

Giving – But How?

A Teaching Sermon on the Subject of Giving and Offerings.



At the last meeting of our church council, they asked me to give a sermon on the subject of giving.

First, a short analogy: When you play a card game with others, you first have to agree to play together. However, there are certainly differences in how you want to engage in the game. For example, there may be some who want to watch from the sidelines before they participate. Others participate but don't yet know the rules and therefore rely on those who know the game well. It is similar in our church. We welcome everyone who wants to be there and participate. We even welcome those who stand on the sidelines and want to watch at first. Yet ultimately, we have to rely on those who are fully involved and engaged in the opportunities available to them. If we don't have enough of these people, the togetherness of our church breaks down. As Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, *"And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken."* When playing cards, a situation can arise where no one is sure what the next move should be. In such moments, someone who knows the rules reaches for them, explains the situation, and the game can continue. When it comes to our church and congregation, many people wonder what the rules are for offerings and donations because everyone knows that the church also depends on financial support. The following questions can arise: How much should I give? Is it the tithe, as described in some places in the Bible? Or should I base my giving on the deductions that are automatically deducted from the payroll account of the members of the State church, which corresponds to around 3.5% of one's gross salary?

Before we talk specifically about giving, I think it is important to first think about the topic of private property in general. There are two very different viewpoints on the topic of property in history. The first viewpoint is that you can't be a true Christian if you are rich. This viewpoint sees wealth as a problem in principle. It is based on Jesus' instruction to His disciples to take only the bare necessities with them and to live from hand to mouth. Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa followed this example and led a simple, spartan life while giving everything they had to the poor. In contrast, there are churches that claim the exact opposite. According to their theory, God wants to bless us with wealth, and if you believe and pray strong enough, you will receive this blessing. From this point of view, poverty is seen as an indication of weak faith. Both views are extreme. We don't need to go into more detail with the so-called "Prosperity Gospel" as it hardly exists in Germany. Nor does the Bible give us a blanket instruction that one shouldn't have any possessions at all. The Bible gives many examples of people who were rich – King Solomon, for example, was the richest king of his time. There are also rich people in the New Testament, such as Philemon, to whom Paul writes. Nevertheless, the New Testament shows an ambivalent attitude towards wealth. In Mark 10:23 it says: *"And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'"* Jesus isn't saying here that it's impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, but He is emphasizing that it will be "hard." In the parable of the seed that fell among thorns, Jesus describes wealth as something that can choke the Word of God. God doesn't condemn wealth, but like everything else in the world, it must be secondary to the first commandment: *"We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."* That's why it's important to recognize God as the Giver of our possessions. Like in the creation story, God entrusts us with our possessions – our responsibility is to manage them for the good of people and creation. In Matthew 6:2, Jesus gives us another clue as to how we should act as stewards: *"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."*

If I can go back to our initial example of the card game, where the rules are concerned, I have to say that the first rule of giving is that it should be done secretly and privately. This makes it clear that giving is a personal matter that each individual should clarify with God in prayer. However, that doesn't mean that we can or should no longer talk about giving at all. It's precisely in this area that I notice that many people are unsure, perhaps because we don't talk about it enough. Some people have very practical questions: Is it better to give directly to the poor or to large aid organizations that are active in crisis areas with war and famine? Others want to know what the standard should be for giving: the statutory church tax or the Biblical tithe? These are the exact questions that the Apostle Paul addresses in his first letter to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Paul says: *"Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come."* The first answer that the apostle Paul gives us is: We should give where it is needed. For many, however, this statement can be overwhelming because the need is great everywhere: wars, natural disasters – the need is almost endless. It's easy to

lose track. In our church too, there are numerous opportunities for giving: church building projects, mission, social work, the general church treasury, donations to the congregation treasury – all unspectacular but important ways to help quietly. But what should we do? We cannot help everyone. Who should we give our money to? Here we can't avoid setting priorities. An important guideline is the relationship with people and the personal responsibility that God has placed on us. These are exactly the two points that Paul addresses in his letter to the Corinthians. The situation was as follows: The "mother church" in Jerusalem had fallen into economic hard times. Therefore, Paul organized a collection. For him, this was a question of solidarity with his sisters and brothers in Jerusalem. The church in Corinth couldn't be indifferent to the plight of fellow Christians in another place, whose existence was possibly at stake. After all, they form one body together. Paul makes the matter personal. He reminds us of the connection between the Christians in Jerusalem and Corinth and commits himself to it.

I want to return to the example of the card game. When I start a card game with a few friends, I am initially focused on these people and enter into a relationship with them. Therefore, I follow the rules of this card game and stick to the people with whom I am in relationship. These principles also apply in the church. When I go to church, I enter into a relationship. I share the one body and the one cup of Christ with these people and live as one body of Christ with them. This also means that I take responsibility for these people. If someone is in need, I pray for them. If someone is in crisis, I try to help to the best of my ability and means. In fact, our church is based on this solidarity. In the SELK, there are congregations that finance more than two pastors, even though they only have one. These congregations deliberately pay more than the required amount into the general church fund because they know that they support poorer congregations in this way. Each congregation decides for itself how much it can give. Our congregation can't afford to fully pay one pastor so we receive support from other congregations so that the work here can continue. Now we can and should ask ourselves whether we give more so that more help can be provided elsewhere. Yes, we should ask this question. Solidarity with the body of Christ requires it! But the congregation can only give as much as has been collected by the individual congregation members. Therefore, everything begins with each individual. Each congregation member, as a steward of the good gifts God has given him or her, must decide for themselves what should be done with that money. If part of their money goes to the congregational treasury, the congregation can then decide how much of it is passed on to the general church treasury. At our congregational meeting in February of this year, it was unanimously decided to increase the contribution to the general church treasury. Unfortunately, less than the hoped-for and agreed amounts have been collected so far, so the congregational treasury currently has a deficit. It is therefore fair to say that we are currently in dire straits.

This sermon is therefore also a call that concerns us all: to rethink how much our church is worth to us and how much we want and can set aside for it. It's worth noting that Paul doesn't give any guidelines here – he doesn't mention a specific amount or percentage, not even a minimum amount. Everyone can decide for themselves how much of their private money they set aside for the church. Paul only says: "as much as he is able." There is no objective standard. Everyone must decide according to their own knowledge and conscience in consultation with God. That is also the only honest answer I can give when asked "how much" – Give as much as you are able! The apostle Paul doesn't just appeal for a collection, but he also gives concrete advice on how to give money. He says: *"On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come."* Giving is voluntary. Paul promotes the collection, emphasizes the purpose, and shows the responsibility that Christians have for one another, but he doesn't force anyone. Coercion would be completely inappropriate here because giving has something to do with our relationship with God. And that cannot be forced. By giving, I confess that God is the Lord of all my possessions – and that can't be done under pressure or coercion.

However, Paul gives us another note: we should donate regularly. The Christians in Corinth were to put their donations aside on the very first day of the week – not at the end of the week when their wages are almost used up. Paul challenges the church to think about what everyone can give right at the beginning and to put this amount aside. Today he would probably say: "It's best to set up a standing order!" For some of our church members, however, this is easier said than done. Many are asylum seekers and no longer receive cash, but only a shopping card. You can't transfer money to the church with this card but can only buy things that are part of your living expenses. These people can hardly give or maybe they can't give at all. Those in such a situation can contribute in other ways instead, such as through practical help or through personal involvement in the church. For Paul it's clear: Giving doesn't make us poorer. Giving is an exercise in trust – it means letting go in order to receive again. God is the One who brings about both through His Spirit: opening the hands to give and giving gifts with an open hand. Those who let go have free hands to receive God's gifts and are ready for the work God has prepared for them. Amen.