

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, November 12, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6,7

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly,
and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each one
should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly
or under compulsion, for God loves a generous giver!”

FAITH PROMISES AND CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP

If you are a visitor to Faith Church this morning I want you to know that any member of the congregation will attest to the fact that I very rarely preach about money! But I address the subject today because on November 19 we will ask you, as members and friends of the Church, to indicate how much you will promise God that you will give to His work for 1990.

It is always well to remember that Jesus spoke a great deal about money. In fact, 16 of His 38 parables deal with money. The Bible has a great deal to say about prayer -- 500 verses. It has a great deal to say about faith -- something less than 500 verses. But more than 1,200 verses are devoted to the subject of money and possessions. Now either Jesus spoke too much about money, or we don't emphasize it enough. Do you know that in the Gospels an amazing one out of every ten verses -- 288 of them in all — deals with the subject of money. So, let us give our close attention to this important subject of the stewardship of our possessions.

Here at Faith Church we adhere to a concept in Christian stewardship which we believe is most honoring to God. It is called the FAITH PROMISE; and I wish, this morning, to explain its meaning and significance, especially for the benefit of the many new friends who have joined our fellowship in recent times.

The Faith Promise allows us to promise God the amount He wants us to give, and then to exercise faith in Him to supply that amount plus the rest of our needs during the coming year. The Faith Promise is not a system of pledges to the church but is rather a promise only between the individual believer and God Himself. No one will ever know what you promise except God and yourself.

You go to God in prayer, saying, “Lord, what would You have me promise?” And God puts into your mind and heart the amount He wants you to give. As He thus reveals to us individually, or as a married couple, the amount He desires us to trust Him for, He thereby gives us an opportunity to demonstrate our faith, and to allow Him to increase our faith in His ability to care for us in every way.

Perhaps you have been in the habit of making a pledge, by ascertaining your projected income for the year ahead, and then determining what amount you should return to God. This process simply takes a little mathematics and a little faith. All we do, virtually, is to commit a

fraction of what we know we will be receiving.

But it is entirely different with a faith promise offering. I have to pray and ask God how much He would have me give, then trust Him for it. Month by month, or week by week, I must go to Him in prayer and ask Him for the amount promised. I must wait upon Him until it comes in. That is the offering that brings blessing. That is the offering that will increase our faith, because, as God provides what may seem to us to be a staggering amount, our faith in His providing ability will increase, and we will praise Him for allowing us to be good stewards of what He has entrusted to us.

Now let us look at the Faith Promise card you received through the mail. The left-hand section says, "My Faith Promise to God." After prayer and careful reflection, you hear from God what He wants you to promise. You circle that amount or write in a figure that isn't listed on the card. (After all, the card only goes up to \$150 a week!) Now you don't sign your name to this section of the card. But we ask you to tear off that section of the card and seal it in the envelope which was sent to you. On November 19, please place this card in the offering plate, so that we may know how much our people are promising God. We will then be able to operate on a realistic budget. You understand that by doing it this way, we know that someone has made a faith promise of, say, \$60 a week, but we have no idea who that person is.

Now, at the right-hand side of the card it says, "My Faith Promise to My Church." On this card, you will simply record your name and address to signify that you have, in fact, made a Faith Promise to God. This will enable us to provide you with Faith Promise envelopes in which to place your weekly gift; and to furnish you, quarterly, through our Financial Secretary, with a record of what you have in fact given. We ask you also to place this section of the card in the offering plate along with your sealed envelope on November 19. There will therefore be no way in which your Faith Promise can be identified. But I beseech you, even if you forget to eat breakfast next Lord's Day morning, please don't forget to bring your Faith Promise cards to church as a high act of worship.

Now the middle section of this card you will retain as your record of what you have promised God. Circle or write in the amount, and I suggest that you use it as your Bible marker for the year. As you read through the Scriptures, day by day, this card will mark your place, and it will act as a constant reminder to you of your Faith Promise to the Lord.

I am reticent to tell you what we need for 1990, because I don't want you to give necessarily what you think your share of that amount might be. We don't deal in "shares" — you need to make a Faith Promise! We actually need about \$350,000 to do what we should for the Kingdom of God; and about 10% of what we receive will go to the support of missionary work. The more we give, the more of God's work will get done.

The plain fact is, as Christians we need to GIVE. The Bible is so clear about this -- "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each one should give what he has decided. in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, "for God loves a hilarious giver." That is what the word actually is in the Greek, "hilaros," from which, by simple transliteration, we get our English word "hilarious."

Tell me -- do you give somewhat less than “hilariously”?! Giving hilariously! Isn’t that an exciting concept? You see, God owns everything you have, and until you understand that you are simply His steward, entrusted with the dispensing of what is His, you will never give hilariously. You’ll never know the joy of giving. I heard a preacher say years ago that by the look on some people’s faces when they are giving their offering, you wonder if they feel like singing the third stanza of “Blest be the tie that binds.” You know how it goes --

“When we asunder part
It gives us inward pain”!

Now let’s note what the Bible says about giving. How should you and I give?

1. You should give what God tells you to give. That’s the beauty of the “Faith Promise” as I see it. No one from the church will ever come to your home and say to you, “Here is your pledge card. Please sign here.” You will never have anybody in the church even know what you give in 1990, because we’re not concerned about that. The minister doesn’t know; the treasurer doesn’t know. Only the Financial Secretary knows what a person gives for the year, and she is not a member of the church. We believe you should give what God tells you to give.

Now we also believe that God has given us some pretty clear advice about how we should give. As you know, the Old Testament explicitly lays down the principle of the tithe — a person shall give one-tenth of his or her income to the Lord. I believe, further, that that is the minimum place a Christian ought to begin in asking God. about how much he should give. Now there is no stipulation in the New Testament that says a person is obliged to tithe. But surely if a pious Jew, in Old Testament times, was to give a tenth of what he earned to the Lord, can we, living this side of the Cross, expect that we would. give less than a Jew? I believe that is where we ought to begin.

Notice that in our Order of Service we make provision for minimum and maximum giving. Did you realize that? We have “The Reception of Tithes and Offerings.” What are the “Offerings”? They are what you give over and above your minimum, the tithe. The tithe is not a freewill offering; it is simply what the Lord requires of us. The “offering” is that freewill contribution you make over and above the tithe.

Listen as the Lord speaks to us through Malachi, His prophet: “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse...if you do, I will open up the windows of heaven for you and pour out a blessing so great you won’t have room enough to take it in! Try it! Let Me prove it to you! Your crops will be large, for I will guard them from insects and plagues. Your grapes won’t shrivel away before they ripen... And all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land sparkling with happiness! These are the promises of the Lord of hosts.” (Malachi 3:10-12, Living Bible). God will reward you in so many ways if you are faithful to Him in this matter of the tithes and offerings. He honors those who honor Him. This doesn’t mean that you’ll run around in a Cadillac, or that you’ll never experience heartache and sorrow and disappointment, as the “health and wealth” heretics proclaim. But I have seen over the years that as people have given what God told them to give, the results have been phenomenal. If we had time to go ‘round this

congregation and talk to the tithers, we would hear exciting stories concerning the goodness and faithfulness of God. When people give what God wants them to give, things really begin to happen in them and to them, and to the Church. That's the key. What should we give? -- whatever it is God tells us to give.

2. You should give in order to honor God. Proverbs 3:9 says, "Honor the Lord with your wealth." To "honor" means "to give preeminence to," "to glorify," "to put someone in the first place." I think that is an important concept to understand. We need to put Christ first. We give what He tells us to give, and then we move ahead in our stewardship with great joy. Now I'm not saying that you buy your salvation. Please don't ever say I said that! I would never say that. Salvation is by grace alone.

But, you know, what we give really indicates what we think is important. It really demonstrates whether we are giving preeminence to the Lord or not. I believe that if we give at least a tenth, we are honoring the Lord because we are doing what the Bible says is the minimum of what we should be doing. We give as Christians in order to give honor and glory to Christ Who has saved us, and kept us, and provided so richly for us by His grace. He is the One Who must have the preeminence.

3. You should give off the top. Proverbs 3:9 says, "Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce." Now that term "first fruits" is an Old Testament term, and simply means that a faithful Jew would give to God the very best of his increase; he would give to God the first and best tenth of his flocks, herds and crops; and then he trusted that God would bring to fruition all the rest of his livestock and produce. Having done what God asked him to do, he rested in the joyful assurance that God would meet all his needs, for Proverbs 3:9 goes on to say, "Honor the Lord with... the first fruits of all your produce, then your barns will be filled with plenty." God will be no person's debtor. Honor Him, and He will honor you.

So always skim that tithe off the top and set it aside before any other commitments are dealt with. In Faith Promise giving we ask God how much we should give, and then we promise Him that we will give that much money off the top, trusting that as we do that, He will also provide an adequate amount to sustain us and our family in our daily lives.

And so, on November 19 you will bring your two cards, one of which will be in a sealed envelope, and the other will bear your name, but we will not know how much you have promised to give. But it's important that you write down your name, for that releases your faith, so to speak. It is relatively easy to say, "I know God will meet my needs." But when you append your name, you are really saying to God and to yourself, "Not only do I know that God will enable me to meet my commitment to Him, but I'm going to write it down, to release my faith, to show that I not only believe it, but that I'm sure God will enable me to fulfill that commitment."

"But," says someone, "surely God would expect me to pay my bills first, and then give to God what is left over." Well, all I can say is this, "You do not honor Christ by that kind of attitude." Where would you be if God were to bless you only in that cautious kind of way? If you were invited to someone's home for dinner, and they said, "We're just giving you the leftovers from yesterday's evening meal," how would you feel? You wouldn't feel very "honored," would

you?

Incidentally, some people think it's harder to tithe when you're living on a small income than when you have a handsome salary. But I'm not so sure, and for this reason: when we become more and more successful, and money amounts get larger, then a person is sorely tempted to think, "Well now, that tithe is an awful lot of money. Surely God doesn't need all that much of my income!" Suppose you earn \$40,000 a year. Your tithe is \$4,000, about \$80 a week — and those are big bucks! And it blows your mind. when you think about making that kind of a commitment, and so we begin to hold out on God; or, as Malachi bluntly says -- we rob God! That is strong language, but it is God's statement, not mine.

Let me tell you this: if the thought of giving your tithes and offerings to the Lord blows your mind, just try to imagine the untold blessings of one sort of another that God will bestow upon you if you go all the way with Him in obedient and loving commitment! There is something to really blow your mind.

So, God expects us to give what He tells us to give. He tells us to honor Him, to put Him first, and to give Him the first fruits. The first check you write each pay period should be to the Lord. Put Him first. Trust Him to provide all that you need for your life and living. The tither always discovers, to his joyful amazement, that God gives you the wisdom to use the remaining nine-tenths in such a way that it goes farther and accomplishes more than the ten-tenths would ever have done! Indeed, I believe you will never experience financial freedom until the Lord gets the first share of your income.

And so the Word of God rings challengingly and instantly in our ears -- "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously... for God loves a HILARIOUS giver!"

AMEN.