

OUR OFFERINGS: AN HONEST EXPRESSION OF OUR LOVE FOR GOD

Dear friends in Christ, you're not going to like what I have to say this morning. We've hit that point in our *Inside Look at How and Why We Worship* where we talk about the Offering, our giving from our wealth to God—and you're not going to like what I have to say. You may wonder how I can be so sure of that. Well, the fact is that we each have a selfish, greedy, jealous, idolatrous, miserly, God-hating part of us that is our sinful nature. And that ugly little monster shows his face quite often where money is involved. Even when God and money are pitted against each other, he chooses the side of money. That is the unsanctified, sinful beast that lives inside each of us—and he has no intention of listening to God's Word today and learning from it so that he can live it. He's going to fight you for the next 20 minutes.

However, when we were given the gift of saving faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit took up residence in our heart too. And so we became a different kind of person. Yes, that monster of a sinful nature still resides in us, but there is also this new person who lives there—right next door to him. That new person in us loves God perfectly and wants to live in a way that gives glory and thanks to the Lord. This new person LOVES to consider and talk about God's giving to us and our giving back to him. The subject of money in a sermon or Bible class or Christian conversation doesn't bother him in the least! In fact, this part of us WANTS to talk about it because God talks about it in his Word.

Day by day, even hour by hour, the struggle goes on inside us between the monster and the saint within us. And this struggle is often evident when the subject of money comes up. Today in God's Word, we have a sad, sad story about this very thing. These events took place when the Christian Church was just beginning. In fact, this is the first sin in the new church that we hear of. Acts chapter 5, beginning at verse 1:

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property.² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.⁶ Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

⁹ Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Ananias and Sapphira were members of the church. They planned to deceive the body of believers that gathered together for worship. They sold a piece of property and gave the impression to all those there that they were giving all the proceeds from the sale to the church, but they kept for themselves part of the money. It's important that we understand that they were not wrong to keep some for themselves and present the rest as an offering to God for the gospel ministry of the church. Really, they could have kept the whole thing and not been in any trouble with God! You see, since Jesus lived a perfect life, keeping God's Law in our place, we are now free from those Old Testament Laws like the tithe. God no longer demands a specific 10% of all we have and earn.

You and I, just like Ananias and Sapphira, have only these directions in the New Testament Scriptures for giving offerings: we are to give out of love for God; we are to give cheerfully; we are to give in proportion to how God has blessed us; we are to give regularly; we are to give generously. That's kind of your 5-point checklist for giving an offering: motivated by love for Jesus, cheerfully, proportionately, regularly, generously. When a Christian gives like this, his or her giving is AN HONEST EXPRESSION OF THEIR LOVE FOR GOD.

When we hear about Ananias and Sapphira we see the opposite, don't we? Their giving was *dishonest* and it revealed their lack of love for God. Put another way, I guess we could say that the way they went about giving was AN HONEST EXPRESSION OF THEIR LOVE FOR GOD! It showed exactly how much they loved their Savior—not much. What did they love instead? I suppose there is a list of things—attention, praise from others, maybe even the money itself.

God had revealed their hypocrisy to the Apostle Peter and in doing so, he gave them a chance to come clean. Ananias could have admitted that they were lying and repented. And because Jesus paid for the sins of all people on the cross—Ananias included—he would have been forgiven by God. The same would have been true for his wife. But they both continued in their sin regarding the money and therefore earned God's judgment. God struck each of them down—they dropped dead on the spot for lying about their offering to the Lord and his church. It's no wonder that **Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.**

What if that happened today? Maybe you've given someone else the impression you were giving when you really weren't or tried to make people think you were giving more than you really were. Perhaps you have sinned in your giving in other ways from time to time or are even sinning in regard to your offerings right now. What if God dropped his judgment down on you whenever that happened? After all, God looks straight into your heart just like he stared into the hearts of this dishonest couple.

God knows if you keep for yourself the quarter that was supposed to be your Sunday School offering. What if he struck you down dead for doing that? God knows when you're more concerned about having all the "stuff" you want while your offerings to your Savior are not only not in proportion to the way God has blessed you but they're actually pitiful. What if God struck you down dead for doing that? God knows when you

have no problem scrounging up beer money for Friday night but there's nothing left for him on Sunday morning. What if God struck you down dead for doing that? God knows when you and your earthly wants are more important to you than he is. You do realize that the way you give thanks to God in your offerings to him is a reflection of your love for him, right? God looks right into your heart and sees just what you find more important than giving back to him in the way that he encourages us in his Word. He can see what you value more than Jesus, his Son. See, I told you that you wouldn't like what I had to say. That's tough to think of it in those terms, isn't it? We don't want to think that that's what we're doing. We don't want to see our offerings to God as being that important, but it's true: **OUR OFFERINGS ARE AN HONEST EXPRESSION OF OUR LOVE FOR GOD.** They tell God where he ranks in our hearts. Jesus even said **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).** “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Things in this world are not our treasure, God is. We prove that in a very practical way when we give properly back to God.

Don't misunderstand though. God doesn't say that if you really love him, you'll give him 100%. He doesn't say that if you really love him the amount you give to him will be huge. He doesn't ask you to give *everything* you have in the offering plate. He also doesn't ask you to give what you *don't* have. Remember he tells us to give in proportion to the way he has blessed us. That's why many Christians think in terms of percentage of their income, very often using that 10% as a guide or a starting point. He tells us to give generously and joyfully and regularly. You can see how doing all that forces a person to actually think about God's many blessings to them and consider how they will manage all those blessings.

Most importantly though, don't lose sight of our motivation for giving. God the Father loved us so much that he did not want us to die eternally because of our sin. He gave an offering of his one and only Son Jesus to live without sin and to offer his life as a sacrifice for ours. Jesus gladly, willingly, gave an offering of himself on the cross to save us. The Holy Spirit gave us an offering—the gift of faith to trust in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. What can you and I even say to those offerings of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Doesn't that, at least for a moment, render you speechless—that the almighty and holy Triune God would stoop down from heaven and give to you, a sinful human being who really deserves nothing?! And we don't even have the time to consider the material, physical, earthly blessings that God showers upon us in addition to these most important spiritual offerings to us!

When you think about that, isn't it pathetic when we're stingy with our giving back to him? When you compare what God has given to you with the way you give to him, isn't it ridiculous of us to hold back and not give lovingly so that he can be praised in our giving and so that the church may use those gifts to share the saving message of salvation in Jesus? We all need to repent for being short on love for God sometimes and having that show in our offerings to him.

And There is tremendous comfort for us. We know that Jesus paid for these sins of ours. They were taken to the cross along with the rest of our sins. Each repentant sinner sitting in these pews or standing in this pulpit can be comforted because every single “giving sin” we’ve every committed is entirely gone. We are forgiven.

So what do forgiven people do? They praise their God. They make every effort to fix the things that they were doing wrong before God. Does God give you any chances to do that? Absolutely! It seems that Ananias and Sapphira were in worship when they brought their offering and laid it at the apostles’ feet. We do the same thing the church has been doing from the very beginning: we have the opportunity to offer our joyful, proportionate, generous, love-for-Christ motivated gifts each week in worship.

It only makes sense that we would do this in worship, not just because the early church did this, but because this is one of those parts of the service where we get to respond to God’s love with love of our own! Remember, **OUR OFFERINGS ARE AN HONEST EXPRESSION OF OUR LOVE FOR GOD**. Just like our prayers of thanks and our hymns of praise are expressions of our love to God, so are our offerings. When the offering plate comes around, you have an opportunity to praise God by giving to him a well-thought-out gift taken from the larger amount that he has given to you. You’re giving back a piece of the paycheck or commission or bonus or allowance or whatever other income God has given you. I feel sorry for the people who attend one church here in town where they make a big deal out of the fact that they don’t take an offering in worship! That’s actually part of their advertising to get people to come to their church! Obviously people can give their offerings at another time, but what a joy and privilege it is for us to respond in this way to the love of God expressed in his Word and given to us in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in worship!

Just one final thought this morning: Don’t buy into the sinful accusation that all the church is concerned about is money or that that’s all they talk about. That’s ridiculous and untrue and those who say that are obviously uneducated about what God says about giving in his Word. Don’t be that person and don’t let others get away with saying that either. The interest your pastors or church have in your offerings is only this: that each soul might give to God in a way that expresses true love for him and that with those gathered gifts we are able to share the truth of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus Christ with God’s people and with those who do not yet know of Christ’s love. We use our collected offerings to do gospel ministry here at Grace, to support the Christian education of our young people, to support the training of pastors and teachers and staff ministers for our church body, and to send missionaries around the world. Those are God-pleasing things which can only be done together when we each, as individual members of Christ’s church, give an honest expression of our love for God through our offerings to him. May we suppress the greedy and self-centered sinful nature that rebels against giving to God and instead grow in Christian faith that we might show our great love for God in the way we give back to him. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.