

Being shy of God's grace, when his people need a stewardship message.
Comparing 1 Chronicles 17 with 1 Chronicles 28:1-10

Scripture Reading: 1 Chronicles 28: 1 - 10 and 1 Cor 3: 6 - 9

Introduction:

Is it enough to preach God's unconditional love and covenantal grace, when the dream of a strong congregation doing God's work lies heavily on your heart? Do you not need to do much more to motivate a congregation to pull together to make the church's mission happen? King David struggled with this message, and so do many preachers and church leaders and so do I from time to time!

Dreaming and Planning is not enough.

For a long time David aspired to build a temple like no other. He already had the plans drawn up. He had feasibility studies done, budgeted for staffing and considered the cost of maintenance. He looked at all the detail and understood what it would take to complete the work.

David had it all planned - in writing - complete with mission statement, formalised vision and a budget. He thought of everything needed to erect this temple. And so David also knew that there was one more thing that he needed: the perfect stewardship sermon to bring every single believer in Israel on board, buying into the dream. He wanted to so powerfully engage the people that every person in his kingdom would be geared up and would commit to being teachers, planners, workers and givers of their valuable time and their precious money to build the temple that David envisioned for so long. David knew that temples are not built by visionaries but that they are built by a community of the committed.

So David was not content to stay with the same old stewardship sermon. David wanted something to *ensure* that this temple would be built by volunteers who are committed to its construction. He wanted to give them a message that would do more than calling them to serve, *but one that required them to participate, pledging their support in every way possible.*

Whipping and tempting is not a good idea.

David then did what many preachers might do when faced with a challenge of having such a thorny word for the congregation. He made God's blessings dependent on their willingness to make sacrifices for the Lord's work. "If you seek God," he said publicly to his son, Solomon, "God will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will abandon you forever." That is what David chose to preach as his farewell message: God's love depends on your faithfulness, son! God's grace and God's faithfulness depend on how you respond to what you have been called to do and what you have been called to do is to build a temple.

What a temptation to give such a message when your Board is sweating over the figures that have become available for the annual budget and when leaders are looking nervously at the few volunteers that they have who will have to do the work that is before them. When the leaders understand how many people they will need to help them bring about the common visions and dreams of the community, the message that God's grace depends on their commitment is a tempting one. It is a tempting message, because it seems to work for so many other churches! If you give a lot, you will be blessed a lot!!!

The problem is, that this was not the message that God gave to David to comfort him in his old age and to ensure him that the temple-dream will come true during the reign of the king of peace, his son Solomon.

David described a God who threatens instead of a God who promises. I do not like this part of David's farewell sermon, because the public message he gave to his son is not the same message that God in the first place gave to him through the prophet Nathan. God did not say that God's commitment to Solomon depends on Solomon's faithfulness. God never threatened to abandon Solomon. God sent word to David back in chapter 17 and 18, saying exactly the opposite: "*Solomon will build a house for me. . . I will not take my steadfast love from him, but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever.*" (1 Chronicles 17:12-13). This was what God promised unconditionally. *God said to David: I will love your son unconditionally and my favour will fall on Solomon, not because of anything he does, but because I choose to love him and work through him.*

I do not think that David adjusting God's message was a good idea at all. I do not think anyone should change God's word, because he thinks a radical message of grace would make the people slack and negligent in

pursuing God's mission for his church. I do not think it a good idea only because David used feelings of guilt to motivate his people, but because what he said smells of manipulation as well.

But is the gospel of grace enough to motivate God's people to work hard and give enough?

It is so tempting to forget about God's unearned grace during a stewardship campaign. It does not feel wise to talk about a God who chooses to be in covenant with people whether they give or whether they don't, whether they sacrifice or not and whether they have made a pledge or not. It feels dangerous to say, that regardless of what you pledge in terms of your money or your time, regardless of whether you have been to church every week or once a year, God has chosen to love you, like a parent whose love cannot be swayed by the decisions of a child.

It feels as if the risk is simply too high to proclaim that God's steadfast love for you does not depend on how many social justice actions you take part in, does not depend on whether you tithe or not, does not depend on how many committees you serve on, or how many meetings you attend. No minister feels like saying these things during a stewardship campaign. David did not, because he had a temple to be built and he knew his son Solomon would need all the people to give money and time and commitment and pledges, to make it happen.

Yes, I do sympathize with David when I think about the dreams that we have for this congregation - dreams of a church that is known as gracious and compassionate and open to all who want to follow Jesus. When I think about the dreams that we have for this church to find ways to open our doors even wider to those who are being squeezed by racism, fundamentalism, heresy, spiritual pride and unbiblical prosperity ambitions, I get uneasy thinking of what it will take to get us there. When I think about traditional churches that are closing down or struggling, I get restless and nervous, considering what it will take to consistently provide an evangelical shelter for those in need of the gospel of grace.

Because it will take everybody - every member of this church, to be involved in such a ministry. It will take greeters to welcome people on Sunday morning, it will take committed Sunday school teachers to help our children grow in grace and it will take Bible study leaders and elders who commit to careful ministry planning. It will take caregivers who visit the sick and homebound, and respond to spiritual needs of members and their families. It will take elders and board members to listen for and discern God's call to this church. It will take activists and prayer guides, mission delegates and godly counsellors. When I think of what it will take for this church to reach the vision of a church that God has laid out for us to be, it is overwhelming.

It will take more than simply the same small group of people doing much of the work. It will take more than just a minister and a church office doing all that is needed to serve God's people. It will take everybody, yes everyone who has taken responsibility for their membership promises, to commit their whole lives, including their diaries and wallets, in service to Jesus Christ. When I think about all that it will take, it is enough to be tempted - like David - to reach for some theological whip or tempting carrot to threaten or encourage people to give of themselves.

David yearned to see the temple that he envisioned, built before his very eyes. He spent years dreaming about the place. He spent years laying out the plans so carefully and in so much detail that in his imagination he could almost walk through the sanctuary before it was even built.

When you have spent a lot of time building the church that will be God's instrument in your own mind, it is hard to let go of controlling the outcome of the process. ***And it is hard to imagine that the future of the temple does not depend solely on your own efforts and on that small reliable group who helped you up to now.***

It is no wonder that David reached for a whip and a carrot in his last sermon to his people. I think David was afraid that this temple-dream is not going to happen, when he was not around to drive the process. He was afraid that the members of his community might not give enough of themselves. He was afraid that if their lives did not depend on what they gave and do, they might not give at all. He might have been afraid that the message of God's steadfast love would simply not be enough to motivate people to build the temple.

Only grace, only faith and only God's word..

I do not believe God wants a congregation built by watering down the good news of God's radical grace for a few extra bucks or a few extra sets of hands. God wants his temple to be built on the good news that God's

steadfast love does not depend on our faithfulness and that God's salvation does not depend on what we do, or on how hard we do it, but that it depends on God's firm promise to build his church on the foundation of the redemptive work of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

God knows that the message of his covenantal promises, steadfast love and divine grace and mercy is enough to build up a people for his work. The news of God's unending graciousness is enough of a motivation to encourage all of Israel to choose to act for the work of the Lord. Once you look at all the giving that God has done for your people and for the world, what else can you do but respond in the same way: by giving yourself to God through the work of Christ's body on earth?

It will take every member involved in this work to make God's mission happen. It will take people willing to make a commitment to give their lives, their gifts, their money and their time - not as tokens but as meaningful acts of giving their whole lives to God. It will take people will all sorts of gifts, using them to God's glory through this church in this community.

Remember Paul's words in 1 Cor 3: 6 - 9: *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow workers;*

Appeal:

We know that the message of God's grace, mercy and steadfast love is enough to build up his work and motivate all his children to participate fully. We know that if you saw God sacrificing his Son for this work of mercy, outreach and the salvation of many, a message of the radical, complete and sufficient grace of God our Father in and through Jesus Christ, it is the only sermon worth giving in times of enormous needs and challenges and that it is the only motivation the Holy Sprit of Christ uses, to make it all happen.

This is the gospel of grace!

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.