

EMPOWERED BY GRACE!

DEVOTIONAL MEDITATIONS



2024 GENEROSITY PROGRAM

2024 Generosity Fall Schedule

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EMPOWERED BY GRACE!



Stewardship is more than giving some money and a token amount of time. Stewardship is our response to the faith that God gives us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. Stewardship is faith in action. Belief in Jesus gives us access to God's endless source of grace and power, and produces the works of love that we do in Christ. Through the continued reading and study of God's Word and through continual attendance at the Lord's Table, we are nourished, strengthened, and sustained in our faith for dutiful stewardship.

God's stewards are on a lifetime journey of faith. In this journey, God is changing us from owners to stewards, from bondage to freedom, and from a sense of obligation to joyful obedience. The journey moves forward as our relationship with and our dependence on Christ grows. In our journey, God calls each of us to be faithful in our living, serving, witnessing, and giving. The steps we take are sometimes large, sometimes small, and sometimes even backward. As stewards, we understand that we are managers, not owners of what God has entrusted to us. God is the creator and owner of the universe. "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:10). We have been given the responsibility of managing God's property according to his will wisely and effectively. As faithful stewards, our wills and purposes become one with God's.

Our lives as stewards do not start or stop at certain times of the day or days of the week or month. We are not stewards merely on Sundays or other special days. As stewards for Christ, we are to be devoted to a full-time effort and commitment to serve the Lord with our lives and possessions. Faithful stewardship requires our entire beings, and involves both our attitudes and our actions. It is a commitment of all that we are and all that we have to God's glory.

Week 1 - Empowered by Grace to Know Your Purpose. Where are you looking to find purpose in your life? As Christians, we know the purpose that the world offers doesn't in any shape or form resemble God's purpose for our lives.

Week 2 - Empowered by Grace to Serve. 1 Peter 4:10 is one of the Bible's most challenging and motivating verses: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." The verse outlines three truths. First, each one of us has received a gift. Second, we are to serve others. Finally, we are to be stewards in administering God's grace, which has been entrusted to us. Again, this year we will focus on our favorite Saints who have served in the past and celebrate All Saints Sunday on November 3.

We will start this week of reading by hearing from Jerry and Stacy Kramer who will be returning to St. Peters on Sunday October 27 to give the sermon and be examples of what modern day service looks like.

Week 3 - Empowered by Grace to Witness. The Bible says, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven" (Matthew 5:16). The question we must ask is, "How clearly and how brightly are we reflecting Christ in our lives?"

Week 4 - Empowered by Grace to Give. Jesus shows us how to give. Jesus gave us the greatest and most perfect gift by offering himself on the Cross. Filled with gratitude and love for what Jesus has done for us, we are empowered to give.

Empowered by Grace to Know your Purpose

Monday, October 21st

Where are you looking to find purpose in your life? As Christians, we know the purpose that the world offers doesn't in any shape or form resemble God's purpose for our lives. The world promotes self-reliance and self-promotion. The purpose promoted by the world is to accumulate more and more things to enjoy the good life. In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, we read about King Solomon who had everything the world offered. His worldly interests and appetite were completely indulged, but he found no satisfaction or purpose in his worldly possessions or accomplishments: "Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 2:11). We can discover our purpose in life only through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). He is telling us that, when God is in control of our lives, we have new meaning and purpose. In essence, we live under new management. The old godless person is hardly recognizable as the new person in Jesus is created. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). God is now in control of our lives. We have a new master and a new purpose: to live for Christ.



Purpose to Glorify God

By God's grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who enlightens us through the Gospel of Christ, we acknowledge God as our Creator and Jesus as our Savior from sin. "Praise the Lord!...Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forevermore! From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised!" (Psalm 113:1-3).

Purpose to Do Good Works

How blessed we are to be given the opportunity to be Jesus' hands, feet, and mouth as he works through us. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Share the Good News: Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are to share the Gospel with people in our neighborhoods, cities, and throughout the world (Acts 1:8). God has placed us among many people who do not know Jesus. With God's help, we can become very intentional with our witnessing. He can open our eyes to opportunities and give us the words to speak.

Love and Serve Others: Just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve, he wants us to live lives in service to others. Jesus tells us, "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant..." (Matthew 20:26). Greatness in God's kingdom is characterized by willingness to serve others rather than being served.

Give Generously: Created in God's image, we have been made to be giving people. When we give, we display God's image and likeness. Through our generosity, we give glory to our heavenly Father. We are to give the first portion of our incomes cheerfully and generously (2 Corinthians 9:7-8; 1 Corinthians 16:2).

Purpose to Be Disciples

We do not choose to be disciples. Jesus says, “Follow me” (Matthew 4:19). He calls us to be his disciples. Christ is the active agent. We are the passive recipients (John 15:16). We claim no credit when it comes to being disciples or making disciples. Such activity is God’s initiative and his work in us. Jesus’ love demonstrated on the cross prompts us to be his disciples.

Purpose to Be Stewards

A steward is one who has been entrusted with property which is to be administered according to the owner’s will or direction. God owns everything, “The earth is the LORD’S and the fullness thereof...” (Psalm 24:1). “‘The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,’ declares the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:8). No, nothing is ours, but God has given us the high calling of stewards.

From the beginning God called us to be stewards: “Let [man] have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1:26). With such a high calling comes responsibility. With such high honor comes accountability: “Moreover,” writes the Apostle Paul, “it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:2). May we, like the two faithful stewards we read about in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), hear our Master’s gracious words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Mid-Week Bible Study

Empowered by Grace to Know Your Purpose

Prayer: *Dear good and gracious heavenly Father, we pray for your blessings on this study as we examine the purpose you have for each of our lives. Empower us, Lord, to be faithful to our calling. Teach us to fix our eyes on you so that we will not be deterred in our serving and witnessing. Mold us into the people that you want us to be. In your name we pray. Amen.*

Introduction

King David wrote, “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me” (Psalm 138:8). Just as God had a purpose for David, so he has for each of us as well. Have you given much thought to what purpose God may have for your life? By grace, we understand that we were created for God’s purpose, not ours. “...for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). Through the working of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to acknowledge that God is in control and that we are made for his pleasure. Through his power, we are transformed into people who stop focusing completely on ourselves and become his stewards. Our mind-set changes from what we want to do to what God wants us to do.

In order to understand God’s plan, we need to turn to his Word. As we read and study God’s Word, his purposes for our lives are revealed to us, and, through Word and Sacrament, we no longer conform to the pattern of the world but are transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). God’s purposes become our purposes. We abandon our agendas and accept God’s agenda for our lives.

Unfortunately, many people live with no real purpose and many others live with no purpose other than to please themselves. Thomas Carlyle wrote, “The man without a purpose is like a ship without a rudder ... a waif, a nothing, a no man.” We need purpose in order to have meaning for our lives. If we don’t have meaning, life does not have value or hope. In Christ, we have purpose, meaning, and hope.

We thank God that he has given us faith and wisdom to understand that he is both our source of life and our purpose for living. We realize that we exist only because God wants us to exist. “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Revelation 4:11). Our purpose is to live for “the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:12-13). We are blessed to have been given the privilege of being stewards of a wonderful and gracious God who has created us and called us to serve him.

When we understand our role and purpose as God’s stewards, we begin to see

that our time, abilities, and money are tools to accomplish God's purposes for our lives. Acknowledging our blessings as gifts from God, we want to show our gratitude for these gifts by using them in ways that accomplish his purposes and extend his kingdom. Therefore, we are eager to help others, to serve in church, to witness, and to give. As we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, we become more selective with the activities and the ways we spend our time, talents, and resources. As we grow in our understanding of Biblical stewardship, we become more intentional and focused on using our lives and resources in ways that help us live as faithful stewards.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is it important for you to understand God's purposes for you in order for you to be a faithful steward?
2. How is it different to be a servant than to act as a servant?

Prayer: *Dear good and gracious heavenly Father, we pray for your blessings on this study as we examine the purpose you have for each of our lives. Empower us, Lord, to be faithful to our calling. Teach us to fix our eyes on you so that we will not be deterred in our serving and witnessing. Mold us into the people that you want us to be. In your name we pray. Amen*

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. Galatians 2:20

For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Philippians 2:13

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 2:13

Empowered by Grace to Serve



Lifting Others Up

Very likely you remember the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). We sympathize with Lazarus lying at the rich man's door, grateful for any crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, and we are critical of the rich man who, so engrossed in his opulence and high station in life, doesn't even notice the poor beggar at his door. When Lazarus ends up in Heaven, we're cheering, and, when the rich man ends up begging for mercy, we think he's getting what he deserved.

So which are you? Maybe your circumstance puts you somewhere between begging in order to meet your daily needs and being classified as "rich." Do you see the Lazarus at your gate, or do you pass by on the way to your important business of the day? The Apostle Paul urges, "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).

Humility was missing from the Rich Man's heart. Even "in Hades, being in torment" (Luke 16:23), he still was all about looking to his own interests.

“Come on, you guys up there! Give me a break. All I want is just a drop of water!” Finally, at last, he thinks of his brothers. It’s too late for him, but maybe they will hear the Word and be saved. Maybe that Word will penetrate their cold hearts and give them faith to believe and respond by lifting others up.

Serving with a Servant’s Heart

We are reminded by the words of Matthew 20:28, “...Even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,” that the life of Jesus was one of total sacrifice. That he wants to develop a servant spirit in his disciples and us as well is made clear by his statement recorded in Matthew 20:26: “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26). Jesus embodied this truth, becoming the ultimate servant who laid down his life for those he came to serve (John 10:14-15). He sends us his Spirit who transforms us to the image of God (2 Corinthians 3:18) creating in us the desire to take on the role of servants.

Because of our desire to serve Jesus, we begin to identify with the passion he has for people. We are freed from selfish interests and freed for Christian service. “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13)

God brings us into a proper relationship with himself so we can begin to “serve one another.” As imitators of Christ (Ephesians 5:1), who lived a life of compassion for others, we, too, will serve the hungry, handicapped, and helpless. We serve out of love for Christ and his people. Desiring to be worthy of his calling (Colossians 1:10), our thoughts of self-exaltation or praise from men are absent.

Jesus’ Example

The entire life of Jesus was one of service, but one act of servanthood that is most often referred to is his washing of the disciples’ feet during the evening of the Passover Feast before his crucifixion (John 13:12-17). As he performed this duty of a servant, Jesus told them to do as he had done. Christ did not consider a life of servanthood to be beneath him. Neither should we. Through service, we put our faith into action. As we rely on God’s strength to serve, we desire all the

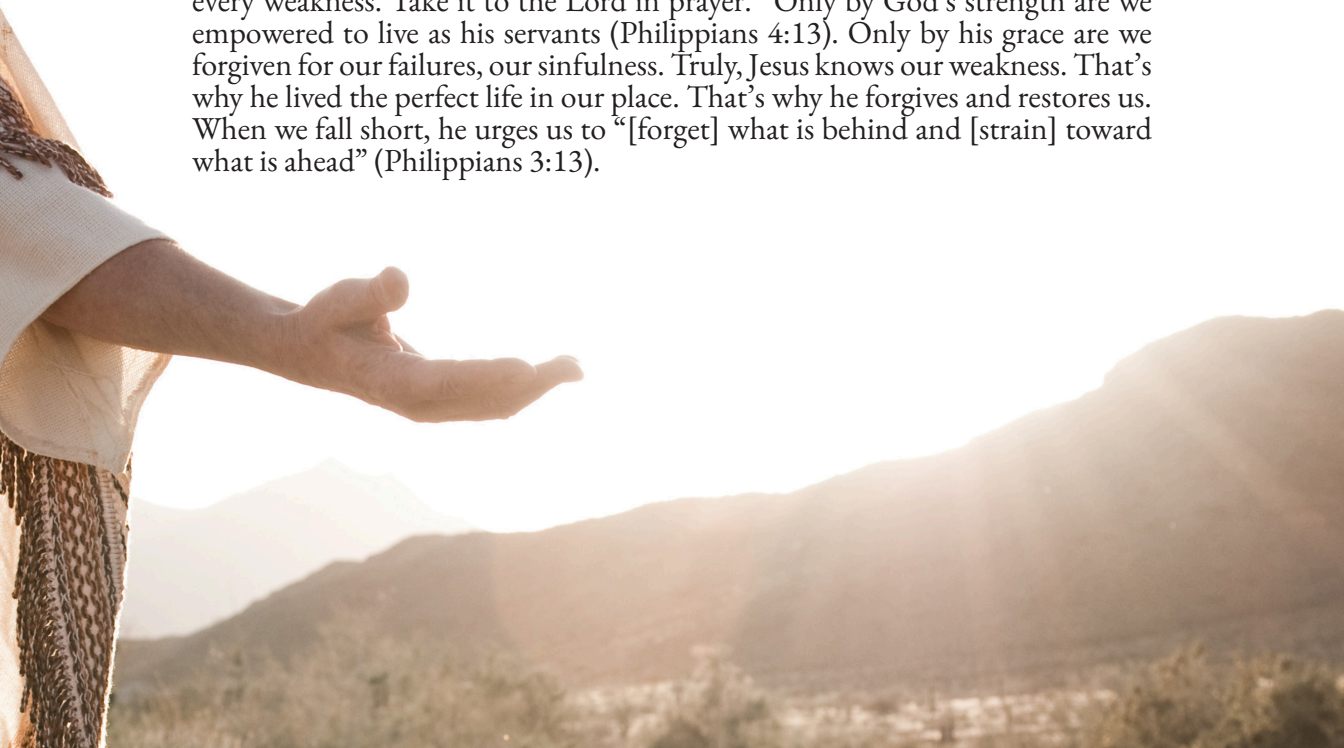
more to put our faith into practice. James reminds us that faith and actions work together and that faith is made complete by what we do (James 2:22).

Speaking about our service to others Joan Rawlusk wrote, “There is a great paradox in reaching out to someone ... and that is, the more you reach out to others, the more you will be touched yourself. Joy and happiness in great measure are waiting for us if we will reach just a little further. In the reaching we become God’s own hand.” While serving others, we are equally blessed. Jesus, speaking about acts of service, said, “blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17b).

Using Our Gifts for Service

First Peter 4:10 is one of the Bible’s most challenging and motivating verses: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” The verse outlines three truths. First of all, each one of us has received a gift. Second, we are to serve others. Finally, we are to be stewards in administering God’s grace, which has been entrusted to us.

Scripture teaches us that these are things we as Christians ought to do, but, like the old hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” reminds us, “Jesus knows our every weakness. Take it to the Lord in prayer.” Only by God’s strength are we empowered to live as his servants (Philippians 4:13). Only by his grace are we forgiven for our failures, our sinfulness. Truly, Jesus knows our weakness. That’s why he lived the perfect life in our place. That’s why he forgives and restores us. When we fall short, he urges us to “[forget] what is behind and [strain] toward what is ahead” (Philippians 3:13).



Bible Study

Empowered by Grace to Serve

Prayer: *Dear good and gracious heavenly Father, we pray for your blessings on this study as we examine the purpose you have for each of our lives. Empower us, Lord, to be faithful to our calling. Teach us to fix our eyes on you so that we will not be deterred in our serving and witnessing. Mold us into the people that you want us to be. In your name we pray. Amen.*

Introduction

As God's people, we are urged to "fix our eyes on Jesus" (Hebrews 12:2 NIV). The writer to the Philippians asserted, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). What is that attitude? When we "fix our eyes on Jesus," what will we see?

We see the Suffering Servant about whom Isaiah wrote. The one who has "borne our griefs and carried our sorrows"; the one who was "wounded for our transgressions ... crushed for our iniquities..." and by his "stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4, 5).

We see the Son of Man who, in his own words, "came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). This is the Son of Man who lived a childhood in obedience to his Father and to the earthly parents who were chosen for him. This is the Son of Man who preached and taught, who healed the sick, confronted the wicked, and comforted the despairing. This is the Son of Man who calls us to "deny [ourselves] and take up [our crosses] and follow [him]" (Matthew 16:24).

We follow him in paths of service. Just as Jesus did, we serve when it might be inconvenient or when the person needing our service is unlovable. Just as Jesus did, we put others first. Just as Jesus endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him" (Hebrews 12:2), we, too, will find joy and fulfillment in serving in Jesus' name.

As God's people, we are called to love God with all of our hearts, souls, and minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37). The key to our service is to live with an attitude that is God-centered. With God as our focus, we will want to love and serve him and others. Unfortunately, because we are by nature self-centered, our interest is in serving ourselves instead of serving others. When we succumb to the temptation of putting ourselves first, we place ourselves in the center of life, and we become less interested and ultimately unaware of the needs of others. God's grace turns us around. In Christ, He has put us first, so now we are freed to put others first.

Jesus said in Luke 4:8, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." Our prayer is that God will enable and strengthen us to put others first as we faithfully respond to his call to serve.

Questions for Discussion

1. How can you become a person who willingly serves others?

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings." Corinthians 9:19-23

2. How is your service seen as God working through you, and how do you make yourself available to serve?
3. How would you contrast true service with self-serving service?
4. In which service activities are you currently involved? What service is God prompting you to do? Is there someone you know who God wants you to serve regularly and consistently?

Prayer: *Dear good and gracious heavenly Father, we pray for your blessings on this study as we examine the purpose you have for each of our lives. Empower us, Lord, to be faithful to our calling. Teach us to fix our eyes on you so that we will not be deterred in our serving and witnessing. Mold us into the people that you want us to be. In your name we pray. Amen.*

Empowered by Grace to Witness

Called to be Fishers of Men

When the brothers Simon Peter and Andrew were called by Jesus to be his disciples, they were casting their fishing net into the sea. Jesus told them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). Peter and Andrew did not have to ask for time to consider Jesus’ invitation. They knew Jesus as the Messiah, and they regarded Jesus’ invitation as a special privilege, so they followed him. Jesus would be instructing and training them to go out and speak to other people about him. Andrew and Simon Peter had no special qualifications. It is unlikely that, as fishermen, they had any formal education. In the same way, we need no special degrees or qualifications to share the Gospel and become fishers of men, only that we are obedient and trust Jesus.

As fishers of men, Peter and Andrew would follow Jesus’ instruction and trust him to bring about the results he had in mind. Their experiences as fishermen possibly helped them to be patient and persevering. They exchanged their fishing nets for a new net that Jesus would provide, which we could call the means of grace, the Gospel of Christ in Word and Sacrament. This is the only power that can bring sinners into Christ’s kingdom.

When Jesus told his disciples that they would be fishers of men, he shared with them his mission and purpose. Jesus is about saving souls. We are called to that same mission. We plant the seeds and do a little watering, and Jesus provides the growth. Like Peter and Andrew, we become fishers of men.

Making Contacts for Jesus

Do your neighbors and co-workers know you are Christian? How about the person who sells you your coffee or the person who delivers your mail? Are you attempting to develop a relationship with these people so you can share the Good News of the Gospel with them? Scripture tells us that we have the responsibility and purpose to tell others about Jesus. We can give no greater service to Jesus than to be part of rescuing lost souls by sharing the life-saving

Gospel. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). God desires “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). We are to be Jesus’ hands, feet, and mouth. Jesus tells us “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2). We are the laborers whom Jesus is seeking.

For many, sharing the Gospel is uncomfortable. But don’t people need Jesus more than we need to be comfortable? God has placed us among many people who do not know Jesus. With God’s help, we can become very intentional with our witnessing. He can open our eyes to opportunities and give us the words to speak. We may want to consider developing a list of people who do not have a relationship with Jesus. The people could be in your inner circle of family and friends or in your outer circle of relationships. We can be empowered to witness because the Holy Spirit will guide and direct us.

Let your Light Shine



The Bible says, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The question we have to ask is, “How clearly and how brightly are we reflecting Christ in our lives?” There are lots of things that diminish our reflections. Willful disobedience to God’s will, unconfessed sin in our lives, grudges and anger, grief, and guilt diminish and tarnish our reflections. God designed us to be reflections of him, and what is happening in our lives, in our hearts, in our minds, and in our actions affects the brightness of the reflections.

God wants us to be his light, so others will be drawn not to us, but to Jesus, the “light of the world” (John 8:12). The depth of our own relationships with God matters a lot when it comes to letting his light shine!

We busy ourselves with a lot of activities, things that are important to us, and rightly so. We are going to be investing our time and energy in many things, yet each of us needs to ask, “How much am I investing in the lives of others?”

As children of the light, we have this Good News to tell. Jesus reminded us of the urgency of the proclamation of his redemption. We read in John 4:35 that Jesus said, “Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?’ Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are [ripe] for harvest.” There is a need for us to tell this message effectively, passionately, clearly, and with perseverance so that all may be led by God’s grace to respond to Christ’s gift of salvation.

Bible Study

Empowered by Grace to Witness

Prayer: *Dear good and gracious heavenly Father, we pray for your blessings on this study as we examine the purpose you have for each of our lives. Empower us, Lord, to be faithful to our calling. Teach us to fix our eyes on you so that we will not be deterred in our serving and witnessing. Mold us into the people that you want us to be. In your name we pray. Amen.*

Introduction

God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4), and he gives us the privilege and responsibility to share that truth, the Gospel, with all people. Empowered by his grace, he uses us as his hands, feet, and mouth. We are his instruments through which others hear and learn about Jesus and his love, grace, and mercy.

Prior to Jesus’ ascension, he told his disciples, “...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Filled with the Holy Spirit and his power, the disciples began the task that every generation of Christians since then has continued. Our witnessing takes place in our homes, neighborhoods, at our places of work, and beyond. Being a witness for Jesus is more than attending church or being busy in church work. We share his Gospel so others will come to know him as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). We have the opportunity to tell others of the greatest miracle that has ever occurred. The Son of God came to live as one of us, to be humiliated for the sake of those he loves, and then to rise victoriously, the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). This miracle is one to be shouted from the housetops, for it is meant not just for you and me, but for all humankind. That’s what the “Therefore” in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) means. Christ has died for our sins and risen again so that we might live forever with him. He has authority to issue this command. “GO THEREFORE!” Don’t keep this miracle a secret. Take time to tell it to your neighbors and friends. Use your talents to build up your church so that its mission and ministry might be enhanced. Spend your resources so that others (if not you yourself) are enabled to be his witnesses to “all nations.”

God’s plan for his people has always been that we take responsibility for sharing the Good News. Peter wrote, “Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). God blesses us with minds to learn and mouths to speak. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God will give us the words and the courage to use them. Along with most people, we are eager to talk about the weather, sports, economy, or politics, but, as Christians, we have been given “this treasure in jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7), the treasure of the Gospel message ... something vastly more important to talk about. Our attitude should be like that of Peter and John, who, when commanded to stop speaking of Christ, said, “...for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Questions for Discussion

1. Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. How does building relationships help you witness?

1 Corinthians 9:19-23. 19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; 20 and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the [e]law, that I might win those who are under the law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law (not being without [f]law toward God, but under [g]law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; 22 to the weak I became [h]as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 23 Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

2. You are not to be speechless when called upon to defend your faith (1 Peter 3:15). How can you “be prepared”?

1 Peter 3:15, 15 But [a]sanctify [b]the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;

Paul's Witness

After his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul lived his life witnessing for Jesus. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he had much to say in his letters about proclaiming the Gospel. In 1 Corinthians 9:16-17, Paul discussed his role as a steward of the Gospel: “For if I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.” Paul was controlled by the love of Christ to give his life over to preaching the Word of God (2 Corinthians 5:14).

In 1 Corinthians 4:1 Paul introduced himself and his fellow workers “as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Paul was called to be a servant and steward for the Lord in order to win others for Christ. Knowing that as a

steward for Christ his strength was not his own, he stated, “For this I toil, struggling with all [God’s] energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:29). Paul saw his life, energy, and motivation as gifts of grace. “Of this Gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power” (Ephesians 3:7). The greatest treasure we can share with others is the Good News of the Gospel. That same grace that motivated and empowered Paul to go about witnessing for Jesus can equip and energize us.

Prayer: *Lord, we thank you for the privilege and opportunity to be your witnesses. Grant us faith, boldness, and generosity to be effective in sharing the Gospel with others. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*



Empowered by Grace to Give

Following Jesus' Example

Jesus shows us how to give. Jesus gave us the greatest and most perfect gift by offering himself on the Cross. Filled with gratitude and love for what Jesus has done for us, we are empowered to give. Our giving emulates Jesus who showed us what it means to love and to give. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we become “givers” rather than “takers.”

Born into sin, we are by nature selfish people. As toddlers, one of the first words we learned was “no,” followed closely by “mine!” This selfish attitude carries forward into our adult years. Obviously a selfish attitude is not conducive to giving. However, when God transforms our hearts, selfishness is no longer an obstacle to our giving. By the working of the Holy Spirit through his Word, God redirects our hearts and minds from focusing on ourselves to focusing on him. With our hearts right with God, we can acknowledge him as the owner of all things and trust in Jesus' care and protection, opening our hearts to give.

Giving our First and Best

Giving is an act of worship which expresses our praise and gratitude to God for his precious gifts to us, especially the gift of salvation through his Son, Jesus. Empowered by grace, we understand that who we are and what we have are gifts from God, and we demonstrate our thanks by returning willingly and generously a portion of our blessings to him. God is pleased when we give cheerfully from loving and trusting hearts (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Even though God should receive the first and best from his people, we read in the first chapter of Malachi that the Israelites went through only the outward motions of giving as they offered their sick and dying animals. They showed disrespect to God by giving what they didn't want. “When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil?” (Malachi 1:8). In essence, gifts reflect how much God is revered and appreciated. Through their giving, the Israelites demonstrated their lack of trust, respect, and gratitude for God.

Sadly, we, too, often show disrespect to God through our giving. If we give away only unwanted items in the house or loose change that we pull out of our pockets at the end of the day, our gifts are not from the heart. If we give grudgingly, God is not pleased, nor is he pleased when we give what is left over after we pay our bills. If we give for tax reasons or for recognition, God is not being honored. Since God is more concerned about the motive of giving than the gift itself, he desires gifts that come from loving and giving hearts.

Blessings for Giving Faithfully

When our hope is in Jesus rather than in material security, we are empowered to be generous. Trusting in him to provide for all our needs, physical and spiritual, we are freed to give, rather than to hoard those blessings. As we express our love



for God through our giving, God blesses us with fuller lives. Through serving the needy, we are enriched. True fulfillment comes when we live a generous lifestyle ... manifested by a willingness to share our time, talents, and money. The recipients of our gifts are blessed in what they receive, and God blesses us for giving. Because we now live the abundant life in Christ, we are eager to share our blessings with others.

Through a willingness to share, we will store up “treasure for [ourselves] as a good foundation for the future, so that [we] may take hold of that which is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:17-19). The true life belongs to those who are unselfish, by God’s grace, with their lives and resources. Giving rescues us from a self-consumed life of idolatry and covetousness. Giving is evidence of unselfishness and an outward indicator of the condition of our hearts.

2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9 record the Apostle Paul’s effort to secure a collection from the people in Corinth for the distressed Christians in Jerusalem. He promises them a true and full life for their generosity when he writes: “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Corinthians 9:6). When we give much, we will receive much. Solomon expressed the principle of sowing and reaping in these words: “One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered” (Proverbs 11:24-25). He also wrote, “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed” (Proverbs 19:17). God has ordained that, when we give generously, we receive generously.

Bible Study

Empowered by Grace to Give

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for your generosity toward us, demonstrated especially by the gift of your Son, Jesus. Grant us loving and thankful hearts so we might give freely to you through our church. Bless this study as we learn what it means to be empowered by grace to give faithfully and generously. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*

Introduction

In the beginning God gave, and he continues to give. God's character is to give. Out of his love, God gives humanity a beautiful and majestic place to dwell. Our heavenly Father loves us so much that he holds nothing back from us. God gives and keeps on giving. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). To give and to keep on giving is the essential nature of God, who is love. All that we are, have, and hope to be are gifts from God.

We give because God first gave to us. The natural response of love is to give. Love is never close-lipped or tight-fisted. Love never asks how little I must give, but how much can I give. When we are filled with God's love, we give.

Acknowledging God's ownership is a basic principle for Christian giving. King David said, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1). When we give our gifts to God as grateful and faithful stewards, we are merely returning to him what he has already given to us. Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 4:7, "What do you have that you did not receive?"

Wholehearted and unconditional giving has its source in God who himself gave unreservedly. Because of the awesome love shown to us at the cross, we give. God, abiding in us, enables us to give, for, through Christ, we have his very nature, a giving nature. We become more Christ-like as his love for us and within us opens our clenched fists and breaks down our natural desire to put ourselves first. Then we can experience the joy of giving and grow in the grace of giving.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does today's consumerism impede your giving?
2. In what ways does giving indicate the spiritual condition of your heart?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 8:7. What does it mean to excel in the grace of giving?

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. 2 Corinthians 8:7

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for this study and the encouragement we receive through it to give faithfully and generously. You have given so freely and generously to us. Help us to show our gratitude to you by faithfully using and giving our money as you direct us. Open our eyes and hearts to the opportunities to help those in need and to ways that we can further your kingdom. Thank you for Jesus who suffered and died on the Cross so we can live as forgiven and redeemed people here on earth and forever with you in heaven. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

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