

REDISCOVER MACEDONIA

A spirit of gratitude and generosity



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Bible Study #4 – Giving Freely

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Voluntarily gave ... according to their means

“For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means,...”
-2 Corinthians 8:3

“But is that really fair?”

The youth leaders were discussing the upcoming mission trip, and how best to divide the considerable expenses involved. The discussion had revealed a host of complicated factors. There were some families with more than one child in youth group. In one family, unemployment made finances tight, while other youth came from relative affluence. When it came to fund raisers, some of the youth were readily available to help, but others worked on weekends to help support their families or save for college, and others were involved in sports or other extra-curricular activities.

Dividing the expenses evenly seemed reasonable for those who could afford it. Others thought the money should all be raised as a group, with everyone required to participate in the fundraisers. This would allow those whose families were cash strapped to participate. But it was such a large amount of money to raise, that it would discourage participation among the youth who were working or involved in other activities. A compromise position advocated a split between youth group funds, with a detailed accounting of hours worked, and families assuming responsibility for the cost.

Finally someone suggested a radical idea. What if the group let each family know what the over-all cost would be, and asked them to prayerfully consider what they could contribute. Whatever additional funds were needed would be collected through fundraisers and sponsorships. Anyone who couldn't participate in the fundraisers would be asked to seek sponsors for the trip on behalf of the group.

There was some skepticism at first. Why would anybody contribute? What if some people just used this as a way to get a free trip? How would they handle it if one paid a lot and another was taking advantage and not doing their fair share? But as they thought it through, and considered their relationships, they decided that maybe this could work. Maybe if each one gave what they were able, there would be enough. And if grace was required, well, this couldn't this be a chance to practice what we preach.

Have you ever experienced a dilemma like this one in your church, or in another group? How did you address it? (Pause to share stories!)

Are you a person of means? Chances are, if you are reading this, you are. In the North American context a focus on the super-rich can leave us feeling like our means are meager in comparison. Yet even a person with an annual income of \$5,445, (half the United States Department of Health and Human Services poverty guideline), has a higher income than eight-five percent of the people on earth.

On the website “Global Rich List” (www.globalrichlist.com), you can enter your income and see where you rank in the world context. It can be an eye-opening experience! The 25 richest people in the world have more combined income than the 25 million poorest. When we compare what we have with those whose incomes are similar to or higher than our own, and do not consider those with lower income levels, we get a skewed view of how rich we are.

What influences your sense of how wealthy you are?

How does it feel to think of yourself as a person of means? (Pause to share stories!)

Paul recognized that the Macedonian Christians had limited means financially, but he also realized that they were blessed by God. They had some capacity to give. His expectation of their gift was small, because their quantity of resources was small. But Paul did expect them to make a gift in proportion to their financial means.

The idea of a proportionate offering was consistent with the Hebraic tradition that Paul knew prior to his encounter with Jesus. The Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) make clear that offerings are expected to be proportionate to means. Those who have been blessed with much are expected to give in proportion to what they have received. The generosity of individuals is to be an echo of the generosity they have received at God’s hand.

Since God is the source of all that we have, it is our right and responsibility to participate in the offering, **“Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth,” - Deuteronomy 8:17-18a**

As far back as the book of Genesis, Jacob, in response to his vision at Bethel, committed a tenth of everything that he had to God: **“of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.” – Genesis 28:22b**

Jesus too, referred to an expectation of generosity proportionate to what had been received. **“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” - Luke 12:48b**

Do you think about giving as a percentage or proportion of your income?

Have you calculated a tenth of your income?

Does the figure surprise you? Have you, or others in your group, tried tithing?

(Pause to share stories!)

Paul is clear that contributions to the work of God in the world are not meant to be a work of the law. They are not a way to earn God's favor, but a natural response to the favor we have already received from God. He declares that giving must be voluntary:

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And 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. – II Corinthians 9:7-8

When people consider giving to the work of God in the world, how do they decide on the right amount to give? Do you know a cheerful giver? (Pause to share stories!)

When I first began to tithe, (give one tenth of my income), I was a college student with barely any income. It wasn't that hard. A tenth of almost nothing is almost nothing! As I grew older, with a greater income, and responsibilities like a mortgage and children, I have occasionally been surprised at the size of my tithe. Like a mustard seed, that nothing has grown to a significant size. I know that I am free in Christ and could contribute less, yet even when I have seen lean times, I always still seem to have enough.

Tithing is a significant enough contribution that I notice it, which helps me remember my commitment to God in my everyday life. Yet, because my tithe increases or decreases with my income it isn't a burden and it makes me mindful of how much I have been blessed.

The Youth group families and the Macedonian Christians, were committed to being part of the God's work in the world, recognized how they had been blessed, and willingly contributed according to their means. They dared to trust God and the community of faith!

*Let us pray,
Lord God, you have generously blessed us. When we were separated from you by sin and death, you gave yourself to overcome the world and include us in your kingdom. Give us eyes to see our wealth, and the courage and generosity we need to love one another and follow you!*