

“Imagine...”

Let me do a quick little survey as I get started. How many of you hear today have been a part of Saint Paul's for 50 or more years? How many of you have been here 25 to 49 years? How about 10 to 24 years? How about 5-9 years? How about 1-4 years?

Today I want you to imagine three scenes with me. Scenes in the life of Saint Paul's. The first scene is of 10 years ago. In 1995 imagine, remember really, what Saint Paul's was like. We worshipped in what we now call the Family Life Center. It was a cross between a gymnasium and sanctuary. In fact it was called the Sanctunarium.

There were right at 225 people in average worship attendance. 4 more than the year before—and we were excited! We were growing! There were 2 worship services every Sunday morning. There were 3 full-time staff members, myself included, leading the ministries of the church. The church was active in serving in the community, helping people in need. Our biggest ongoing ministries were Homebound Services, Crosslines and holiday gift baskets. We were doing our best to reach out and share the Good News. That year we had a dozen children in Crosstraining and we thought that was awesome! We had about 15 youth in the youth group and it was growing. We didn't have a confirmation class that year because there weren't enough kids. And we didn't send any youth or kids to church camp that summer. But we were excited about the future.

We had a part-time secretary. And one full-time custodian.

Many nights of the week there wasn't anything going on in the building. We had a Bible Study on Sunday nights, and several women's circles, but almost no other small groups.

The people of Saint Paul's were excited about the future. We had moved out here from 32nd and Wall a couple years before. We had a new building and a new sense of excitement and a vision for being a place of worship and transformation for the Joplin area. We were living out a passion for people, and a passion for serving, and a passion to reach children, youth and adults for Jesus Christ.

Money was tight, but there always seemed to be just enough to get by.

It's amazing to me to imagine what it was like back then. It was a wonderful and exciting time in the life of Saint Paul's and the future was wide open. The church had been around for about 100 years, and the people were looking ahead to the next 100 years.

Think about it, 10 years ago we were feasting on the produce of seeds that had been planted many years before that. 10 years ago, we were enjoying the fruit of somebody else's labor and it was a good time. An exciting time, a challenging time.

Imagine 10 years ago, standing in a building that was new, with a vision that was exciting, with people who were charged up. How did that happen? It happened because people for generations had put their hearts, souls, and resources behind a mission; a purpose; a direction. I think of people like the late Willa Rickman who spent her life teaching Sunday School, working with women's groups, doing crafts, helping the needy, and giving her money to build what we enjoyed 10 years ago.

I remember one time when Willa called me to come by her home for a visit. As we talked she shared a deep concern. She had to let me know that because her fixed income had changed, she would only be able to give 10% of her income instead the 20% she had worked up to. She gave sacrificially and invested in the vision of the church, changing lives, giving meaning. She gave so much. When she moved from her home and into a nursing home, she sold her house and gave a large portion to the church, more investment in the lives of people. 10 years ago was an amazing time! A time built on the sacrifices of others. But 10 years ago doesn't compare to the next scene in the life of Saint Paul's.

The second scene of Saint Paul's is the present. Today we have about 10 ongoing mission projects that we actively support. Things like the Lafayette House, Crosslines, Children's Haven, the Turnaround Ranch, Homebound Services, Watered Gardens, First Families, a Hispanic Ministry, a sister church in Russia, and several others. We have 4 worship services every Sunday (we added Mosaic this past April) and we average over 650 in worship each week. On Wednesday nights we often have as many as 15 classes and

groups of adults, 100 or more children and 80 youth. It keeps our volunteer kitchen staff hopping feeding any where from 200 to 400 people. And we've been offering classes on so many things. Parenting and step-parenting, women's groups, men's groups, prayer groups, Bible studies of all kinds, classes on personal finance, and caring for aging parents, recovery groups, craft groups! This list goes on and on.

3 years ago we moved into our new kids' wing and worship center so that we could do more ministry for the people that God was sending our way. You see, when God wants to make new Christians he leads them to a warm incubator. And that's us! When God wants to heal a broken heart or a broken life, he leads people to a place of healing and hope, and that's us! When God wants to help somebody deepen their faith and equip them to share that faith with somebody else, he sends them to a place with sound teaching. And that's us! When God wants to put someone to work helping others he sends them to a places that's on a mission. And that's us.

We now have 10 full-time staff members and about 25 part-time staff members who lead leaders, coordinate ministries, take care of our administrative needs, teach in our preschool, enable our missions, develop small groups, lead music and so much more. All aimed a one thing, leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ.

To get from where we were 10 years ago to where we are now took a stewardship challenge; a resource challenge. Many people had to step forward with their time, talents and treasures. And as we look ahead and imagine the future we have to be preparing today to do the same. You and me. This is facing the stewardship challenge of the **next** 10 years. Because you see, having a mission (of leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ) is not enough. That mission needs the fuel of stewardship behind it and that comes from you and me. You and me doing the best for God with what we've been given as we get ready for the future.

So I want us to spend some time doing some stewardship training by looking at what the Bible teaches us about our lives and our resources. These are some basic principles to help all of us know God's expectations about what we have and how we use it to provide fuel for what God is doing in the present and will do in the future.

The most basic principle of stewardship, of giving, comes from the very heart of what it means to be a Christ-follower. It's this: **[SLIDE: "Principles of Stewardship for the Next 10 Years"...] We give in proportion to how we see we have received.** We develop as givers in direct proportion to how we see ourselves as receivers. Galatians 2:20 says this, **[SLIDE...] "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (NIV).**

John wrote this in his Gospel, **[SLIDE...] "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that we wouldn't die, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).** God gave us life when we faced death. Jesus paid the price for our sin, by giving his life. He gave everything.

So giving our time, our spiritual gifts, our financial resources is a response to the fact that we have received life. The more we realize what his gift means, the more willingly we give. Christ offers us the gift of life, when we're ready we receive, then we're ready to give. We give in proportion to how we have received.

The next principle of Godly giving is that **[SLIDE: "We give of our own free will.]"** 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, **[SLIDE...] "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion because God loves a cheerful giver."** Circle the phrase, "not reluctantly or under compulsion." Giving under compulsion means giving because you feel forced or because of what others may say or think. But God doesn't want you or me to give because we feel guilty or to compete with somebody else's giving. He wants us to look within ourselves and give as we are led to give. We shouldn't give out of guilt, or because somebody is twisting our arm. But because we choose to give.

Let's face it, we give with lots of different attitudes. Sometimes we give as we go. When we attend church, we give, when we don't we don't. Sometimes we give when we like what's going on at the church. When we feel like things are good, when we like the people and like the pastor we give, when we don't we withhold our support. Sometimes we give out of duty—I'm supposed to do it, I said I'd do it, so I'll do it.

Sometimes we give out of mere habit. I've been giving the same amount year after year and never really thought about anything else. Sometimes we give nothing at all and feel guilty about it.

These are all ways that we can give, but we're told to give freely, not out of guilt, and do it cheerfully.

But who willingly, cheerfully gives away perfectly good money?! I'll tell you who... Somebody who is thankful. And that's the next principle of Godly giving. **[SLIDE...]** **We give out of thankfulness.** We look at what we have in life: Friends, family, a church family, resources. We look back and see how God has gotten us through the tough stuff—a rocky place in our marriages, teenagers who were rebelling so hard, job lay-offs, not having enough to pay the bills, times of depression or grief or both. We look at the hardships we're smack dab in the middle of right now and feel God's presence. In the middle of all that we hear God's promises that he will never leave us or forsake us, that when we're lost, he won't stop until he finds us. And we're thankful and out of that thankfulness comes our giving.

One woman who is celebrating a renewal in her marriage and family wrote, "I'm infinitely grateful for Saint Paul's...It became my home, and the people here my family, when home didn't feel so much like home. And it continues to be that, even though our family is healing. This church has directly and drastically influenced my life and by extension the lives of my kids, my husband, and many others...I honestly can't imagine our lives now had I not given in to the nudge to come to a Sunday service at Saint Paul's almost four years ago...Thanks!"

We look around, see God at work, see our blessings and we give back out of deep thankfulness. Of course part of growing mature as a Christ-follower is learning to see with thankful eyes.

The next principle of Godly giving from the Bible is that **[SLIDE...]** **we give with discipline.** As the Apostle Paul collected an offering to help the Christians of Jerusalem who were suffering from persecution and famine he gave some guidance about giving. We set aside a proportion of what we have each week (or month). It's disciplined, not casual, or occasional, or erratic, or left up to how we feel at the time. Godly giving calls us to planned, intentional, structured giving. There are times when we give spontaneously and experience the joy of that spontaneous gift, but that builds on top of our disciplined giving.

Disciplined giving has some important symbols. One is an offering card. **[PICTURE: 2006 COMMITMENT CARD]** The yearly opportunity we have to say what we will work toward giving in an intentional way. If you're a member you know that you've made the commitment to return an offering card every year as way to prayerfully, systematically make a commitment. And it's not the amount on that card that matters. What matters is that you have taken the time to pray, to say to God, "Lord, I want to give sacrificially. Please show me how to give a gift that will stretch my faith."

Tithing is another symbol of disciplined giving. It's the biblical goal of giving God the first 10% of what we have been given. It's a way to give proportionately to what we make. If you've become a member of Saint Paul's in the last 10 years, you know that part of your membership commitment is to give in proportion to your income working toward a tithe.

I started tithing after Janet and I had gotten married. Prior to that it was very sporadic. And as we've tithed over the years, we've been blessed and we've been able to go beyond a tithe. We've found that we can live better on 90% or 85% of our income than we can on %100. Why? Because when we put God first, everything else falls into place. You see, tithing, giving proportionately to our income is a way to say thank you, to show with our actions, what we say with our words, it is a way to get or keep our priorities straight.

I love what Luke 6:38 says. It gives such a great image: **[SLIDE...]** **"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, NIV).** In other words, you can't out-give God!

These are the principles for Godly giving in the present. Principles we live out in the present, so that we can imagine the future. This leads to the third scene that I want you to imagine. Think about 10 years from now. Here we are today at a very exciting time in the life of our church. We are on a mission to reach out, to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ. To let people know that they have a purpose in life. To help

people find that purpose and the peace and joy that go along with it. Imagine as we live out stewardship to fuel that mission.

Imagine the number of children and youth that will be able to go to camp in the summers and how those experiences will impact their lives forever. As we live out stewardship imagine adult literacy programs and a food bank, imagine day care programs, recovery programs to help people defeat drug addiction, alcohol addiction, and a variety of other things that enslave people.

Imagine us having started other congregations in nearby communities where vital churches are needed.

Imagine a Christian counseling center to help people move through difficulties.

Imagine us training next generation pastors in partnership with the seminary in Kansas City.

Imagine the way we could extend God's good news to the community through mailings, TV, radio, newspapers and the internet.

Imagine the homes we could repair, the homebound we could help, the cars we could fix for working single parents.

Imagine the fellowship, the teaching the joy and mission!

Your giving, your stewardship, helps what we can imagine to become a reality. We've been doing this for over 100 years, and as our vision of what we can imagine grows, our giving must grow too. What we imagine to be possible in the future will only become a reality if we commit and give to God's work in the present.

You see, you and I can spend our money on things that are here today and in a landfill tomorrow or we can invest them in eternity. We can buy things to satisfy wants-- nicer cars, gadgets, boats, bigger houses, and things that will give us temporary comforts and pleasures, or we can invest in things that will have eternal value. Like the lives of people.

In fact I want you to hear from Joy Owens. She is one life that has been changed because people have given to support what goes on here at Saint Paul's

[VIDEO: Joy Owens]

Joy was baptized last Sunday. Her story is just one of hundreds. Your giving reaches out to real people who will have real eternities. Imagine if a story like Joy's is told 100 times or 1,000 times over in the years ahead. Imagine.

Finally, imagine at the end of your life, when you stand before God and he asks you, "So what did you do with what I gave you?" What will you say. "I accumulated stuff. I catered to my wants." Or, "I changed the eternities of children, youth and adults because I gave." Stewardship is investing in things that have eternal value—in people, in ministry, in things that transform lives. You see, the world uses people to make money, but the church uses money to make people...to make them whole, and loved, and encouraged and godly.

Next week you'll be getting an offering card in the mail along with some other information. Please, take the time to look at it carefully and imagine what it looks like to take a forward step in your giving for next year. Take the time to pray and ask for God's guidance. Say, "God I need to hear from you on this because you'll tell me the right amount. Stretch me to give sacrificially. I know that you'll meet my needs and beyond, help me to know what I should give." And he will.

Bring your offering cards with you next week and we will dedicate them to God.

So let's face the challenge and give **because we have received**. Let's give of our own **free will**, not out of guilt or shame or competition. Let's give as a **sign of thanks** for what God has done for us. Let's give with **discipline**. Let's give as a **sign of trust** knowing that God will provide. And let's imagine what God will do through us together.

And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.