

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

OCTOBER 8, 2023

II CORINTHIANS 9:6-11

“GIVING TO GOD”

One of the most famous verses in the Bible is in today's epistle reading from II Corinthians, where St. Paul says, “God loves a cheerful giver.” Giving without cheerfulness is not so great..... There was a farmer who went out to the barn in the morning to milk his cow. When he was done, he went back into the house and his wife asked him, “Was the cow generous with her milk this morning?” He answered, “Oh, yes, Old Bessie was quite generous and gave me 9 quarts of milk. The only problem was that just as I was finishing she gave a big kick---she spilled most of the milk and badly bruised my leg!” (Father Anthony Coniaris, Treasures From Paul's Letters, Vol. I, p. 47).

Giving without cheer isn't so great! When we give to God, are we smiling? Or is it with a frown? Or maybe even a kick!

As you may have noticed over the years, I only preach one sermon a year about giving to the church. Guess what I'm preaching about today? And today's epistle lesson, II Corinthians 9: 6-11, is all about giving to God. Let's look at St. Paul's points about giving and then look at how God wants us to give.

St. Paul makes 4 points---

FIRST---In verse 6, he writes---“he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” If we give generously, God generously gives back to us. So if you want a good harvest, you should plant a lot of seeds. To be blessed, sow bountifully.

SECOND---Our giving to God should be voluntary, not forced. In verse 7, he writes---“Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver.” We shouldn't be like the farmer's cow---she gave the milk, but also gave a

kick! We should give because we want to give, not because we have to give. We should be cheerful givers.

THIRD---This point is in verse 8---God won't leave us hanging when we give to him. He will provide. St. Paul here writes---"And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything." Give generously, give cheerfully---and God will provide.

But sometimes we get afraid. And over-possessive.... The Russian author Anton Chekhov writes about a fellow like that in his short story, "Gooseberries". There was a cattle dealer who had become quite wealthy trading in cattle. He was prosperous, but very selfish and very scared of becoming poor. To be sure he didn't lose his money somehow, or have it stolen, he had a special pouch sewed into his left boot----and there he kept lots of his money. Always safe, always handy to use. One day he was going to check on some cows coming in on a train and was walking along the railroad tracks. He happened to slip and fall onto the track right as a train came by---and the train sliced off his left leg. He was rushed to the hospital to try and save his life. As the doctors were frantically sewing him up, he began to demand----"Bring me the leg that was cut off, bring me my leg!" The doctors said, "Why worry about that? We can't reconnect it!" He screamed, "I don't care about the leg! I need the boot----all my money is in it!" (The Best Short Stories of the Modern Age, edited by Douglas Angus, Fawcett Press, p. 32)

We can get like that from fear of not having enough. Then we hang on tight to what we have and give to God as little as possible. But Paul's message in verse 8 is that we should give generously and then not worry because God will make sure that we "always have enough of everything".

FOUR---St. Paul's fourth point is in verse 13. He writes that when you give generously, "you will glorify God by your obedience....and by the generosity of your contribution...." What is this glory to God that is the result of our giving? God's work gets done!

So how should we give generously to God as St. Paul urges us in this epistle reading? What method of giving?

The best method is a way that is very fair and sensible----proportionate giving. That means to give back to God in proportion as He has given to you. If God blesses with a smaller amount of wealth, then you give in proportion to what he has given you. If he blesses you with more, then you give back more---in proportion to what He is giving you. Fair and sensible.

What guideline, what percentage, should you give when you give proportionately? God tells us what proportion, what percentage to give, in both the Old and New Testaments----10%. God's wisdom is evident in that 10% proportion. It's significant, it's substantial. And yet it's not something that will just wipe us out. And it makes things simple. Even a person poor at math like me can figure this out! Just take your total income figure, divide it by 10, and give 10%. No trigonometry necessary!

Of course, if we are able to give more than 10%, that is beautiful! But the 10% is what God specifically wishes from us. We give 10% to Him to thank Him for the 100% He has given us. And we do it to glorify God by all the good that 10% we give will do through the work of God's Church.

Next week, we begin our annual fall stewardship campaign as we all are asked to make a pledge of what we can give God next year. So pray, consider, think about it---two questions for you to consider as you fill out your own pledge form----First, can I begin proportionate giving if I haven't already? Second, will I give the proportion God asks for?---10%.

Of course, God is merciful. God is patient. For some, if you are not used to the 10% concept, it may seem totally impossible. It may seem very radical---as many things about God are! So if 10% just blows you away right now and you can't even imagine it----then start with a lower percentage number. That way you will learn the practice of proportionate giving, even if it's not the 10% God prefers.

So if 10% isn't going to be what you do next year, start with a lower number. Even if you start a lot lower, like 5%, then you will learn that it works---as you give, God gives back. And at the end of next year, my guess is you won't have starved to death! And if you are still alive, then perhaps you can figure like this for 2025—"Well, I started proportionate giving with 5% in 2024 and I made it through! So maybe I can try 6% this next time....." And perhaps on and on like that over a few years-----and guess where you will end up!

And meanwhile, God will be blessing you for becoming more generous in giving back to him some of what He has given to you! As you give, God will bless you and will make you a blessing to others-----by the means of the good work His Church will be able to do because of your generosity.

To conclude---St. Paul in our epistle reading today urges us to give generously to God for the glory of God. May we be obedient to what the Holy Apostle says!

And what is the best method to do that---God's method: proportionate giving. Giving to God in proportion as He gives to us. And what is the best way to figure that? Using the 10% that God specifically asks. And if we just don't think we can do that, then it is good to use a lower percentage number---because God is patient with us and will still bless us if our giving is at a lower percentage. And then you can always increase the percentage later as a way to thank God for providing for you.

So in the weeks ahead as we go through this annual process of deciding what we can give to God-----think about it, pray about it, act on it. And as St. Paul wrote in verse 11---"You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God."