gratuitous

adjective

1. given, done, bestowed, or obtained without charge or payment; free; voluntary.
2. being without apparent reason, cause, or justification
3. given without receiving any return value

What have you been blessed with? What has God given to you?

When we think of everything that God has entrusted to us we are often moved to thankfulness. But what is the next step after gratitude? What can we do to show God that we are not only thankful, but that we want to glorify Him with all we've been given? We can turn to Matthew 10:8:

Freely you have received; freely give.

As we are humbled by the abundance that God bestows on our lives, these thoughts must turn into action. The action of giving like Christ did, with no conditions or expectations.

In the 2014 Pentecost service, Chief Apostle Schneider said that one of the effects of God's love is that He is always the giver.

> *He gives without calculation. He gives without expecting anything in return. He gives without stipulating any conditions…The Lord Jesus gave His life for all, without any conditions. He has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. And I am sure we all agree: without any merit on our part…He gives because He loves us. So if we truly have love then we also have to be those who give it. We too are to give to others without calculation and without expecting anything in return.*

Think again of what God has given you. Maybe you are thankful for your spiritual gifts, your relationships, your health, or the time you have to make experiences and learn new things. How can you freely give these things to others? Can you give these things without calculation or without stipulating certain conditions? How can you give away things like time or health?

If we can stay in the frame of mind that the things in our lives really belong to God and not to us, the natural response inspires us to give freely.



Through our giving to others we are drawn into a closer fellowship and likeness to God and His Son. Acts 20:35 is a verse we are familiar with: *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* As our relationship with Christ grows, we clearly see that true joy in Christ is found in giving.

How can our congregations embrace the concept of gratuitousness? It's very clearly defined in our Vision by the phrase, to create "a church in which people feel at home." When we can "give without calculation," we display our love for those to whom we give. This culture of giving and serving is a key aspect in fulfilling our Vision and is a responsibility that is inherent in all of Christianity. **–VB/KAH**

> *Who we are, and what we have, has been given to us so that we can place it at the service of others. Freely we have received, freely we must give. Our task is to make it bear fruit in good works.* - Pope Francis



What can I give with what I have received?



STEWARDSHIP

WHAT DO WE DO WITH WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN US?

As we approach the autumn season, it is customary for me to write to you about our New Apostolic Thanksgiving Day. For those of you who have diligently saved during the year and intend to give a special expression of your thanks to God with your offering, I thank God for your faith and am inspired by your example.

This Thanksgiving season, I would like to introduce a new perspective to our understanding of offering. This perspective comes directly from the teachings of Christ and is called stewardship. Allow me to explain it this way:

Stewardship may require an evolution in our thinking and a different level of Christian understanding from which to view our lives. It begins with the knowledge that God has called us to follow a unique path of service and love to Him and to others, according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. This is His purpose for our lives. He has given us many gifts to equip us on our paths; **in fact, all that we have are His gifts to us:**

- The gift of our physical existence; our lives and health
- Our time; a lifetime of opportunity
- The grace of Jesus
- The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives; the gift of Divine Childhood in God
- Our unique spiritual giftedness which can be identified through Work of Ministry
- Our relationships with our parents, spouse, children; family and friends
- Our wealth or material possessions

These things really belong to Him, not to us. He has given them to us to glorify Him and to serve His purpose. A steward is someone who manages the possessions of another with the highest level of trust.

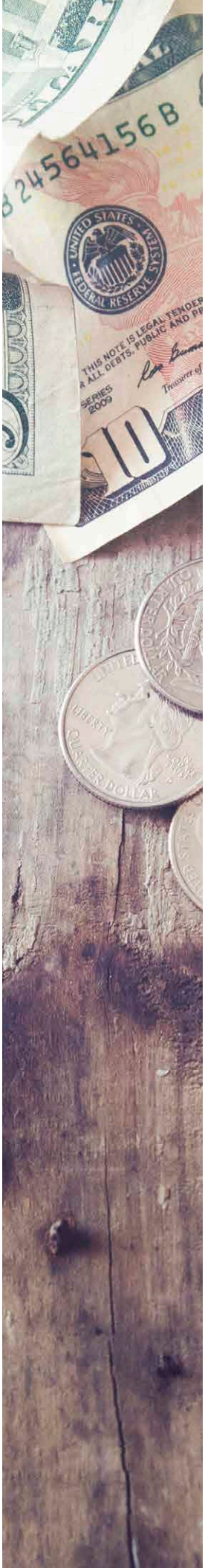
We see that Jesus described this relationship between God and us in many parables. Perhaps most notable is the parable of the talents which we can find in the 25th chapter of Matthew. I would ask you to read this parable carefully and ponder these points:

- Each servant received something different "to each according to his own ability" from his "lord." We see here that not everyone receives the same gifts.
- The lord of the parable then leaves these servants to care for his talents "in trust" during his absence.
- But each one is expected to account for their use of the lord's talents. He expected them to be good stewards over His gifts.
- It was not acceptable to ignore the talent or to plead ignorance as to what to do with it.

And then it is interesting that this parable leads directly into Christ's comments on the judging of the nations as sheep or goats.

All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me." (Matthew 25:32-36)

Perhaps here is the purpose that God has called us to and for which He has gifted us.



I would like to continue this discussion of stewardship and add to our awareness over the coming months. Let me conclude this segment with a few final thoughts on offering and money:

Jesus defines "blessing" in a new way. Our offering is given out of thankfulness for God's blessing in our lives. God's blessing is often associated with natural abundance such as wealth and good fortune, like Abraham. Conversely, consider the parable of Job. His friends assume God has removed His blessing from Job's life because of his natural calamities and they unfairly judge him.

But Jesus paints a different picture in His teachings. In the Beatitudes, He tells the poor, the meek, the mourners and the persecuted that they are blessed also, but links blessing to the Kingdom of Heaven. Our Chief Apostle recently emphasized that in this way, Jesus defines blessing. It is anything that God gives or allows that brings us closer to the Kingdom. Hence, some conditions may be a blessing that are not pleasant to experience and may not include wealth and health. Please be careful of the idea that our offerings will lead to prosperity.

Materialism: This is a powerful negative force that takes us in the opposite direction of stewardship. Here, the individual spends their God-given giftedness in the pursuit of things that *moth and rust destroys.* [Matthew 6:20] Further, this individual says: "I am what I own. I define my life's purpose, even my self-worth, by my possessions." This path can be quite destructive. We are inundated with messages that reinforce the myth that material possessions bring respect, acceptance, and purpose to our lives. When taken to the extreme, this path leads away from a true Christian life of peace and love towards God and each other. There are startling statistics that indicate just how indebted our society has become in the pursuit of materialism and the effects this has on spiritual, emotional, and even physical health.

Lastly, it is quite interesting to recognize just how focused Jesus Christ was on this subject. It would be much easier for us to avoid the subject of money completely; it is an uncomfortable topic. However, Jesus dedicated a significant number of His teaching parables to the subject of our relationship with money, so we must conclude that it is an important part of our decision to walk as disciples with Him.

Perhaps we find ourselves in the dilemma of the servant who buried his talent. Perhaps he didn't know how to manage the gift that he received. Likewise, perhaps some of our members have a heart to help others and to support the cause of Christ, but are prevented by a lack of financial skills. Take just a moment to consider the parable of the Good Samaritan. How would the story be different if he had a heart filled with compassion, but no funds? He had both the heart to help and the ability to give.

Stewardship, in the form of healthy financial habits, is a common problem for many folks today. If you or someone you love could use some help in this area, you are not alone. There are resources available that approach this subject from a Christian perspective. **–LRK/WJ**



WHAT WILL YOU LOOK BACK ON?



What will be said about the year 2020 when we look back on it years from now? For sure, we will think about the pandemic that our world was afflicted by and how our everyday lives were changed. How we were locked away in our homes and kept from our families, friends, and workplaces. We may reflect on the missed celebrations, vacations, and events, that seemingly were robbed from us. Some will remember this year and still celebrate because of the birth of children, graduations from high school or college, and marriages. But ultimately, many may look back upon 2020 and consider it a wasted year.

Yet, we would be remiss not to take the time now to look towards God and recognize that in these days, He has been with us, He has been working, and that each day of 2020 had purpose. The purpose is the same for God's children no matter what is happening in the world around us. We are to be disciples of Christ and glorify Him in all we do. And certainly, during this time, we have been afforded the opportunity to share the love of God and the light of Jesus Christ, and to glorify His name. We can do that because we have been reborn by water and Spirit. After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell within His disciples so that they could live out His mission and fulfill their purpose – to glorify God.

This year is not a wasted year. We can resolve to make this our best year yet because we know that our God is with us, and with the power of the Holy Spirit, *we can grow in our personal relationship with God* and deepen our faith.

In the word service that was broadcasted on April 19, the District Apostle mentioned five areas of focus that we can strive to grow in to make this year memorable.

1 First, let us focus on learning about the **POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT** in our lives. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and God the Holy Spirit accompanies us throughout our life. Do we feel Him prompting us when to speak, where to go, and what to do? Do we fully trust in Him to help us to speak the truth about Jesus? And in difficult times, do we still recognize His presence and allow Him to turn our distress into joy? We encourage each one to begin every day by seeking the presence of God's Spirit and daily surrendering to Him. Then you will grow in your knowledge of His power. During the craziness of this time that challenges us with the noise of the media and the boredom of being quarantined, *the power of the Spirit gives us a sound mind* that helps us to make decisions by remaining calm, peaceful, and steady.

For God has not given us a spirt of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

2 Timothy 1:7



2 Second, let us focus on our **PRAYER** life and learn to really pray with depth and substance, like we have never done before. As we grow in our relationship with God, we learn more about His nature, and that knowledge deepens our prayers. We recognize more and more how great and awesome He is. We know that He initiates this interaction through the power of the Spirit, and so we are confident that He hears us as His children. Because we know that our God is sovereign and omnipotent, we know we can trust Him with all things, and therefore, we can learn to pray with deeper expression, pouring out our heart to Him. Through prayer, we worship Him and give Him praise. And through prayer, He strengthens and changes us. What a beautiful relationship this is!

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

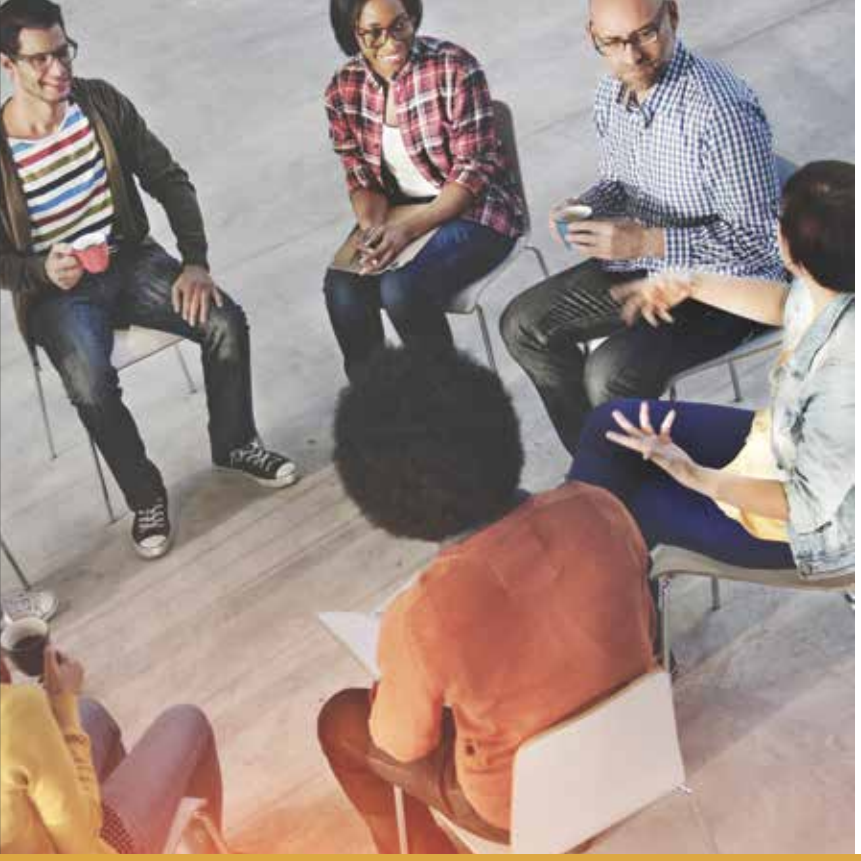
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

3 Third, let's focus on learning about our **FAMILY** and deepening our relationship with one another by sharing together what the Lord Jesus means to us. Spouses, talk to each other about your faith in Jesus Christ and learn together how your relationship with Him helps to strengthen the bond of your relationship. Parents, talk with your children about what God has done for us through His Son, and discover ways to demonstrate the love of God to the world around you, so that you can glorify Him together as a family. Children, talk to your parents about Jesus. Tell them why you love Jesus and encourage them to continue to grow in their relationship with Him. How wonderful it would be that at the end of this year, each family would truly know that they are secure in the hands of God and moving together forward under His blessing.

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6





4 Fourth, strive to recognize and learn that none of us can walk the journey of faith alone. We need our **BROTHERS AND SISTERS** in faith. This year, let us learn to value one another and recognize that we are here together to help one another, to nudge, to pick up and encourage, to celebrate together, to grieve and mourn together, and to fulfill the will of God together. Strive to be able to see each other as God sees us and learn to utilize each one's gifts to edify the body of Christ.

Therefore, let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.

Romans 14:19

5 Our fifth and final focus is that during this year we develop a never-ending hunger to continuously experience true fellowship with Jesus Christ in **HOLY COMMUNION**. That we recognize that each time we celebrate this meal with Him, we remember His life and death, the all-encompassing and eternal sacrifice, which sets us free from sin and brings us into a life-giving relationship with God. Let the desire to join in this fellowship with our Savior and our congregations to grow and deepen, so that we value every opportunity we have to share in the remembrance and celebration of Him.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17





The year 2020 does not have to be one that is remembered as a lost year. It can be a time we look back on and recall the graciousness and goodness of God and embrace the treasures that He provided us with to take along into the future. **– MJB**

To rewatch this sermon from the District Apostle, visit our NAC USA YouTube page.