

EXODUS 16 THE HEART OF GIVING

Let's talk today, about giving.

I offer these words today, not with scolding in my heart, but with thanksgiving in my heart.

The last several months have been tough for our church financially. As leaders, we are thankful for how God has provided for our needs, even while we continue to seek God's wisdom for how to use his resources.

Whenever we must focus on these issues as leaders, this question is raised: "Should we have a sermon or sermons on giving?"

I tend to resist that, for two reasons:

* First, it is hard for me as a pastor, who is supported by the people, to talk to the people who support him, about their support!

* Second, while it is hard for me, it seems far too easy for some pastors. I tend to react against pastors who talk too much about giving, by talking less about giving than I should.

This has always been my approach: when God's Word, which roots every word I utter from this pulpit, directs us to the issue of giving, I will preach about giving.

I believe Exodus 16, which is part of our Old Testament reading for this week, directs us to the issue of giving.

It may not seem so. Exodus 16 is focused on God's giving to his people, not God's people giving to God. But how we receive what God gives, will be a strong indicator of how we give back to him.

When we reach Exodus 16, it is several weeks after God's deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt. The first burst of excitement is gone. The first store of supplies is dwindling. The people are grumbling.

But as Moses says, the people are not grumbling against him. They are grumbling against God. When we talk about giving, we are talking about more than giving to Christ Presbyterian Church. Yes, if you are a member of CPC, you have made a commitment to support the worship and work of the church, to the best of your ability.

Yet giving is first about your heart toward God, and the gifts he gives.

This morning, I offer only a slice of all that could be said about giving. Because it is only a slice, I will be thinking especially of our financial giving, although this subject is much bigger than that.

But this slice is so important. What is the heart of giving all about?

This heart is about two things: a heart of delight in God's gifts, and a heart of desire for God's glory.

Giving is about A HEART OF DELIGHT - IN GOD'S GIFTS.

The people grumble, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this assembly to death."

They are not delighting in God's gifts. Why not? WHAT HINDERS THIS? Could it be what hinders you? Could it be what hinders me?

Here is one hindrance: The gap between what I want, and what I have.

Notice this: no one is starving. As we read in chapter 15, the Lord has provided water for them, when they thought they were going to run out. As well, students of this book remind us that the Israelites have livestock with them that they could kill and eat, if they want.

Yet they grumble.

Their situation is very different than our situation. They are in a desert. We are in a land of plenty, with endless supplies and countless choices.

Yet the heart issue is the same. Here is what I want, and here is what I have. There is a gap, and that gap settles into my heart, and I grumble.

Here is another hindrance: The gap between what I want, and what I could have.

What do they grumble about? They long for the days of Egypt, when they had big pots of meat and all sorts of food.

This is a rather convenient lapse of memory, isn't it? They groaned in Egypt, because they were slaves, driven to exhaustion by cruel masters.

What a description of our hearts! We say, "The grass is always greener on the other side." We are describing the human heart habit of longing after what could be, rather than resting in what is.

Our culture urges us to this. You need a bigger-screen TV. You need a better lawn mower. You need a more beautiful wife. We think often of what could be, we see a gap between what is and what

could be, and we grumble.

I will not dwell long here, but I will ask you to ask yourself about your heart. How big is the gap for you? How big is that gap between what you want, and what you have, or could have? Then how does the gap, grip your heart and move you to grumble?

So WHAT HELPS THIS? What helps create a heart that delights in God's gifts?

It starts with this: contentment.

The Lord says, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day."

We call this bread "manna." People have written volumes on exactly what this was, and exactly how it appeared.

But this is the most important detail to notice: God said the people would gather "enough." God would make sure they had enough.

Maybe not every bit they could ever want. Maybe not every bit they could ever imagine having. But enough.

We live in a culture where we are told we never have enough. But a delight in God's gifts begins with a heart that says, "I have enough."

This is the heart expressed by the writer of Proverbs 30:

"Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.

"Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?...'"

A heart of contentment. How do we develop this? I offer a few ideas.

* A prayerful acceptance of God's "enough." This is a daily habit of giving thanks to God for how he has provided, rather than a daily habit of looking at what God could provide. Am I looking at the gifts, or the gap?

* A thoughtful response to the consumerism of the culture. This is a moment-by-moment awareness that I am being told to be discontent, for someone wants me to believe my life does consist in the abundance of my possessions. Am I thoughtfully rejecting the pressures of my culture?

* An ongoing commitment to simplicity. This is the lifelong understanding that if I must spend all my time managing my possessions, then my possessions are really managing me. If my life can be as simple as possible in this complex culture, will I not have more time and resources to give?

A heart of contentment. Yet "contentment" is too small a word to capture this. God does not just want his people to be content with his gifts. He wants them to delight in those gifts.

I will not grumble, because I see what God has given, and I delight in it!

We have so much! We are the richest culture, by far, in all of human history! Do you see this? Do you appreciate this? Or have you become so accustomed to what you have, that you assume you have a right to it? And does this assumption, keep you from delighting in what you have?

When we were in Tanzania two summers ago, we were generally healthy. But in the city of Musoma, the dust from the roads irritated our noses and eyes. I spent several days blowing my nose a lot, then I finally asked our friend Kitula if there was anywhere I could get some saline solution.

He went to a "pharmacist" in town, who occupied a space about as big as the third bathroom in your home. I received a little bottle with some water and something mixed in it, but it was not saline solution as we know it.

So I truly appreciated it when Marcia, our other new friend (who lives in Florida), realized she had brought some saline solution, and let me use it.

That's a little thing. But a heart of delight is built upon such an appreciation of the little things, because no gift from God is really little.

I have clean, running water! I have a car that runs! I have boxes that show and tell me everything that is going on in the world! I can breathe the air! I can get whatever I want to eat, whenever I want it! I have so many comforts and conveniences that I never notice!

I must delight in these things! Not so I can grumble that I don't have more of them, but so that I will know how well I am blessed!

Draw a horizontal line on a piece of paper, or just in your mind. On the left end of the line, write the word "delight". On the right end of the line, write the word "grumbling." Maybe put the word "content" in the middle.

Where is your heart? What habits of your heart and life, drive you toward one direction or the other?

But what does this have to do with giving? It has everything to do with giving. As you grumble, you give not at all, or with a grudging heart. As you are content and even delight in what God has given, you are free to give.

The heart of giving, is a heart of delight in God's gifts.

The heart of giving, is a HEART OF DESIRE FOR GOD'S GLORY.

This desire for God's glory, starts with A DESIRE FOR RELATIONSHIP.

How do we think of God? Sometimes we see God, like we see retailers.

How do you deal with a retailer? You give them money, and they give you something in return. He gives me what I want, and I give him what he wants, and we are both happy.

It is a business transaction. There is nothing personal about it. I do not need to know everything about the retailer, and the retailer does not need to know everything about me. We operate on a "business" level, and that is fine.

But what does the Lord say to the Israelites?

"At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God."

Why has the Lord done what he has done? Why has he brought these people out of Egypt? Why is he going to send this food to them?

He wants them to know him. He wants them to know that he is the Lord, the Almighty, the great "I am," the King of all the earth.

He wants the people to relate to him, in a covenant relationship. He wants them to know that he is God of all, and they are his people.

This is not just a transaction. God is not the great "retailer" in the sky. This is a personal God, personally loving and blessing the people he has chosen to be his own.

Do you know the love of God in Jesus Christ? Do you love the One, who sent his Son to redeem you from your sins?

If the Lord is just the great retailer in the sky, you will either not give, or you will give only what is required. But if you love him, your desire will be to give to him.

We talk about giving, and we ask, "What must I do?" What does God want from me? What is the tax? What need I give, to get what I want?

That is a transactional mentality. But God wants his people to have a relational mentality. This is not about God getting stuff out from us, or us getting stuff from God. This is about the God who has loved us eternally in Jesus, and who calls us to show our love to him, as we give.

I think of my children. Somehow, through the years, probably through the good influence of my wife, they have taken to giving each other gifts on birthdays. The gifts do not just come from mom and dad. They come from sibling to sibling.

But what kind of gifts are they? My children are not rich. They do not have much to give. But they give.

They give a package of candy. They give something of theirs, that the other sibling has seen and liked. They give something they found while they were standing in line at the grocery store.

Truly, it is the thought that counts. It is the love that counts. They give out of love, to each other.

A desire for relationship. That is how we give. God has loved us in Jesus. We love him. So we give from the delightful gifts we have received.

Yet our desire is not just a desire for relationship. Our desire is also A DESIRE FOR GLORY.

In Exodus 16, Moses and Aaron declare to the people, "In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord."

What is the glory of the Lord? It is God's "heaviness." It is God's "weightiness." Not in pounds, but in goodness and greatness.

It is the idea that God is so great, and God is so good, that we put so much "weight" on who he is, that nothing is more important to us, than that every nation should worship and serve him.

That is what everything is all about! God has made us, and God has redeemed us in Jesus, so that we may eternally live for him!

A desire for glory.

We are "wanters." We want. That's okay. It's how God made us.

But as broken people in a broken world, we sometimes want what is wrong. As well, we sometimes want what is good, but not what is the best.

This is the best: "May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth."

"You will see the glory of the Lord." We have seen the glory of the Lord! We have seen that he has provided redemption for sinners like us. So we want more than anything, to see him glorified, honored, and worshipped.

We know Jesus. We love Jesus. We want him to be known. We want him to be loved. So we give.

Have you ever pondered the difference between the good, the better, and the best? There is lots of good. There is lots of better.

But what is best? Jesus is best! The proclamation of Jesus is best! We are about the business of the kingdom, for the glory of God. If we are his in Jesus, we desire his glory, more than any other thing. So we give.

During my teen years, a caring man and his wife led the little youth group in our church. Sometimes, when we were displaying lousy attitudes, Bob would say, "It's time for a heart check. It's time for an attitude check."

We have considered just a slice of this subject. But no matter how big a slice we take, the issue is the same. God calls us to check our hearts and our attitudes. He says to Moses in verse 4, "...I will test them..."

Are you content with God's "enough"?

Are you delighting in what he has given you?

Do you have a passion for him, and for his glory?

As you answer those questions, so you will give.