

"November 15th Is Not April 15th"
A Sermon Based on 2 Corinthians 9:6-15
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In case you were wondering, November 15th, Consecration Sunday, is not April 15th. Now I know we all know that intellectually. After all, daylight savings time just ended; it didn't just begin. The weather is getting colder, not warmer. Leaves are beginning to fall, not bud. Today is the first of November, kick-off to our stewardship campaign, two weeks prior to November 15th, which is not April 15th.

April 15th is one of those handful of dates that is known simply by its date: like December 25th, January 1st, February 14th, July 4th, October 31st. But unlike all those other dates, April 15th, I suppose is the one that brings us little joy. It's not even a holiday.

I, for one, dread April 15th. Each year around the beginning of April, I get a call from my accountant, my tax man. "Scott," he says, "it's that time of year. Get your taxes in to me. You're my last client." When it comes to taxes, I procrastinate. It's so complicated, my being a minister. Lots of special rules for clergy.

I don't particularly like April 15th, not only for how complicated taxes have become, but for the very thought that I am giving away such a large percentage of my hard-earned income to our government. Yes, I know that government is a good thing. Paula affirms that especially in Romans 13. And I know that we Americans are far from being the most taxed people in the industrialized world. I appreciate the fact that we have good school systems to educate us, nice highways that transport us, police and firefighters and military to protect us, 911 service and disaster relief service to help us when an emergency strikes, and social security to care for us in our old age. Taxes enable all that and more. But I admit I don't get excited about writing that check to the IRS.

Perhaps some of you feel the same way. Perhaps some of you wait minutes before the stroke of midnight on April 15th to take your tax returns to the post office. Or maybe your middle name is "Extension." Except on those rare occasions when we are actually owed money back, we tally up our taxes, sign them, and then, with joy in our hearts--Ha! Ha!-- we write a check to Uncle Sam. April 15th is simply a day most of us wished would go away.

And I suppose many of us here this morning feel the same about November 15th, Holy Consecration Sunday, or Stewardship Commitment Sunday or Dedication Sunday in some circles. It is a time when we all submit our financial pledges to the work of the church. For you visitors this morning, I can see you with that dreaded look in your eyes, that "deer in the headlights" look. "Oh no, honey, we're visiting on Stewardship Kick-Off Sunday. Noooooo!" You visitors hang in there with us. I'd like to think there is something in this message for you as well.

As I speak to the members, as you anticipate filling out your “Estimate of Giving” card in two weeks, perhaps you do so not so much out of a sense of joy, but rather out of a sense of obligation. We write in our pledge, we sign our check not so much because we are thrilled about helping to enable the work of the church, but simply because that is what a good Christian is supposed to do. As with our taxes, our pledges to the church are our obligation.

Apparently, the Corinthian church had some of those same feelings, a sense of dread when asked to give. At an earlier time, Paul had sent his associate Titus to take up an offering for the church in Jerusalem, a church that obviously was poor and needy. In this second letter to the Corinthian church, Paul was sending him back again to urge the Christians there to make good on the contributions that they themselves had long before pledged but never fulfilled. Earlier, Paul had encouraged them to give insofar as they are able based upon the principle of equality, for, as Paul states, “it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need.” Give in response to what Christ had done for them, Paul writes.

When we do that, as Paul suggests, things change. Primarily, we get a new attitude to what we do. We give not under compulsion, but with joy in our hearts. God loves a cheerful giver. What a great Bible bumper sticker. The actual Greek translates better, “God loves a hilarious giver.” What a unique adjective to describe an attitude toward giving: hilarious. That’s cheerfulness taken to the nth degree. That’s cheerfulness that borders on being giddy.

After all, the cheerful, hilarious, giddy giver discovers that the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Paul’s point here is not that God will enable people to attain the ancient (and modern) ideal of economic self-sufficiency. Rather, God will supply their needs so that they may in turn help supply the needs of others. God enables generosity. As Paul says, “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” God enables generosity. Say that with me, “God enables generosity.” Every act of charity that we do, including our pledging, become a response to a God to whom we are all eternally indebted. God enables generosity. That’s the first thing I want you to remember this morning.

The second thing is this: Generosity glorifies God. Say that with me: “Generosity glorifies God.” Paul makes that so clear. “You glorify God,” he writes, “by the generosity of your giving.” As we give our money away, we do so not out of some general philanthropic ideal. Our giving should be shaped by the conviction that every human being is ultimately dependent upon and accountable to God and, most importantly, made in God’s image. God is glorified every time we help others through this church. God is glorified every time on the fourth Sunday of each month when a group of youth and adults from this church go serve hundreds of homeless breakfast downtown. God is glorified every time we host another homeless family here at the church through our Family Promise program. God is glorified on each Saturday night as so many of you are working so diligently on your Sunday School lesson the next day. God is glorified every time we decide on Sunday morning to get out of bed and come to this place to sing our praises to God. God is glorified every time we give generously and sacrificially with hilarious joy in our hearts to the work of the church. Generosity glorifies God.

I've shared this before, but my wife, Karla, and I enjoy entertaining friends. Each time practically, I have to say, Karla goes all out. If it were up to me, I admit, when friends come over, I'd just get a frozen Stouffer's lasagna, transfer it over to our own casserole dish, and serve it. Take the easy way out. But not my wife. When friends come over, Karla begins the long preparation early. She gets out the special dining room dishes--the "fine china." She re-washes them, even though I think they're okay ("Just blow off the dust," I tell her). She'll iron the tablecloth. Then she'll get out a recipe book, usually the Rachel Ray book, make her choices, write up the shopping list, and then head off to Publix. When she returns, she comes back with about 12 bags of groceries to serve our four guests. She then cooks the 12-course meal to perfection.

Almost always, the meal is a big hit. I have to hand it to my wife. She makes our guests feel special. And then with the abundant leftovers, we fill up our tupperware so that we can eat chicken cordon bleu for breakfast, lunch, and dinner all week until it's gone. I trust most of you have been to such a meal where, as a guest to such a fine spread, you feel like a king or queen.

Now imagine with me for a moment if this process were reversed. Imagine Karla having cooked a lavish meal for just her immediate family. We enjoy to our hearts' content. Then afterwards, we gather all the leftovers, put them in the tupperware and then into the refrigerator. A few days later, we invite special friends over. We then get those leftovers in the Tupperware out of the refrigerator, and we bring them over to our guests. We say (ACT OUT WITH REAL LEFTOVERS), "Here you go, Jerry, how about some five-meat Christmas pasta from our family meal the other night. We cooked so much then, we figured we share our leftovers with you, our guests."

How would you feel? Hardly like a king or queen. Even if the food actually tasted pretty good, I suppose, you would somehow feel a bit cheated, knowing that what you are eating is leftovers.

Perhaps that's the way God feels when all we give God is the leftovers. At the beginning of the year, for some of us, we set aside money for all our bills, for the mortgage, the cable, eating out, vacations, etc. and if by chance it looks like we have money left over we give some of it to the church.

Does your giving represent your leftovers or is it the best you have to offer? Or in good Biblical language, does it represent your "first fruit"? If what you give are simply your leftovers, chances are there is little joy in such giving, and certainly no hilarity. It's like that five-meat Christmas pasta; there's a lot more joy in eating it on the first day than on fourth day when it is leftovers.

A man I know faithfully tithes his 10 percent of his income each year to the church. When asked if he struggled with giving so much and if he worried about money, he responded, "Of course, I worry about money. I just worry about 90 percent of it. The other ten percent doesn't even come into play." God loves a cheerful giver.

As I think about how we Christians deal with our money, I am reminded of how in the early church certain Christians were baptized. When Christianity became "official" with the conversion of Constantine in 303 AD, soldiers of the Roman army suddenly were being baptized

by the thousands. When the commander-in-chief becomes a Christian, it is perhaps in the best interest of his followers that they too follow his example and become baptized as well, especially as it became a virtual crime not to become a Christian.

An interesting thing took place as these soldiers were baptized. As they were immersed into the water (that's the way baptisms were done then), their entire body was submerged, except for one thing, their arm, which was held out of the water holding a sword. The idea was, they were letting their whole selves be baptized in the name of the triune God--everything, that is, except that which killed others. So therefore they could rationalize their violence and destruction.

Sometimes I think we in the church act similarly. We get baptized, but the one thing many of us metaphorically hold out of the water is our wallets and checkbooks. We pretend that how we spend our money has absolutely nothing to do with our being disciples of Jesus Christ. We say that our money is of world, not of the spiritual realm, and therefore has nothing to do with our faith. Such reasoning, however, indeed misses the mark, for Jesus says much about money in the Scriptures, perhaps more than any other topic: how you get it, how you use it, and what your attitude toward it is. How you spend your money is integral to your relationship with God.

It is my hope and prayer that as we kick off this stewardship season today that all of our baptisms be complete, for God enables generosity. Generosity glorifies God. November 15th is not April 15th. We come with joy. We come to give our first fruits, not our leftovers. God loves a cheerful, hilarious giver. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. Amen.