

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 16
September 20, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
How can we give?

—1 Corinthians 16:1-4

Has this thought ever entered your imagination? You hear about someone winning the lotto and all of a sudden 100 million dollars is dropped into their laps (ok so maybe only 50 million after taxes, or even less if they decide to take the lump sum). Or the thought, “What if I invested only a few thousand dollars in that company 10 years ago, I’d be a millionaire.” Or you hear about the salary of a major league athlete and you contemplate what you would do if you had that much money. And certainly we know that life does not consist of earthly possessions. We know it’s wrong to covet and that a greedy heart robs us of true contentment, so when the thought of having that kind of wealth dropped into our lap crosses our mind we try to dream of how we might use that wealth to God’s glory. We might think, “If I had that kind of money, I’d be able to give so generously that our fellowship hall could be reduced to rubble and we could break ground on a new Ministry Center!” Or we think, “If I received such a windfall from the Lord, I could give this percentage to support this cause, or this ministry, or this organization, and do a lot of good.” Imagine the possibilities...

Let’s all snap back to reality now. Today as we talk about the hows of giving, it’s not hypothetical. The Lord does not ask us to ponder or fantasize about what we would give if a load of cash were dropped into our laps. He only asks us to give what we’ve already currently received from his gracious hand. We know the why of giving: God gave his own Son to be our Savior. We want to give in response to that. But how can we give?

To answer that question, we turn to 1 Corinthians 16. ***“Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. ² On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. ³ Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴ If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.”***

When Paul talks about the hows of giving, he was answering a question the Corinthians had apparently asked him. The Corinthians heard about the church in Jerusalem, which was in need due to a severe famine. So the question came up, “How can we help?” How can we give? It’s a question I’ve heard many a grateful Christian ask, “How can we help?”

Well here’s how: ***“On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money...”*** How can we give? It starts by establishing a regular habit. Paul suggested the first day of each week for the Corinthians as a regular day to set aside a sum of money. Maybe you track your finances on a weekly basis or a monthly basis. If so, that gives you an opportunity to decide and regularly set aside, to designate a particular amount. I’m going to pause right there... I just said, maybe you track your finances on a weekly or monthly basis. But here’s one more maybe... maybe you don’t really track your finances all that closely. If that’s the case, that could be a major reason we struggle with the how of giving. We may know the why very well. We may have the desire to give as our natural response to the gospel, but if we don’t have a way to assess and track and designate our resources, we’re really going to struggle with the how. “I want to give but how do I do it?”

In order to be a steward, a caretaker, of the financial gifts that God gives us, we need to have a good grasp of what those gifts amount to. How much money do I have coming in each week or month? How much am I spending each month on different things? I’m not going to go all Dave Ramsey on you, but I encourage you to sign up for the next Financial Peace Course the stewardship committee offers. Also, as we talk about the hows of giving, having some sort of budget is a key tool that enables us to give as we so desire. A budget can be as simple or as detailed as you want it. I use a spreadsheet that does the math for me. If you are into online banking, chances are your banking app has a simple tool that automatically designates different purchases into preset categories that you can adjust. If not there are online tools that do the same thing. Whatever you use, the important thing is that you can see how much the Lord has blessed you with. Then you can see how those funds are being used.

And the numbers don’t lie. They are a good indication of what is important to us. Looking at those numbers can be eye-opening. Maybe by looking at those numbers we see, “I have some considerable needs and expenses, but the Lord meets those needs.” Other times it opens our eyes to how we’ve been setting our priorities lately. “Have I been spending carelessly or selfishly? Have I eagerly poured money into my own desires so that I have little or nothing to give as a thank offering to the Lord?”

Tracking money coming in and out is not the only purpose of a budget though. It's not just meant to highlight your spending habits. It is a helpful tool to plan your spending. Here's what the Lord has given me, right now. How do I spend? How do I prioritize? How do I give? ***"Each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income..."*** I want to give, but how do I do it? Put in the budget, set it aside, plan it. I know how much my mortgage is. I can guess how much diapers are going to cost. And granted there are other unplanned expenses that come up, but we don't want our offerings to be unplanned. We don't want to give the Lord left overs, but first fruits. We also want to give in keeping with our income. In the Old Testament Law, God commanded his people to give a tithe, that is ten percent. In the New Testament a percentage isn't mandated, but we are guided to give in proportion to our income. And circumstances change. Maybe you're not able to give as much as you did ten years ago because circumstances have changed. Or maybe you're able to give more because circumstances have changed. Remember, the Lord doesn't ask us to give according to what we don't have but only according to what he has graciously given us.

How. How we speak, how we act, how we live, every aspect of our lives as Christians is a reflection of our relationship to Jesus. It's no different with our finances. As we contemplate the hows of giving we can ask ourselves, "Does the management of our finances reflect a heart that is thankful and appreciative of Jesus? Does our spending reflect a faithful management of all that which God has given us?" Also as we contemplate the hows of giving, I want to recognize this: Maybe I'm preaching to the choir. Some of you have this concept dialed in and you can teach me a thing or two about budgeting and the mechanics of giving. If that's the case, I want to emphasize this: As we contemplate the hows of giving, let's be aware of sinful pride. We do not stand before God as forgiven because of our acts of giving. On the other hand, maybe this how-to sermon uncovers some guilt or shame—"I haven't been doing this..." Then let me emphasize this: The answer to our sins and failures in this area is not a balanced budget. It's Jesus Christ. You do not stand forgiven before God because you give God a gift. You are forgiven because God gave you a gift. For you, God spared no expense. He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all. You don't have the status of child of God because you give a portion of your income. You have that status because Jesus gave not only a portion, but his entire life as an offering and sacrifice acceptable to God. It's *that* offering which makes who you are—a dearly loved child of God and an heir of eternal life.

Remember that daydream we started the sermon with? What if the Lord dropped such a wealth right into my lap! It's not a dream or fantasy. It's not hypothetical. ***"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."*** That's what the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians. Our lesson for today came right at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians. They wanted to give and they wanted to know how. So Paul told them, ***"On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made."*** But he wanted to make sure the that how of giving did not become disconnected from the why. As you contemplate the question, "How can I be rich toward God," remember how God has been rich toward you. ***"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."***

Amen