work that we are accomplishing together through our church. Amen!