



Grace Giving

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
2 Corinthians 8:1-7

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People are resorting to all sorts of novel ways to raise money these days, such as the woman who sat in a freezing bath of baked beans for seven hours to raise money for



Alzheimer's research. Or the guy who watched all 238 episodes of the TV sitcom Friends for 84 consecutive hours for charity. Or the South Carolina sheriff who agreed to be tased with a stun gun for every \$1000 donated to the local Sheriff Foundation.

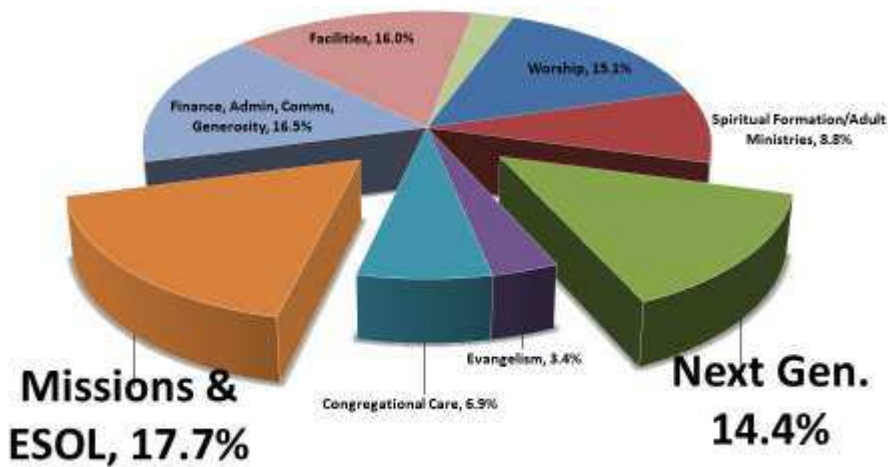
I'm not a big fan of out-of-the-ordinary fundraisers. I've never been keen on church bazaars and bake sales. We don't do raffles here. I prefer to raise money the old-fashioned way. Ask people for it!

I don't believe in pressuring people for money. Any pressure for money must come in a vertical direction from God to us.

As you entered worship today, you should have received a summary of our 2017 budget for your consideration. Eighteen elders, with our pastoral staff, have prayed over this budget. We have labored long and hard over it. We've already submitted pledges to support it. We practice transparency with regard to this budget. If you want a line-by-line accounting of this budget, you are welcome to it.

Let me highlight two aspects of this budget for special emphasis. The first area is mission. We have identified 40+ outreach projects worthy of your support. Two Sundays ago in worship, we highlighted one such project: Community Coalition for Haiti or CCH. This mission project originated 25 years ago with this church in partnership and First Baptist

in Vienna. It's primarily a medical mission to an under-served area of Haiti. Why Haiti? Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, that's why!



The second area for emphasis is Next Generation ministry. We want to reach children and students for Jesus Christ.

That's why we are investing significant staff and volunteer time in reaching the next generation for faith in Jesus Christ.

If you believe in what we are trying to do, support this effort. If not, then give elsewhere. There are plenty of nonprofits out there competing for charitable dollars. Just do your homework with how they allocate your resources. The Washington Redskins right now are playing the Cincinnati Bengals in London. During October, the National Football League (NFL) is making a big deal out of Breast Cancer Awareness. That's why the players are wearing pink merchandise. Do you know how much money this merchandise is generating for Breast Cancer research? Would you believe eight percent?

Our Scripture lesson from 2 Corinthians functions as Paul's signature work on the topic of fundraising. The Collection, as he calls it, is important enough for Paul to devote two chapters to it. He spends the better part of a decade raising money for poor Christians in Jerusalem. During his second missionary journey, Paul travels to churches in Macedonia to seek support for this collection. They jump at the chance to help their fellow Christians. Next, Paul stops at the prosperous port city called Corinth.

These Corinthian believers are equally enthusiastic about joining this relief effort.

The Macedonians make good on their promise. We read, in chapter 8, that despite their poverty, they exercise considerable generosity in helping the poor (8:2). They not only give according to their means; they give beyond their means (8:3). They even beg Paul for the privilege of sharing in this ministry (8:4).

Paul never once mentions money in this appeal for funds. Instead, he uses substitute words like ministry, service and partnership...gift, generosity and grace. Paul doesn't regard fundraising simply as a money-making proposition. He offers theological justification for why this collection is worthy of their support.

Grace is the word that appears more than any other in this stewardship appeal. Grace appears ten times in a span of two chapters. Paul

begins chapter 8 by reminding these Corinthians about the grace God has given these Macedonian churches (8:1). He closes this section by urging them to excel in the grace of giving (8:7).

Grace is essential to Paul's theology. Grace is God's undeserved favor for people. We are saved by an act of God's grace. Paul writes in verse 9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that you through his

I want you to know about the **grace** of God that has been given the Macedonian Churches...8.1

...see that you also excel in this **grace** of giving 8.7

poverty might become rich.” Martin Luther called this verse “the happy exchange.” Jesus substitutes his riches for our spiritual poverty.

1. Provides relief to poor people

**Be openhanded toward those who are poor and needy in your land.
Dt. 15.11**

Grace makes us gracious. God’s grace makes it possible for us to become grace-filled. Grace is what opens hearts and wallets.

Paul has two reasons for giving so much air time to this collection. The first reason is rather obvious. It provides relief for poor people. Make no mistake about it. The Bible is unambiguous about God’s concern for the poor. We read in Deuteronomy, “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be open-handed toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land” (15:11).

The second reason may be less obvious yet equally compelling. The collection provides a tangible demonstration of unity in the Christian church. These poor Christians living in Jerusalem are Jews by background. Yet the people to whom Paul appeals for help in Corinth and Macedonia are principally Gentiles. There was considerable friction back in the day between Jews and Gentiles. The reason why Paul is all over this collection is that he regards it as a golden opportunity to express unity in the gospel.

Remembering the poor and seeking racial reconciliation are core to our mission. I mentioned a few Sundays ago that 6,000 people within a five-mile radius of our church live below the poverty line. Let me break it down further. We

partner with a neighborhood school that has identified 50 families who do not have adequate food to feed their children. We will partner with other churches in an effort we are calling Generosity Feeds in early 2017 to address this food shortage. We are also providing mentors for these families to help reverse the cycle of poverty.

I also identified, in this same sermon, 146,000 people within a ten-mile radius of our church who do not identify with any church. During November, we will be talking about souls on fire for sharing our faith. We have a team of people who are right now sharing their faith with recent immigrant communities. These efforts at charity and evangelism are a prelude to our Outreach Center we are expecting to launch in cooperation with our Ignite Initiative next year.



Last Monday, our Elders met with Deacons from First Baptist to continue our conversation on race. First Baptist is a predominantly African American

church in town. We have the distinct sense as churches that God is calling us to serve more closely together as we share a common witness for Jesus Christ.

Later this week, I'll devote three days to a men's retreat called Great Banquet. Nearly one half of the leadership team of Great Banquet is African-American. In the first talk of this weekend, we will ask men three questions: What do you do with your time? How do you spend your money? What do you think about? These questions are really good at helping men and women alike prioritize what's important to us. Inviting men to a three-day retreat is something of a

challenge. For all the tough guy talk guys throw around, men are rather timid about signing up for anything that is outside their comfort zone. Trust me, I wouldn't invest this much time if it didn't change lives. We still have ten openings for the men's Great Banquet next weekend. I dare you to talk with me about it!

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? Our focus this fall is *Souls on Fire*. We began the fall by talking about souls on fire for loving and serving God. We are focusing this call to love and serve God in three main areas: mission, generosity and sharing our faith.

Let's talk about generosity. We're asking you to estimate your 2017 giving on a simple pledge card. This exercise accomplishes two objectives. First, it gives us a gauge on your intentions in the coming year. Second, it makes it possible for you to become more intentional about your giving next year.

Have you ever calculated the actual percentage you give to the Lord's work? The average church people give to their local congregation is nothing special—about two percent. Why don't you determine the percentage you currently give to the Lord's work and raise this number by one percent next year?

Six years ago, we conducted a little experiment that we've been talking about ever since. Given that many of you are new to our church, we



decided to repeat this experiment. In the past two Sundays, we asked you to indicate on a 3x5 card ten percent of your yearly household income. We didn't need to know your name; only a ten percent figure. We also made it possible for you this time around to text this number to us.

Why ten percent? Ten percent represents a tithe in the Old Testament. It was a common practice for Biblical people to give a tenth of their earnings to the Lord's work. So, we were interested in knowing what ten percent of our income would be. We ran the numbers and compiled the totals. Here is what we found...viennapres.org/giving.

There is so much potential here. God has big plans for us; bigger plans than we have yet realized. God has given us something vital to share. We need your help in delivering this message. We need your time, your money and your prayers. We want to share God's mercy and God's salvation with more people. That's why we are unapologetic about asking for your help. We need you to be all-in.

