

Giving is Worship:

The Sacrifice of Thanksgiving (Psalm 50:1-15; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on January 7, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ With the start of every new year, there's always talk about new resolutions. Which typically have to do with our habits. We're usually trying to break bad habits and form healthier ones. So we make resolutions to cut carbs or sweets out of our diet. To workout more often. To watch less Netflix and to read more books, especially the Bible.
 - **But as we've learned through years of annual failure, building new habits is really really hard.** It doesn't take long for our resolutions to fall by the wayside. One NYTimes article I read this week says that by January 8th (tomorrow!) 25 percent of resolutions have failed, and by year's end fewer than 10 percent have been kept.¹

- ❖ **The contributor (a psychology professor) says his studies show that the reason we fail to break bad habits and form new ones is because we rely too much on rational analysis and sheer willpower to control our impulses.** In other words, we *know* this habit is so much better and healthier than what we've been doing, and we try to *force* ourselves to make a change. But the change never seems to last.
 - Why? According to this secular psychologist, it's because we don't know how self-control works. **We tend to ignore the evolutionary tools we've inherited called our social emotions.** He specifically identifies the emotions of gratitude and compassion. He writes, "*For years I've been studying the effects of these emotions on decision-making and behavior, and I've found that unlike reason and willpower, they naturally incline us to be patient and persevere.*"
 - He goes on to argue that by cultivating the emotions of gratitude and compassion, we're better equipped to delay gratification and maintain new resolutions even when they're hard and offer little short-term gain.

- ❖ Now he's coming from the perspective of evolutionary science, and so from a Christian worldview we'd say that he's missing a huge piece of the puzzle. But we should at least acknowledge that this psychology professor does recognize a profound, biblical truth.
 - **If you want to make a change, to keep a resolution, to pick up a new habit or discipline – just convincing yourself with good reasons and exerting your willpower to make a change might produce a flash in the pan but it won't last.** There's no lasting change until emotions (or if you prefer *virtues*) like gratitude and compassion are engaged. Only then will deliberate habits become second nature to us.

- ❖ Now I found that to be a timely article because as a staff we're reading this book by James K. A. Smith called *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. **And Smith's basic premise is that we're not just thinking beings but feeling beings.** You can't just think your way into spiritual maturity. Just learning the Bible, memorizing verses, studying theology are not enough for one's spiritual formation. **You aren't what you think.** Just thinking biblically won't do. **You are what you love.** It's about learning to love biblically. To love and desire the things we're told to love and desire in Scripture. That's the path to spiritual maturity.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/29/opinion/sunday/the-only-way-to-keep-your-resolutions.html>

- ❖ So I think Smith would agree with the psychologist that if you want to form a new habit, then you've got to engage the heart (and emotions like gratitude and compassion). But Smith would also argue that there's a back-and-forth between your heart and your habits.
 - **To solidify a habit, you've got to engage the heart. But to engage the heart, you've got to intentionally pick up a habit.** Smith argues that there's a spiritual power – an affective power – in our habits, in our spiritual practices and disciplines. If you keep doing something deliberately (a habit), it effects your desires.

- ❖ **For example, when I gave up the habit of drinking sodas and juices or sweetening my coffee and just stuck with pure water and black coffee, it was hard at first.** My mind said it was good for me, but my desires craved something sweeter. But as I kept up the healthy habit, one day I opened a can of Coke and it was way too sweet for me. I couldn't finish it.
 - **My habits had a formative effect on my tastes, on my desires.** It changed what I loved. Now that's just an example on the level of appetite, but as we'll see, this reciprocity between our hearts and habits also occurs on the level of spirituality.

- ❖ It's very relevant today as we've introduced a new practice in our worship service. **Today is the first time we've included an offertory in our order of service.** In the past we've asked members to drop their gifts in an offering box in the back as they leave the service or at their own leisure. And we're thankful to God for always moving our members to give generously even though we don't collect an offering like most churches.

- ❖ **But one challenge we face has been the difficulty of expressing our act of giving as an act of worship.** When it's not included as an integral element in the church's corporate worship, then it's tempting to simply treat giving as a pragmatic duty of church members. It's seen as a necessary duty for meeting the financial needs of the church.
 - And now that we've recently introduced an online giving option and allowed for members to set up automatic bank drafts, **the act of giving is even further separated from corporate worship and for some it's no longer a conscious act.** It's automatically withdrawn on the first of the month along with the mortgage.

- ❖ Now don't get me wrong. I don't want anyone to feel bad for utilizing online or automated means of giving. I realize that's the trend, especially the younger you go. Most college students don't even own a checkbook these days. **But to counteract this trend, we'd like to introduce an offertory as a way to remind us all that giving is not merely a duty. It's worship.** It's a way to praise God and make him look great.
 - But once you introduce a new practice like an offertory, it's important to explain our intent and affirm the need for a right heart. **We're hoping to develop in all our members a healthy habit of corporate and conscientious giving, so making sure our motives are pure and biblical is so vital.** So that's my aim this morning.
 - We're going to start by looking at Psalm 50 and three things a humble heart acknowledges about giving. And then we'll see what a healthy habit of giving practices and consider four practices out of 1 Corinthians 16.

A Humble Heart of Giving

- ❖ So let's begin by looking at Psalm 50:1-15, and again here I want to affirm the right heart behind our acts of giving, especially public ones. **For those of us who have been Christians long enough, we know how easy it is for a healthy spiritual habit to turn into a mindless, heartless routine.** Where we just go through the motions. The Bible clearly identifies that as hypocrisy and warns us against it plenty of times.
 - Psalm 50 is one of those warnings. It begins with the imagery of a trial. God begins by summoning the heavens and the earth to gather forth and be his witnesses as he judges his covenant people. In vv7-15 in particular, he rebukes them for a lack of true gratitude when they offer their sacrifices. **In v8, God makes it clear that he's not rebuking them for a lack of sacrifices.** *"Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me."*

- ❖ So they were dutifully giving to the LORD on a continual basis. **They weren't being rebuked for failing to give but for failing to have the right heart when they give.** They were mistaken to think the sacrifices they gave to God were essential and indispensable to him. And therefore, they assumed that giving gave them a degree of leverage on God.
 - So what God does is to remind us of what we often fail to understand about giving. There are three things to acknowledge if you want a right heart in giving.

- ❖ **First, acknowledge that you have nothing to give God that doesn't already belong to him.** When you give God an offering, what you're doing is giving back what is rightfully his. Notice how the LORD stresses the word "*mine*" three times in our text.
 - Let me read vv9-11, *"I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. ¹⁰For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine."*
 - Everything belongs to the LORD. Look at the end of v12, *"for the world and its fullness are mine."* **So no matter what you offer to the LORD, you're just giving back what already belongs to him that he entrusted to you.**

- ❖ **I'm sure we all have that friend or family member that's so hard to shop for.** You didn't know what to get them for Christmas because they already have everything. They've already got the latest gadgets and games and accessories and all the clothes and shoes they need. So what do you get someone who already has everything?
 - **What do you give them something from the heart.** You make something for them. You write a card. Whatever you end up giving likely has little monetary value, but it's full of sentimental heart value.

- ❖ So think about God. **What do you give to a God who literally has everything?** What do you offer a God who owns everything in your possession? You give him something from the heart. What matters to him is not the monetary value but the sentimental. Nothing you give him is, in itself, going to impress him. But the heart behind the gift can certainly please him.

- ❖ My daughter did this really cute thing this past Christmas. For weeks in advance, she went around the house finding random items to gift wrap and give to us. So on Christmas day I'm opening up a bunch of little gifts, and it's like my spare keychain, my old flashlight, etc. It's all my stuff. It all belongs to me. But the love inherent in this whole process of choosing and wrapping these little gifts so that she could give Mommy and Daddy something herself on Christmas day – that means the world to me.
 - I think that's how God views your offering. The money was already his. **He's thankful for the gift but it's you and your heart that he loves.** When you give to God like a child giving to her father what already belongs to him, he's pleased and greatly honored. So that's the first acknowledgment in a right heart of giving.

- ❖ **Second, we need to acknowledge that since God has no needs, your gifts are not to his benefit.** The mistake that the Israelites made was to adopt very pagan views of God. They thought God somehow fed on these sacrifices of bulls and goats. It sounds ridiculous to us, but that's what was assumed to occur in pagan sacrifices.
 - But God makes it clear that he has no hunger or need for sacrifices. Look at v12, *"¹²If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. ¹³Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?"* God doesn't need food. He doesn't need sacrifices. They're of no benefit to him. **Because he's a God who has no needs. He's perfectly content within himself. He's completely self-sufficient.**

- ❖ Listen to what the Apostle Paul has to say as he introduced the LORD to the Athenians. In their pantheon of gods, they called him the Unknown God. So Paul explains in Acts 17:24-25, *"²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything."*
 - **So unlike false gods, the LORD doesn't need us to serve him.** He doesn't need anything, Paul says. Yes, we use our hands to worship him. But we do it by lifting them high in praise. Not to supply God's needs, as if he had any. We're the ones with needs, and God is the one filling them up with *"life and breath and everything"*.

- ❖ **The point is that God's not trying to use you or manipulate you for selfish gain. And frankly it's because he doesn't need you.** I know that sound harsh. But the truth is you'll only be truly loved by a God who has no needs.
 - The false gods of this world are only benevolent towards you because they need something from you. They're missing something so they're trying to satisfy it through you. They're using you for their own benefit.

- ❖ But because the LORD has no needs, because our offerings are not to his benefit, he's able to freely love you with true benevolence. **It's only to a God like that can we give an offering with our whole heart knowing that we're not being used.** We're not being manipulated. We're being loved. Now all of this leads to the third thing you need to acknowledge.

- ❖ **Third, if God has no needs and if all things already belong to him, then your act of giving does not put him in your debt.** You don't give to God with the expectation that he must return the favor in kind. No matter how much you give him, he still owes you nothing.
 - You give God your money. It was already his. You give him your service using your gifts and talents. Where do you think you got them? You give God your obedience. You've merely done your duty (cf. Lk. 17:10).
 - **The fact of the matter is God owes us nothing but we owe him everything.** And for our failure to give him our everything, our whole hearts, we have a debt. A debt we cannot pay. A debt that demands an eternal punishment.

- ❖ **But the good news is that One who owes you nothing – who could never be put in your debt – has paid the debt of your sin by sending his Son to die on a cross in your place.** This One who is not obligated to give you anything, has graciously given you the assurance of his love and salvation by raising his Son from the dead.
 - Now this Mighty One calls you to turn from your sins and receive his grace by calling on him for deliverance. Look what he says in vv14-15, *“¹⁴Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, ¹⁵and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”*

- ❖ **It appears that the humble prayer for help from a desperate worshipper smells sweeter to God than the aroma of a thousand sacrificed bulls.** Nothing pleases and glorifies him more than a cry of faith coming from those who recognize their need of deliverance and turn to him alone. **And for those who have been delivered – who know his salvation – they're to return to God regularly to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving as a way to express that same cry of help and deliverance.**

- ❖ That's what we're hoping to accomplish with this new offertory. Every time we take up an offering, we want to glorify God with hearts grateful for his salvation. **We want to demonstrate that we love and trust the LORD more than we do money. We want our giving to be a true act of worship.**
 - And at the same time, we believe our giving can be an act of spiritual formation. While it doesn't do God any good, giving does us good. There's a spiritual good that we receive when we develop the habit of giving to God. **In time, it engages our hearts and shapes us to become more generous and compassionate people.**

A Healthy Habit of Giving

- ❖ That's the reason why we want to build a healthy habit together of giving gifts to God in the course of our worship services. For God's glory and our good. Now what I'd like to do with the remainder of our time is to look at 1 Corinthians 16 and consider four marks of a healthy habit of giving.

- ❖ Turn to 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. Paul is writing to the church and instructing them on how to give for relief efforts that were directed at the saints in Jerusalem. *“¹Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ²On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.”*
 - **Some have wondered if perhaps the putting something aside and storing it up was to be handled privately in one’s own home.** If so, then this passage has nothing to do with a public offering in a worship service. But I doubt that to be the case, otherwise it makes no sense of Paul’s statement at the end. He wants the putting aside and storing up to be conducted in such a way so as when he arrives, he doesn’t have to make another appeal and go around collecting from everyone’s private stash.
 - **So the putting aside and storing up was likely centralized in the church.** There must have been some sort of proto-church treasury. Now given that assumption, there are four practices in this public act of giving to consider.

- ❖ First, notice how their giving was to be **periodic**. Paul says that this putting aside should take place on the first day of every week. **Every Sunday when the early Christians gathered as the church, this putting aside was to occur.** Paul doesn’t want their giving to be sporadic. He hopes to avoid a situation where they only give when he shows up with an appeal. So taking from this biblical example, the majority of churches throughout history have taken up on offering in their corporate worship every Sunday.

- ❖ Second, we see that this public giving was to be **planned**. Paul says “*each of you*” so he’s expecting every believer to receive this instruction and to thoughtfully participate by putting something aside every week. I should stress here that there was no expectation for non-Christians to give and we feel the same. These are instructions for believers.
 - **We believe an offertory is going to help our Christian giving to be both periodic and planned.** So even if you take advantage of online giving options I’d still encourage you to plan out and prepare something to put aside each Sunday when the offertory occurs.

- ❖ Here’s just a suggestion (not a command). Let’s say the bulk of your giving happens electronically. That’s fine. But what if you deducted \$52 from your planned annual offering and prepared yourself to give a \$1 each week as a token of your normal offering. Or if you like, times that by 5, 10, or 20. It’s not about the amount. **It’s about actively participating.**
 - In our previous church, we used to write a monthly check and drop it in the offering plate once a month. But eventually my wife and I felt convicted to prepare 52 checks in the beginning of the year, so that we could actually participate in the corporate act of giving every Sunday. And it was good for our souls.

- ❖ **If your habits have formative power to engage and shape your heart, then building up a habit of weekly giving is going to do you spiritual good.** Just as we believe it'll do you more spiritual good to participate in worship singing (vs. just standing there) or to engage as you listen to a sermon (vs. just doodling) or to take part in Lord's Supper (vs. just observing) – we believe it'll do you spiritual good to have something prepared each week to give as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the LORD.
 - Even if your habit is to get on your phone during the offertory to give electronically, that's fine. I'd say that's a good example of a modern-day to apply this ancient biblical practice found in 1 Corinthians.

- ❖ Third, it says our giving ought to be **proportionate**. Paul says, "*each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper*". The point is that we give according to our means. **And if God graciously causes us to prosper and our financial means increase, then we increase what we put aside proportionately.** That's what Paul means.
 - That's why when we think about giving to God, it's not helpful to think strictly in terms of a tithe, of ten percent of your income. I think that's a good starting point for believers. But if we focus too much on ten percent, then we start thinking that ten percent of my income belongs to God (which I'm willing to part with) but the rest is mine for me to use as I see fit.
 - But God is saying, "No it's all mine." **All your finances belongs to him. All of it should be used in a way that honors and glorifies him.** And a portion of it (whether it be ten percent or more as we may prosper), we give to God and to the work he's doing through local churches, particularly the one you've joined as a member.

- ❖ Now there's a fourth mark of a healthy habit of giving and that's where the giving is **plentiful**. Notice how Paul assumes that they'll put aside and store up enough, so that when he arrives there will be plenty available for the relief of the saints.
 - Later on in his second letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 8:3, Paul encourages them to be plentiful in their giving by pointing to the churches in Macedonia. They gave according to their means, but Paul says they've even given "*beyond their means, of their own accord*." They themselves were under severe affliction and extreme poverty, and yet they overflowed in a wealth of generosity. He says they were begging earnestly for the chance to give more (2 Cor. 8:4).

- ❖ **To call their practice of giving a 'habit' doesn't do it justice. It's more like a passion.** And where did that come from? Where did they get that passion? **Paul goes on to explain that this kind of passionate giving is an expression of genuine Christian love.**
 - Love rooted in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. He writes in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*"

- ❖ **I hope you realize by now that this is not about the money.** I know that's the biggest concern with offertories. That the church might give the impression that it's all about the money. About collecting more of *your* money.
 - ▶ But I want to be clear that, here at HCC, it's about the gospel. **It's about our worshipful response to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the gospel.** Who by his poverty has made us eternally rich in his heavenly inheritance. So we want to build up – in all believers who worship with us – a healthy habit of giving that's periodic, planned, proportionate, and plentiful. All as a way to glorify the Son of God and to become more like him.