Harvesting the Kingdom: The Joy of Cheerful Giving

2 Corinthians 9: 6 – 15

A sermon by Rev. Dr. David Clark

Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – October 26, 2025

Why This Sermon Makes Me Squirm

I'll be honest with you: I hate talking about money. I really do.

I cringe when I hear people dismiss all the good that churches do with a cynical wave of the hand: "All they care about is money." I feel sick when I see celebrity preachers on TV, exploiting vulnerable people with their prosperity gospel snake oil—"Send me your last hundred dollars and God will give you back a thousand!"—while they're purchasing their third private jet. And truthfully? I find it distasteful to stand up here and talk about financial stewardship when it might sound like I'm begging for my own salary.

So I've tried to steer clear of those ugly caricatures, and as a result, I haven't been as forthright about this subject as I should have. Because here's the truth: how we handle our money is a vital spiritual matter. It's not peripheral to our faith. It's central. And my calling is to talk about spiritual truths, whether or not they make us uncomfortable. Whether or not they make me uncomfortable.

Jesus Talked About Money All the Time

Jesus saw how we handle money as a profoundly spiritual issue. His most frequent subject was the kin-dom of God—that beautiful, radical vision of a world made whole. And his second-largest topic? Money, because you can't get to that vision when people hoard resources and no one shares in a rigged economic system. It works when we shift from a "me" to a "we" mindset.

In the Lord's Prayer, he encouraged us to trust in God to provide what we need—not everything we want, but what we need. He warned us to be on guard against all sorts of greed. He said it is better to give than to receive. He reminded us of our moral obligation to care for those who struggle: "As you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."

Grow toward tithing

Early on, God commanded a tithe—ten percent—as a starting place for giving. The idea is simple but radical: everything ultimately belongs to God, and we return a portion of it to make the world a better place. The Bible describes us as stewards or managers of what God has entrusted to us. The question then becomes: since it all belongs to God, how much do you feel entitled to?

Like any spiritual practice, generosity is something we develop over time. Dayna and I have always made stewardship a priority. Yes, we don't have the portfolios or possessions that many others have. But the peace of mind that comes from knowing we're making a difference? That's far more valuable than any luxury car or vacation home.

Paul's First Fundraising Letter

The entire Bible emphasizes the importance of generosity in building a healthy spiritual life. It gets us out of ourselves and more focused on gratitude for what we have and how far we've come, rather than feeling like we don't have enough or that we are not enough.

Just last week, Dana Milbank wrote in The Washington Post about a six-year Cornell study that found that having a sense of purpose and making progress toward it were the secret to happiness. It's not found in self-indulgence, but in doing for others and making a difference.

Our scripture lesson from 2 Corinthians 9 comes from what might be the first Christian fundraising letter ever written. The Apostle Paul was appealing to Gentile Christians in Corinth to help out Jewish Christians who were in desperate need in Jerusalem. He asks them to give not out of obligation but from a spirit of joy, knowing they're making a difference, that they're paying forward the blessings they have received.

I want you to want to do it

He emphasizes. "God loves a cheerful giver." He wants them to be the kind of people who want to help.

I remember there was some chore around the house Dayna asked me to do. Something like scrubbing the toilets or something. I had other intentions but I went to it, but grumbly. She was frustrated by my attitude and said I don't want you to do it because I told you to but because it's something you want to do.

"You want me to want to scrub toilets?"

"No, want you to care about the details. I want you to care about me, share the load, and do your part. I want to feel that we are connected.

The Story of Duke (Or, How Not to Give)

I once had a parishioner named Duke at one of my previous churches. Duke came up to me during stewardship season and said, "Pastor, I'm not going to pledge this year."

I asked him why not.

He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Well, the Bible says the Lord loves a cheerful giver, and I'm not cheerful. So I'm not going to give."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Duke had found what he thought was a biblical loophole. If God only loves cheerful givers, and Duke wasn't feeling cheerful, then surely God would understand if he just sat this one out, right?

Here's what Duke missed: Giving is what leads to cheerfulness when you know that you are making progress in the things that matter to you.

In some churches, they announce the offering by saying, "Now we come to the most joyful part of the service." It's our chance to give back, to make a difference, to show that we respond to what God has done for us.

Let Me Be Clear

So let me clear the air about a few things. I don't have a jet. If you're in desperate financial straits, I'm not going to offer any false promises that if you give $100, you'll magically receive $1,000 in a surprise windfall. If you need resources, we're here to help you, not drain you.

This church doesn't only care about money. We care about you and helping you make the world a better place.

Rev. Michael Niel, who preached here in May, works in development for St. Mary's Hospital Foundation. He told me it's a joy helping people use their resources to do good, because that's where their hearts are. That's exactly how I feel about this conversation.

This is discipleship. It's a protest against the values of consumerism, of envy, of reducing your life and your sense of worth to the amount in your checking account. It reminds us of the worth of others. It reflects our trust in God as our trustworthy source of provision.

I'm not shy about asking anymore. Why should I be? Generosity is an essential and joyful part of my life. Making money isn't enough. You've got to find a way to make a difference. Why should I be embarrassed about inviting you to experience the same joy that I have found?

The Power of Paying It Forward

Donna Attallah joined our church last year, and she recently wrote a beautiful memoir about her life. In it, she shared an early lesson from her mother that shaped everything that followed.

When Donna was young, she was on a school field trip. Everyone was buying little trinkets, but there was one boy—a little red-haired boy—who looked sad because he couldn't afford to buy anything. Donna had enough money to buy something for herself, and she did. She didn't share with him.

When she got home, her mother asked why she didn't share with the boy who couldn't afford a trinket. It had never occurred to Donna. But from that moment on, she made generosity her life practice.

Donna came from a modest family. When it came time for her senior year of college, they couldn't afford the tuition. Then she received a $200 scholarship—just $200—that made all the difference in the world. She became a teacher, married a professor and psychologist. In their spare time, they flipped houses and buildings. And they paid forward the blessings.

Scholarships. Educational programs at Chapman University. Funded initiatives. So many of her students and others she helped along the way learned to have a "pay it forward" mentality.

In her memoir, Donna wrote these concluding words about the main takeaway from her life:

"In the end, generosity is the most important lesson I have learned in many ways throughout my life. Mom taught me about it when I was a small girl, and it has stayed with me since. The impact

of sharing and giving to others is the key element to life, and it is the message I want to always share with others. Doing so just might encourage the next person to 'Pay it forward!'"

Her husband likes to say: "We help others. We serve good causes. We uplift souls and hearts like ours."

The Kingdom We're Harvesting Together

During our centennial celebration, many of you filled out blue cards describing all the ways this church has been important in your lives. I've read every single one. The stories of transformation, of healing, of community, of finding purpose and belonging—they're breathtaking.

All the groups we host. All the impact we make. The interfaith hospitality. The justice work. The care for one another. None of it happens by accident. It happens because people like you choose to make generosity a spiritual practice.

Cheerfully Giving to Something That Matters

God loves a cheerful giver. Not because God needs your money—God doesn't have a mortgage or car payment. God loves a cheerful giver because cheerful giving is the sign of a liberated soul. It's the evidence of a heart that has discovered the secret to happiness that our Cornell researchers finally figured out: that purpose and contribution, not accumulation and consumption, are what make us truly alive.

An Invitation to Joy

When we give together, when we invest in this community and its mission to transform lives and make our corner of the world a little more like the kin-dom Jesus described, we're not just funding programs.

We're harvesting the kingdom. We're helping people find help, health, and spiritual guidance they need to keep their lives on track and become better people who make a difference in this world.

Amen.