

We Teach . . .

The Grace of Giving Stewardship

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age

—Titus 2:11-12.

Stewardship. Giving. Tithing. Offering. No matter what we call it, these words invoke images ranging from offering envelopes to giving campaign thermometers to the slick, emotion-wrenching pleas of TV evangelists. Many pastors find it their unpleasant task to preach on stewardship when the church is behind budget. Trustee boards languish over giving profiles wishing more people would tithe. And lots of Christians wish they could better manage their resources for their own *and* their church’s benefit.

So how do we talk about this subject? “The grace of God . . . teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and selfish passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives...”

GRACE

Grace: God’s undeserved favor. God loving us even though we don’t deserve his love. God forgiving us even though we don’t deserve forgiveness. God giving to us eternal life when we deserve only eternal judgment.

Grace is the father waiting for the prodigal to come home and then throwing aside all of his dignity and running to his prodigal son who has disgraced him and disowned him and throwing his arms around him and kissing him. Grace is the answer to Mozart’s prayer in his *Requiem*, “Remember, merciful Jesu, that I am the cause of your journey.” Grace is Hosea rescuing his adulterous wife from slavery. Grace is God denouncing Ephraim and Israel for their sins and then crying out, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath” (Hosea 11:8-9, NIV).

But such free grace has a costly price-tag. Even though God’s grace is free to us, it was costly to God. God gave his Son. God’s Son suffered the shame and poverty of the cross to make us rich in grace. God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense. Grace.

WHAT DOES GOD’S GRACE

TEACH US TO DO?

First, God’s grace teaches us to say “No.” To what? To ungodliness and selfish passions. Second, God’s grace teaches us to say “Yes,” yes to self-control, right actions, and godliness. Let’s look at each of these two lessons to see how they relate to stewardship.

God’s grace teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and selfish passions as we manage our resources.

Someone has well said, “Show me your check register and I’ll tell you about your priorities and lifestyle.” Our money is one of the few accurate measures of our lives. The way we spend or don’t spend our money reveals our purposes and even many of our passions. Grace teaches us to resist spending or hoarding our money in ungodly ways motivated by selfish passions.

What are these ungodly ways?

Using our money to feed our egos by acquiring possessions or wealth for their own sake. Using our money selfishly only for our own pleasures and not for the needs of the poor and the lost. Using our money for entertainments that are unhealthy and ungodly. Treating our money as though it were our own to do with as we please rather than a stewardship received from God. Grace teaches us to say “No” to these things.

How? It would be easy to just quote the words of Jesus, “Freely you have received. Freely give.” Yet, we misunderstand his words if we hear him saying, “You have received grace, God’s gifts of love, forgiveness and life given freely without cost or obligation. Therefore, you ought to respond in kind.” But this turns the words of Jesus into demand and it turns grace into law. We need more than to be told, “Now that you’ve received grace, you’re obligated to give back.” No, grace does something other than create obligations in us. Grace changes us.

August Toplady captured the essence of this change in the following line from the hymn, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for me.” In the first verse he wrote: “*Let the water and the blood, From Thy wounded side which flowed, Be of sin the double cure, Save me from its guilt and pow’r.*” The “double” cure is this: salvation from both sin’s guilt and sin’s power. The grace of God in the Gospel has set me free from sin’s condemnation. It is now setting me free from sin’s power.

Jesus is describing the life that has been the recipient of God's grace. We will freely give. Before coming to Christ we were motivated by selfish passions and we spent accordingly. Now, we give motivated by Grace. If we are not doing as Jesus described—freely giving—then we need again to hear God's condemning word, i.e., his law. God's word condemns us for our love of the world, for not saying "No" to ungodly lusts in the way we spend our money. Amazingly, grace does not then throw us into a cycle of "You should have. Now you better." Instead it brings us what we do not deserve, forgiveness—again. We, the very ones to whom God has freely given and who have failed to give freely, we are forgiven—again.

So then I can just keep spending on myself and asking for forgiveness, right? Wrong. When there is no change, when there is no graciousness, no freely giving, in us, we show that grace means nothing to us. Grace has just become an easy escape from the responsibility for our sin. We are acting like the unforgiving steward who owed a couple billion and wouldn't forgive a debt of a few bucks even though grace and mercy had erased his debt. The same Law of God that necessitates grace if we are to be saved still condemns such a flippant attitude towards grace and ungodliness.

Grace does not teach me to spend on myself and then ask for forgiveness. Grace teaches me to say "No" to ungodliness motivated by selfish passions and to instead give freely motivated by the grace I have received.

2. God's grace teaches us to say "Yes" to self-control, right actions, and godliness as we manage our resources.

The Greek word for "self-control" in Titus 2:12 is not primarily focused on controlling our greedy impulses when we walk into the mall. That idea is stated negatively in the first phrase: saying "No" to selfish passions. This word is more concerned with "thoughtfulness" and "prudence." Grace teaches us to budget wisely and to plan our giving carefully. Of course there is always room for spontaneity in giving when our passion and compassion is aroused by the desperate plight of the poor and the lost. But Grace directs us through this word to prudently and thoughtfully manage our resources.

The next word, "righteously," can simply be understood through its root. It means to do what is right. Someone who is righteous conforms to the laws of God. Grace declares that God looks on us in Christ as perfectly conforming to his laws. Grace teaches us to now do what is right according to God's law.

What is right? Above everything else, Grace teaches us to give freely. We never give in order to obligate God to bless us. We don't even give to fulfill our obligations to God. We give freely just as we have received.

Grace teaches us to give joyfully. "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Grace teaches us to give humbly. "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17).

Grace teaches us to give generously. "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Timothy 6:18).

What is right? Tithing can be right. Those who base their financial giving on a percentage such as 10% of their income trust God to provide for their needs on 90% or other percentage of their remaining income. This means that they give trustingly. "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).

What is right? Acknowledging God's ownership of *all* we possess is right. God owns everything because he created it. "The earth is the Lord's" (Psalm 24:1). Now he also owns us by right of redemption. "You are not your own. You were bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

What is right? Seeking justice for the poor and the oppressed in our economic and political system is right. This is the rallying cry of the prophet Amos as he denounced the wealthy in Israel who oppressed the poor and crushed the needy. He called for justice (the same word used for righteousness) to roll down like a stream.

What is right? It is right to give consistently and proportionately. "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income" (1 Corinthians 16:2).

What is right? It is right to trust God to oversee the right use of our gift. While we seek to give intelligently, we do not hold back our giving in order to have power over the decision makers. To do so is prideful and a withholding of what belongs to God. This means that we also give corporately. It is our nature to want to be independent. However, in the work of the kingdom there is a powerful interdependence. We submit our gifts to the local congregation so that we can work together to accomplish the ministry God has called us to.

The last word that delineates our look the grace of stewardship is an inclusive term: godliness. What does grace teach us as the *godly* way to manage our resources and to give to the Lord's work?

Grace has a four-point outline in teaching us godly giving.

Give sacrificially. This is the essence of grace. God gave all he had though it was undeserved because the need was so great. Like the widow who put in more than all the rest, we are called to give it all. We are even called to give ourselves. Like the Christians in Macedonia who gave out of their extreme poverty (2 Corinthians 8:2), we are called to give more than our wealth. They first gave themselves to the Lord (vs. 5); so do we.

Give compassionately. While we can't stir our emotions each time we give, we do give because of the need and not only because of the Lord's command. We give out of compassion for the poor who are hungry and the unsaved who are lost spiritually. In this God bestows on us a great blessing and a great honor. We can participate in the ministry of his kingdom simply through our gifts.

Give personally. We don't give just to a budget. We give to people and to mission.

Give intelligently. We give so that we can help.

Grace. That awesome, free mercy and love of God which reaches out to poor sinners like us. This grace teaches us to say "No" to selfish passions in using our wealth and to say "Yes" to the free and right use of our resources.

Dr. David Veum is President of Lutheran Brethren Seminary in Fergus Falls, MN.

As you seek how to best support your local Congregation, and other ministries to which you are committed, prayerfully consider the grace of giving in your response.