In Paul's second letter to the believers in Corinth, he pushes back against false teaching. Some doubted his integrity. They were saying he was putting into his own pocket the money they had collected for the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem. Paul urges them to prepare for his upcoming visit by completing their pledged funds that they had started a year previously. In chapter 8, Paul encourages their generosity, and to not be as one that gives grudgingly. In light of next Sunday (being our Stewardship Sunday), these verses seem especially relevant to us as believers in Knoxville. In 2nd Corinthians 9:6-8 &12-15, Paul explains the results of generous giving.

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

12 This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. 13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. 14 And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

In Paul's appeal to the Corinthians to get a collection for the believers in Jerusalem, he emphasizes not to worry about earthly matters. One can give generously, because our all-knowing God supplies our needs. Let us not be fooled, thinking that we can take care of ourselves.

I've been mistaken many times with the misconception that I can fare on my own. It may have been the temporary lack of broken things in my life, or an unexpected financial boost, or a forgetfulness of my NEED for God, but every time I've done so, I fall on my face because of pride. Focusing on heavenly things is what the Scripture directs us to do, so we must invite God to help us strive for such.

When Paul says each should figure out "what to give in their own heart," it means that with prayer, one earnestly calculates what is truly important to them. Taking conscientious time
to be mindful, specifically asking oneself, “What does the church mean to me?” The gifts in pledges are, in turn, dispersed, in part, to: local, regional, and global outreaches/ missionaries. How much value do I place on this Christian-fellowship-of-support in difficulties and on the joy it is to have this wonderful tie-that-binds-us? When we take a close look at those priorities, laced with prayer, then we know that this church is extremely special to us. We see that our heart has been and is in it, because the people have surrounded us and have been vessels for God, almost angels at times. They’ve bolstered us up, and we’re thanking God for their presence!

We can't help but acknowledge that especially during baptisms, communions, weddings and funerals that this God (we serve) is the most important thing in our life. Our hearts are full, and words hardly express our love for the Lord. We want that blessing and fortification for our church’s children and others that follow. Then, in determining all these things, our priorities have made it clear to us what we should give.

Let me illustrate: Presbyterian Jean Arthur of Florida, took the time to calculate priorities, before passing away, a year ago, today. She gave $1M to the Presbyterian Foundation in Indiana. It is for need-based scholarships to Presbyterian related colleges, like M.C. She chose Paul’s concept of charitable giving. One shaped by conviction that every human being is ultimately dependent upon and accountable to God. With this, God is praised as the neighbor benefits by being served in love (see Rom. 15:2-6). I wonder... what was her mood when she bequeathed $1M?

I know some Christians, like Jean, who give cheerfully. I know others that cringe and their body language says they’re tight-fisted with worldly possessions not flowing through fingers easily. I admit to a little bit of cheerful giving and reluctant withholding wrestling back and forth in my heart, at times. In this state of mind, we can feel guilty when we don’t give cheerfully. However, we, individually and corporately, can live with less obligations or should, and more with delight and thanksgiving.

To bring glory to God, we fully open our hearts to our Creator. In doing so we’re saying, in the words of a classic hymn, “Just As I Am, Without One Plea, ... I come.” Each and every day we strive to submit to His over ours, and even need God’s help doing that.

God is much more concerned about us loving and enjoying Him than anything else. If we anticipate responding in faith to His love out of obligatory guilt, then we need to free ourselves. We don’t earn God’s merit by works or giving, especially grudgingly. We create a smile on God’s face by repenting and saying “Here I Am, Lord. Have my heart and soul.” God knows we cannot do good on our own. God, therefore, invites us to participate in the liberating reality that our response is about grace and gratitude. We live this out in relationships, as a community of faith, as the priesthood of believers. When we love God and neighbor, we discover we are participating in reconciliation in a broken world, full of awful hate crimes. Like Zion in today’s Psalm reading, God can restore us. He does so with joy! Ps. 126 prayerfully dreams of a happy future under God’s direction.
Our sad reality, though, is we do not worship God alone. God is Lord of our conscience, resources, time, and talent. So, we welcome God’s convicting disruption of our corrupt ways of worshiping other gods in our lives. Our idols may be materialism or the love of money, but with God’s Spirit at work, we can release that misappropriation. We give our whole heart, mind, soul and strength to God. In doing so, this is our healthy stewardship of priorities.

How do we know how to set our priorities for love? God shows us how to give our hearts. We model after God giving his indescribable gift. This “indescribable gift,” Paul refers to, is obviously God giving his only begotten son. God is the first giver; he first selflessly gives himself to us in Jesus on the Cross. All true Christian giving is our response of the gratitude for this gift that is beyond description. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

Five hundred years ago God led many faithful leaders of our heritage to give their hearts and meet the needs of others. They heeded our Lord’s command to love one another which, in turn, motivated other believers to glorify God.

Three significant reformers, who were contemporaries, gave themselves to God as open vessels. One was Martin Luther who, in 1517, posted his 95 theses on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther’s hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God, (we sang earlier) is a commentary on Psalm 46. It has probably been translated more frequently than any other. It “comforts” in the face of challenges and encourages us to confess Christ as the Lord over all. Another reformer was the outspoken Scot and father of Presbyterianism, John Knox. He left the British Isles as an expatriate. In giving his heart, he was led to teach and often sought to explain how to balance life. (Incidentally, the Scots knew all about debts and debtors because it was mainly a merchant economy in the 16th century. This is where we get the Lord’s Prayer wording, instead of trespasses.) A final reformer was John Calvin, who pastorally created an atmosphere in Geneva welcoming outsiders. He also established a hospital for refugees, as well as an academy for their Christian education. Knox and Calvin ministered in the same auditorium. They emphasized placing full trust in God and it stirred hundreds of hearts with gratitude. They were giving their all to God, and the church growth was off the charts.

For Calvin and for Knox, trusting and loving God enlarged the community’s joy. People responded to God’s call through love and service. They were not reluctant to give, but felt a healthy compulsion by their hearts being moved. Calvin’s most quoted line is “Lord, my heart I give you, eagerly and sincerely.” Repeat that inspiring line after me: “Lord, my heart I give you, eagerly and sincerely.” Let’s let God restore and fashion our hearts like moldable clay in a loving potter’s hands.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost... Amen