

Series: The Joy of Giving
Part III: How to Really Shine
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We are coming to the final message in our “Joy of Giving” series. We began by talking about blessing – how Jesus tells us that *it is more blessed to give than to receive*. (Acts 20:35b, NIV) We also said that blessing is not just about us, as in getting more money or more stuff for us, but that *we are blessed to be a blessing to others*. We even spent time talking about how those, both inside and outside of this extended church family, are blessed by our giving through the many life-transforming ministries of this church. Last week we talked about how our giving not only brings joy to others, but it also brings joy to us by shaping us into the persons God created each one of us to become. *The more we give, the more generous and Christlike we become.*

Today we are looking at part of a letter the apostle Paul writes to the Philippian church – a church he himself started. Paul is writing from prison. He is facing a capital charge which could lead to death. Some scholars believe that he was in prison for as long as two years. It may have been in some of the worst conditions one could imagine. And yet, if you have read this letter to the Philippians, you may remember that Paul’s main theme in the midst of these hard times is *joy*. But, joy is not what you would expect from someone going through hard times in prison. So, if we want to learn the secret of finding joy, then maybe Paul is our man. When it comes to finding this joy in hard times, Paul can sincerely say, “Been there – done that!” Like the old E.F. Hutton commercial used to say: “When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen.” Today we can say, “When Paul talks, we need to listen,” especially when it comes to finding joy.

Paul is writing these words to some Christians that he genuinely cared for. Philippi was a Roman colony settled by former Roman soldiers who were given land for their service. There were also other Greeks and Jews in that city and church. Paul is thanking them at the end of his letter for a monetary gift he has received from them. It was a genuine surprise. Paul is not asking for more money, but simply expressing his thanks to God and to them for what they have done. So, this is a passage about joy and giving – which fits in nicely with our theme, *The Joy of Giving*.

So, please turn with me to these words of Paul from Philippians 2:14-18. They can be found on your bulletin insert or in your own Bible. As we read this, listen for the Word of the Lord. Paul writes,

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold out the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.
(Philippians 2:14-18, NIV)

Paul ends these words with joy and rejoicing when he writes, “I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.” (Philippians 2:17b-18, NIV) But, how does Paul get to this joy? That’s what we want to find out today – *how do we get to joy* -- especially *The Joy of Giving?*

Paul begins by talking about stars shining in the darkness. That is the picture the Paul is painting for us in these words – the image of looking up into the night sky filled with stars. Paul writes to these Philippians, “Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold out the word of life.” (Phil. 2:15b-16a, NIV) But, prior to these words about shining like stars, Paul has said, “Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’” (Philippians 2:14-15a, NIV) So, why does he begin there in the search for joy?

First of all, I think Paul is giving the Philippians some very practical advice – that when we grumble or argue with one another, it is very hard to experience joy. Just try to imagine how you feel when you are grumbling or arguing with someone – is there any way you can conceive of experiencing joy at the same time?

Paul is giving this very practical advice because he wants the Philippians to be blameless and pure “in a warped and crooked generation.” Those are some harsh words – but, they are words which may have crossed our minds recently when we look at some of what is going on in our world today. Sometimes it feels “warped and crooked” – perhaps even like a time of darkness. But, as some have said, “It is in the darkest night that stars shine brightest.” That’s why Paul is encouraging the Philippians to be like stars that shine in the night sky by the way they live – not grumbling or arguing – but by holding out the word of life like a light in the darkness.

When we hear words like Paul’s describing “a warped and crooked generation”, we may gain some perspective in knowing that *we are not the first generation that may have felt that way*. Paul clearly feels that way about his time – so, we should not think that we are the first, or that no one has ever had to face something like what we are experiencing now. I think that should encourage us – reminding us that God can see us through now, just as God did 2,000 years ago in the time of Paul.

It might also give us a game plan for shining the light of God’s love and grace into the dark places of the world. One way we could do that is by choosing not to grumble or argue. Another way would be by choosing to give – as the Philippians had given Paul. Both of these are ways not only to shine like stars in the night, but also to bring joy to others, and to experience joy ourselves.

We may wonder what that looks like in our day and time – to really “shine.” This morning I want to share with you a short video that may show us what it looks like to “shine” – perhaps in more than one way. It is the story of Albert Lexie who died at the age of 76 a few days ago. He lived in Pittsburgh and was known as the “Shoeshine Man” by the folks at UPMC Children’s Hospital where Albert worked for 30 years. Albert arrived at 7:25 a.m. in the morning after getting on a bus at 5:50 a.m. He shined shoes all day. He was paid \$5.00 for each pair he shined, but notice what he did with his tips. Albert is a little hard to understand at times, so you will need to pay

close attention. Pay special attention to the first thing he says about why he does this – it has to do with JOY.

(Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euKSHfc-H70>)

That video was made a few years ago. By the time Albert died recently, the hospital reports that he had given over \$202,000 to the hospital's Free Care Fund. It goes to help those children who needed medical care but whose families couldn't afford it. In another video, Albert says that he charges \$5.00 for the shoeshine, and that people usually tip him a dollar or two, sometimes more.

Now when it comes to how much *we* should give away, I was not a math major, but I think Albert gave away almost 20% of his income! The Bible's ideal or goal for us as Christians is to give away at least a "tithe" or 10%. But Albert, whom I would guess had a much more modest income than most of us, gave away 20% -- which over time added up to more than \$200,000! So, if we are thinking we cannot possibly give away anything like a tithe or 10% of what we have, just look at Albert's example and the difference he made in the lives of children – some of whom are probably alive today in part because of Albert's simple and joyful giving.

Also, notice the long-term effect of giving consistently over time. I believe that is really the model for the Christian – *to be consistently generous over time* – not just a promise to make one big gift when we do something like win the lottery. That kind of consistency requires a different kind of sacrifice. It is not glorious or flashy, but over time it can make a huge difference in the lives of others – bringing God's joy into others' lives, and into ours!

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he uses this idea of "sacrifice" – which may sound a little confusing to us. When he talks about "being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith," he is using imagery from the sacrificial rituals of his day. But, Paul makes reference to both his own sacrifice and to the sacrifice of the Philippians.

Paul is most likely at the end of his life when he writes these words. He has faced suffering and trials, sacrificing much to share with folks like the Philippians the good news of God's love and grace shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus -- God's son. As we said earlier, Paul is writing this joy-filled letter in part to thank the Philippians for their sacrificial gift that they sent to Paul to meet his needs and support his work of sharing the good news with others. And like doing anything of real value, we know that giving requires some sacrifice on our part. Giving costs us something -- but in the end, it is worth it! For example, it is worth it to give all of one's tips to help children who can't afford medical care. And it is worth it to give through the ministries of Johns Creek Presbyterian Church to make a difference in the lives of others.

On this Kirkin' of the Tartans Sunday, we celebrate our Presbyterian heritage. Our history is filled with stories of people who made sacrifices, sometimes of their lives -- so that we could be here today worshipping God and making a difference in the lives of others. They are people like Patrick Hamilton, the first protestant martyr who preached the faith in Scotland, which led to his arrest and execution. Or, George Wishart, who preached fiery, hour-long sermons in the language of the people that they could understand, and he created a popular songbook of hymns to energize congregational singing. He, too, was arrested and later killed. There was Andrew

Melville, sometimes called the “Architect of the New Church” in Scotland. He helped create the first document to lay out the key tenets of how we should organize ourselves as Presbyterian Christians. He was imprisoned for four years in the Tower of London and later exiled to France. There was also James Stewart who used his position of influence with Mary Queen of Scots, even though it was very risky. He was “determined to set Scotland on a course of peace and unity” (J. Stephen Lang, *Dates with Destiny*, Revell, 1990)

This past week, we also lost one of the great church figures of our day – Eugene Peterson. A Presbyterian (PCUSA) pastor, professor and author, he is probably best known as the translator of *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible which has sold 17 million copies. Last fall I invited all of us to read one of his earliest books, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. As you may remember, I had the privilege of visiting with him during my sabbatical the summer before last. It was a life-changing encounter for me. This past week, articles about the widespread impact he has made over his lifetime have appeared almost every day. One of the articles that Brian passed along to me talked about someone who, like me, had visited Eugene in his home on Lake Flathead in Montana. This is what the writer said about his visit with Eugene:

I asked Eugene about a lot of things, but I stumbled onto something. I wanted to know what he has learned about money. To give a little context, this is a guy who translated a Bible that has sold over 17 million copies. I was interested to know what that has taught a guy who grew up in a modest home during the Great Depression, in a hard-working, small-town community, who himself lived paycheck-to-paycheck for most of his working years.

Eugene was totally silent for about 60 seconds. He was rubbing his fingers through his grey beard and staring off into the distance across the lake where the Rocky Mountains are in view. Through so many of these moments with Eugene over the years, I have learned to wait through the long pauses. It seemed like he had gathered a thought. “I don’t think I’ve learned anything about money,” he said. And then he went silent again. I waited, but I was thinking, *What do you mean you haven’t learned anything about money?*

Then it hit me. This is a guy who lives in his childhood home. They have one car, a Honda. There is not an ostentatious bone in their bodies. These are people who have turned down opportunity after opportunity in order to preserve a life of simplicity and quiet faithfulness. A long obedience in the same direction. I have long said that it only took Eugene Peterson 65 years to become an overnight success, and the success came when he had gotten over his need to be successful. God must have known he could trust this old couple with that kind of money, that kind of acclaim.

What I discovered is that Eugene and Jan have been doing this their whole lives, been giving themselves away, their strength away, their money away. I basically made him admit that he and Jan have paid for scores of his students to pursue Masters or Doctoral degrees. Full scholarships out of their own pockets. “We determined that that’s why God gave us this money. That’s what it’s for,” he said. They have given to local and global mission work. Eugene and Jan could have gone the traditional retirement route that is the

last stretch on the highway to the American Dream and no one would have blamed them. They could have circled the wagons and shut everyone else out. They could have spent that money on themselves. But they haven't.

At the end of their time together, Eugene prayed for all of them:

“Father, help Jan and I to take what’s left with us and share it with those around us ... Help us give it all away.” Of all that I have learned from Eugene and Jan Peterson over the years, maybe that’s the thing that will stick with me the most: that true life is found as we become like Jesus, as we spend our lives giving it all away. (“The Hidden Legacy of Eugene Peterson” by Daniel Grothe, October 18, 2018, relevantmagazine.com)

So, what could inspire Eugene and Jan to “give it all away?” I think it was because they tried as best they could, both before they had wealth and after, to give *because God gave first*. As John’s gospel reminds us, “For God so loved the world, that He gave” . . . Jesus. (John 3:16) And Jesus *gave it all* for each one of us through his death on a Roman cross. So, if we want to find joy, then *give*. Friends, it is just that simple – give! *That is how you find joy in life*.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.