

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
An Abundance Attitude: Finding a Balance  
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Deuteronomy 15:7-11; 1 Timothy 6:17-19

We begin with story one. He never had much money in his wallet. Whenever Dr. Mauze and his staff would go out for lunch he barely seemed to have enough to pay for his food. This always seemed a bit odd to his staff since he was the senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, and even though in the 50s and 60s when he was there, he was not paid a great deal, he was paid well. No one quite understood this until one day a staff member happened to mention this in passing to Mrs. Mauze. "Oh," she replied, "That's my doing. Each day I carefully count out how much money he needs for lunch and I put it in his wallet." Curious, the staff member asked why. "Because," came the reply, "George is a man with a big heart." As you know, he loves to get out of his office and wander around downtown. The problem was that everyone there knew that George was a soft touch. People would come up and ask him for money and he could never say no. So what he would do was that he would give away everything he had with him. I decided that if we were to have anything to retire on, I need to give him only what he needed, or he would give away everything we had."

Dr. Mauze was a man with an abundant attitude. He always believed that he had enough and more than enough to give to those in need. And you could see this in the two qualities that make for an abundant attitude; and open heart and an open hand. What is interesting about the scriptures is that those two qualities, an open heart and an open hand go hand in hand and they are both desired by God. I say this because whenever it is mention that one ought to give, it is always done in the context of giving willingly, giving joyfully, giving lovingly. We can see this in verses seven and eight in Deuteronomy where the writer says, "*If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.*" Later in verse ten, the people are told to, "*Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so.*" In a sense, it is the attitude of an open heart that allows for the action of an open hand. Why do these two go together? Because human nature is that the more we have the less, open our hearts become to others.

I know that sounds strange, but it is noted in scripture and in a wide variety of recent studies. I will offer two studies. The first is the candy jar study. Researchers began by having subjects think about whether they saw themselves having more money or less money than other people. Following that, the subjects were shown a bowl of candy. They were told that they could take as much as they wanted, and whatever was left would be given to children in need. The results were that those who thought of themselves as having more money than others, took more candy, while those who thought of themselves as having less, took less candy. The second study is one in which people were give VR glasses...you know those glasses where you are seeing in 3-D? The video shown to the subjects was of a street scene in which the subjects were walking down a street. Along the way were a variety of people, all trying to

make eye contact with the wearer. The less money the subject had, the more eye contact they made with people, especially those who might appear to be needy. The more money someone had, the less eye contact they made, not only with those in need, but with anyone. These studies, along with many other ones, show that as our income increases, we not only begin to close our hearts to others, but also we don't actually see others. This is the reason the scriptures remind us that we are to nurture having an open heart, so that we can see not only the needs of others, but we can see their worth and value, as did Dr. Mauze.

Now for story two. When we lived in the Panhandle of Texas, I was asked to do a memorial service for a former member of my congregation. He had been one of the few physicians in the town and was much beloved. People talked about him with great affection because he was always willing to make house calls and was always available. In addition to that, at his death he had left a large bequest to the community foundation in order to assist the town that he loved. As I was meeting with his daughter to discuss the service, I commented on those two things about her dad. Her response took me by surprise. "Do you know what that bequest is?" she asked. Before I could respond she continued, "That was the bicycle I never got. That was the vacation my mother never had. My father never took a day off, ever. My mother begged him for even a few days to go someplace. He always said no. And he said no to Christmas gifts and birthday gifts. Sure, he cared for all those other people. But not us." To so many this was a dedicated man with an abundance attitude, that he always had enough to give away, but somehow not to himself, or to his family.

I bring this up because an attitude of abundance is about having an open heart and an open hand to all. It is not only about giving away to strangers, but it is about giving to family and self in order to enjoy life. We can see this in those often overlooked verses seventeen and eighteen in 1 Timothy. *"As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share..."* Notice that an open heart and an open hand to others is there, but there is also the reminder that what we are given by God is to be enjoyed. This is a very Jewish and not a very Puritan concept. I say this because within Judaism there is always a call to enjoy life. The writer of Ecclesiastes states that there is nothing better in life than to eat, drink and enjoy the fruits of our labor. Think of Fiddler on the Roof and the wedding scene. Think of Jesus first miracle in the Gospel of John where Jesus turns water into wine for the wedding. Life within the Biblical tradition is not to be a dreary, ascetic journey...which our Puritan ancestors seemed to think it was to be. Instead it is to be enjoyed by family, friends and community.

What Paul is trying to tell Timothy and the church he serves is that as God's people we are to find the balance in our attitude of abundance. We are to find an attitude of abundance that as Paul puts it elsewhere, does not cause us to be in need, but insures that others have what they need. This is the balance of an attitude of abundance. It allows us to see ourselves and others as equally worthy of having the blessings of God's bounty on this earth. It allows us to find a balance between loving ourselves and loving neighbor. My challenge to you then on this day in which we make our financial commitments to the church is to ask yourselves, "Where is my balance? Where is my balance that allows me to have an open heart and hand toward strangers and toward self?" Then to work toward that balance in such a way that you live with an attitude of abundance toward all.