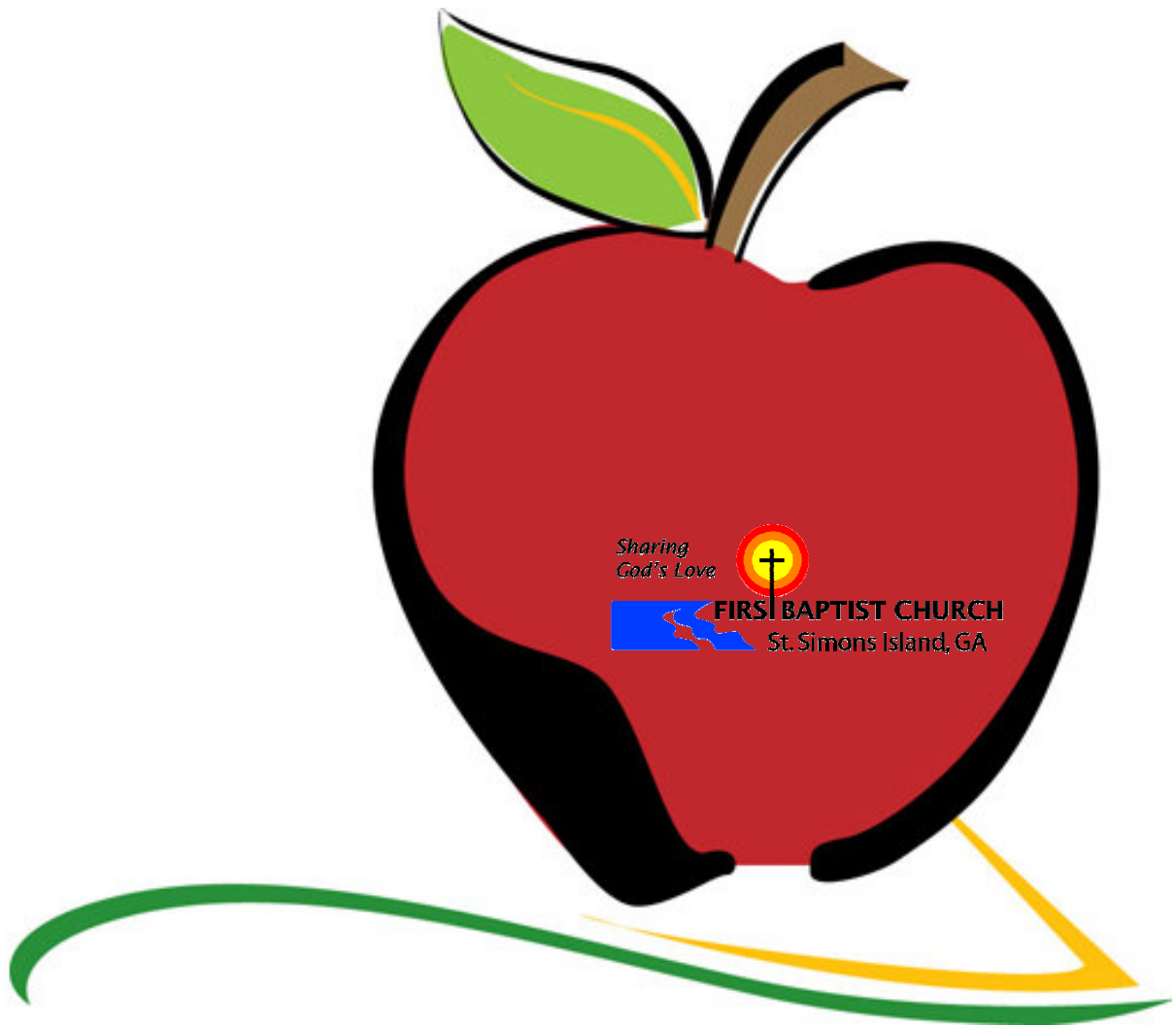


Congregational Letter: The Challenge of Giving

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First Baptist Church of St. Simons Island is strategically located across the street from the Atlantic Ocean and in the shadow of one of the longest continually operating lighthouses in America. Situated on the south-end of St. Simons near the village, the church has excellent visibility in a magnetically compelling area for ministry.

First Baptist Church was among the earliest churches established on St. Simons Island. For seventy-one (71) years it has served as a beacon light for our Savior in this unique setting. When these facilities were just constructed, under the leadership of Reverend King I. Evans, the total amount of everything for the sanctuary and classrooms was \$35,700. Therefore, with land and building the total investment was around \$60,000. Throughout the years the church has acquisitioned adjacent property, added space and upgraded these facilities which have served our Lord's ministry here well. If you valued all the existing property, the total would be in excess of twelve million dollars.

You can say that this history has had a quality about it that merits the words of the Master, "Well done." These buildings have facilitated meaningful ministry. I know without equivocation First Baptist Church of St. Simons Island has made a difference. The history has been honorable. (One former pastor served as Executive-secretary of the Georgia Baptist Convention! Others have served distinguished ministries.)

Today, we stand at a unique crossroads. We face the challenges of a future that necessitates a deliberate transformation process. We do not want to be "an eight-track church in an iPod world." Our calling in Christ demands our best in "lengthening our cords and strengthening our stakes."

We have looked at some of the areas where our cords must be "stretched" in order to serve with greater impact. This morning I want to share specifics about our "stewardship". The word means "house-hold management" - managing our Master's business through His church.

We have three challenging dimensions as it pertains to the management of our Lord's business: budget, debt and future facility upgrades.

In terms of budget, we have met the needs over these past few years with minor shortfalls. However, our responsibility has become greater with a full staff so that the challenge in 2010 will call for a solid commitment to stewardship goals.

As to debt, we owe approximately \$160,000. Based on our current giving in 2009, we are facing a \$25,000 plus deficit in actual spending. That figure has remained fairly constant. This is served by our line of credit. Only a small amount of this has accrued because of budget shortfalls. \$100,000 of this comes from the purchase of the Demere Road property between the Missions House and the duplex at Demere Way. Obviously, this is extremely valuable property. Most of the remaining \$60,000 has to do with other property improvements. Thus, the debt of which we speak is "good debt." However, this is a matter that needs a solution before we move toward additional goals. I share this information because our leadership will address this with a plan in the early Spring of 2010.

Beyond that, and probably as a part of the debt elimination plan, we must take a serious, well-planned, and reasonable look at future facility needs. Well thought-out aims and goals will move us forward into a dynamic and faithful ministry.

Our first goal will be to call you to an "estimated giving" approach for 2010. This calls us to a time of careful prayer and reflection. Estimated giving is simply to ask you to determine your projected personal giving for next year. Further, it calls for all of us to step it up a notch to reach budget goals for the coming year. The accomplishment of budget goals would be a strong source of encouragement in envisioning new goals for the days ahead.

I have indicated to you a plan to address our existing debt and future facilities needs in the Spring of next year because I think we must be clear about our situation and all the parts and pieces which need to fall in place for planning a prudent future.

In summary: First, in these coming weeks we will offer you an opportunity to turn in an “estimated giving card” for 2010. This will culminate the two Sunday’s before Thanksgiving. In the coming weeks we will share much more about this process. Secondly, in the early Spring another “open letter sermon” will address and give specifics concerning our approach to eliminating the debt and as a beginning point for stewardship efforts for our future needs.

I feel very strongly about what First Baptist Church means in this dynamic location. We are a unique Baptist church made up of a wide diversity of people and backgrounds. We are different in a delightful sense.

- Committed to a strongly biblical-balanced ministry
- Placing a high value on soul competency and the priesthood of the believers.
- We are an inclusive congregation seeking to express God’s love and grace.
- We value and honor the spiritual gifts of all people, male and female.
- We have a dual alliance with the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.
- We value the freedom and local church autonomy which have prevailed in our history.

The bottom line is that we believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. He is our standard for living and serving.

WHY A CALL TO GIVE?

I. Giving Flows out of the generosity of God.

Our giving is a celebration of the grace of God in redemption. II Corinthians 8:9 “For you know the grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be made rich ...” God’s love for us has enabled us to receive the gift of eternal life. He has provided marvelous resources to enjoy and use on the journey of life. He has given us a future and a hope.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that God “bestowed His grace” on them (8:1). He alludes to their “great trial of affliction” (8:2). Yet, Paul indicates they gave beyond their means - and, above all, “they gave themselves to the Lord.” That’s why the apostle holds up the model of Jesus’ giving Himself for our redemption (8:9). This beautiful example conveys a model for our response in giving. Something happens where grace touches your heart.

1. When grace touches our hearts, hard times are not a hindrance to giving (v. 2)
2. When grace touches our hearts, we respond beyond expectation. Paul says they “gave not as we hoped - but beyond.”
3. When grace touches our hearts, money will not be a substitute for giving ourselves: “First they gave themselves.”

Stewardship is not God’s plan for raising money. It is God’s plan for developing people. Our giving is an extension of ourselves, an expression of our commitment and gratitude. As Emerson puts it, “The true gift is the gift of ourselves.” True stewardship calls us to realize how much God has given.

II. When we give to meet the needs of others, God changes our hearts and we experience greater joy.

Luke 6:38, “Give and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by the standard of your measure it will be measured to you in return.”

Sometime ago there appeared in the *Reader's Digest* an article entitled, "The Bats Have Known it for a Thousand Years." The article was a down-to-earth approach to the principles of radar. Scientists discovered how bats were able to fly for miles underground, through dark caverns and never strike an object.

The test began with captured bats placed in a long, dark room across which wires were stretched. But, the bats in their flight never struck a wire. Though they were blindfolded with adhesive across their eyes, still they flew in perfect precision, never touching the sides of the room nor the wires. But, when they removed the blindfold and taped the bat's ears and bills, there was swift disaster. With eyes wide open, they flew into everything.

An amplifier was then set up and it was discovered that when a bat began its flight, it sang a song; it uttered a shrill high note, too high for the human ear to detect. The vibrations from this weird song located and positioned any object in its way. The echo was the bat's guide. When the vibrations hit anything solid and bounded back, the bat swerved. Hence the principles of radar.

Here's the point, dear friends, the bats might have known it for a thousand years, but Jesus recorded it in the Bible two thousand years ago: "With what measure you use, the same shall be used with you."

The Bible is loaded with truth about a cause and effect world. Chance is not king in the world. God built the principles of radar into our lives. We are commanded to give and there is compensation: "Give ... (command), and it shall be given... (compensation)".

There are two sides to this text. There are two sides to life.

The Dangerous side:

"He that taketh the sword shall die by the sword."

"Be sure your sins will find you out."

"Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he reap ..."

They hanged Haman on the gallows he prepared for Mordecai.

My appeal to you is to eagerly pursue the good side: "Full measure, pressed down, running over." Blessings flow compounded, condensed ... more than you can expect.

"Cast your bread upon many waters and thou shalt find it after many days." (Ecclesiastes 11:1)

"Treat people the way you want to be treated." (Luke 6:31)

"Love your enemies ... and expect nothing in return." (Luke 6:35)

"Be merciful ..." (Luke 6:36)

When we express a positive, loving and graceful ministry individually and corporately, God will honor such a thousand times. (John 13:34-35)

One of my favorite stories comes from *Guidepost Magazine* entitled "The Little Blue Bucket".

The story is that a little girl was up in the attic with her mother and they were cleaning out some old things they had saved. And, from the trunk they pulled out some old garments and some articles. Among the articles was a blue bucket.

The little girl said, "Mama, what is the blue bucket for."

And, the mother related the story of the blue bucket of love. She said, "Oh, that's the bucket your grandmother used to take and would put strawberries in it or fresh fruit and cookies. She would take it and leave it at someone's door with just a note: Please put the bucket back where you found it. And then, so the neighbor wouldn't know who brought it, she would creep back at night and get the bucket, take it back home, refill it, and take it to another neighbor's house.

The little girl caught on to the idea real quick. She said, "Mama, there's a little boy new in school in my grade. He was treated rudely by some of the pupils because he was new."

She said, "Let's bake a pan of brownies and put 'em in grandmother's blue bucket of love - and let's sneak it down to his house and leave a note for him to put it back where he found it." They agreed.

And so, she baked those brownies with a loving heart. Then, she put the brownies in that bucket. And that little girl had the joy of sneaking down and putting that bucket of brownies at the front door of that new boy's house ... And she kept that going!

One of the great needs of our world today - and the church - is for people to start loving each other and demonstrating that love to others ... no strings attached.

The blue bucket of love has high value!

This rule works!

To the merciful and generous spirit ... life takes on new dimensions and meaning.

What we get depends on what we give out. You really never can give anything away - it comes back a thousand fold. Not that you ever give expecting to get anything back.

The Law of the Boomerang is the law of Life

When a bit of sunshine hits you after a passing cloud

When a bit of laughter gets to you and your heart is feeling proud

Don't forget to fling it at a soul that's feeling blue

For the moment you fling it, it'll boomerang back to you.

III. Giving Has Eternal Values.

Luke 16:9 "Make friends for yourselves by the mammon of unrighteousness that when it fails they will receive you in the eternal dwellings."

This verse is a strong motivation for giving. When we use our resources, money, and gifts to the eternal betterment of another, it enriches our eternal destiny. Money can be tainted, and a false sense of security. But, if we invest our time and resources so that another person comes to Christ and finds God's eternal touch, this text suggests that our crossing to the other side is more glorious. Those in whose lives we have made a difference are "there" to bless us in the "eternal habitation".

Years ago, I heard someone say about another who was slipping from this world to the next, "I know God will give him a glorious crossing". Somehow I think that's what this text means: because we have been faithful and sacrificially given to make another's life better, God, in turn, gives us a more glorious eternal habitation (heaven).

When our mission giving provides life-saving medical help to someone we don't know in another part of the world, they will bless us in the eternal habitation.

When our giving results in changing lives for eternal good, we are blessed on the other side.

We cannot calculate how far-reaching our giving can become. When we realize the startling implications of our investment in eternity, then giving becomes a dominating force in life.

IV. Giving is a Response to what the Bible Calls Tithing.

Take note of the ten apples on the Communion Table. God says nine of these are yours. Use them to take care of your family, to clothe yourselves. Use them for food and for shelter and set some of them aside for your retirement. Give some of them to your needy friends. Use some for your pleasure, trips and vacations.

You've got nine apples. But, the Lord says, "One is mine. And, it's meant to be used, first of all, as a way to express your praise and your love for me - your obedience and devotion. But, then I am going to use it to accomplish my purposes in the world."

But, here's what happens to many of us. Many of us find - because the world pulls us in so many directions - that nine apples aren't enough anymore. I mean - they really aren't. How can we do the fun stuff and the cool stuff and the stuff we need to do and pay the bills on everything on just nine apples? And so, we think, "Well, the Lord's not going to mind if we just take a little bit."

You know, there's a trip that we've been wanting to take - really important and special. We'll just take a little bit of this apple. He'll understand.

Oh, and then Christmas. We didn't anticipate the need. After all, it's for children and other people - good giving. We'll need a little more of God's apple.

And you know, retirement is coming - and in this economy I'll need a little more of this apple.

And, to top it all, we didn't set aside enough in our savings for those medical emergencies. I've got to find that somewhere.

The house needs a re-do and the car is getting too old. I would really like to have a flat-screen high density for the Super Bowl. And, pretty soon, there's not too much left from the Lord's apple. Wait a minute. Hold on. And, we say, "Well, Lord, this is Your part. I'm going to give it to you."

By the time we get around to God, there is not much left. And, we may take one last bite before we give it to God.

Conclusion

Most of us would say, "We want to give our best to our Lord." Paul commended the Philippians for their gifts and called them "An odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God." (Philippians 4:18).

We only fully understand grace when we have lived out the red letters of Jesus. Once we have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, sat by a well of societies' outcasts, packed a Christmas shoe box, delivered a Hearts & Hands meal, then we understand how great is the generosity of God's grace.

These expressions of Christ in us are fragrant to God, fruitful in the Kingdom, and enable us to hear Him say on that eternal day that dawns: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

