

# All Who Are Willing

Exodus 35:20-29

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 6, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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**<sup>20</sup> Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. <sup>21</sup> And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. <sup>22</sup> So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen or goats' hair or tanned rams' skins or fine leather, brought them. <sup>24</sup> Everyone who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord's offering; and everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work, brought it. <sup>25</sup> All the skillful women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; <sup>26</sup> all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats' hair. <sup>27</sup> And the leaders brought onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breastpiece, <sup>28</sup> and spices and oil for the light, and for the anointing oil, and for the fragrant incense. <sup>29</sup> All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.**  
(Exodus 35:20-29, NRSV)

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Today the message is going to be a bit shorter than usual. I was reminded this week that there's a fine line between a long, drawn-out sermon and a hostage situation. Short and sweet this morning, which means that you should have plenty of attention span to listen carefully to the end.

I'm going to talk about money this morning, which is good news. Right? I actually love to talk about money in church. I may be in the minority on this; I realize that. Some people actually avoid worship when they know the sermon topic is money. I get it. Sadly, the topic has been widely abused from pulpits for a long time. Congregations have been manipulated and guilted into giving. Once recent CNN article suggested

that many people have come to even see the offering in church as the 'Sunday morning stickup.'<sup>1</sup> Empty your wallets! Or else!

I hope you don't feel that way. Jesus talked about money and wealth as much as he talked about nearly every other topic. Furthermore, nothing he had to say about it was bad news. *Everything* our good and loving Father in heaven has to teach us is good news, as long as we are willing to trust that he is indeed good and loving. You know, ever single Sunday morning we do this, we take time to offer a portion of our material possessions back to God. Once a year at this time we prayerfully consider how much of our annual income God is calling us to give back to him in the coming year. It's worth taking time to think carefully about why God is calling us to do these good things with money.

To help us get at this I want to look at the fairly obscure account we just read from Exodus. What we have here is a historical record of an ancient community making offerings to God. To set the context, God has just delivered the Israelites from Egypt where they lived for over 400 years in captivity as slaves. Now that he has made them a free people, God has instructed the people through Moses to build a tabernacle, which was basically a giant portable sanctuary where the people could gather in the wilderness to worship God. So Moses sets out to organize what was essentially the first church building campaign. And in this simple account of the offering which ensues, there are at least four lessons that can help us better understand what it is are doing when we pledge to make offerings next Sunday and then follow through with those pledges Sunday after Sunday in the coming year.

Lesson number one: obedience always follows deliverance. This is so critical. God did not meet the Israelites in captivity in Egypt and say to them, "Listen, let me make a deal with you. If you will make a generous offering to build me a tabernacle, then in exchange I will reward you by getting you out of slavery. You obey. I'll deliver." Had that been the order of things then God's salvation would have been a reward and God's salvation is never a reward. It is a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/14/us/sunday-stickup/index.html>

gift. The Israelites had done nothing to earn deliverance other than cry out to God.

So when God then commands the Israelites to make an offering to build a tabernacle it is not for the purpose of earning his favor. They already have his favor, demonstrated to them in mighty fashion as he led them out of Egypt, even though they grumbled against him as he did! Their offering is therefore a *response* to God's favor, not a prerequisite. In fact, where did the Israelites get all these items that they offered up for the tabernacle: precious metals and gems, jewelry, fine linens, animal hides, spices and incense? You ever thought about this? These people just came out of slavery, and if you're a slave you're lucky if you own the shirt on your back!

Some of you remember the story. Some of you remember how the Lord touched the Egyptian hearts to lavish great wealth on the Israelites as they were fleeing Egypt. Exodus 12:36 reads, **“And the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians.”** Do you see what this means? The Israelites were only asked to give back to God from that which he had already given to them. And the same is true of us. Grace always comes before works, deliverance before obedience. We only give out of what we have already been given. Everything good in your possession is ultimately traceable back to God's grace.<sup>2</sup> King David put it this way in I Chronicles 29:14, **“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.”** Once we recognize this reality, it changes the way we respond to God's command to give.

This leads to the second lesson we learn here, which is that our offering needs to come from a willing heart. Did you notice that theme here in the text? Who came to bring the offering? Verse 20: everyone **“who was willing”**, everyone **“whose heart moved them”**. Verse 22: **“All who were willing...came”**. Verse 26: **“all the women who were willing and had the skill...”** Verse 29: **“All the Israelite men and women who were willing...”** Do you think the writer is trying to make a point here? Sometimes we focus on the size of the gift as what's most important. Not here. It's the heart behind the gift that seems to matter most. Doesn't it remind you of the poor widow who only put two pennies into the offering but was commended by Jesus

because her motivation to do so was far more pure than the others who came and put in large sums?<sup>3</sup>

Here's a good question to ask yourself as you bring an offering to worship, or as you make a pledge this coming week: Why am I doing this? What is my motive? If the answer is duty, if this an obligation you grudgingly fulfill, then you are misunderstanding what it is you are doing. Chances are you think that you are doing this for God's benefit. Now, we all pay taxes but not many of us find joy in doing so. But we do it because it's the law. And it's the law because it benefits others. Our offerings certainly also benefit others, but they do not benefit God! You know why? That money you put in the offering plate earlier, it already belongs to God. Think about it! You can't give anything to a God who already owns every created thing there is.

Imagine a child who brushes her teeth every morning and every night before bed but grumbles as she does so. This kid is brushing her teeth because mom says she has to brush her teeth. That's the only reason. If it were up to her she wouldn't do it. She's just making mom happy. That's childish thinking. Yes, she is obeying her mom, but what she doesn't yet understand is that her obedience is benefitting *her*, not her mother. In fact, her obedience will bring her joy someday because she'll get to avoid the dentist's drill and ultimately keep her teeth.

We have to check our thinking when it comes to spiritual practices God commands us to incorporate into our lives, practices like prayer, and Sabbath, and worship, and giving. As writer James Bryan Smith puts it, these practices are therapeutic, not meritorious.<sup>4</sup> In other words, they are not for God's benefit. And they certainly don't change the way God loves us. They are for *our* benefit. They cure our souls; they set us free.

Specifically – and this the third lesson we learn here – obedient offerings benefit us by helping us remember that God is the source and center of all things.

It's important to notice that the first thing God has his people do after they are delivered is to build a place where they can worship. Understand, this is not the act of an egocentric God, but a loving Father in Heaven. As the creator and sustainer of life, God knows that his people must build their lives on and around him if they are to thrive. They must trust him, stay connected to him, follow him, live with him. Therefore, worship, the

<sup>3</sup> See Luke 21:1-4

<sup>4</sup> From a video interview found at <https://www.c4so.org/getting-to-know-james-bryan-smith/#single/0>

<sup>2</sup> I'm borrowing here from J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 320.

act of turning our lives completely towards God as Lord, is essential for us to live.

Imagine a mother walking with her small child through a very busy section of downtown. Lots of people. Lots of traffic. Lots of potential go get lost. So she tells her child, “Stay very close to mommy and don’t let go of mommy’s hand.” And the little kid says in response, “Well, it’s always got to be all about *you, doesn’t it!*” No! No, God wants us to stay close to him, stay focused on him, worship him, because life will always go better for *us* if we do!

In fact, remember that worship – acknowledging God at the center - is not just the act of coming on Sunday mornings to sit in this room and sing songs, pray prayers, and listen to sermons. Of course, this is worship, community worship. But all of life is meant to be worship. Paul encourages us in Romans 12:1:

**“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”**<sup>5</sup> Anything we do for the glory of God is worship. Your work tomorrow morning, whether at school or your job, is worship as you do it to honor God. Raising your kids can be an act of worship. So can loving your spouse. Doing dishes, planting a garden, driving a car, engaging a stranger on the street, every ordinary activity, if done to honor God, to recognize God at the center, is just as much worship as singing a hymn here this morning. God takes whatever ordinary thing that is offered to him for his glory and makes it sacred, uses it for his purposes. And in all of it we are reminded that God, not us, is the center and source of all things, of every activity under heaven.

This is no less true of our offering. You take an ordinary \$20 bill and you offer it back to God – or \$200, or \$2,000, whatever – and you are actually doing *yourself* a favor by reminding yourself that none of it belongs to you. It never has and it never will. God is the source and center of your possessions. And not just the ones you offer back but the ones you hold on to for a time as well.

Finally, here is a fourth beautiful lesson we learn here: everybody contributes in their own way. The writer here not only emphasizes several times that the *whole* Israelite community contributed to this offering, but that everyone brought something *different* according to his or her means and abilities. Some brought jewelry or precious metals. Some brought goats’ hair or rams’ skins they had woven or tanned. Some women were skilled in weaving and so they brought linens. It’s a beautiful picture of God’s people all bringing something

different and allowing God to take those various gifts and knit them into something marvelous.

*You* have something to offer God which is unique, different from what unique thing I have to offer God. So bring what you are called to offer. Yes, bring it as a response to what God has already done. Yes, bring it with a willing heart. Yes, bring it remembering that God is the source and center. But bring it, every one of us. The youngest among us has something to offer. The one here who is struggling month to month to put food on the table also has something to offer. The one here with the fattest bank account has something to offer. Different, yes, but something, all of us who are willing.

In light of all this, here is what we are all being asked to do, me included. After worship, stop and pick up the stewardship packet at the table just out these back doors. Take it home and read the letter of invitation you’ll find there and then set aside time this week, using the enclosed devotion, to prayerfully consider what you, or your family, is called to pledge to God’s work in and through Faith Presbyterian Church in 2020. The pledge card you’ll find enclosed is to be filled out and then brought back next Sunday where, in worship, we will dedicate these pledges to God. If you’ve got kids at home, pick up as many extra pledge cards for them so that they each can also participate because, again, everybody in the community gets to participate!

Yes, I encourage you to be generous. I really do. God is doing marvelous kingdom work in and through this congregation and I am eager to see what things God has in store in the coming year. Our budget supports this kingdom work.

Yes, I encourage you to try and use God’s tithe as a starting place. We are never going to be legalistic about this, but I do believe that committing the first 10% of your income next year towards God’s work in the church is a really healthy place to start in your giving. Many of you already do this and beyond. If that’s a stretch for you, then move towards it year by year. And if some more teaching on this would be helpful, email me and I can send you some teaching I’ve done on tithing in the past.

Above all, yes! I pray that this will be a joyful exercise for you. This is no Sunday morning stickup! You’ve probably heard people tell you to give until it hurts. Please don’t repeat that or believe that. It’s not helpful. God’s Word gives us an entirely different message: give until it brings joy. Because sometimes giving hurts right away, especially if we aren’t used to giving or are giving in sacrificial ways. But as we trust God,

<sup>5</sup> NRSV

remembering that our giving is a *response* to his favor and not a means to *earn* his favor, we will eventually discover the joy of obeying God in this way.

The point is this, as Paul puts it so beautifully in II Corinthians: **“The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”**<sup>6</sup>  
All who are willing!

Amen.

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## The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Do you like talking about money in church? Why or why not?
2. Read Exodus 35:20-29 again, this historical account of an offering given by God’s people. What stands out to you from this passage?
3. Why does the author of Exodus emphasize the willing hearts of those who brought the offering, mentioning this over and over and over again?
4. Here are four lessons we can learn from this account. Which one did you most need to hear? Why?
  - a. Obedience always follows deliverance (not the other way around).
  - b. Offerings must come from a willing heart.
  - c. Offerings remind us that God is the source and center of all things.
  - d. Everybody contributes to the offering in their own unique way.
5. People in the story each brought different offerings. What do you bring God when you worship him? What unique gift do you think you are called to offer?
6. Do you think our giving is to be a private matter or a corporate (communal) practice? Why?

7. What is one way you sense God is calling you to think differently about the way you handle material wealth and the way you offer it back to God? And...
8. How are you going to live differently because of this new understanding?

### Table to Table Question

*A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Why do we take some of our money and put it in the offering plate every week? What are we doing when we do this?

<sup>6</sup> II Corinthians 9:6-7 (NRSV)