

Freedom Means Choosing to Remain Faithful
Exodus 35:4-5, 36:2-5 (AFBC 8/12/18)

Last week, we talked about “continuing to grow”—highlighting our need to get serious with God--seeking, as Moses did, to experience God at a deeper level—to grow in our relationship with Him.

This week, we deal with something similar—a closely related topic. In fact, we could call this... “*digging deeper.*” So you’ve gotta’ know what it’s about! If that sounds like giving—you’re right!

Giving is one of the major challenges put before us in the book of Exodus. And although some evidently feel that giving is optional, meeting this challenge is vital to our relationship with God and to our witness for Jesus Christ. Giving really is this important to Christian discipleship.

So when we talk about giving, we’re once again focusing on God’s truth for our lives—another aspect of His Truth that sets us free. You and I will never be truly free until we learn to be faithful and generous in our giving. So today, we’re going to talk about it.

Now, I want to be clear. Giving was never meant to be associated with meeting a church budget. Obviously, doing so is important to our church’s life and ministry; but meeting the church budget is simply a by-product of our obedience to God in relation to money.

Stewardship is about my need and yours to give something back to God who has given everything to us. When we’re doing this, we don’t have to be concerned about the church’s budget--there will always be plenty. With that, let’s turn to our Scripture for today:

Exodus 35:4-5: Moses said to the whole Israelite community, “This is what the LORD has commanded: ⁵ From what you have, take an offering for the LORD. Everyone who is willing is to bring to the LORD an offering....

Exodus 36:2-5: Then Moses summoned Bezalel and Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the LORD had given ability and who was willing to come and do the work. ³ They received from Moses all the offerings the Israelites had brought to carry out the work of constructing the sanctuary. And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. ⁴ So all the skilled workers who were doing all the work on the sanctuary left what they were doing

⁵ and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the LORD commanded to be done."

Whether we turn to the Old Testament or New, it's clear that God intends for His people to give. Here in Exodus, they did. They brought more than was needed to build and furnish the Tabernacle. The leaders finally had to say, "That's enough."

I'm sure the members of our Stewardship Committee would be pleased if this was our giving pattern here at First Baptist—if they had to say to me, "Jim, tell the people not to give any more for now. We have more than we need to do the Lord's work!"

But isn't it encouraging to know that there was a time when God's people were so thankful for all the Lord had done in their lives... that they gave beyond what was needed—more than what was required to build and furnish their house of worship?!?

God challenged them to give through His prophet Moses. The people were assigned the task of building the Tabernacle.

It required a lot to do this—gifts over and above their normal giving. Most of them didn't have much. Still, they gave in such abundance, there was more than enough to finish the job.

If you read the book of Exodus closely, you'll find this theme running throughout. It's a remarkable story of generosity. These people were willing to give. They had generous hearts. They gave what was needed to accomplish what God wanted them to do.

Friends, we can all learn from those who've made this journey of faith before us. We find some guidelines for giving in these verses—principles that guided those ancient Israelites and can also help us as we seek to follow God's plan for our lives today.

I. The first principle can be stated simply: **EVERYONE GIVING.** God's instruction to His people is that every believer is to financially support the Lord's work. In **Exodus 34:20**, God says, **"No one is to appear before me empty-handed."**

Worship always involves bringing an offering, a worthy offering... a gift that reflects the love and gratitude we have in our hearts for God. We do not fool God with our words. Nor do we fool God by just showing up occasionally at His house—at church.

We say: "I love you, Lord." God says: "That's good, my child, now what did you bring in your hand?"

"I really am grateful for your blessings in my life." "As well you should be. So show me what's in your hand."

"Hey, Lord, didn't you notice I'm in church today?" "Of course, I see you; but I don't see anything in your hand. Maybe you didn't get the message. No one is to come empty-handed! According to God's Book, empty-handed worship really is... EMPTY!"

This is stated clearly in Scripture. Our church's goal is for everyone to give. We exist to make disciples for Jesus Christ, and Jesus talked more about giving than any other subject—so we probably should emphasize this more than we do.

And I say this fully realizing that researchers tell us that many people are turned off when they hear talk of money at church. But truth be told, those same people are turned off by many things Jesus said—and things He stood for.

A few months back, I began a sermon series that I called "Foundations" by preaching through the Ten Commandments. Many people are turned off by them, including some who claim they want them posted in public places. I'm sure their tune would change if that meant they actually had to live by them.

It's interesting how the symbol of the Ten Commandments is often more important to folks than their substance. They're more useful to some as kind of political ploy than as an actual guide for living.

In the same way, there are more people who speak highly of stewardship than those who actually practice it. Being the church of Jesus Christ means that everyone understands their responsibility to give.

Now, we're to give in proportion to how God has blessed us—even when we don't really feel all that prosperous. You know, something I've noticed even during my few years of ministry: it really seems to take a lot to make us feel prosperous these days—much more so than when I started out as a young pastor--which is a big part of our problem today!

This is becoming a much greater challenge to Christian discipleship today. I wonder how we're doing? Let's take a look.

During the past year, 267 families and individuals gave their tithes and offerings to the Lord through this church—this likely represents about 500 people. Janice Fouts, our Church Financial Secretary, shared this number of contributors with me after checking our church records.

I asked her to do this because I thought some of you might find it interesting to hear how some folks are exercising their God-given freedom to "remain faithful" in their giving. Others of you wish I wouldn't do this: but don't worry, I'm not calling any names!

So here goes: 82 of these 267 annual contributions in 2017 amounted to less than a thousand dollars. This would include some young people and perhaps others who are on very limited fixed incomes. Some of these gifts are surely both generous and faithful, reflecting the circumstances of those who gave them.

This, of course, could be true at any of the giving levels I'll mention. The Bible teaches proportional giving—to whom much is given, much is required. I do hope, however, that the Lord will use this information to inspire others to be more faithful and generous.

We began with smaller amounts. Let's consider the larger gifts next. We have 13 First Baptist families and individuals who averaged giving over \$1,000 per month. In fact, their average annual contribution was nearly \$17,000. We all hope and pray that these will also choose to remain faithful.

The next group I'll highlight are those who gave between one and \$3,000. 76 contributors fell into this category. Someone who serves on our collection committee shared this with me.

She said, "Jim, every time I count the offerings, there will be checks from people who are retired; and their check will be for an odd amount of dollars, sometimes even down to the cents. And I just know the amount on those checks represents exactly 10% of their Social Security check. They're giving their tithe to the Lord."

That's faithfulness. I don't know about you, but this inspires me! And in most cases, friends, these are folks who have tithed their whole lives—so far, anyway--and they're not about to stop now. They know God has been faithful, and they will be faithful too!

Giving between \$3,000 and \$6,000 a year, we have 58 stewards. Together, they contributed about \$250,000 last year. And giving between six and \$12,000 annually are 38 families who together gave almost \$320,000. These two groups, representing 96 giving units, gave well over 50% of our church's budget last year.

To all our faithful and generous folks, "Thank you." But, listen, this thank you comes from me, not God. You won't find God thanking anyone in the Bible—nor any of us. Not for now.

What the Bible says instead is that we are only returning a portion of what God has first given us; so God doesn't owe any of us a "thank you."

As your Pastor, though, I'm saying thank you for your faithfulness to the cause of Christ and His Kingdom. May the Lord continue to bless you as you remain faithful to Him.

Now, think about this: "Do you see the potential if every member of this congregation gave—if we all... tithed?" We wouldn't ever have to ask for extra money for missions or benevolence, new parks or painting or anything else. There would always be plenty.

EVERYONE GIVING is the goal—but it's not just *my* goal or the *church's* goal. This is *God's goal* for my life and your life and every life that follows Christ. God makes this clear. We are all to give faithfully in proportion to how we've been blessed.

II. Now there are a couple of other guidelines we find here. I'll mention them briefly, beginning with this: **EVERYONE'S BEST.** Only our best is a worthy gift to God.

In the Old Testament, the best is called the "first fruits." **Exodus 34:26** says, "**The first of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God.**"

Maybe you heard about the boy who took an apple and ate it all the way down to the core. He then decided, as boys will, to play a trick on his little sister. He took that apple, put it in a box, wrapped it in pretty paper, and gave it to her as a gift.

The little girl was so excited to receive this present from her big brother, so she quickly tore off the wrappings. But as she opened the package and saw her "gift," her whole expression changed.

She lifted it slowly, carefully by the stem...and said, "Ooooo—it's an ate apple."

How often does the Lord take a look at what we give to Him and have a similar reaction? All he sees is something akin to an "ate apple"--not our "first fruits"--not our best... but only what's left over after we've gotten our fill—if anything is left over.

It happens to God all the time, friends. I hope you never do that to God. Ask those who are generous and faithful givers and you'll find a very different approach from that.

They make stewardship a priority in their lives. They aren't giving to the Lord what's left over. They're giving their best.

And by the way, while we're talking stewardship—money management, in other words--these folks aren't saving for retirement by just using leftovers. They aren't funding their children's education that way. That's not how they're paying their mortgage or any other bills.

Instead, they're taking care of all these things while managing to live well within their means. They understand that when you adopt that "leftover mentality" with anything, it won't turn out well. Without good discipline, without setting priorities, there won't be anything leftover. There may not even be... enough!

Faithful stewards set aside the first fruits for the Lord. They commit to Him the first portion of their incomes, and they do not allow impulsive purchases to take away from the Lord's work.

This, friends, is as basic to Christian discipleship as anything can be. At the root of discipleship... is discipline. It isn't optional. It's a requirement of faithful Christian living. We choose, we decide, we make a commitment... to give God our best.

III. Then, finally, a third truth that's spelled out clearly here in Exodus... is that we give **IN RESPONSE TO GOD'S GRACE.**

That's really the only proper motivation for our giving-- a generous and grateful response to the goodness and graciousness of God. And it is the only motive, friends, that sets us free to give.

We may give out of a sense of guilt or duty or fear, or even as a means of bargaining with God for still more blessings; but none of

these are worthy motives for giving. Legalisms, in whatever form they take, only enslave us. They cannot set us free.

We give to God best when we know and understand that all that we are and all that we have are God's gifts to us—gifts undeserved --gifts of God's grace. Thus the motive for our giving is gratitude—a deep, life-changing gratitude, for all we have.

It's then that giving ceases to be a have-to thing, and it becomes something we want to do. Listen to what **Exodus 35:21** says--
"...everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him, came and brought an offering to the Lord."

There was desire in their giving, and there was joy--and this only happens as a response to grace. The Israelites didn't forget they were slaves, but set free now... by the mercy of God.

To be free, we have to embrace God's Truth—the Truth that says that this is also who we are. We're free now, but that's not always been the case.

We're former slaves too--slaves to sin and death--but set free now—liberated--by the amazing grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is why we give—and it's why we count it a joy to do so.

Listen: if this experience of God's Grace is not real for you, if it doesn't stir your heart, then you won't give like the Lord wants you to—because your heart won't be in it.

But if you know that when you were without hope, God reached down through His Son, Christ Jesus, and touched your soul with forgiveness and eternal life, if this is your faith, then you'll give—you'll be set free to give—to give with a willing and joyful heart!

God had to teach His people this lesson long ago—and, friends, some of us are still trying to learn it. I promise you, there is nothing in our lives more likely to enslave us today than money.

But here's the up side: there is nothing more liberating than allowing God's grace to set us free... to be good and faithful stewards—finally, by the grace of God, to be set free to give.

It all begins with grace—with that saving, life-changing relationship with God that we know we don't deserve—but God offers it to us anyway. Are you ready to receive His gift today?