

Dear Darin,

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that "No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." For many years, this passage was prominent in my thinking as I would tithe or give alms. I could feel the selfishness lurking in my own heart, and I wanted to break the hold that money and material things had over it.

This is not a bad thing, and I certainly do not want to criticize any reason to strive to be generous. However, I found that despite frequent giving I was not always a very cheerful giver. I felt anxious and unfulfilled as I would put my check in an envelope and send it far away. I wished it could be more, or I would be worried about what good it would do when it arrived at its destination.

My giving was leading me to hate sin and selfishness, but it was not helping me to love my brother.

The reason why I have and still participate in collaborative giving is because it pushes me to reach out in friendship to people to whom I can give and to people with whom I can give. So often we focus on the need and want "out there" and "over there" and are blind to the frequent desperate and often heroic struggles of our neighbor next door. So often I focus on how I want to give, and what I want to do, and how I want to help. My generosity becomes paternalistic as I forget to ask my neighbor what help he actually needs or actually wants. My generosity becomes narcissistic as I forget to ask the rest of the community if maybe they have thought of some way to help that is more loving or more efficient than what I was able to devise. Thus, I avoid worshipping money, but I still stumble into worshipping power and control.

Collaborative giving helps me rip this weed out of my heart too. I put my money at the feet of the community, and I trust them to help find needs and to help find solutions. I trust and believe in something bigger than myself.

I will always put money in an envelope and send it far away. I will send it to doctors and relief workers far away who are working in crisis situations; I will send off a check when a hurricane or an earthquake hits. I will always give at least some of my alms in a way that is just between me and God, so that 'my left hand does not know what my right is doing.' But so too will I find a way to give to and with the person who is right next door, because it is this type of giving that has led me more than any other to love God and love my neighbor. And it is not the hatred of sin, but rather the love of God and neighbor on which the whole law and the prophets depend.

Wishing you all things good,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be the name 'Steven', written in a cursive style.

Steven