For the next two Sundays we will be in our stewardship series which will be centered on the theme, “a beautiful day in the neighborhood.” The idea behind everything is possibility, what is possible because of Cross and Crown? This will be done a little differently than normal. This is going to be one sermon that is split into two parts and you will see how it all makes sense after next Sunday.

In all my hope is to lay the groundwork for us to say, “I want to give to the church because we make a difference.”

The first thing I want to do is talk about the how, what and why about giving this week, and next week I will paint the picture of who we are as a church.

In the church when stewardship comes around there is a lot of talk about tithing. Tithing is pretty simple and straightforward concept. Here's the definition of tithe: A “tithe” is a tenth and it is used in several Old Testament passages, we will look at Leviticus 27:30 which states “A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord.” We can clearly see a tithe is giving back 10% of what the Lord has given us.

That much is clear, what is unclear for some folks is if we are still bound by the standard of the tithe because of the revelation of Jesus Christ. There are differing opinions, but basically, most Christians today align with one of these two views:

1. Christians are commanded to tithe
2. Christians are commanded only to be generous givers

Let’s take a brief look at both of these positions.

Here is the argument that folks use who believe Christians are commanded to tithe. Tithing began in the Old Testament, and it's still commanded today. This position stands on two pillars.

First, is that the requirement to tithe was made before the Mosaic covenant when Abraham tithed to Malchizadek. If this is true, then this means the tithe was not abolished in Christ and is still in force today.

Second, this position argues that Jesus affirmed the continuation of the tithe in Matt. 23:23. Since Jesus upheld the tithe, then Christians are commanded to tithe today.

Now let’s look at the arguments for Christians are commanded to be just give generously.

For folks who believe that Christians are called to give generously, but they’re not commanded to tithe hold onto three main points.

First, the tithes that were given by Abraham (Gen. 14) and Jacob (Gen. 28) are descriptions—not prescriptions. In other words, there's no evidence that Abraham and Jacob continued to tithe or that their actions were binding for others then or today.

Second, the tithes required by the Israelites were a part of the Mosaic Law. When Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Mosaic Law, the obligation to tithe was also abolished.

Finally, the New Testament does not command Christians to tithe. When giving is referenced in the New Testament, Christians are commanded to give generously or freely. (2 Cor. 8–9)—not to give strict 10 percent.

Where do you fall in the discussion? My hope is that by the end of this message it will not matter because when we look at why God calls his people to give, and why we give to the church, the question of how much to give will become moot.

We have talked about what we give, but the question is why do we give? If we look at the tithe, Tithing was a command God gave His people to give a tenth of everything God had given them back to Him. It seems like an ineffective system for God to give something and then ask for a tenth of it back. Why didn’t He just give them ninety-percent of what He would have given them and then kept the ten percent He wanted to keep in the first place? The point of the tithe was so they would know it all came from Him. When the Israelites tithed, they were acknowledging that everything they had comes from God.

The tithe has a way of humbling the people, in the sense it helps us to remember the source of all our resources. Of course the tithe could go one of two ways. It could go “wow I did all this work and I have to give to God even though I did all the hard work and lead to resentment.” Or it can go like this “thank you Lord for all that you do for me, in appreciation I get to give you back some of what you gave me.”

If you think about it, the tithe, or giving back to God, is a litmus test of the heart. The attitude we have toward giving back to God reveals the state of our heart. When we give begrudgingly, we know something is not right. When we are a cheerful giver we can tell we are focused on God, that our hearts are saturated in Christ.

We have talked about what we give, and why God calls us to give. Now I want to turn our attention toward the church itself, and why we give to God, by giving to the church. I said that earlier that underlying everything is possibilities. I want to be a little more specific now. When I think of Mr.Rogers neighborhood and his theme song. What comes to mind is that the neighbor is being acknowledged, the neighbor is being welcomed, the neighbor is being taken care of, the neighbor is being included.

And I thought that was beautiful, and then I began to think, isn’t that supposed to be the church. The people who go around and ask everyone wont you be my neighbor, the people who go and tend to those who are taken advantage of, the people who brings the balm in gilead right to the doorsteps of the folks in the community, the people who bring healing to the sick, food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, sight to the blind, and megaphones to the voices on the margins. The people that help people to know their worth, and to know that they are loved. The people who come together to uplift each other by partaking in word and sacrament, praying for each other and helping each other to grow in their faith so that when we are grounded in Christ we are able to live into the great commission and tend to the needs of others in such a way that we reveal the love of Christ to them and they in turn give thanks and praise to God.

If we can agree that this is a good representation of the church, then I would argue that it is the church, the body of Christ that is Gods answer to the problems in the world. Creating possibilities for those that see none.

To drive this home I want to look at Habakkuk. The book of Habakkuk is a compilation of the prophet's laments. Habakkuk questions God's goodness because he sees so much injustice, evil and tragedy in the world. And as we heard Habakkuk feels as if God is not listening. He says “O Lord, how long shall I cry help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you violence and you will not save?” Habakkuk is living in a stark reality. The prophet looks around and all he sees is heart break. The ruling class and merchants are taking advantage of the blue collar workers, justice never prevails, the wicked surround the righteous, and therefore justice comes forth perverted.”

How many people in the world today are still able to ask these or similar questions and these or similar statements? How many people in Florence, Darlington, Marion, throughout the PeeDee are still able to ask these questions and similar statements? I would imagine a lot. We live in an unjust world just like those in the ancient near east.

God had an answer for Habakkuk. God tells Habakkuk “there is still a vision for the appointed time.” My friends God has a different answer to us. This is the appointed time. The appointed time was the reign of Christ and the establishment of the church. A time where the Holy Spirit would dwell in Gods people and lead and guide them to be Gods hands and feet in the world, that is why God has given us a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

The body of Christ is the answer to prayer, the answer to the voices that are crying out from the margins, the answer to the question how long must I cry for help? The church, You are the one that God has chosen to bring about possibilities.

I believe when we think of the church in this framework I think the questions begins to change from what do I have to give, to, how much do I get to give? How much do I get to give to Gods agent of change in the world that creates so many possibilities in the lives of people that attend and the lives of people who we reach out to?