

Sermon 119, Giving to God, Exodus 35:1-36:7

Proposition: God provides for His dwelling place through His people's generosity.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, allow me to strike fear into your hearts this evening by suggesting that we may be embarking soon on a building campaign. The church may very well ask you to dig deep so that we can pay for a beautiful and useful meeting space. I don't know this for sure, but the signs are on the horizon.

Well, tonight we are going to talk about another building campaign — the one to build the tabernacle. This structure used one ton of gold, two tons of silver, and three tons of bronze — and it was portable! Now, don't worry. There is no one-to-one correlation between the building campaign and generosity recorded in these chapters and the building campaign and generosity that our church may be called upon to participate in. There is a correlation, of course. But it's different than you are probably thinking. Let me put it negatively first: This passage does not give our church a warrant to ask you to dig deep and contribute time and money for a building. What does it do? Well, as I trust you know by now (this is our 119th sermon on Exodus), the tabernacle was God's dwelling place. He lived there and moved in that tent alongside His people as they lived in tents and moved from place to place in the wilderness.

Today, God does not dwell in any tent or temple made with hands. He dwells in His people; we are the temple of the living God. This passage warrants us in asking you to support the church, to build up the dwelling place of God by investing time and money in your fellow saints. Now, a building can be part of that. You can and should invest in your fellow saints by paying for them to have a place to meet. But the tabernacle was not a place for Israel to assemble; it was not big enough inside for more than a few people, for it was a private residence rather than a public building. Anyway, the upshot is that what the OT says about contributing to

the temple relates to giving to God's dwelling place, which in our NT context means giving to your fellow saints.

Well, we will see that through Israel's generosity, God's tent was built among His people. He came to live with them, but He asked them to pay the cost with goods and skills that they had acquired in Egypt. He provides for His dwelling place through His people's generosity.

I. The Primary Thing God Wants Is Your Time, vv. 1-3

The first thing we see in the text is a reminder about the Sabbath day. As we saw thirteen messages ago, the whole golden calf incident is bracketed by mentions of the Sabbath. God's rest is unbroken and unbreakable; even a vile golden calf cannot stop Him from resting and inviting His people to enter into His rest.

Secondly, the placement of this passage tells us that the primary thing God wants is our time. Giving blue, purple, and scarlet yarns is important. Giving whatever is needed for the dwelling place of God is important, and is the subject of the next several chapters. But right at the beginning of the account of all Israel's obedient giving stands this reminder that God wants your time first. More than anything, He wants you to be with Him. Yes, He requested oil and spices and bronze and whatnot, but before He even mentioned any of that He reminded His people that His primary desire is to have them come and spend the day with Him. The tabernacle is important, but the Sabbath day is more important. A place for God to live is important, but simply being with Him in worship and fellowship is more important. Only here does the command against lighting a fire on the Sabbath day appear. This is one of those commands of "Jewish strictness" that our Reformed forebears insisted no longer apply to the New Covenant Sabbath. But the command against working still applies; the day is the Lord's Day, not your day.

What about the idea that we don't need to build the church on Sunday? I think in literal terms, Sunday is not a day for fixing up the building. More broadly, Sunday is not the best day for elder and deacon meetings, drawing up our financial statements, and performing the other institutional actions that the church needs for its well-being. Sunday is the day for the organic side of the church to flourish. We are doing what we want to do; we are meeting for love, and not for hard-headed workaday reasons.

II. God Will Tell You What He Wants, vv. 4-20

The next thing we see about giving to the Lord is that He will tell you what He wants. The items needed are literally listed out right here. The lists are broken into two categories.

A. Goods, vv. 4-9

The first is goods. All of the materials for the tabernacle were donated in kind, presumably from what the people had been able to plunder from the Egyptians before they departed the land of their enslavement. We have talked about how rare and valuable most of these items were, but let me highlight again that the Lord is not requesting brown paper and clay pots. To give to the Lord is not a matter of 25 cents here and there. He asks for a lot. He deserves a lot. Indeed, He deserves everything. Don't skimp on what you give to God.

B. Services, vv. 10-19

The other thing the people gave was services. They worked this material hard, making it exactly what it needed to be. The skillful men and skillful women worked hard on this project because they wanted to give to God.

III. God Wants You to Give Freely, v. 22

Indeed, here at what is basically the center of the chapter Moses tells us that the reason people gave was because their hearts moved them. That was also the first thing that God said: Give if your heart moves you. If you don't want to give, you don't have to.

Now, as one of the commentators pointed out, we are always quick to criticize Israel and point out their shortcomings. But we also need to celebrate their successes. Israel gave freely. We are told that everyone who could make a contribution made one — and that everyone who had something to give gave it. In other words, the text is certainly suggesting that all Israel came and gave.

That is an example for us, to say it as directly as I can. You and I need to give to God. We have to — but only if we're willing. What would make your heart willing? Recognizing all that God has done for you. Meditating on His gifts. Looking around at His benefits. Seeing the value of His presence. Knowing that He is worthy! Brothers and sisters, do you train yourself to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? When you have absolute confidence that He is worthy, you will give freely. In addition, when you know that your gifts will be used for worthwhile earthly projects, you give freely.

IV. Different Groups Give What they Can, vv. 23-28

The text highlights the different groups who gave.

A. Men

Every man who had fabric, animal skins, or wood brought it to the Lord. It's worth noting that the Israelites weren't necessarily carrying all this stuff out of Egypt. They could have gotten some of it in the wilderness, either by buying from Midianite traders, cutting trees and catching dolphins, or otherwise working and trading for the materials necessary for the tabernacle. Especially when it comes to gold and silver and bronze, it seems unlikely that they had facilities for mining those metals with them, but they either had them on hand or bought them from traders.

B. Women

Nor were the men alone; the women gave too. Especially they were notable for their skill in spinning thread for making cloth. Every skilled woman spun with her hands — they spun blue, purple, scarlet and white linen threads; they also spun the coarse goats' hair. Ladies, I'm going to take just a minute to ask whether this sounds like lesser work or unimportant work. So the women were doing the traditionally female task of spinning. Is that because God didn't want them giving wood and bronze? Or is it rather because He wanted them to be doing what they were good at? In the same way, today it is easy for you ladies to resent being asked to do a traditionally female task. "Why do we decorate the church building and host baby showers and sit in the nursery while the men stand up front and preach?" Brothers and sisters, that is as

wrong-headed as it would have been for Bezalel to say “Let me do the spinning; sisters, you lead the crew in fancy metalworking and furniture building.” The women gave to God the skills they had. They did not wish that they had other skills, or claim to have them when they didn’t. They submitted their skills to the Lord. They were glad for what they had, and they contributed it freely.

C. Leaders

Finally, we see that the leaders gave as well. They brought precious stones of every kind, and the other valuable items like spices. In other words, this is a word to church leaders — you too need to give! The same goes for political authorities. Kings and presidents should also tithe.

After mentioning the three different groups who brought gifts to the LORD, Moses goes back to speaking of the entire congregation and emphasizing that they all brought gifts. Well, he doesn’t quite say that every Israelite brought a gift; just that “the Israelites, all the men and women whose heart moved them” brought a gift.

V. God Provides Leaders to Utilize the Gifts, 35:30-36:2

And those gifts were not just piled in the desert and left to rot; through the skill of Oholiab and Bezalel, the gifts were actually used to make something greater than they had been alone. A pile of purple fabric and acacia wood is valuable, but it’s not nearly as impressive as the ordered and beautiful tabernacle. In the same way, God continues to provide church leaders whose job it is to take your gifts and turn them into a beautifully ordered dwelling place for God.

VI. God’s People Provide More than Enough, vv. 3-7

The upshot of it all is that God’s people provide more than enough. God wants to move in with them, and though they had served the golden calf, they really want His presence with them.

A. Enough Services, v. 4

The people did all of the work; all kinds of skillful men were doing it, and of course, as we will see, they completed it.

B. More than Enough Goods, vv. 3-7, 38:21-31

And there were more than enough goods. Brothers and sisters, churches that are well run tend to quickly become rich organizations, because they accumulate wealth over generations. God’s people give more than enough. The text makes it sound like they did so in just a few days, but doesn’t say for sure. But we know that this is still true: in the aggregate, over time, the people of God are extremely generous and give far more than enough.

The Lord has given gifts to us that we can and must give back to Him so that He can dwell among us. The greatest gift He has given is His Son — and along with His Son, the fivefold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. All of this is, as Psalm 68 says, so that Yahweh God might dwell among them.

God gives; we receive His gifts, and then we turn around and imitate Him by giving the gifts back to Him. What a delight. Jesus is the Father’s Gift, His indescribable gift! And having been given Him, will you not also freely give Him all things? Amen.