

**PARTICIPATION**  
**Philippians 1:5**

**Dr. Howard Batson**  
**First Baptist Church**  
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You sit there with a box of thank you notes, a pen, and a coffee table book upon which to bear down – and pause. And pause. And pause. You're writing thank you notes. You really are grateful, but you don't know how to say it. It needs to be personal, not fill-in-the-blank. It needs to feel real, not rote.

So, paralyzed by the weight of the task before you, you pause.

Nicole Viola Bennett says the main reason people fail to send thank you notes isn't so much a lack of time or motivation. It's not knowing what to say. In article entitled "The Lost Art of Writing Thank You Notes" ([theartofsimple.net](http://theartofsimple.net)), Bennett advises her daughter on an effective outline for a thank you note. It goes along these lines:

1. Offer a greeting.
2. Say "thanks for the gift."
3. Say something about the gift. What's your favorite part. When are you going to use it.
4. And finally, say something about the giver. "I love you." "I hope to see you soon." "You mean much to me."

Perhaps Paul was the prince at writing thank you notes. At least, he writes a wonderful one in the book of Philippians. Paul doesn't pause; Paul says thanks. Philippians is, in essence, a friendly thank you note from Paul to the most generous church – a Macedonian church in Philippi.

I know that waiting for today has been like waiting for Easter Sunday. In fact, I'd say outside of Easter Sunday and the Christmas Eve service, I suppose this is everybody's favorite sermon. You could hear the anticipatory chatter in the hallways this morning, the special music that Dan writes. The piano pieces Janice weaves together seamlessly. And now, Parker the guitar guru strums with extra emotion today. A great deal of effort is invested each year to make this Sunday meet your high expectations.

Stewardship Sermon Sunday.

I'm, of course, being facetious because nobody wants the pastor to preach about finances.

Yes, we pause – take a pause from Paul in Romans to ponder Paul in Philippians, as Philippians 1:5 is our theme verse, "Grateful for your giving."

Dan wondered if we'd need to do an extra service for today, and I assured him we probably could squeeze all the folks in who were here to stew over stewardship.

The reality is that a great deal of God's word is devoted to the topic of stewardship. The New Testament speaks more about giving than any other topic except salvation. Jesus told 38 parables – 16 concerned the spiritual use of material possessions. One out of every six verses in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke discuss the spiritual use of money. The Bible mentions prayer slightly more than 500 times, faith slightly less than 500 times, but the spiritual use of possessions is mentioned over 1,000 times. If what we do with our finances is so important in God's Word, it certainly should be important to us.

We never know the real joy of being a child of God until we know the joy of giving to His church, empowering His people to be salt and light in a decaying and dark world. The longer you live in life, the more you realize the only money you really get to keep is the money you give away. Money invested in a meaningful way continues to give you joy, while the money spent on stuff crumbles, cracks, rusts, rots, evaporates, tears, tarnishes, shrinks, corrodes, and goes kaput.

About 500 years ago, the father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, developed the idea of the "third conversion." He said the first conversion takes place in the mind when you make the mental decision to give yourself completely to God. The second conversion, Luther argued, was in the heart, when passion for Christ really takes root. Luther said the third conversion takes place in your pocketbook, for the transformation has truly happened when your finances reflect that God and God's people, the church, are your priority.

According to Christian financial manager, Larry Burkett, sadly enough, the way Christians manage their money is "almost identical" to non-Christians. Christians don't give any more to their church than unbelievers give to charities. Elton Trueblood said something similar when he said our faith becomes practical when it is expressed in two books: our date book and our pocket book.

The greatest joy is never found in getting – it is always found in giving.

The Philippians were givers, and Paul was grateful.

You remember how this church began. Turn back to the Acts of the Apostles, the book of Acts, chapter 16. Paul is traveling on a missionary journey, and the Spirit is guiding as he goes. He's trying to get to Bithynia to preach the gospel, "but the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them" (Acts 16:7). They pass through Mysia, and they come to a town named Troas. During a dream in the night, a man – I've always pictured him as standing and waving his hands – appeals to Paul. Luke captures his words: "Come over to Macedonia [that's the name of the whole region], come over to Macedonia and help us. When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:9-10).

Paul and his companions, at last, arrive at a town named Philippi, a leading city of the district of Macedonia. As was Paul's practice, he, most likely, sought a synagogue on the Sabbath to teach that the rabbi Jesus was the Christ. But in Philippi, there was no synagogue, because there were not enough Jewish men to warrant one.

Alternatively, Paul goes down to the riverside where there is a place of prayer – where women had assembled for prayer. And there he meets a lady by the name of Lydia. She was a well-do-do business woman, a seller of purple fabrics, one who worshiped God. And as Paul preached Jesus, Luke tells us in Acts 16:14, “the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” Lydia said yes to Jesus. She was baptized. In fact, her whole family took the plunge into the gospel. She and Paul become good friends as he stays with her family in her home.

Paul returns to the river, preaching the gospel. But a slave girl, who has a spirit of divination – a fortune teller, who was making a fortune for her master – pesters Paul, following him around as the spirit within her shouted, “These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.” She did this for days. Paul is annoyed. “I’ve preached in difficult circumstances, but never did I have to duel with a demon during my delivery.”

Perturbed, Paul proclaims to the demon, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” And she was delivered from the demon that day.

When her masters saw that she was not longer a demonic prophetess, and, thus, she wasn’t a profit center – no more money to be made from the devil – they drug Paul and Silas before the magistrates. They ripped off their robes and gave Paul and Silas a brutal beating, locking them in the stocks in the center of the jail.

It’s midnight. Paul and Silas were praying to God and singing hymns of praise as the other prisoners listen to these strange men with a hopeful message. Somewhere in the middle of one of those hymns – I imagine it being about the fourth stanza or so – there is a great earthquake. The foundation of the prison shakes, the doors are flung open, and the chains fall from all the prisoners. The jailer himself is roused by the rumble of the earthquake. He sees the prison doors open and draws his sword to commit suicide, knowing his life would be required because he had permitted the prisoners to escape.

Paul cries out, “Don’t do it. Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.” The jailer rushes in with a flaming torch, falls down before Paul and Silas – these mysterious men who can make earthquakes, these prisoners who sing strange praise in the middle of the night after being beaten with rods – and says, “What do I have to do to be saved?” And Paul and Silas said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” He was, and, just like Lydia, his whole family was saved, too. They were all baptized. Paul goes to the jailer’s house for a banquet.

Eventually, the leaders of the city discover that Paul himself is a Roman citizen, and they try to get him to just go, because they want to cover up their own crime of unjustly beating a Roman citizen.

That’s the way this church begins in Philippi. A lady who sells purple fabric. A servant girl who has been set free from a demon. And a jailer who joins the Jesus movement because he has seen God shake the earth.

They were the most giving church. I imagine Lydia, selling purple – a rare commodity, was a lady of means. And the rest did their part, too. They gave. They gave to Paul, time and time again. In fact, he says in Philippians 4:15, “You have been supporting me from the very beginning.”

From the beginning of their faith, they gave generously. At times, when other churches were unable or unwilling to assist him (4:15b), they gave. Even when he was in a nearby town, in Thessalonica, Paul received money for missions from the Philippians (4:16). And the Philippians also joined other Macedonian churches in supporting Paul when he was in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:8-9). In fact, when Paul was taking up a collection from the churches for the famine-stricken believers in Jerusalem, Paul used the church in Philippi as an example to the Corinthians of people who understand the grace of giving (2 Corinthians 8:1-7).

But, here’s the surprise: all their generosity was not from an abundance of resources, but they gave from their poverty (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). He says that while they were in affliction and deep poverty, they had an abundance of joy and gave generously.

So Paul sits in prison, awaiting a trial that could result in his execution, and he writes a thank you note – a thank you note to the church that had found the joy of a generous spirit. Let’s go over a bit of his gratitude – found right here in Philippians, the church who gives.

1:1-2a

“Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons [the leaders].”

1:2b

Then he gives his greeting, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Grace – God’s gift which comes to us at Christ’s expense. It will always remind us of the cross, God’s greatest gift. And peace, *shalom* – peace from knowing that God is in control.

1:4-5

“always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.”

Participation. The Greek word *koinonia*. It means to partake in, to share with, to be a part of with. Sometimes it means fellowship. What Paul is saying is that when Lydia and the Philippian jailer and the slave girl and all the converts to Christ in Philippi wrote a check for his mission endeavors, they themselves were taking part in the preaching of this gospel. In 4:15, he puts it this way: They were participating in the giving and receiving during his ministry. In their poverty, when no other church did so, in the midst of affliction, they gave.

When Paul talks about an offering, particularly an offering for the poor Jews in Jerusalem, he doesn’t use financial words as much as he uses theological language. He calls the offering “grace” (2 Corinthians 8:6, 7, 19). Like here, he calls it “partnership.” He also does that in 2 Corinthians 8 and Romans 15. He calls it “ministry” (2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1, 12, 13; Romans 15:25, 31). He

calls it “abundance” (2 Corinthians 8:14). He calls it “blessing” (2 Corinthians 9:5). He calls it “good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). He calls it “the yield of your righteousness” (2 Corinthians 9:10). And he calls it “fruit” (Romans 15:28).

You see, for Paul, one’s financial gift was connected to one’s heart, to what one believed, how one lived. You show me a faith that does not impact your finances, and Paul would say it’s a fraud, it’s fake. You see, Paul is in prison and the church has sent Epaphroditus with a gift for the apostle.

Turn over to Philippians 4:10.

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me.

It’s the language of horticulture. Blooming again. It’s springtime for Paul, even in prison, because the generous church has brought the gift for his ministry and missions.

Don’t get me wrong, Paul says (v. 11ff.), I’m doing okay, for I have learned to be content with meager means, because (v. 13) “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Nevertheless, you have done well to – here’s our word, *koinonia*, the root here – you have done well to share with me while I am afflicted, while I am here in prison (v. 14). No church, he says in verse 15, has helped me like you’ve helped me. When I was in neighboring Thessalonica (v. 16), you sent a gift over. And that gift will pay dividends to your account (v. 17). Paul views the gift to him as a spiritual investment entered as a credit to the account of the Philippians – an investment that will increasingly pay them rich dividends.

I received (v. 18) from Epaphroditus the gift you sent. It’s a sweet aroma. A sacrifice that furthers the cause of Christ. It pleases God. And God, therefore, will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus (v. 19).

In fact, giving is part of our sacrificial worship. It always has been. Whether you drop it at the door on your way out, give it online before you get here, or text it during the service, it is a sacrifice. In Genesis 8:21ff., God inhales, takes pleasure in the sacrifices offered by His people. And, you remember back in Act 10, God says to Cornelius, “Your gifts have arisen to heaven like an aroma, a sacrifice to Me.”

God’s plan is for his people to give. To be generous. To tithe. To bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, the church, so we can participate in the preaching of the gospel and in all that our church does to minister in the name of our Christ.

“Go, break to the needy sweet charity’s bread;  
For giving is living,” the angel said.

“And must I be giving again and again?”  
my peevish and pitiless answer ran.

“Oh, no!” said the angel, piercing me through.  
“Just give till the Master stops giving to you.”

I'll give you some guidelines for giving, and I'll do it quickly.

Give to God first. He always expects the first fruits. Your tithe ought to be your first priority with your paycheck, not your last. "And that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the Lord annually, and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God. We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns" (Nehemiah 10:35-37).

Give systematically, not sporadically. Set it aside for the first day of the week as part of your worship. "On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come" (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Give cheerfully. God loves a cheerful giver. You really don't know joy until you have the joy of giving. "Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

Give regardless of your circumstances. The Philippians gave in their poverty. "Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints" (2 Corinthians 8:1-4). Notice the word "participation" again in verse 4.

And give to God proportionally. (See 2 Corinthians 8 above.)

Your church, her missions and ministries in the proclamation of the gospel are possible because school teachers, bank tellers, custodians, coaches, and caterers – each of us doing our part with our tithe.

Paul thanks the church in Philippi because she is so generous during difficult days. I thank you for your unbelievable faithfulness during a scary pandemic. This year, we give thanks for all you have done and will do in extreme generosity.

Last week, I gave all the children ten dimes to teach them to tithe, and told them on the way out they needed to put one of the dimes in the offering plate. One child, like Paul, wrote a thank you note – I think the best thank you note we've ever received. "Dear God, thank you for the money [MONY]. Dear God, here's the money" – meaning here's your tithe.

God gives us 100 percent, and he, in turn, asks that we be generous, too.

Dear God, we join Paul and this child – thank You for the money. And, dear God, we will participate. Here's the money you asked us to return to your house as part of our worship. We want to participate in the gospel.