

Giving and Living in Troubled Times

At the close of the message this morning we are going to receive a special offering for Speed the Light. As most of you know, our youth make a faith promise each year to give to missions through this arm of the Assemblies of God. Speed the Light supplies the tools and equipment that our missionaries need on the field. Last year the youth of Carbondale gave over \$50,000 to STL. We are going to receive that offering this morning to help them with their faith promise. I wanted to warn you in advance so you wouldn't think I preached this sermon just in order to get you to give. I hope you are encouraged and inspired to give by the end of the message.

We've been talking about how we as followers of Christ are to respond in troubled times. The economic crisis seemed to worsen this week as a number of major corporations announced possible cut-backs and lay-offs in the coming days. It may be a difficult holiday season for a number of people. But this is nothing new. There have always been troubled times. The Scriptures were written in times of trouble to people that were often facing far greater difficulties than we face today. What can we learn from the word of God about how to respond and how to live in troubled times? Let me share some simple truths with you this morning.

In troubled times we must obey his commands. Of course we should obey his commands all the time, but I don't understand the response of so many people in times of trouble. "This is what we believe and this is how we live...unless of course times get hard...unless of course things don't turn out the way I expected...unless my husband or my wife or my parents or my friends let me down...unless I lose my job or can't pay my bills...unless it is going to be painful or cost me something...unless you start calling my lifestyle and my choices sinful..." The list could go on and on. The point is, regardless of the times, regardless of the circumstances, we must obey God's commands! We are either followers of Christ or not. We either obey his word and his commands, regardless of what is happening, or not. It's about complete surrender to Christ.

God's word, God's commands are non-negotiable. They don't change because public opinion changes. They don't change because social mores or standards change. God's word is forever settled and established in heaven and we are to follow

his commands and obey his word.

We find ourselves in economic difficulties and often the first thing people do is stop paying their tithes and giving to the work of the Lord because they are afraid of running out of money. Afraid they couldn't pay all their bills. I want you to pay your bills too, but the bible tells us to bring our tithes into the storehouse, to give to the Lord our tithes and offerings, the firstfruits of our increase and income. It's not just about money or giving, about having or not having, it's about obedience. Am I going to obey God and his word or not?

Obeying God's word keeps our focus where it should be – not on us and our problems but on God and his provision and his faithfulness. Obeying God's word keeps us focused on his agenda and not on our own. I can't promise that he will always supply all you need to complete your agenda, but I can assure you that he will supply all you need to carry out his agenda and to complete what he has called you to do. Pastor Jones always says "If God ordered it he is obligated to pay for it." If God commands it, then he is going to enable us to do it. The provision will be there. The need will be met. Trust and obey.

Obeying his command keeps us focused on eternal things and not just the temporal things. If we are frightened in troubled times it's because we are focusing on material things, our own agenda, just possessions and our needs - just the temporal things of life. We set our affections on things here on earth and we are frightened we might lose some of the things we love. But the bible tells us to **"Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."** Colossians 3:1-2.

If we just stay focused on earthly things then of course we are frightened and panicked about all that is going on. If we are just focusing on ourselves and our needs and our situation, of course we get frightened and anxious, but obedience to his commands shifts our focus. He will take care of all of the "stuff" if we will obey him and his word. Jesus said, **"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well."** Matthew 6:33. All the things we worry about - Jesus referred specifically in that passage to what we eat, drink, what we wear - he will take care of as we focus on seeking him and obeying his commands.

What are we focused on? Before Jesus ascended into heaven he gave us this ultimate commission, this directive: **“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.” Matthew 28:19-20**

Here is our focus. We can worry about the economy, but does that change his command to go into all the world, to make disciples, to teach others to obey all his commands? We can worry about job lay-offs but does that change his instruction to us concerning giving or going, or any other command? We start thinking maybe we shouldn't give to missions. Maybe we shouldn't go on a missions trip because politically and economically things are in turmoil. In troubled times we must obey his commands. He didn't say go as long as it is safe, make disciples as long as it is cost effective, teach them as long as you are comfortable doing so. In troubled times we remain focused on obeying his commands. Period. Nothing else is as important as our obedience to the Lord and especially in times of trouble.

In troubled times we must live by his principles. Maybe this is just another way of saying obey his commands. But there are some principles of living and giving that seem a bit threatened in times of trouble. There is a tendency to pull back during tough economic times, to hold everything a little closer to the vest. We listen to the experts, the pundits and prognosticators on television and in the newspapers and it sounds like there is nothing but trouble ahead. Everyone is worried and frightened, but we aren't like other people. We aren't citizens of this world alone. First and foremost we are citizens of another kingdom, a heavenly kingdom and we live by the established principles of a higher realm – the principles of the kingdom of God. When trouble comes, we keep on living by his principles.

You see, we don't give into fear because we walk by faith, not by sight. We don't just go by what we see because, as crazy as it sounds to some, we see another path, another way, another story, another ending. We see with eyes of faith into the timing and the promises and provision of God. Instead of giving into fear, we do what I told you a few Sundays ago: we cast all of our cares upon the Lord, we commit our ways to him and then we chill out, resting peacefully in the knowledge that he is God. Whatever we are facing, he is God and he will cause all things to work together for the good of

those who love him and are called according to his purposes.

Instead of grasping desperately, trying to hold on to every last penny we have, we release it to God and give it away. Instead of giving when we get ahead a little, we give regularly, faithfully, freely. The world can't understand people giving to God their tithes and offerings, especially when the economy is so bad. But you see we live by His principles regardless of the circumstances. We live by the principles of kingdom economics, the principles of sowing and reaping. We know what Jesus taught us. He said, **“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Luke 6:38.** Jesus was talking about judging and forgiving and showing mercy, but the principle applies in every area of life. We must live by the principles of the kingdom during troubled times.

We give out of our poverty and not just out of our abundance. In Mark 12:41-44, Jesus watched people as they were giving their tithes and offering to the temple treasury. Many of the rich people threw in large amounts but the bible says a poor widow came and put in “two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.” Jesus called his disciples over and told them, **“I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.”**
Mark 12:43-44

Am I suggesting you put everything you have to live on in the offering today? No, but I'm suggesting we learn God's principles and begin to live by them. I'm telling you that we can obey God in our giving in troubled economic times and he will meet our needs.

Consider another story of giving during tough times found in 1 Kings 17. There is a drought and famine in the land. God sends Elijah the prophet to a widow in the town of Zarephath. It was a difficult time and Zarephath was a difficult place. Elijah finds a widow there gathering sticks and asks her for a drink of water and a piece of bread. She tells him that she doesn't have any bread, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. She told him she was gathering the sticks for a fire to make a meal for herself and her son, the last meal they would have because there was no more

money, no more food and no more hope.

But look what happened. **“Elijah said to her, ‘Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.’”** **1 Kings 17:13** The Lord was teaching this widow a lesson about living by heaven’s principles in tough times. She could have just said, “Mister, you’re crazy. This is all I’ve got and I’m not about to give it to you, I don’t care what you say.” Instead, she chose to believe the word of the Lord spoken to her by the prophet. She chose to obey God and learn the lesson. If you will obey God’s commands and give as he taught us to give, even out of our poverty and our need in the tough times, he will meet our needs. The bible says, **“She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.”** **1 Kings 17:15-16**

Is it the truth? Is what I’m telling you the truth about giving to God and paying tithes? You decide. God said, “Bring the whole tithe into the store house that there may be food in my house. ‘Test me in this’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.’” He didn’t say money, but he did say he would pour out blessing. He will supply your needs. Is it the truth?

Look at what the apostle Paul taught us about living by God’s principles of giving in troubled times. He was writing to a church in difficulty and requesting that they give to help meet the financial needs of the believers in Jerusalem who were in even greater difficulty. Listen to what he said of the church in Macedonia. **“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”** **2 Corinthians 8:2-4.**

Paul wrote, **“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under**

compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

What did Paul say? In all things at all times, having all that you need... At all times? Really? Do you think he even meant in times like this? In America in 2008 when the economy is so bad? Even then God is able to supply our need so that we will have all we need and we can continue to give to the work of the Lord? Do you believe it's the truth? I do.

This coming May it will be ten years since a tornado destroyed our building and forced us into borrowed facilities for 20 months. Maybe I need to remind you of what happened. For twenty months we met in the VBI building and for twenty months we never had to pay a dollar for rent or utilities or custodial work. We needed to raise an additional million dollars over and above the total giving of the church in the prior year. The experts told us it couldn't be done. You couldn't ask a church to double their giving in one year. But we did. Remember that Sunday morning when we took up pledges for the building fund, believing that God wanted us to rebuild debt free? We received a cash offering of \$100,000 and pledges that totaled 1 million dollars to be given over the next 12 months. The experts said we couldn't do it, but this church knew that if you sow generously you will reap generously. We never stopped giving to missions. We never cut back a dollar on our mission giving or on our outreach. We still had missionaries coming to speak. We didn't stop reaching out to our community. And when it was all said and done, we spent \$4.8 million dollars, approximately \$1.8 million more than we had when we started and we moved in debt free, with more people attending and with more money in the bank than when the tornado hit us.

Do I believe you can live by God's principles in troubled times? Absolutely. I've seen it and proven it over and over.

In troubled times you have to do more than agree with God's commands and principles, you have to live by them! Do more than agree with what I'm telling you today – act on it! Live by it. Do it!

Obey God. What has he told you to do? That didn't stop because times got bad. The timing may be affected, but you keep obeying God. Keep giving. Keep living

by his promises. Keep obeying his commands. This isn't just truth for the good times. This is God's truth for everyday. It doesn't do you much good to just agree with what I'm telling you. Even the devil believes what I'm saying this morning. Believing it is a start but we have to live it every day. We have to act upon our faith. We have to continue to give and go and obey and pray.

Don't let the times frighten you. Keep obeying God. Don't start searching here and there for some other solution, just keep trusting and obeying and committing your ways to the Lord. Don't start hoarding your money and resources - keep living by God's principles of giving. Certainly I encourage you to be wise, to have savings and retirement, but don't let fear dictate your responses. Instead, keep living and giving by faith, even in troubled times. Obedience to God, obeying his commands and living by his principles, acting on his promises, it's the only way to live regardless of the times.

Troubled times are just another opportunity for us to lead the way, obeying his commands, testifying to the world about God's faithfulness as we walk and live and give by faith.