

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: In God We Trust**

(Generosity and Stewardship)

#### **Generous Living and Giving**

(Selected passages)

Study #2

#### **Introduction: Learning to fly...**

In his excellent book, Run with the Horses, Eugene Peterson described the time what he watched an adult bird teach its young to fly.

Three young swallows had perched up on a dead branch that stretched out over a lake. The adult birds' teaching style was tough.

Peterson writes, *"The adult swallow got alongside the chicks and started shoving them out toward the end of the branch. The grown-up bird kept pushing.*

*Finally, the chick on the end fell off. But before it hit the water its wings started working and the fledgling was flying. The same thing happened to the second one.*

*"The third chick, though, was not to be bullied. At the last possible moment, his grip on the branch loosened just enough that he swung downward. Hanging upside down, he re-tightened his grip.*

*"The adult swallow was unsentimental. He pecked at the chick's talons until it was more painful to hang on than to risk trying to fly.*

*"The grip released, the bird dropped, the wings pumped, and off the chick flew.*

*The mature swallow knew what the chick did not - that it would fly - that there was no danger in making it do what it was perfectly designed to do.*

*"Birds have feet and birds can walk - but badly. Birds have talons and can grasp a branch. But flying is their natural action, and not until they fly are they living at their best."*

Peterson goes on to speak of God's design for His people.

*"Living generously is what we do best. Having received an incredible gift from God, we are designed to be givers of all that we have - both to glorify our Lord, and to benefit people.*

*"Some of us desperately try to hold on to branches of security. We want to live for ourselves. But, when we do that, we are pathetic. We don't think we can live generously - generous of our time, energy, money - because we have never been willing to let go of the branch.*

*"But, the sooner we start, the better, for we are going to have to give up our lives in the end anyway. The longer we wait to grow in the grace of generosity, the less time we have for that soaring life."*

My goal today is to put before each of us here a vision for generosity. The application of what I'll have to say will extend to being generous with time and energy and gifts and talents.

But I'll be focusing mostly on generosity with material possessions and with money.<sup>1</sup>

*Valuable values...*

A few years ago, our church went through a process of identifying a few biblical values that we hold especially dear.

After a lot of discussion and prayer involving lots of people in the church, the Elders listed six Core Values that we envision will increasingly mark our church.

These are:

- Masks-off relating - dealing with each other transparently and genuinely.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bible speaks about money a lot. Not because money, *per se*, is important to God, but because He knows that money is important to us.

- Depending on God Through Prayer - trusting Him to do in and through us what only He can do when we ask Him.
- Building Faith at Home - establishing homes where Jesus reigns.
- Bringing Our Friends to Jesus - joyfully sharing the Good News of Jesus' salvation with others.
- Living and Loving the Bible - clear enough.

Our church has totally arrived in NONE of these areas, and to a great extent, they are all aspirational.

But we do believe that God has put us in this place at this time to honor Jesus by living out these distinctives before a world in desperate need of Jesus.

So far, I've only listed five of the six. Here's number six: Living and Giving Generously.

We aspire to follow Jesus into generosity. We believe that to the extent that we are a generous church, to that extent we will be a healthy church.

We believe God wants to do powerful things through our generosity.

Generosity toward those in need communicate love. Generosity can push forward God's work on earth. God can transform investments of money, material goods, time, and energy into blessings of other people that will pay eternal dividends – to us and to others.

Yes, as we saw last Sunday, it is true that ***“the love of money”*** will shipwreck souls<sup>2</sup> and the lure of money can misshape values<sup>3</sup> and the lust for money will prompt some people to stop following Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See 1 Timothy 6:9-10. Note that it is not money that is the root of all evils, but the love of money that is a root of all sorts of evil. We have often seen prominent people - in business, in church - shipwrecked because of a love of money.

<sup>3</sup> See James 2:1-4. James points out what we all too often see. Riches can make us insensitive to the needs of those who are less well off, materially.

<sup>4</sup> See Jesus' parable of the Sower and the Soils, Matthew 13. Embracing the lie that riches and the things that riches buy brings fulfillment will erode what could have been great spiritual vitality and impact for Christ.

But, along with the dangers that accompany money, there are glorious uses to which we can put our money, and we'll spend our time together today exploring some of them.

First, having financial resources allows us the privilege of supporting people we love.<sup>5</sup>

### **Bless People by Our Financial Resources**

#### **Meeting Family Obligations (2 Thess. 3:10-12)**

*Immediate family (1 Thessalonians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:8)*

If before today you didn't know that God commends you for meeting family obligations, providing for the needs of your home, and working hard for a living, you can be assured of that now.

It is a good and God-honoring thing when you give yourself to an honest day's work for an honest day's pay to provide for the people who mean the most to you in the world.

Paul told the Thessalonian Christians, and he would tell us, ***[1 Thessalonians 4:11]...to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you.***<sup>6</sup>

God commends you - and I applaud you - who work hard to provide for your families. Way to go!

Another special group of people who are to be honored by our use of money are aging parents.

*[Aging] Parents (Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:2)*

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<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word for “honor” meant to treat someone with respect and esteem. Sometimes, the word meant simply that you were wealthy. Thus, to “honor” someone meant that you would show them respect by giving them money.

<sup>6</sup> And this - ***[2 Thessalonians 3:10] For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.***

The fifth of the Ten Commandments reads, **[Exodus 20:12]**  
***Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be prolonged on the land which the Lord your God gives you.***

Significantly, Jesus repeated this command (Mark 7), and Paul told the Christians in Ephesus, **[Ephesians 6:2] HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER**

Honoring parents is a “spanning the ages” kind of command, just as applicable to New Testament Christians as it was to Old Testament Jews.

And the thought behind “honoring” is more than simply paying respect. Embedded in the command to honor parents is the idea of providing for them materially when they can no longer provide for themselves.<sup>7</sup>

And that day comes.<sup>8</sup>

They’ll need help as their mental faculties diminish. They may need your financial counsel. They may need your financial assistance.

Kathy and I both experienced a measure of this with the aging and the passing of our parents. I have watched many others go through the same. And for those of you who are not yet there with your parents, the day comes.

It is loving, it is biblical, it is a great example to a watching world, and it is a great blessing to you and to your parents to be there for them when they are in need.

In addition to the support of the family we love, both Jesus<sup>9</sup> and Paul<sup>10</sup> tell us to financially support our government.

<sup>7</sup> It can be tempting to withhold support of parents in favor of seemingly “higher” purposes - even charitable giving. Jesus rebuked the Jews of His day for doing exactly this. (See Mark 7:9-13)

<sup>8</sup> Parents will often need assistance navigating an increasingly complex health care system, dealing with their own physical limitations, and adjusting to new technologies.

<sup>9</sup> In Luke 20:19-26, the religious rulers, who were out to get Jesus, asked Him, **“Should we pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”** They thought they had Jesus trapped. If

## **In Support of Government (Luke 20; Romans 13)**

Governments have the God-ordained right to require citizens to pay taxes. Government is a great gift of God. Is it governing powers that keep anarchy at bay. (Anarchy - “no authority” - is the worst of all possible social arrangements.)

Remember that the New Testament writers who told the early Christians to pay their taxes were telling them to pay taxes to Rome.

We can be certain that some of that tax money went for the support of things the Christians would have opposed on political, spiritual, ethical, and moral grounds.

And no matter where you land on the political spectrum, you probably won’t argue that our government - or any other you could name - spends every dollar the way you would choose to spend it.

But the Bible speaks plainly here. We are all to pay our taxes out of obedience to God.

The Bible also makes it clear that we are to support certain groups of people who are in particular need.

It often mentions widows.

### **Honoring Special People**

*Those in special need (widows, orphans, the poor)*

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He answered “Yes,” He would be pitting Himself against the OT restriction against paying tribute to foreign nations. Had He said “No,” He would have been opposing the Roman government, making Him guilty of treason. Instead of giving a direct answer, Jesus asked to be shown a denarius (Hmmm...He didn’t have one), showed His audience the picture of Caesar on the coin, and said, *“If you are going to use his money, then you had better pay him his due in taxes.”* Jesus thus legitimized the paying of taxes to governments - even to the corrupt, pagan Roman emperors. Jesus was not a revolutionary seeking the overthrow of political Rome by the non-payment of taxes.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 13:1-2, 6-7.

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he directed that Christians who have widows in their family should care for them. (1 Timothy 5:4) That is every family's welcomed obligation.

Then, the church should help support those who have no family at all. He calls them "**widows indeed**." (1 Timothy 5:3) And churches should give aid to "**widows indeed**" who are a part of that church. Over the years, our church has frequently had the privilege of being involved in this wonderful ministry.

As well, Paul singles out orphans as a special class deserving special attention (See James, chapter 1).

There are lots of ways to provide for children who are in desperate, orphaned situations.

Helping them is a loving, Christ-honoring thing to do, whether that is by providing foster care, adopting a child who is in the care of the state, supporting orphaned children in other countries, or being a big brother or a big sister to a needy child.

And I will happily mention again, as I did last Sunday, our Food Pantry and Benevolence Fund as wonderful ways in which we can, together, serve people in need.

#### *Shepherds of the church*

In addition, Paul tells us that churches are to provide for church leaders (elders / shepherds / pastors) who give themselves to the task of shepherding in the church. (1 Timothy 5:17-18)

Some teachers and leaders will work at these tasks as their livelihood.

To the extent that a church is able to do so, it should support these people, financially, for their work, just as an ox is not muzzled when it is threshing wheat (no offense taken ☺).

So, money gives us the opportunity to provide for the needs of special classes of people.

The New Testament is also clear that money - what Jesus once called [**Luke 16:9**] "**the mammon of unrighteousness**" - gives us another almost unbelievably glorious privilege.

By the use of our material resources, God invites us to be His partners as we support what is on His heart to do in the world.

#### **Support God's Work on Earth**

#### **Support Those Who GO! for the Sake of Jesus' Name (2 John 5-8)**

For the last two thousand years, Christians have supported other Christians who have gone cross-cultural to share Jesus.

Some *GO* to make disciples, plant churches, start hospitals and schools, share the good news, serve widows and orphans, provide clean water, and otherwise meet needs in Jesus' Name.

And some *SUPPORT* those who go to do all these things.<sup>11</sup>

The Apostle John wrote about this in his third letter.

***[3 John 5] Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brothers and sisters, and especially when they are strangers; [6] and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. [7] For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. [8] Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may prove to be fellow workers with the truth.***

Here at Northwest, we count it a great privilege to support those who are serving Christ outside of our church. You can find a list of the groups and people we support in our "Connections" directory.

Some of these are rather recent additions to our Missions family and some we have supported for many, many years.

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<sup>11</sup> The book of Acts shows numerous examples of Christians supporting other Christians who have gone to various places with the Gospel to people who had never heard the name of Jesus.

I've asked Nicole Johnson, the Chair of our Missions Team here at Northwest, to tell you who you are supporting each time you give money to Northwest.

----- Nicole Johnson presents.

So, Northwest has in its annual budget the support of these missionaries and Missions agencies.

Of course, in addition to the outside ministries that the church supports through the budget, we have always encouraged you to support ministries you believe in out of your own household budget.

So...

Say that it is on your heart to help Christians who are suffering terrible persecution for their faith in some tough places in the world.

Well, you can make donations to groups that are on the ground in those tough places, helping those brothers and sisters. What a privilege.

Or maybe you want to help people who are trapped in homelessness. Wonderful. If you aren't able to physically help the homeless, you can help by proxy as you give to groups that do.

If you benefit from the ministry of a Christian podcast, you can give to support it.

You can donate household items, cars, or boats to Gospel-centered organizations that can sell them and turn them into cash that will fund ministry.

By all these means - and many, many more - you can join in what God is doing around the world by the use of your money.

Now, what about the support of the on-going ministries of a church like Northwest? Does the Bible have anything to say about the use of our money to support churches?

I believe it does. But on the way to explaining how I think that the Bible speaks to giving to local churches, I'll tell you about one of my favorite animals: the duck-billed platypus.

### Supporting the Local Church

#### *The duck-billed platypus*

The platypus is a walking, swimming, waddling contradiction.

- Like a duck, it has a flat, rubbery bill, no teeth, and webbed feet.
- Like a mammal, it has a furry body, a beaver-like tail, and it nurses its young.
- Like a reptile, it has a lizard-like gait, lays leathery eggs, and uses venomous hind-leg spurs to strike at its enemies.

Yet somehow, the platypus, this confused conglomeration of parts, still works as an animal. I like to think that in designing the platypus, God had a lot of fun stretching the envelope.<sup>12</sup>

I like the platypus for its unique makeup. But I like it for another reason, too.

The combination of so many incompatible features in one animal gives me hope for the church, because the local church is the platypus of the world's societies.

#### *The church of Jesus, a duck-billed platypus*

The church is both organism and organization.

We are an expression of the Body of Christ and we are a 501(c)(3) corporation.

We are a Christian family and we are an enterprise with membership and rules.

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<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, the first platypuses (platypi?) shipped from Australia to England around 1800 were judged to be frauds. Europeans were still reeling from an expensive and popular fad item: imported "genuine mermaids" - which turned out to be nothing more than monkeys' heads stitched to the bodies of fish caught in the China Sea. Englishmen weren't about to fall for a bizarre concoction of parts like the platypus.

We are a holy temple to God, but a holy temple with recurring expenses and a set budget.

Here at Northwest, we regularly pay attention to certain aspects of the church.

We focus a lot on our connection as brothers and sisters, the unity we enjoy in the Spirit, and the mission we have in Christ. All of that is the organic side of things.

Today, we're also focusing on the other side.

And to help us all understand the organizational part of the church-as-platypus that we don't focus on as much - the financial part - I've invited Bob Robison, our church treasurer, to talk about the Northwest Community Church budget.

----- Bob Robison presents.

Nowhere does the Bible command a church to spend money for copier repair, air conditional repair, utility bills or janitorial service. These are the expenses of an organization.

But then, neither does the Bible prohibit a church from such expenses.

In fact, the New Testament gives very wide latitude to churches as to how they are supposed to organize themselves.

Scripture is crystal clear on FUNCTION: Make disciples. Evangelize. Love. Pray. Build community. Serve the poor.

But beyond some very basic guidelines, the biblical instruction on FORM is vague. Non-specific.

Congregations are free to experiment with different FORMS so as to best carry out the biblical FUNCTIONS in their own cultural contexts.

In other words, the *organization* can be arranged so as to best help the church fulfill its *organic* mandates.

That is why it is perfectly OK to find different churches in San Antonio with different emphases and distinctives or organizational setups because different churches will see that they are best suited to serve Jesus differently than other churches.

At Northwest, we have decided that having a copying machine, a building and playground, administrative staff, toilet paper in the restrooms, signage and reliable electric service helps us fulfill our mission as a church.

So, just as a portion of every dollar you give to this church goes to the mission field, so a portion goes for printer toner, phone service, staff salaries, and craft supplies.

Some of these expenses may seem less glamorous and less mission critical than others. But they all contribute to helping the organization. And the organization only exists to feed, fuel, and further the work of the organism.

Think of it this way.

The external bark of a tree is dead. But the bark is crucial because it protects the living stuff - the cambium and the xylem - underneath the bark that keeps the tree healthy and growing.

In the same way, the church organization - the building, the programs, parking lot - exists solely to protect the spiritual vitality of the people who make up the church.

The organism is always the thing. The living, breathing body of Christ, on mission for His Great Commission. That's the thing.

We are here to love the Lord our God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, together. We are here to love each other as Jesus has loved us. We are here to be and to make disciples. We are here to serve.

Scripture calls us to take off relational masks, to depend on God to do what only He can do when we ask Him, to build faith at home, to bring our friends to Jesus, to love and to live the Bible, and to live and give generously.

All of that is what we are all about. And today we've considered that last element. Living and giving generously.

And here is some of what happens when we live out our generous destiny.

### **Conclusion:**

- A young man with a wife and children came to the church this week and received enough money to fill up his car so that he could drive to work because you GAVE to the Benevolence Fund.
- A grandmother caring for her grandkids regularly receives from us because you GAVE to the Food Pantry.
- Children are learning in their Sunday School classes this morning because you GAVE of your time to prepare a lesson or to serve as a helper in a class in Jesus' Name.
- Our group of young people are being shepherded into spiritual maturity because you are GIVING your time to serve them or you're GIVING to support staff that equips them.
- Every week our Praise Team and sound and video team lead us into a time of worship through song as they GIVE of their abilities to bless the Lord and us.
- Staff is in place here to preach, to teach, to equip and to lead because you GIVE to support the church.
- Missionaries in Sweden and Spain, Nicaragua and Kenya, and elsewhere, along with those we support here in San Antonio, and missionaries who travel worldwide are sharing the Gospel because people like you GIVE.

Truly, little happens unless someone gives something, be it time, energy, or money.

But then, when someone gives, God does something amazing. He transforms that gift of whatever form or amount into ministry that changes everything.

Maybe you're being tempted to be like those baby birds Eugene Peterson described at the beginning who didn't want to leave their secure branch.

While you are destined to fly into generosity, you may be tempted to hoard resources, to give sparingly, to hold tightly to what you have.

Today, Jesus is inviting you to embrace the destiny God has for you. Take flight into the generous life Jesus saved you to display.

What a thrill to know that God, who GAVE His Son for you, invites you to be like He is, a generous giver.

***[2 Corinthians 9:15] Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!***