

Sermon for Sunday, November 23, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"THE FIRST GIFT"

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Test: "so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." I Thessalonians 1:7

The theme for our stewardship campaign this year has been "the second gift." It was taken from the eighth chapter of II Corinthians where Paul is writing about the Christians in northern Greece, which is called Macedonia. He tells the Corinthians that these Macedonians have been persecuted and that they are extremely poor as well. Yet, he says that they have a lot of joy in the Lord. And when they found out about a famine in Jerusalem where their fellow Christians there were suffering, they took up an offering. Paul was obviously surprised at the results. He said they gave even beyond their means. But, he added, they did that because they had first given themselves to the Lord.

That means that the first gift the Macedonians gave was their hearts. And when they gave their hearts to Jesus it was only natural that the second thing they would do would be to live like Jesus would want them to. However there is one trouble with the second gift. You see, you can't really give the second gift until you give the first gift first. Or, to put it another way, you are not going to live for Jesus really--you are not likely to be a tither--you are not likely to live a loving, caring, moral life unless you have first given your heart to Jesus. You just can't give that second gift really until you give the first gift first.

Now, I think a lot of us try. We try to be what we ought to be. We try to live as God wants us to live. Some even try to give what we hope will be a reasonable amount to the Lord. But the fact is, it just doesn't work for us. It doesn't work because our hearts really are not in it. We just can't give those second gifts because we haven't truly given our hearts to Jesus first.

Does that make sense to you? Isn't it a fact that we can't do something well--we can't do something fully and completely unless we really have our hearts in it? You see, if our hearts are not really in what we do, then we usually have another motive. For example, every Christmas a certain funeral home in St. Louis sends a small gift certificate to many of the ministers in the community. Now, I have always felt a little funny about that gift certificate because I wonder about the motive for sending it in the first place. (Of course, I never felt funny enough not to use it!) So if our hearts are not really in what we do as Christian, we are likely to have some other motives for trying to live like a Christian. It's like the man who wanted to be a Christian so God would bless him. One night he prayed and as he talked to the Lord, he said, "Lord, the Bible says a thousand years are like a minute to you." God replied, "Yes, my son, that is true." "Well," said the man, "Then a million dollars must be like a penny to you." "My son," said God, "that is also true." "Then," prayed the man, "will you give me a penny?" "Indeed I will," replied God, "in a minute."

So it turns out that we can't really give God the second gift--we can't really be the kind of people God wants us to be--unless we give him the first gift first, unless we first give our hearts to Jesus.

Does that make sense to you? What God really wants is you! He loves you. He cares about you. He sent his Son to take your place, to bear the punishment for your sins, to die for you. And what he really wants is for you and me to give him our hearts. Until we do that first, we can't really give him anything at all. Whoever you are this morning, whatever sin you may have committed, whatever evil

you may have done, God cares about you. You are very important to him and he wants to forgive you. Would you like that this morning? Would you like to be forgiven, to have a fresh, new start? Would you like for the slate to be wiped clean and to have the chance to start all over? Well, that's what God wants to do for you this morning--all you have to do is accept his forgiveness and give him your heart.

Now, this brings me to the thing I really want to talk about this morning. I want to talk about what happens when a person gives his or her heart to Jesus. I want to talk about what happens when a church gives its heart to Jesus. For example, the Christians in Macedonia first gave their hearts to Jesus. But do you realize what happened as a consequence of that? Do you realize what an impact that had on their lives? Now, here we are, two thousand years later, still talking about those Macedonians. And do you know why? Was it because they gave beyond their means to help some fellow Christians? Well, that was a part of it, but it was more than that. We still remember them and still talk about them because when they gave their hearts to Jesus first, their lives became an example of what God wants to do for you and me.

I have been to northern Greece. Most of those ancient cities lie in ruins today. I have stood in the market place of ancient Philippi where Paul once stood. I have walked among the ruins of ancient Thessalonica where Paul once walked. The cities where those Macedonians lived are gone now except for jumbled piles of ruins. But the example of those Macedonian Christians still lives on. The kind of people they became after they gave their hearts to Jesus still endures and still touches lives today.

Our congregation is in the process of over-subscribing what is by far the largest budget in our history. Will that have been important a hundred years from now? Look at this lovely sanctuary--think about our new building across the street. What will they look like a thousand years from now? Surely they will not be here then. Will they be a pile of rubble like ancient Philippi or will some other building, itself grown old, stand on this place? Will there be anything a hundred years, a thousand years, from now that still endures because of you and me? Yes, it is possible for that to happen. If you and I have given our hearts to Jesus first, it is possible for something of us to still endure when the centuries have rolled by.

Well, what will be left? What will be left is the same that the Macedonians left. Let me explain what I mean. Remember what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus? He met Jesus and he gave his life to him. Paul in turn became an example to other people. In our scripture this morning he says to the Thessalonians: "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord..." Now, notice what happens! Because of Paul they became believers and then they in turn became examples. Paul writes, "so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia...your faith in God has gone forth everywhere..."

Do you realize what happened? Paul was an example to them and they believed. They became examples to others who believed. Others became examples to still others who believed. They represent an unbroken link in a chain of examples that would stretch forward into the future and touch your life and my life.

Who will be an example of what Jesus can do today when a person gives his heart to Jesus first? Will you and I be a part of that chain that stretches forward into the future. Will we be a link in God's chain that will touch lives in generations yet to come? When our budget has long since been forgotten; when these buildings lie in ruins, will there be lives still being touched because

you and I first give our hearts to Jesus and because we were a strong link of that chain that reaches into tomorrow?

We live in a city where crime is rampant. Every day the papers are filled with stories of rape and murder and robbery and violence. We live in a nation where there is evil on every side, where the forces of secular humanism seek to destroy any word about God. We live in a world where there is war in many places, where there is inhumanity, famine, and trouble. And what our city, our nation, our world so desperately needs is examples of brave men and women who have given their hearts to Jesus.

What your family needs from you--what your neighbors need from you--what our city needs from you is an inspiring example of what it means to give your heart to Jesus. You see, who and what you are in affecting other lives. Today--tomorrow--someone is going to be following your example. It may be your mate who will take a cue from you on how to act or what kind of person to be. It may be your child who will learn a life-style from you. It may be a close friend--or a business associate. It may be someone you work with or your neighbor next door. But whomever it may be, how you live and what you do and what you are is going to have an impact, an influence, on someone else.

I remember reading a story recently about a man who had been a robber. He was caught, convicted, and sent to prison. There in the jail he came to know Jesus as his personal saviour and he gave his heart to Jesus. He explained it this way, "Jesus said to me, I will come and live in your heart and we will serve this sentence together." Several years later, when he was being released from prison, he was handed a letter from a fellow prisoner. Here is what the letter said, "Dear Fred. When I came here I despised everything religious. I only went to the chapel services so I could get out of my cell and because there was nothing else to do. They told me you had accepted Jesus and I thought you did it so that it would help you get a parole. But Fred, I've watched you for two years. I've watched you in your cell, in the exercise yard, working in the shop, and at meals. You never made a slip, Fred. Now I'm a Christian, too. Your saviour is my saviour because I watched you."

Well, that is the way it is. Not all of us can be teachers and not all of us can be preachers, but there is one place where the ground is level. Every person who claims the name of Jesus is an example to others by the way he or she lives and others are either judging Jesus because of us or accepting him because of us.

Our city needs a church like Central where Christians are giving an example of what happens when men and women have given their hearts to Jesus and as a consequence are building a strong church to witness for Jesus. But most of all it needs the examples of committed lives. Over a century and a half ago the Highland Brigade of the British Army was in Egypt. The soldiers were forced to march across the desert at night in order to engage the enemy. A young naval officer who could navigate by the stars was assigned to the troops to guide them across the desert. At dawn he had guided them precisely to their destination and a surprise attack was launched against the enemy. In brief, bitter battle that followed the young naval officer was mortally wounded. Later, when the commanding General came to visit among the wounded, he stopped by the bedside of the dying young man to thank him. The young man looked up at the general and said, "Sir, I did the best I could. I led them straight."

Will you and I be an example of what it means to belong to Jesus? Will other lives be touched by ours--will we be a part of the chain that stretched into the future? When the end comes for us, will we be able to look into the face of Jesus and say, "I did the best I could. I led them straight?"