Own the Vision - Part 3

****Excelling in The Grace of Giving

**(2 Corinthians 8:2-7)**

Welcome to Christ’s Community Church. Today we’re continuing in part three of our series “Own the Vision” and I want to talk to you about the grace of giving. This is so important, because if you consider the strength of the church, the effectiveness of the church, and the practicality of the church in the world today it really comes down to a body of believers excelling in the grace of giving. You see, as we consider our values, those things that are our strength, and that empower our vision to make a difference in the world; one of the driving forces behind the church is its generosity. In fact, the apostle Paul quoted these words of Jesus in Acts chapter 20 saying,

“It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

However, understanding the grace of giving and owning that for yourself is not something that comes easily to everyone. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons why I feel so strongly about this is that I wasn’t very generous at all. My generosity today is purely a work of grace, it’s what God has done in my heart, because I grew up as the oldest of seven children believing that there simply wasn’t enough to go around. But when I came to faith in Christ, he quickly began working in me in that area along with many others and now for many years I have wholly embraced the grace of giving.

Giving is a value that has been instilled in the church from the very beginning. In Acts chapter 2 we see the church helping others; in Acts chapter 4 we see believers selling their possessions and giving to those who are in need; in Acts chapter 6 we find the church distributing food to widows and orphans; in Acts chapter 15 the leadership of the Jerusalem church determined that a primary focus of church would be outreach to the poor. And so, from its conception the church has been committed to giving and today the church is making a difference around the world because it is made up of millions and millions of givers.

In fact, I would be bold enough to suggest that if all the good things done in the name of Jesus were to suddenly stop, the world would be a much darker place. In America, thousands of families would become homeless; hundreds of thousands would have no food to eat; millions of children wouldn’t have decent clothes to wear or know the joy of receiving gifts for Christmas. If all the good being done in the name of Jesus, by Christ-centered nonprofits, Christian ministries, and parachurch church organizations were to suddenly stop, it would be only weeks before millions of people throughout the world starve to death.

You could say, that the church is literally holding the world together; we’re making a difference in the world, because for the most part Christians are committed to giving. And it’s all because we recognize that we’re contributors and that our food is to do the work and the will of God. It’s that which satisfies us, because as followers of Jesus we recognize that we are the church and we exist to bring the light and the love of Jesus into this world. And so today, I want to dig in to the topic of excelling in the grace of giving, because anyone who wants their life to make a difference must be willing to put in more than they take out from their community, from their church, and from their relationships.

With that in mind, we’re going to look at an example in the New Testament where the apostle Paul was trying to inspire the church in Corinth to live up to their promise to give to the Jerusalem church which was in great need. Unfortunately, they had made great promises, but had failed to keep them, and now an entire year had passed, and so Paul appealed to them, appealing to the highest spiritual level possible, telling them that giving was an act of grace. He appealed to them as the Bible says in Romans chapter 15 saying,

“Indeed they owe it to them. For if they had shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings” (Romans 15:27).

He also appealed to their Christian nature as having “received this fruit…” (Romans 15:28). And so, it’s a fruit of their Christian faith, but even more so, it’s the working of the grace of God in their hearts.

As we get started, turn in your Bibles to second Corinthians chapter 8, and as you’re finding your place let me give you a little bit of context. The apostle has been telling the Corinthians about the Macedonians, and he’s actually bragging about them because of their generosity; that even though they were extremely poor, even though they were living in deep poverty they gave a very generous gift. And so, he says this about the Macedonian church in verse two,

“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. So, we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us — see that you also excel in this grace of giving” (2 Corinthians 8:2-7).

The difficult situation that the Macedonians found themselves in didn’t keep them from giving. In fact, they gave cheerfully, joyfully, and generously; and when you’ve experienced the grace of God in your life you won’t allow difficult circumstances to be an excuse for not giving. And so, number one, we want to excel in this grace of giving…

## 1. In Spite of Our Circumstances

For that matter, the Macedonians didn’t need to be reminded as the Corinthian church did, but they begged, urgently pleading to be included in this service to the saints and their giving was purely voluntary and spontaneous. This morning, I’d like to ask you to consider whether you’re that kind of Christian, whether you’re that generous, to give in spite of your circumstances. How about you?

Mark tells us about one time when Jesus considered the giving of the people. He actually sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched as the people put their money into the temple treasury. The Bible tells us in Mark chapter 12 that he watched as,

“Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything — all she had to live on" (Mark 12:41-44).

And so, Jesus was observing the giving of the people, not really commending or condemning, but simply observing. And I wonder, what he would say about your giving? Do you give more or less? Are you generous? You see, you can have a lot of money, you can give what most people would consider to be a lot of money, but for you it’s not, and it’s really not that generous. But then on the other hand, like this poor widow, you could have almost nothing, you could give what most people would consider not much at all, but for you it’s a lot and Jesus says, “That makes you more generous.”

What would you consider yourself to be, generous or not so generous? Maybe not in the context of how much you give, but in proportion, how much you keep for yourself.

For example, maybe you’re a tither, and you give the standard baseline ten percent, you give special offerings, and you pray about other situations, because you’re strategic and purposeful in your giving. As the Bible tells us in second Corinthians, chapter 9, that we should plan ahead, prepare, and save up,

“…So that you can be generous on every occasion and…your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God” (2 Cor 9:11).

On the other hand, maybe you might be one who finds it very difficult to be generous and to give like I was for years. As a matter of fact, right now you may be getting uncomfortable, you’re sensitive to the subject, and maybe even a little angry that we’re talking about this in church. But that could be an indication of your generosity, and so, I want you to consider, how much you keep, and how much do you let go to be a blessing to others.

I want to encourage you, if you’re a follower of Jesus, to give radically, generously, excessively, and even extravagantly. Because as those who love as God has loved, and who give as God has given, as stewards of the gracious gift of God, we should be people who plan to do what’s generous. As the Bible tells us in Isaiah chapter 32, verse eight,

“The noble man makes noble plans and by noble deeds he stands” (Isaiah 32:8).

And so, generous people plan to do what generous people do, they plan how they can be even more generous. Today, in a culture that bombards us with the desire to consume, we are contributors, we give, and we’re generous, because that’s just who we are. And then number two, we want to excel in the grace of giving because we’re…

## 2. Worshiping Our Unchanging God

You see, we were created to worship, and as we give we’re worshiping. This is a foundational, fundamental teaching about God and he tells us this himself. In Malachi chapter 3, God tells us,

"I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them” (Malachi 3:6).

This whole book, Malachi, is a series of arguments where God speaking through the prophet says do this, but they don’t want to. God says this is right and they say, “No, it’s wrong.” And honestly, I think that we’ve all been there at one time or another, where we’re arguing with God, questioning God, and even accusing God.

You know, it’s like, “God, I don’t like this part of the Bible. I don’t think you should’ve done that.” Or “I don’t think you have the right to tell me to do that or stop doing that.” And maybe you’ve even said, “God, you need to rethink your position. You need to evolve and catch up with where the world is today.” But God says, “I the Lord do not change. I’m not moving.”

And so, God is unchanging, God doesn’t change, and therefore we must change. We can’t refuse to change. We can’t demand that God change, because God has no sin. And therefore, he makes no mistakes, he has nothing to learn, he has no way to mature, and there’s nothing about God that should change, but everything in us must change. There’s a powerful analogy in Scripture of a potter and clay in Jeremiah chapter 18, the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah:

"Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand…” (Jeremiah 18:1-6).

God says, “I’m the potter and you’re the clay. I shape you. You don’t shape me. I make you into what I want and you don’t make me into what you want.” And so, as Christians we don’t have some sort of spiritual Play-Doh type of theology, because our God doesn’t change. Hebrews chapter 13 tells us,

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

And that’s a good thing for us, that’s a good thing for God’s children, but because he’s unchanging that means we must always be changing. And so, here in Malachi, God moves from the theoretical to the practical, he says, “Let’s get specific, let’s look at the ways you’ve sinned against me. Let’s see what you need to change. Let’s take a look at your budget.” And so, he calls them out, they have a moment with the Lord, sitting down and taking a look at their finances to see how it’s going. And he does this publicly. And so, number three, as we learn to excel in the grace of giving we’re going to talk about returning to the Lord.

## 3. Returning to The Lord

I remember, not long after I became a follower of Jesus, that I heard a pastor teach very convincingly about the power and the privilege of the tithe. And I’ll never forget him teaching what the tithe is; that it’s simply returning the first 10 percent, giving the firstfruits of what God has blessed us with back to him through the local church. I remember being so shocked by the concept and thinking “No way!” But he was so convincing as he taught how the tithe came before the law, how even Jesus speaking of the tithe in Matthew chapter 23 said,

“These are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Mathew 23:23, NASU).

And even in Hebrews, how the tithe was mentioned as a standard or starting point, but then what really struck home was that he said the Bible actually teaches when you don’t do this you’re robbing from God. In Malachi chapter 3, God says in verse seven,

“Return to me, and I’ll return to you…" "But you ask, 'How are we to return?' "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings” says the Lord (Malachi 3:7-8).

And this is what guilty people do. God makes the charge against them and they ask a question. And sometimes, when you and I have questions, it’s that we’re guilty and unrepentant, not that we really want to learn something. And so, God tells them, “In tithes and offerings” literally meaning a tenth, plus the offerings, the contributions above and beyond for other things.

Now, it’s easy to overlook passages of Scripture like this, it’s tempting to avoid certain verses because I don’t want the backlash, the conflict, or controversy that comes when you start approaching someone’s idol. But God doesn’t have that kind of fear and he actually talks a lot about money, wealth, stewardship, investments, and possessions. He speaks of these things in both the Old and New Testament about 800 times. If you were to examine the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you’d discover that 25% of all Jesus teachings were actually on money, wealth, possessions, and stewardship. As a matter of fact, most of the parables are somehow related to how we spend, save, or invest our money, because as Jesus says in Matthew chapter 6, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” giving us an indicator of our first love (vs. 21).

And so, here’s what’s going on in Malachi chapter 3. God calls the people to return to him because there robbing God. That’s what the Bible says, so they have this disagreement, because they don’t feel like they’re robbing God, but God feels like he’s being ripped off, he’s second-place, because he knows their hearts.

And so, God says, “You’re robbing me and because of that you’re cursed. The reason why things are so hard is because you’re stealing from me.” In other words, we can think of it in terms of a business partnership and your partner is stealing from you. The big question is, “Would you invest more in the company?” Now I’d assume that most of you wouldn’t until your partner came clean and became more ethical and trustworthy.

In the same way, God is saying, “I’ve invested in you, but you’re not responding correctly. And so, until you change your mind I won’t invest anymore because I’m not changing mine.” And so, the solution he says is, “Return to me and I’ll return to you” (Malachi 3:7). And in verse 10, he completes the thought saying, “Here’s what you need to do. Here’s the solution.”

“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it” (Malachi 3:10).

And God echoes the days of Noah when the floodgates of heaven opened and the rain came down in judgment; but here he’s talking about the floodgates of heaven opening and the rain of God’s blessing coming down. The Bible says it this way in James chapter 1,

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who doesn’t change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17).

Reminding us, number one that God doesn’t change, but the number two, that ultimately every blessing comes down from God to his people. All of this foreshadowing the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, who came down from heaven, but here in Malachi chapter 3, many centuries before the Son of God came into the world, there was a promise given to the people of God, “Return to me, give and I’ll bless you.”

And so, to excel in the grace of giving, we’re going to return to God, it’s going to be cheerful, it’s going to be generous, it’s going to be sacrificial, it’s going to be regular, and it’s going to be proportional. As we read earlier in second Corinthians, the apostle encourages the church,

“See that you also excel in this grace of giving” (2 Corinthians 8:7).

I’ll never forget when I began to tithe because it was then that I started to understand that 90% with God’s blessing goes further than 100% without. And from that time on I’ve never not tithed, and the tithe has always been the basis and the foundation for generous giving. And so, I want to encourage you to return, to give your tithes and offerings in your local church, because it’s here where you’ll have your greatest return, and where you’ll make the greatest spiritual impact in the lives of people you know and love. As you “Own the Vision” of Christ’s Church, get plugged in, get connected, use your gifts, give generously and then give beyond that. Excel in this grace of giving!

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