

We Give Thee But Thine Own

1 Chronicles 28:1-6, 29:1-18

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If you have been to Jerusalem, you have seen the Western Wall, known also as the Wailing Wall. No tour of the Holy City is complete without a visit to the site where Jews have gathered to pray for at least five hundred years. The wall is massive, some sixty feet in height, containing stones weighing over a hundred tons. Originally, the wall supported the high platform on which Solomon built the Jewish temple nine hundred fifty years before Christ. We call it Solomon's Temple, but if David had had his way, the temple would have borne his name, not his son's. David had already donated enough material to make a good start on the building when he got the bad news from God: "You shall not build a house for my name, for you are a warrior and have shed blood." That must have been a bitter disappointment. He had set aside all that money and material, and then God ruled against him. Someone else, his son Solomon, would get the credit for building the Temple. And how did David react?

He might have responded in anger. We're all human, after all, and when things don't go our way it's easy to get upset, and then to recruit others to our crusade. But had David done that, had David nursed his anger and stirred up others, he would have split the kingdom down the middle, and the Temple might never have been built. David did not let his personal disappointment metastasize into congregational cancer.

Or David might have cancelled his pledge. But had he done that it would have been the innocent who suffered most, people who come to the Lord's house seeking counsel and comfort, families wanting to be led in worship and instructed in the faith. David did not cancel his pledge or withhold his giving just because he didn't get his way.

In fact, he increased his giving after learning he would not be allowed to build the Temple. "In addition to all that I have provided for the holy house, I have a treasure of my own of gold and silver, and because of my devotion to the house of my God I give it to the house of my God." That kind of generosity is unheard of: giving even more when your name won't go on the building. So why did he do it?

First, because he wasn't out to promote himself but to glorify God. "The temple," he said, "will not be for mortals but for the Lord God." But surely the temple was for mortals. Surely it was a place where men and women could offer their prayers, sing their hymns, and receive assurance of God's forgiveness and blessing. Yes, all that is true, but David's point is that the temple didn't belong to mortals. It was not the property of the clergy who ministered there, nor was it owned by the people who supported it with their offerings. Even David, far and away the biggest contributor, would not control the temple. He paid for it, but it was not his temple. Then whose was it? Repeatedly David speaks of "the house of God," and "the house of the Lord." And when he prays, he voices one of the most magnificent tributes to God found anywhere in Scripture: "Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all."

Yes, and "Yours is The National Presbyterian Church, O God, for you are exalted as head above all." This is not my church, or your church, or even our church. This is God's church. And if I have learned anything in my fourteen months as your interim pastor, it is that we as a congregation want to worship God devotedly, to follow Christ faithfully, to study Scripture diligently, to witness creatively, and to serve compassionately. Like David, our main concern is not to promote ourselves, but to glorify God. Secondly, David was generous because, though his name was on the bank account, his money really belonged to God. "O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own." (29:16) But is that really true? When we place our tithes and offerings in the plate on Sunday, are we giving what was really God's all along? Yes, and for two reasons. First, it belongs to God by right of creation. Life itself is a gift from God, and so are the opportunities and freedoms we enjoy in abundance. Of course we must study and work to make something of ourselves, but the raw materials came gift-wrapped from the hand of God. "The world and all that is in it is mine," says the Lord in Psalm 50. Second, our money belongs to God by right of redemption: "Do you not know...that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price." (1 Cor. 6:19-20) I cannot look at the cross hanging above the chancel and then go out and do as I please with my life. I belong to Another, lock, stock, and barrel. And if all that we have belongs to God, what then? Must we give it all to God? No, for God graciously says, "I don't need it all; keep 90% for yourself." Carol and I have found across the years that we can live very well on 90%. Even when my salary was mediocre; even when our children were small; even when we were buying a home; even when we were paying our daughters' college bills, even then we had the joy of giving at least 10% of our income to undergird the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Finally, because his possessions really belonged to God, David gave ungrudgingly: "In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you." David might have been the author of the hymn we will sing in a moment, "We give thee but thine own, whate'er the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee. May we thy bounties thus as stewards true receive, and gladly, as thou blessest us, to thee our first-fruits give."

In last week's mail our members received a Faith Giving brochure containing a tear-off card on which you can commit your support for the ministry of this church in 2004. If you find you cannot give ungrudgingly, then please do this with that card (tore it up). But if God's glory means more to you than your own reputation or comfort or pleasure, fill this card out and bring it back next Sunday.

If you consider giving to be nothing more than an obligation of membership, like paying taxes to the government, then do this with the card (tore it up). But if you know that you have been bought with a price, show your gratitude by filling out this card and bringing it back next Sunday.

A pastor I once heard of told his congregation, "Friends, I have wonderful news about next year's budget." He paused for a moment and then said, "We already have the money." A happy buzz went through the congregation until the pastor held up his hands for quiet. "Yes," he said, "we have all the money we need. Now all we have to do...is give it."

David gave it, ungrudgingly, freely and joyously. Then, after setting a marvelous example, he turned to the congregation and asked, "Who then will offer willingly, consecrating themselves...to the Lord?" And listen to the response: "Then the leaders of ancestral houses made their freewill offerings, as did also the leaders of the tribes, the commanders of the thousands and of the hundreds, and the officers over the king's work. They gave for the service of the house of God five thousand talents and ten thousand darics of gold, ten thousand talents of silver, eighteen thousand talents or bronze, and one hundred thousand talents of iron. Whoever had precious stones gave them to the treasury of the house of the Lord, into the care of Jehiel the Gershonite. Then the people rejoiced because these had given willingly, for with single mind they had offered freely to the Lord."

That's what Faith Giving is all about, really. It's all about answering David's challenge: "Who will offer willingly, consecrating themselves to the Lord?" For the fact is, we have all the money we need. All we have to do is give it.