

The longer I seek to live a life of faith, the more I find myself surprised by God. It happens in big and little ways. It happens when I read scripture and find myself surprised. It happens when I spend time with children and they share common observations of life with me.

Do you ever find yourself surprised by God?

Not long ago, I heard a story about a mother who came home from the hospital and had to be confined to bed for two weeks. Her 9-year-old daughter came home from school and walked into her room. Thinking that her mother was asleep, she quietly unfolded the blanket at the foot of the bed and gently tucked it around her mother. The mother stirred, then whispered, "It wasn't too long ago that I was tucking you in. And now you're covering me."

The little girl responded, "That's okay. Around here we take turns."

This little girl's understanding of life is that it is natural for us to take turns and help each other out. She is right. That is the way life should be. But that is not always the way we live it.

That is one of the main reasons we are doing this sermon series called *Blessed Beyond Expectation*. It is to remind us that we have been blessed in many ways. It is to remind us that God has created us to be people who share. It is to invite us to re-think our attitudes about giving and money, in a way that we can actually use money to help us grow closer to God and lean on God. *Today, we are going to look at some practical ways we can give our best to God.*

In our scripture for today, David wants to offer a sacrifice to God. In following the instructions of the Lord, he goes to the home of Araunah, a citizen of the land.

When Araunah sees the King, David coming, he is excited and asks, "Why have you come to my home?"

The King says, "I have come to buy some of your land and offer a sacrifice to God."

Araunah is touched that the King would come to him with this offer and in his generosity he says, "You don't have to buy it. You can have it. In fact, you can also have my oxen for the sacrifice and you can use my tools and yokes for the wood you need. I will give it all to you, may God accept your sacrifice."

But David does something remarkable. He says, "No, I insist on buying the land and the oxen and giving you a fair price, for I cannot present offerings to God that cost me nothing."

David understands that his gift to God, must be a gift from him. It isn't that he doesn't appreciate Araunah's generosity. I suspect he did. He understands that these offerings are his statement to God, about his own love for God.

When we think about our giving to God, we often lift up the biblical standard of a tithe. This means that one tenth of what we receive we are to give back to God.

Sometimes we look at that and say, "Wow, that is so much, I could never do that."

Here is what that means. Look at the altar, we have on the altar, 10 apples. What this really means is that we get to live off of nine apples, and we give one to God.

I prefer to look at this as having 90 % to live on. This is the standard. This is what I believe God calls us to.

Sometimes people will ask me, "Should my tithe be before taxes or after taxes?"

That is a good question. My response is, "You decide." What I know is that choosing to tithe means we are making a significant commitment to God. It is reminding us that we are going to trust God first, with the best we have to offer.

I also know though, that when we talk about tithing, this feels out of reach for some people. Some people here are new to the faith and are

interested in taking steps toward faithfulness. Some people here have been members a long time, and you haven't changed your giving for a long time either. So I understand this talk of tithing simply gets tuned out.

For all of you who are interested in figuring out how to move toward tithing, I offer a couple of suggestions.

First of all, as a place to start, if you don't feel like you can start at a tithe, I read of a reporter who said, "You should at least give as much back to God on a weekly basis, as it costs your family to go out to eat at a medium priced restaurant."

I find that to be a helpful place to start. I remember using it to so say, "Okay, how much does it cost me to take my family out to eat at a place like Market Street Diner, or Perkins? That is doable."

It was a great place to start.

For those of us in the habit already of giving, one of the most important things we can do is take a look at what is the percentage of giving to my income that I am already at. Once I figure that out, then the challenge is to grow one or two percent a year until I can reach a tithe.

The last thing I have learned about giving back to God, is that I have learned, once I have decided at what level I am going to be at, the first check I write when I am taking care of my obligations is to the church.

The reason I write it first, is because that shows me what my priorities are.

David understands what his priorities are. They are God first. And he offers to God his offerings, as a way to show his love and his trust in God. Those are the most important reasons we offer our gifts to God as well. So that we can say in the giving of these gifts, "God I love you and here is how I want to show it to you."

Does your giving show your love for God? Does your giving show a willingness on your part to trust in God?

I want to close by telling you a story. There was once a small Midwestern community in the midst of a drought that seemed to last as long as eternity. Because of the lack of rain, the crops were dying and the townspeople's very way of life was threatened. A local church felt it was time to get involved.

At the appointed time, the people began to show. The minister arrived and watched his congregation file into the sanctuary. He watched as people were visiting, enjoying the chance to socialize with friends. When the minister finally got to the front of the church, he quieted the crowd.

Just as he began asking for quiet, he noticed an 11-year-old girl sitting in the front row. She was smiling magnificently and sitting next to her was a bright red umbrella, poised for use. This girl, not only had the faith to pray, she had the faith that God would answer her prayer. She trusted God and was willing to act on that faith.

When we give our money and ourselves back to God through the ministry of the church, we are acting on our faith. We are putting our faith into action.

Friends, here is what I know. God loves you. God cares about you. God wants to be in a relationship with you.

God has created us to share.

When we learn how to give and to share ourselves with others, that actually shows the great love and trust that we have in God.

May God help us live lives of faith.

Amen