Dessert First!
Deuteronomy 8:10-18; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15
October 15, 2006

An aging and very wealthy man told his wife that he wanted to take all his money with him to the grave and that his wealth was not to be given to family or charity or church. "Please honor me with this final request." And so he died.

Against the counsel of friends, family, and even her minister, the wife dutifully fulfilled her husband's wish to be buried with his money. At the grave site as the casket was lowered in to the ground there was a hushed silence. Finally the minister asked the wife, "How could you bury him with all that money?"

"It was easy," she said, "I wrote him a check."[1]

What wisdom the wife displayed, honoring her husband's request while not falling prey to foolishness. Money is a very prickly subject. We are protective of our financial affairs. Jesus knew the temptation of money. That is why money is the second most frequently addressed topic in the Bible, second only to the subject of the Kingdom of God. Thirteen of Jesus' eighteen major parables focus on money.

Money has been considered the most precious commodity of modern society, although it may now be in a heated race with time for that distinction. The value we place on money has a way of luring us to seek security in money. That's why the wealthy man's request to take all his money to the grave sounds so ridiculous. It would be like flushing it down the toilet, an utterly absurd idea. It would be like giving away everything you have. By no means would that be the wise and prudent thing to do, but it may be the faithful thing to do. If money has become the source of our security, we are living with a false sense of security. True security can only be found in the nonmaterial aspects of life: the riches of relationships, service, and faith. When we are grounded in the real sources of security, we are set free from our bondage to money. We are able to become the cheerful or hilarious givers Paul applauds.

There are three ways of looking at giving.[2] Some of us see giving as an option—we give after everything else is done—out of our surplus. We consider God a divine waiter whom we tip out of gratitude for a good meal. We make our mortgage payment, buy our food, clothes, cars – necessities we call them. Then we purchase our toys – boats, golf games, vacations, jewelry, antiques, and more. After all, a person has to have a hobby and relax, don't they? Then we make our investments and retirement plans.

After all, we have to plan for the future, don't we? Then, and only then, we look at what is left and we give to God. Some months and years are better than others—and our giving reflects that. When giving is an option then God comes out last on the agenda.

For most American Christians giving is an option. Most of us average about two percent of our income when giving to church and charity. Mark and I reduced our weekly giving to the church nearly 13 years ago when Jeff was born and we went from two incomes down to one. In recent years we have been incrementally increasing our giving to get back to our goal of tithing 10%. Last week as we completed our pledge card for 2007, we were disappointed to see that even at $110 a week, we are still only giving close to 7% of our income to the church. One of our personal goals is to have a full-time second income again soon so that we have more money to give away!

An article in the *New York Times* last week caught my attention. An organization called New Tithing Group is based out of San Francisco. Its founder, Claude Rosenberg, tries to persuade Americans to base their charitable giving on their assets as well as their income, given that many now have substantial assets. Using tax returns, it has ranked the 50 states according to the percentage of charitable giving by households with more than $200,000 in annual income, counting cash, stocks, bonds, and the like. Utah ranked first because the Mormon Church asks its members to donate ten percent of their income. The others in the top five were Oklahoma, Nebraska, Minnesota and Georgia. The striking thing about the list is that it is dominated by a group of states that run from the Rockies through the Plains and down into the Southeast. These are the places that don't have many beaches, famous cultural institutions, or other obvious way to attract residents. The states with beaches and museums, with the larger share of the nation's economic pie, generally failed to crack the top 20 in the ranking. California ranks 21st, New York 23rd, Texas 34th, and Florida 41st. No single list, of course, can capture how generous a state's givers are, but it does show that the middle of America has developed a culture of philanthropy that the coasts and the Southwest, for all their wealth, do not yet have.[3]

Perhaps the difference is because those in the lower ranking states see giving as an option. Option giving operates from a strange combination of guilt and ownership. Option givers give more when confronted by scenes of poverty, malnutrition and starvation, or great need. Option givers tend to give because it makes them feel good—not because their giving is doing any real long-term good. The main motive is to make themselves feel good.

Others see giving as an obligation. They've heard that God instituted the tithe thousands of years ago and that God still expects us to give back ten percent of our income, and so we do it. Sometimes we divide it between the church, United Way, and other charities, but for the most part we give it to God through the church.

There is nothing wrong with being an obligation giver. There are times in our lives when we need to do what we ought to do because we ought to do it. Obedience is not a bad virtue. Churches are kept soluble because of obligation givers who give regularly and faithfully. Week in and week out they bring their tithes and offerings without having to be cajoled or coerced. Guilt-laden pleas do not work with them because they have no guilt—they are giving what they believe God has told them to do, and they do it well.

The challenge for obligation givers is to enjoy their giving. The joy of giving and the joy of faith can be lost if all we are doing is meeting our obligations. Paul wants us to give with hilarious hearts. Nothing will rob us of the joy of giving faster than to be merely doing our duty.

In addition to option and obligation givers, there are those who see giving as an opportunity to express their love and devotion to their Lord. They value giving as an opportunity to share the resources with which God has blessed them. Opportunity givers not only give regularly and faithfully as the obligation givers, they also give cheerfully and joyfully. They enjoy supporting the Lord's work through the church. They give out of a sense of blessing—they have received far more than they could ever repay. They place giving at the top of their monthly pay list, not at the bottom. They not only write their check regularly and faithfully, they do so with gusto and love. Their goal is not to see how little they can give and still meet the minimum of God. Instead they want to see how much they can give because the more they give the happier they are.

Our nation has recently witnessed a stunning example of putting faith first in the Amish community that has extended love and forgiveness to the family of the man who murdered five of their children and seriously wounded five others. They attended his funeral after the funerals for their own children. They have spoken words of grace and forgiveness. Out of their lives of simplicity, self-sufficiency, nonviolence, and faith - lives which have often been ridiculed by mainstream Americans, faith which has been persecuted by Catholics and Protestants – out of the depth of faith they seized an opportunity to offer forgiveness to one who had inflicted the worst of horrors upon their community. They did not seek revenge, returning violence for violence. They will not sue, seeking financial compensation for losses that are priceless. Instead, out of hearts of genuine faith, they have offered a gift of grace.

Opportunity givers operate from deep motives of gratitude and love. Faith has first place in their lives. They recognize what the Lord has done for them and their giving is an extension of their love. Opportunity givers are what make the difference between a great and an average church. They see the vision of what God wants to do upon this earth and they are willing to partner with God to see it done. They realize that they have been richly blessed by God and can never pay God back enough for what God has done. Opportunity givers know that God will bless them for their giving—but that is not their primary motivation. They give because they love, because their lives belong to God.

Opportunity givers give first to God. It seems ridiculous given all the expenses of our North American lifestyles. It's like eating dessert first – not the nutritional thing to do; it will spoil your dinner; it will prevent you from eating the balanced diet you should be eating. Giving first to God may mean there isn't enough left to buy all the luxury items we see advertised or take the exotic vacations that our neighbors do. But putting faith first will bring us the ultimate meaning for which we yearn in life, the fulfillment that material things can never provide.

A beggar in India sat by the road daily, waiting to receive alms from those passing by. He heard the maharaja was coming the next day with his royal retinue. The beggar decided to arrive early—and soon heard the music and acclamation as the royal retinue approached. The beggar edged further out onto the road so as to be seen. An official at the head of the procession approached the beggar. The beggar held up his empty sack. The official said, "Wait," and went back to the enclosure in which the maharajah sat.

Soon he returned. "His highness asks that you give him a gift of what you have."

The beggar was stunned. Slowly he pawed through his meager supply of corn and handed over five pieces. The official thanked him and returned to the royal one with the corn. He then came back to the beggar, took the small pouch of corn, and put it into his hand. "His royal highness returns your gift."

That night after the whole affair the beggar went angrily to his poor space beneath a bridge. He muttered curses about the maharajah. He took out his sack of corn and began to prepare his supper, such as it was.

As he opened the sack, he noticed a glint. He pawed through the corn and drew it out—a nugget of gold. Pawing more frantically now he drew out another nugget of gold and another and another until he had five nuggets of gold. He pawed frantically looking for more but no—only five pieces of gold.

Then the beggar slapped his forehead. "What a fool I am. He gave me one piece of gold for each piece of corn I gave him. Only five. I would be a rich man if I had given him all that I have."

Cheerful, hilarious givers see giving as an opportunity to grow their faith. They delight in sharing the blessings received from God and giving them back to God. How do we view our giving – as an option, giving what is leftover; as an obligation, because it is my duty; or as an opportunity to participate in the creative activity of God on earth and to experience the joy of living?

[1] Michael J. Christensen, *The Living Pulpit,* July-September 2006, p. 6.
[2] Robert U. Ferguson, Jr., "Discovering the Joy of Faithfulness," *Preaching Great Texts*, Volume III, pp. 61=62.
[3] David Leonhardt, "Philanthropy from the Heart of America," *The New York Times*, October 11, 2006.

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