

Our Discipleship Pathway, Part 3: GIVE

Romans 12:1-11 on September 22, 2024

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Please read Romans 12:1-11 before going further in this transcript.

This month our church has been going through our new Strategic Ministry Plan. If you didn't pick one up last week, the first 6 pages of the full report are now available by contacting the church. The green/white infographic was in your bulletin again this week; it gives a helpful overview of some of the primary outcomes of our plan.

Today we're going to focus in on part 3 of our Discipleship Pathway: GIVE. When we say "GIVE" we mean: "GIVE toward the GOSPEL." Our Strategic Ministry Plan further explains: "We want to enable everyone to GIVE by using their spiritual gifts and resources in serving the church body." This ties in with the 3rd bullet point in our VISION statement: WE WILL BE A CHURCH WHO...serves and cares for each other in love. And it also connects more broadly with our 4th bullet point: WE WILL BE A CHURCH WHO...welcomes all people and cares for our neighbors." So the focus here is on serving one another, but it also expands to caring for our neighbors. Both of these are ways that we GIVE toward the GOSPEL. Let's get really practical here; each one of us needs to prayerfully consider two things today:

1. What our personal spiritual gifts are, and how God is calling us to use them.

2. What our personal resources are, and how God is calling us to steward them.

So today we're going to spend some time talking about the 3rd G in our Discipleship Pathway, and what it means to GIVE toward the GOSPEL with our Spiritual Gifts and Resources. Giving in these ways supports and promotes our MISSION, VISION, and CORE VALUES.

If today's Scripture reading from Romans 12 felt strangely familiar to some of us, that's probably because we looked at this very passage back in January of this year. The sermon was on "Worshipping God with Our Spiritual Gifts." Today's message on GIVE, echoes many of these same ideas. Romans 12:1 begins, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." The first 11 chapters of Romans took us on a deep dive into the gospel, and then we came to chapter 12's "Therefore." Therefore, in view of all that we know about the gospel, in view of God's mercy toward us, therefore "offer your

bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship.”¹

The following verses then give us some concrete examples of what’s included in our “true and proper worship.” Romans 12:6-8 says, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophecy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.” You see, gathering for Congregational Worship is only a small fraction of our “true and proper worship.” It’s about so much more. We practice “true and proper worship” through all of the various ways in which we GIVE with our time, talents, and treasure. Romans 12 goes so far as to say that our “true and proper worship” includes offering our very lives, offering our bodies as a living sacrifice to God.² In other words, today’s 3rd G in our Discipleship Pathway: GIVE, is intricately connected with worshipping God. So let’s consider what it means to GIVE, in terms of worshipping God through our Spiritual Gifts and our Resources.

**We GIVE toward the GOSPEL...
...by worshipping God with our Spiritual Gifts.**

A Spiritual Gift can be defined as: a God-given ministry calling and empowerment for believers. So, whatever ministry to which God calls us, He equips us with the spiritual gifting that we need, in order to accomplish that ministry. This ministry calling/empowerment is more than just one of our natural abilities, or acquired skills, it’s a God-given, Spirit-empowered calling on our life. You see, it’s only by God’s grace that any of us are saved, and once we’re saved, it’s only by His grace that any of us are called/empowered for ministry. In the words of Ephesians 2:10, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”³ Romans 12:6 says, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us....”⁴ ⁵ So these different gifts come to those of us who’ve put our trust in Jesus Christ, and they

¹ In the words of our VISION statement: “WE WILL BE A CHURCH WHO glorifies God in all of life.”

² Consider the “offering” mentioned back in Romans 6:13.

³ If anyone wants help figuring out what their spiritual gifts are, or what ministry God is calling them to, then I recommend going to our website’s sermon archive and looking up <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/worshipping-god-with-our-spiritual-gifts/> from January 14, 2024. But since we talked about this so recently, I’m not going to repeat all of that today.

⁴ Gifts (χάρισμα) “that which is freely and graciously given, favor bestowed, gift... ⑥ of special gifts of a non-material sort, bestowed through God’s generosity on individual Christians.” William Arndt et al., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1081.

⁵ Paul explains these spiritual gifts in greater detail in 1 Corinthians 12, but for this message we’re going to focus on what we learn in Romans 12.

come directly from God as He apportions them.⁶ Ephesians 2:10 makes it clear, God not only gives us the spiritual gifts that we need to accomplish His work, but He also created us in Christ Jesus in order to do the works that He's prepared for us. Our Heavenly Father equips and calls His children, to join Him in His work. What an incredible *privilege* to be part of what He's doing in this world!

There are many opportunities to GIVE at E-Free Bemidji:

Kid's Ministry*	Youth Ministry*
Young Adult Ministry	Worship/Music Ministry
Technology/Audio-Visual Ministry	Website/Social Media
Women's Ministry	Men's Ministry
Missions/Outreach Ministry	Welcome/Guest Ministry
Life Groups	Prayer Ministry
Visitation/Care Ministry	Servant Team
Hospitality/Kitchen Ministry	Other

Now, it's difficult to make any list completely comprehensive, so we've cleverly added the category: "Other."⁷ You can sign up to serve in any of these areas, either by talking to the ministry leader who oversees a particular ministry, or by filling out our online form at <https://efcbemidji.org/serve/>.

It's important to state this next point candidly: If E-Free Bemidji is your home church, then you should be serving in some kind of ministry here. Ephesians 4:16 says it this way, "From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Friends, Jesus Christ has designed His church to be a gathered community, where each and every part serves. When each part is doing its thing, then the body functions well. But when some of the parts aren't doing their thing, then the body functions poorly. Here's something particularly encouraging: most people who are part of E-free Bemidji give! Most of us are serving and doing our part, and I'll tell you how I know this. I was talking with Pastor Eric this week and he mentioned that we have 245 people signed up to serve in our Planning Center database. And that database only covers a certain portion of our volunteers, so it probably only accounts for maybe 50-60% of those who are serving in one ministry or another. In other words, we have upwards of 300-400 people who serve at our church. Can you say, "Praise the LORD!" with me!? That's awesome! We have hundreds and hundreds of faithful

⁶ See 1 Corinthians 12, especially verse 11.

⁷ And most of these are actually broad categories, with multiple Ministry Teams under each category. So, for example "Kids Ministry" includes everything from Kids Sunday School and Sunday Morning Kids Church, to Wednesday night Kids Club and VBS and so on. (By the way, that asterisk behind Kids and Youth Ministry has to do with the background check that we require for anyone working with minors.)

servants! So if you're serving our church in any way, then we praise God for YOU!

With the approach of our church's 100-year anniversary, I've found myself reflecting on some of our longest serving saints, who've now gone home to be with the LORD. I remember Chuck and Lois Brown who served faithfully in so many ways, and for so many years. One of my most fond memories is their ministry of prayer and encouragement. They would regularly tell me how they were praying for me as the Youth Pastor, and how they were praying for our young people to come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior.⁸ I remember Richard and Ruth Norvold. Mrs. Norvold was there when the Food Shelf was first being founded in our community, and she fed many people here at our church as well. Mr. Norvold helped hundreds of people find an affordable car, and he also served faithfully as an usher at our church. I can still picture him standing right over there by the main entrance to our Sanctuary handing out bulletins and greeting everyone with a smile. I'm sure we'll share a bunch more memories like these during our 100th Anniversary celebration next month, but I hope that even just these two brief examples can serve to inspire us in our serving today.⁹ At E-Free Bemidji, we have a long-standing legacy of people GIVING toward the GOSPEL by worshipping God with their Spiritual Gifts. In order for that legacy to continue, the next generation of servants will need to step forward.

Hebrews 10:24 urges us, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." So in the spirit of spurring one another on, if you're not currently serving, and you're able to serve, then you need to prayerfully consider what your Spiritual Gifts are, and how God is calling you to use them. 1 Corinthians 15:58 says, "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Galatians 6:9 encourages us, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." There's great joy, and reward, in GIVING toward the GOSPEL. That reward is now as we enjoy being part of God's work in this world. That reward will also be later when Jesus returns and tells us, "well done good and faithful servant."^{10 11}

⁸ When Mr. Brown would pray at our corporate worship service, he'd pray in the King James. But, more importantly, he would pray from the depths of his heart, with a fearful reverence for God, and with a keen understanding of how desperately dependent we were on God alone.

⁹ Hebrews 12:1-3 comes to mind.

¹⁰ See Matthew 25:21.

¹¹ The Apostle Paul spurs us on in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

Another way that...

We GIVE toward the GOSPEL...

...(is) by worshipping God with our Resources.

When I was a young Christian, my church and my youth leaders told me all kinds of ways to grow in my faith: Bible reading, memorization, prayer, church attendance, serving with my Spiritual Gifts, and so on. But there was one particular method of growing in spiritual maturity, that I don't remember anyone ever telling me about: Worshipping God with my Financial Resources.

- No one explained to me something as simple as tithing, that a tithe is giving back 10% of everything that God has blessed me with.
- No one explained that an offering is gift that is given above and beyond my tithe, as a further act of worship.

But as I've grown older in my faith, I've come to understand something vital about my own spiritual maturing. It turns out that financial giving to God, is one of the very most important methods of "Becoming a Deeply Devoted Follower of Jesus." I wish someone had told me this a lot sooner.

Now, why would I say that financial giving is that important? One of *the* most important ways to grow spiritually? In Matthew 6:19-21 Jesus taught His followers, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In other words, what we love the most is revealed by where we keep our treasure. Another way of saying this is that we spend our money on what we value. So if we value the things of heaven, more than the things of this earth, then our faith in Jesus will be demonstrated in how we GIVE our money for His gospel purposes. If we spend all of our money on ourselves, on what we need and what we want, and none of our money on God, and on His priorities, then it reveals that there's something vital missing in our faith.

Jesus talked about money in the Gospels a lot! Why? Well, it certainly wasn't because He was trying to become rich! After all, from all we know of Him, Jesus lived a very modest lifestyle. In fact, He left the riches of heaven to become poor for our sake.¹² So why, why did Jesus focus so much of His gospel teaching on money and earthly riches?¹³ Because He knew that money is one of our most common idols; money is something that we tend to make more important than God.¹⁴ So Jesus consistently

¹² See 2 Corinthians 8:9 and its surrounding context.

¹³ In the *NIV*, "money" shows up 33 times in the Gospels, "treasure" shows up 7 times, "wealth" shows up 10 times.

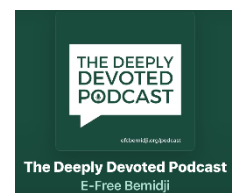
¹⁴ Consider the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19:16-22.

challenged His followers to be generous with their money, generous toward God, and generous toward other people. Proverbs 3:9 puts it simply, “Honor the LORD with your wealth.” How we spend our money, reveals what we chose to honor; it reveals what we’re worshipping, and who we’re serving. So I urge each one of us to prayerfully consider how God would have us steward the money that He’s entrusted to us. It will make a huge difference in growing deeper in our faith, and, it will hold our hearts accountable for who and what we worship.

Now, in full disclosure, our church is currently behind on our annual budget. If you look at the back of today’s bulletin, you’ll see that we’re about 10% behind, with less than 4 months left in our fiscal year. When I was young in my faith, I was never concerned about the back of the bulletin. But now that I’ve grown older, and matured a little more, I’ve come to realize that any deeply devoted follower of Jesus should be concerned with how his or her local church is doing financially. We should be concerned because of all that’s already been mentioned, but we should also be concerned because this shortfall is having a significant impact on our church’s current and future ministry: on our MISSION, VISION, and DISCIPLESHIP PATHWAY. You see, our Trustees and Elders and Staff are doing our best to wisely navigate our budget discussions for 2025, but unfortunately, the way things are shaping up right now, it looks like we’ll need to cut back on some things that we feel called to do.¹⁵ Unless something turns around here in the next month or so, we’ll likely find ourselves voting for cutbacks at our Congregational Meeting at the end of October. And maybe that’s just the way it has to be for now. Maybe we need to tighten our belts as an act of stewardship. But would you please PRAY for the leaders of our church, and would you please PRAYERFULLY CONSIDER your own personal tithes and offerings?

In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus gave His followers this mandate: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” I was challenged in my faith recently by our church’s new podcast: “The Deeply Devoted Podcast.” (*Have you listened to our Podcast yet?*) It’s available right on our website:

<https://efcbemidji.org/podcast/> or you can download the app to your smart phone and listen that way. On a recent episode I was struck



¹⁵ In addition to these concerns, it’s also a bummer because it’s our church’s 100th anniversary, and it sure would be nice to make our budget this year. Then we could dive into our church’s 101st year of ministry firing on all cylinders, with all of the resources that we need for the Gospel Ministry to which we’ve been called.

by a compelling insight: **“EVERYONE is being disciplined by someone.”**

In other words, if we don't GIVE toward the Gospel, by using our spiritual gifts and resources in discipleship, then we're leaving it up to someone else to disciple people, and very often, that discipleship has absolutely nothing to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Instead of being disciplined by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, people are being disciplined by lesser “gospels” like...

- > The Gospel of Social Media Influencers.
- > The Gospel of Politicians.
- > The Gospel of Economists.
- > The Gospel of News Reporters.
- > The Gospel of Artists, Musicians, and Actors.
- > The Gospel of... fill in the blank: _____.

So if we miss this step along our Discipleship Pathway to GIVE, then we're abandoning the prime directive that Jesus gave us in Matthew 28. And not only this, but we're also abandoning the people around us who need to be disciplined in the gospel.

This past Friday, just two days ago, I was driving back from an out-of-town trip and I stopped at the Cass Lake rest stop, and I saw two people sitting at a picnic table next to a sign that said, “FREE BIBLE COURSE.” Sounds pretty good, until you read the fine print, and see that it's being offered by the Jehovah's Witnesses, which means that it's an invitation to be disciplined by a false gospel. This should motivate us all the more to make sure that our church is doing all that we can to GIVE toward the GOSPEL, with our Spiritual Gifts, and with our financial resources. Jesus is the head of the church, and He has designed His church to be a place where the gospel is declared and taught, and then taken forth. (*Pastor Eric will say more about our 4th G: GO, next week.*) For today, let's spur one another on, let's commit ourselves to do our part to GIVE toward the GOSPEL by worshipping God with our Spiritual Gifts and our Resources.