

November 24

It's thanksgiving- we give thanks for the blessings we receive as a nation, as a church, and as individuals – thanksgiving for our families and for *blessings, spiritual and material*.

What grandma always said is true:

Money can't buy happiness.

But we'd like to learn that truth for ourselves – *give me the money and let me see if it makes me happy.*

Many of us think that material improvements in quality of life – like a new car - are going to make us feel better, if not happy.

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By way of contrast, in our lesson, St. Paul says true happiness is found in what you give ... not in what you receive. *“God loves a cheerful giver,”*.

Are you looking for God to provide you *“with every blessing in abundance”*? Then Paul says don't hold tight to a miserly attitude — instead, *“share abundantly in every good work”*.

The apostle is laying out for us a paradox.

In any true paradox, you are faced with a statement that seems to be inherently contradictory, *but turns out to be true*.

In our lesson Paul says that personal enrichment comes from great generosity, and that *blessings in abundance come from sharing abundantly* with others.

His point is that

you receive the most by *giving the most*.

A paradoxical statement.

How does generous giving actually lead to contentment – even happiness?

In our lesson, Paul writes: *‘The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.’*

The connection he makes between sowing generously and reaping abundantly makes logical sense, but the *link between giving and happiness is a bit harder to establish*. It is not immediately clear how good stewardship can make us happier.

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Patrick Johnson found a link one day when he wrote a check for an air-conditioner. Johnson is a vice president at Bancorp South Investment Services, so he is doing pretty well for himself, financially, but he has *discovered that his greatest joy comes from giving*, and it's a joy that borders on hilarity.

As he was writing a *check to help purchase a central air-conditioning unit for a local homeless shelter*, he started praying and thinking about the immense joy that he was feeling as he gave to this worthy cause.

He started thinking about the joy that would be *felt by the homeless men as they slept in an air-conditioned room in the sweltering Mississippi heat*. He then started thinking

about the joy these men would feel when they gave their hearts to Jesus Christ and felt God's love, maybe for the very first time.

And what welled up in Patrick Johnson, as he prayed, was laughter.

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He was actually so overwhelmed with joy that he laughed as he wrote the check.

Spontaneous laughter born out of the joy that would be experienced by the homeless men, and by Johnson himself, due to one gift.

Does this story surprise you?

It shouldn't.

When Paul writes that "*God loves a cheerful giver*" (v. 7), what he says in the original Greek is that God loves a giver who is *hilaros* — the root of our English word "hilarious."

What God loves is a *hilarious* giver, a person who gives with spontaneous joy and laughter.

So, when was the last time that you actually laughed as you sat down to write your check to the church?

Maybe you're not giving at the level that will tip you over into hilarity.

Or perhaps you're not focusing enough on the joy that God is feeling, and that other people are feeling, *as a result of your generosity.*

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Paul teaches us to see ourselves as recipients of God's grace. *In our relationship with the Lord, first he gives -- and then we receive.* Paul explains that salvation is by grace. God saves us, *not because we deserve it, or have earned it*, but because God is gracious - good and merciful.

He also teaches that we receive the gift of salvation by faith -- *by believing God's promise and trusting that it is true for me.*

So the basis of our knowledge of God is that we have gotten a gift -- a precious gift that is more than we deserve -- life and salvation.

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What then should our attitude be?

One of gratitude, of thanksgiving to God --
-- *joyful thanksgiving - rejoice -- and be generous, as God has been generous to you.*

A generous, thankful style of life.

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Not only are we saved by grace, but God continues to bestow gifts and blessings upon us, as he explains in our lesson.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. v. 8

"Abound in every good work" -- when Paul writes about using our talents and abilities to serve other, he begins the discussion by describing those same talents and abilities as gifts from God. As we offer them in service, we are thanking God.

You've been blessed, so that you can share the blessing with others.

*Now he who supplies the seed to the sower and
bread for food will also supply and
enlarge your harvest of righteousness. v. 10*

As we invest ourselves in the Lord's service -- *as we generously live our faith* -- the Lord will bless us.

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Here Paul is not talking just about material blessings, but you will grow spiritually. Your faith grows and strengthens as you offer your talents in service, and...

*You will be made rich in every way so that
you can be generous on every occasion...*

“Rich in every way so you can be generous...”

The blessings you receive, Paul suggests, should lead to generosity --- a *thankful and generous* life style.

A willingness to give of yourself to others. And then...

*Your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. The service you perform is not only
supplying needs -- not just helping others -- but is overflowing in many expressions
of thanks to God.*

Your giving of yourself -- your generosity -- will lead others to thank God because of what you have done.

Giving and serving is not only good for us, it is good for others *because it leads others to be thankful to God and glorify the Lord.*

For Paul, the highest goal of all is that praise and thanksgiving be given to God from whom all blessing flow.

*Because of the service by which you have proved yourself -- proved you are faithful --
people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel
of Christ, and for
your generosity in sharing with them... v.13*

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That's the key to Paul's understanding of the Christian life:

Our *attitude* is shaped by the *realization that we are recipients of God's grace*. The Lord freely gives us salvation and all the blessings of this life. We are surrounded by God's grace and goodness.

Realizing this, our attitude should be joy and gratitude – *rejoice and give thanks everyday* – in hymns and prayers, and in our thankful, generous living. *We have freely received from God, so we can generously give of ourselves.*

And as we do, our blessings multiply, and we inspire others to give thanks to the Lord.

And that's the goal -- that praise and thanksgiving will be offered by more and more people.

So be thankful and generous, because God has been generous to you.

Now thank we all our God

Who wondrous things hath done

Hath blessed us with countless gifts of love

And still is ours today