Offerings of Gratitude

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16, NKJV).

What at first sight appears to be a lamb offering under the Old Covenant system of thank offerings, is actually representative of the offering already made by Jesus; the man’s gratitude is in response to this sacrifice.
Finishing up my medical residency, I prepared for a yearlong fellowship in Baltimore. My husband and I rented our house out to an international student who had just finished up at Yale University. She seemed to be a perfect tenant. We had barely gotten to Baltimore, though, when the young woman called... with news that her work visa was not in order and she had to immediately return to her home country.

The first month's rent and deposit she'd paid got us through July and part of August, but we were soon desperate for a renter who could commit for a full year. Finally, a middle-aged couple decided they wanted our place—pending a list of exacting requests. We moved out the washer and dryer, emptied the attic, and let them paint our house a mustard shade of yellow. It wasn't ideal, but the mortgage wouldn't pay for itself, so we agreed.

As we prepared to return home a year later, we learned that not every room had been painted the shade we'd agreed to and that the carpet needed some severe cleaning. We had our tenants repaint our upstairs bathroom to cover a ghastly orange, and the renters' deposit paid for a good carpet scrubbing. We still didn't like the mustard yellow that now covered our house, or how haphazardly it had been applied, but we thanked God for working out our whole situation.

Being a good steward is caring for something like it's your own. Stewardship begins with the basic principle that nothing we have is ours. It's all been entrusted to us by God. Once we understand and accept that principle, the concept of stewardship is easy to understand and apply.

How does God feel when we abuse our bodies and minds, stain His earth, and leave stains and scars on each other? If we look at it from the perspective that God has entrusted our minds, bodies, families, church, and even the earth itself to us until His return, we see that to be a good steward is to care for these things. With that perspective, we can use every bit to the glory of God.

In 2 Corinthians 9:6, Paul counsels, “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (NIV). Each of us has different resources—time, health, wealth, connections, talents, and more. They are all gifts of God for our well-being yet also assets we can use to God's glory. Let's make the most of them today.

Lisa Hermann, Nashville, Tennessee, USA
Walking by Faith (2 Cor. 5:7)

People often imagine that all one needs to attain a goal is some winning formula or procedure, a lucky charm or incantation. Conversely, many Christians fear that their salvation may be lost based on some simple foul-up, categorically applied. They practically imagine God going down a checklist of right and wrong behavior and noting, “Forgot to wear a tie to church, December 16, 2017—Denied.”

The Bible paints a picture of salvation based on relationship, not ritual. From Isaiah's denouncement of ill-intentioned offerings and Sabbath keeping (1:11, 13) to Jesus' warning that “not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 7:21, NIV), it's clear that faith is not a to-do list but an ongoing attitude, rooted in relationship. It's one that leads to character growth and a deeper connection with and understanding of our heavenly Father, but we must not confuse the outgrowth of faith with faith itself. Faith is trusting in the big picture God has painted when the small details just don't seem to add up.

Most Christians have heard Paul's words “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7, NRSV) so many times that it sounds cliché. The truth is, the world offers no guarantees. We can plan our lives to the nth degree, but, ultimately, trusting God is the only way that offers any true surety. When it comes to matters of stewardship—of time, energy, and money—Jesus calls for total commitment. Our businesses may falter. Our health may shatter. Our time may slip away. Yet, when we give God our work, wealth, and strength, He returns a far greater dividend than any investment we could make on our own.

Many Christians find that following Jesus makes their life more complicated, more fraught with difficulty and uncertainty; yet Jesus sustains them. Money stretches; the Spirit enlivens them; and God provides for all their needs, immeasurably.

A Mighty Widow (Luke 21:1–4)

It's a stunning, poignant scene that starts out as mundane. In the temple with His disciples, just a few days before the religious establishment will have Him killed, Jesus watches as the elite make conspicuous displays of their wealth through large donations.

A far more humble moment, however, catches Jesus' eye. A widow, who has lost family, property, status, and wealth—all the elements she counted...
on for survival—places what meager resources she has left in the collection box. The wealthy have given to show off and elevate their status, with plenty left over to live lavishly. Each of the widow’s “two mites” equal a tenth of an hour’s wage—the smallest amount of money imaginable. For the wealthy, two mites was money they might walk right past on the street. For the widow, it was all she had left.

Jesus declares that the widow “has put in more than all.” It is a comment in line with so many other words of Jesus and Scripture—“Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3, NIV); “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord” (Prov. 19:17, NIV); the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:12–14)—yet something about this scene stands out. The personal quality and touch, as Jesus elevates the meekest of women to the highest possible honor, reminds us that “the Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7, NIV).

This brings to mind another familiar verse: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21, NIV). Much recent research has found that spending money on experiences, rather than material possessions, provides greater, longer-lasting happiness. While common sense might suggest that a fleeting moment would foster less enduring happiness than a tangible product you can return to again and again, research has found that material goods, no matter how dazzling, just become “wallpaper” to us. When we invest in friendships, moments, and God’s kingdom, we dig a well we can drink from again and again.

**Motivation Check (Prov. 16:2; Matt. 6:1–4; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 9:7)**

“The Lord loves a cheerful giver”—but the mortgage is coming due. We should return our tithes and offerings—but can we trust humans to spend it well?

It’s easy to get practical, and cynical, about stewardship, yet the same God who chooses to accomplish His goals through human vessels—you and me included—invites us to give with joy.

Then there’s this advice: “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:1, NIV). Few words from Jesus cut to the bone—and the heart—like these. God sees past our external posturing. A fancy suit (God is good!). A coveted church office (I’m just glad I can give back). Paul declares that what is hidden, God will bring to light—including our motives (1 Cor. 4:5). When we serve God, let us do so with love, gratitude, and an eagerness to better others’ lives. When we do, it will help grow inside of us the only joy that lasts.

**REACT**

1. How can serving God—and others—build your happiness?
2. Why does God ask for a tenth of our money and a seventh of our time? What might make these measures ideal starting points?
3. How can we balance serving others with our own needs? What is the best way to “love your neighbor as yourself”?

Tompaul Wheeler, Nashville, Tennessee, USA
“God has made the proclamation of the gospel dependent upon the labors and the gifts of His people. Voluntary offerings and the tithe constitute the revenue of the Lord’s work. Of the means entrusted to man, God claims a certain portion,—the tenth. He leaves all free to say whether or not they will give more than this. But when the heart is stirred by the influence of the Holy Spirit, and a vow is made to give a certain amount, the one who vows has no longer any right to the consecrated portion.”

The last summer before grad school, I had the opportunity to go on a three-week mission trip to Mexico. Cancun, Mexico, no less. I decided to go (it was a no-brainer) and raised the money within a few weeks.

I could share so many experiences, but one conversation has stayed with me. I was riding with one of the local pastors and two students. Somehow, our conversation turned to the subject of tithes and offerings and the Adventist Church in the United States.

My Spanish is conversational but far from perfect. I explained to the pastor about the process of gift giving within the church and the general practices I had observed. Then, I asked about the practices surrounding tithe in Mexico.

Now, remember, my Spanish isn’t perfect. In my experience, the expressions “pay tithe” and “give tithe” have been used interchangeably within the church, literature, and in conversation. So, when I asked the pastor, I autopiloted to the former: “pay tithe and offering.”

The pastor answered, “Well, first off, none of us ‘pay tithe and offering.’ We give it. It is already the Lord’s, so how could we ever pay it? We give it back.”

I don’t remember anything else about what he said during that drive.

Now I wonder whether my nonspecific language—that is, whether I “pay” my tithe and offering or “give” it—affects the way I see God in relation to myself. Does it affect my humility in response to His goodness?

“The Lord does not need our offerings. We cannot enrich Him by our gifts. Says the psalmist: ‘All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee.’ Yet God permits us to show our appreciation of His mercies by self-sacrificing efforts to extend the same to others. This is the only way in which it is possible for us to manifest our gratitude and love to God. He has provided no other.”

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2. Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, pp. 18, 19.

Yaniz Seeley, Ooltewah, Tennessee, USA
The moment Jesus died, humanity was confronted with the magnanimous extreme of a denied ego. Before, you could theoretically talk about selflessness, but what did it actually look like? What is the limit to one's benevolence? It is possible to look at Jesus' selfless sacrifice from a purely selfish perspective where we appreciate the death of Jesus only in the light of how He has saved us. In other words, the very same event that demonstrated perfect "others centered" love can result in the danger of self-engrossment. We are in danger of making His sacrifice a means to our own ends.

Yet, we are invited to "contemplate" (NIV) and "behold" (NKJV) Him. By doing so, we will be "transformed" into His image (2 Cor. 3:18, NKJV). What is it about that particular action that is so important?

Let's look at Him for a moment—not to try to experience something but simply to study Him almost scientifically. As we visit the many episodes in His life, we encounter Someone amazingly unique. Jesus spoke of a love previously (and since then) practically unknown. He preached and encouraged the death of self. He taught about the highest ideals of what it means to love: "'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:39, NIV). "'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you'" (Luke 6:27, NIV). "'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends'" (John 15:13, NIV). The act that took Him to the cross was the completion of a lifetime of building, encouraging, healing, and doing good. Moments before His last breath, His thoughts were on the very people who put Him to death, seeking their absolution.

How far does one go to practice love? Well, it seems, as far as the grave. This is what true stewardship is all about. In a hate-infested world, where even self-proclaimed Christians call out for death and destruction, Jesus stands as the epitome of peace and love. This is what it means to be "like" Him, to be "transformed" into that same "image." The world should see Him as He is. The world would learn how to love a neighbor, no matter the color, race, or religion. When we use our talents to visit those in prison, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for those who are suffering, we begin to emulate the Man on the cross—and the world is changed. We have entered the kingdom of God. We have truly become "faithful servant[s]."

Stewardship is grace. Stewardship is love.

**REACT**

Who else in the Bible lived a life of love as Jesus did?

Werner Carrasco, Roseville, California, USA
On January 13, 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 nose-dived into the ice-coated Potomac River. A United States Park Police helicopter arrived on site and began to drop a rescue ring to the few freezing crash survivors.

One of the first to receive the life ring was Arland Williams, but Williams passed the life ring off to the next passenger. Again and again he allowed others to be rescued ahead of him. By the time every other survivor had climbed aboard the helicopter, Williams had succumbed to the frigid grip of the Potomac.

In the ultimate moment, He gave us His “life ring.”

When Jesus came to Earth, He stepped into a world of sin (Rom. 3:23). Jesus grew weary; He was tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1–11), tested by the Pharisees (Mark 10:2–12), and ultimately betrayed by His inner circle (Mark 14:43–45).

Jesus could have grabbed the “life ring” and fled the darkness of our world, but He remained, standing by those who floundered in darkness, sin, sorrow, depression, and loneliness. He remained with those who would be lost. Then, in the ultimate moment, He gave us His “life ring.”

In the heat—or numbing chill—of the moment, the way forward can seem daunting. We may freeze in our tracks, not knowing which way to turn or how to show Jesus to someone overcome by the world’s pain and trials. How can we trust in Jesus and share His “life ring” with others?

Be careful how you approach a situation. We sometimes can’t comprehend the horrible sorrow and darkness that can engulf a friend, loved one, or stranger. We must take great care when offering assistance and advice.

Know when it is best to seek outside help. We must know when it is time to step away from a situation and seek outside avenues of assistance.

Always pray. We do not know God’s plans for us. What we perceive as a correct choice or path may not be. This is true for those we are trying to aid and in our own lives (1 Thess. 5:16–18).

REACT

1. What have you done this week to step outside your world to help another, even if on a small scale? (Mark 10:13–16).

2. Have we been kind to do those that do us wrong, mock us, or rebuke us? (Luke 23:34).

Johanna Bjork, Bismarck, North Dakota, USA
When my mother gives money, she likes to roll up her bills into little cylinders—making it hard to see how much is being offered. One day she ran into a roadside panhandler and offered him cash. He saw one dollar, but my mother was actually offering two dollars rolled up.

Disdainfully, the man said to her, “I’ve been here all day and all you’re going to give me is one dollar?”

Ingratitude makes it hard to receive and appreciate God’s blessings.

My mother was shocked by the demanding tone from the beggar. She chuckled and reached into her purse, pulled out her remaining dollar, and gave him all three. “That’s better,” he said.

Ungratefulness permeates our consumerist society and infects both the roadside beggar and the pew-sitting saint. Ungratefulness is wicked because it says to God: “What you offer me is not good enough. You are giving me one dollar, but I deserve more for all of my hard and long labors.” Ingratitude makes it hard to receive and appreciate God’s blessings.

This inner monologue may not be explicit, but it sits deep inside the hearts of many pew-sitting saints. To those who have labored in the Father’s house all their lives and have enjoyed long tenures as Christians, God’s generosity is offensive. God’s love and blessing are offensive things, for they too often go to the unworthy. Ingratitude not only makes it hard to personally receive God’s blessings but also makes one covetous of the goodness God grants to others.

We will be remedied from this coveting ingratitude when we realize that God is a very poor venture capitalist. God’s resources—expensive and precious—are poured into this world at all times and in all places. The Scriptures indicate that whether they are just or unjust, God showers generous and good blessings upon His children (Matt. 5:45). Yet how many will resist, reject, and refuse Him? How many will use the benefits of those blessings to actively oppose God or to disdain His goodness?

However, even closer to home, how many saints will receive grace and yet act wickedly? God is no venture capitalist; God is Savior and Father, and parents know that what they give to children can never possibly be repaid, yet they give anyway.

REACT

In what ways has God’s reckless generosity benefitted your life? Have you ever mismanaged His blessings or demanded more than what He gave?

Bryant Fernando Rodriguez, Collegedale, Tennessee, USA
CONCLUDE
Good stewardship comes from understanding that we are not here for no reason and that we all have a purpose and role in God's beautiful plan. Putting on Christ should be our goal. True selflessness comes only through reflecting on Christ's character and refines us to be able to fulfill our true purpose. Our talents might be different from others', but they all work together for one divine reason. It is such an honor to even be a small part of this massive story. A heart full of gratitude enables us to practice Christlike love (see Matt. 5:43–48).

CONSIDER
• Sketching a picture of a person (give it your name) and labeling each part of the body with the talent that God has given you to use for His glory (for example, point an arrow to the throat to show that you can sing). Put it up on the wall where you can see it and be reminded to use these talents.
• Listening to the hymn “A Diligent and Grateful Heart,” no. 639 in the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal.
• Maintaining a journal to record the areas of your attitude that you are working on and noting each incident that helps you get better and overcome your weaknesses.
• Offering to pray for someone (even wear a badge with the question “May I pray for you?”) as often as possible.
• Making a list of the things God has granted you in answer to your prayers and reflecting on whether you have used them to bring Him glory.
• Writing what you understand from the word dominion (Gen. 1:28) and reflecting on how you can put it into practice in your own environment.
• Watching the sermon “Love Supreme” by Doug Batchelor (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdkHn3jGRIE).

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