

“Fragrant Offerings”

Introduction: As the season of gift giving approaches, how many of you will write thank-you notes for the gifts you will receive? My mother trained us well. As our family opened our presents on Christmas day, she had a yellow legal pad by her side on which she recorded everything we received, and who we received it from, so that we would know who to write our thank-you notes to. After the first few, I almost didn’t want to open another present as it would mean adding another name to my growing list!

As we read the end of Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi this morning, we will be reading Paul’s thank-you for the gift the church had sent to him, to help support him while in prison in Rome. As we heard last week, he had been put in prison for encouraging the church to declare Jesus as lord and savior, and not the Roman emperor. In the midst of the anxiety this must have raised, Paul directed them to pray “with thanksgiving” to remind them of the presence of Jesus in the midst of their anxious moments.

As we hear Paul’s thanksgiving, it reads perhaps a bit differently than we might have expected. Paul spends little time talking about the gift of financial support a man from the church named Epaphroditus had traveled over 800 miles to bring. Instead, he spends almost all his thank-you time talking about what the act of giving had done, and is doing, for the givers, the Philippian congregation.

So, instead of a thank-you note that might have read something like this: “Dear mom, I am so pleased with your gift of an electric blanket. You always know what I need! It’s just the right color to match my bedroom curtains, and I’m sure it will help me to sleep more comfortably,” we will read something like this: “Dear mom, it was great to receive your gift because it confirms how much you really do care for me. I can’t wait to hear how blessed you felt when you sent it! Most of all, do you know how pleased God is with what you’ve done for me?”

As we think this week about our giving for 2024, I thought it might be helpful to hear Paul describe the blessings that generous giving can bring. [READ]

I. An Affirmation of Faith

A. As Paul speaks of the gift he’s received, he uses three familiar metaphors to his readers to draw attention to the givers, not their gift. The first is a flowering blossom: “I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me” (v. 10). The phrase, “renewed your concern” pictures the blooming of a flower or a tree after a period of dormancy, like a perennial or a spring shoot of some kind. This church had been in the habit of sending regular support to Paul but for some reason had stopped or had in some way been prevented from getting their gift to him in recent months. Paul was concerned, not because of his need – he actually goes on to say that he has learned to be content, whether he has a lot or a little – but because he was worried about what their recent lack of giving might be saying about the vitality of their faith.

B. At one point in his teaching, Jesus uses another botanical metaphor, the picture of a vine and its branches, to describe the life of a Christian (John 15). Simply put, if we, the branches, are truly connected to Jesus, the vine, our lives will bear fruit. If our lives are not bearing fruit, it may mean that the connection has grown weak, or is in need of repair of some kind. One of the primary “fruits” that blossoms from a healthy relationship with Jesus is the fruit of giving. This was of such a concern for Jesus

that he spoke of our use of money and possessions more than he spoke of anything else, including heaven and hell combined! Why such an emphasis? Because God knows there's a fundamental link between our spiritual lives and how we think about and handle money.

C. Take just one example from the preaching of John the Baptist, who we'll hear from in the coming weeks of advent. His message was that people need to repent to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord. Three different groups then ask him what the fruit of repentance would look like. He gives three answers: everyone should share clothing and food with the poor; tax collectors shouldn't pocket extra money; soldiers should be content with their wages and not extort money (Lk. 3:7-14). Although no one asked him about how to handle their money and possessions, John's answers were all about those things. John couldn't talk about our spiritual lives without referencing the money and possessions that so often drive us.

Back to the Philippians: had money become an idol to them? Were they now clinging to it in some unhealthy way? Was it leading them to, as the psalmist puts it, a divided heart? None of the above, Paul was relieved to learn as their generous gift reached him. Their meeting of his physical need affirmed the vitality of their spiritual life; their faith was still bearing fruit.

## II. A High-Yield Investment

A. The second metaphor Paul uses to help this church think about their giving is from the world of finance: "Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account" (v. 17). Again, Paul is neither focused on what he got, nor does he want to be seen as angling for another gift in some way. Instead, he focused on what their giving does for their heavenly account, how it increases their accumulation of heavenly treasure. We could say that as a financial investment yields dividends which are credited to our account on earth, giving yields us spiritual dividends, dividends that are stored in our account in heaven. It is the highest yielding investment we could make.

B. We heard Jesus speak about this account, or treasure, in the Sermon on the Mount. He said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. [Ma. 6:19-21]

It's not that earthly treasures are necessarily bad, it's that they won't last.

C. Jesus makes this point in a pithy little parable about a man who discovers a treasure:

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. [Ma. 13:44]

Picture the man opening a treasure chest that he's stumbled across. In it, he discovers treasure more valuable than anything he's ever imagined. He can't take it; the field is not his own. But he can bury it and mark it until he brings the funds sufficient to purchase the field. While it turns out to cost everything he owned, it gains him everything that matters. The ultimate insider trading tip from Jesus is that earth's treasure will one day become worthless while heavenly treasure will only keep increasing in value. Storing up heavenly treasure takes place as we serve God and others, as we are generous with what God has first given us. Heavenly dividends, Paul writes, are then credited to our account.

### III. A Fragrant Offering

A. The third metaphor Paul uses to help us think about our giving is when he calls the gift sent by the Philippians “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (v. 18). This image comes from the OT sacrificial system in which the sacrifice of a burnt offering would result in an aroma that lifted up to the heavens and provided a pleasing smell to the “nostrils” of God.

When Noah, for instance, built an altar and offered a sacrifice to God after landing back on dry ground after the flood, we read that “the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma” of Noah’s sacrifice (Ge. 8:20f), almost as if someone had just handed him a dozen roses and he was inhaling deeply to take in the beauty of that gift.

B. In the NT, with the system of animal sacrifice having been fulfilled by the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, we read that our offerings of praise, that our good deeds, and that our financial contributions are spiritual sacrifices which please God. As the writer of Hebrews puts it:

With Jesus’ help, let us continually offer our sacrifice of praise to God by proclaiming the glory of his name. Don’t forget to do good and to share what you have with those in need, for such sacrifices are very pleasing to God (He. 13:15-16, NLT).

We could say that our giving becomes a way to express our love for God – that giving gifts is one of God’s “love languages,” an action that brings God great joy. And it brings God joy, I think, because as we give to meet the needs of others we are being good stewards of what God has first given us, we are declaring our trust in God to meet our needs, we are indicating our willingness to depend on him and not ourselves . . . and God loves to be trusted and depended upon! Our giving is, in God’s eyes, a fragrant offering to him. Our gifts, before they meet the needs of others, are a gift to Him.

So, as you ponder your pledge card in the week ahead, use it to help you be intentional about your giving. And think of your giving, not only as a percentage of your income, but also as an affirmation of your faith, as an investment in your heavenly account, and as a fragrant expression of your love for the God who loves you dearly.

Paul ends his thank-you note in praise and worship (v. 20) for the riches of God lavished upon us in and through his Son. Let us end that way as well....#545, “For the Fruit of All Creation”