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Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen!

Most if not all of us will at some point be cruising along in some area of our life thinking everything is fine only to find out it's not. You know how it goes in relationships. Whether it's a friendship, dating, marriage or work relationship if somebody starts the conversation with "We need to have a conversation" you're probably gonna find out what you thought was fine isn't.

Earlier this year as part of a pre-surgery routine I had to go in for a routine blood test. Other than the whole surgery thing I was feeling just fine. The routine blood test and guess what—I wasn't fine. The blood test revealed some numbers that were way, I mean way out of whack. The great thing is there is a medication that takes care of it that I'll be on the rest of my life and I'm happy to take it. I thought I was fine but I wasn't. And it wasn't until I started reading the side effects of having these particular numbers messed up that I realized I wasn't as fine as I thought I was. Things are really good now, pretty much all of the side effects are gone and life is good. I am so grateful that even though I felt fine the bloodwork discovered that I wasn't, super grateful for modern medicine and science.

What I love about The Bible and what disturbs me about The Bible is that what that blood test was to my physical health the Bible is to my spiritual health. Sometimes I think everything is perfectly fine only to discover maybe it's not. But the real beauty is that just like the blood test is designed as part of a process to get me back on the path to health the same is true for The Bible. God gives it to us to keep us on track to keep us spiritually healthy.

Here's what I mean: Our Theme for the year is Fit 4 Life: Strengthen Your Core. And just like it's important for our overall physical health to keep our core muscles fit, it's also important for our spiritual health to keep our spiritual core muscles fit. We're talking right now about giving and how it's a core spiritual value. How did we get that as a core spiritual value? There's no chapter and verse that says "Giving is a core spiritual value".

But you don't have to read far or much to discover that it is. The very first commandment is "You Shall Have No Other God's Before Me." When the Pharisees try to trap Jesus by asking which is the greatest commandment he responds with "Love the Lord your God with all your heart Mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself." Theis whole book The bible is about keeping God first

Yet Scripture in so many places reminds us how easily God gets pushed aside and money and stuff take over and sometimes we don't even realize it's happening because everything seems fine---Until it's not. Verses like 1 Timothy 6:10 *“For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”* Or Luke 12:15 *“Watch out, be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”* Or Matthew 6 *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also....No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”*

These are just a few of the verses that remind us how easy it is for Money and stuff to become our god around which our lives revolve without even knowing it.

Nobody I know has a little shrine with a \$50 bill in their house. Nobody I know consciously makes a “god” out of money. Very few people would ever say “Oh yeah I love money”, that just seems so crass. When you ask people what's important many will say Faith,

Family and Friends. But let's get real there's just something about \$ and god where we just sometimes want to love \$ more than God, even if we feel like we don't have much of it let's get real it's pretty seductive. It can become a spiritual issue.

Frankly I wish God would have been a little clearer in The Bible and had a chapter or two that said something like "OK here are ten things that if you do them you know you love money more than God. There isn't a passage in The Bible that says okay here are the ten things you do if you love \$ more than God.

But here's how I know when I'm starting to love \$ more than God and the biblical core value of giving needs a little work in my life. It happens every year and I call it the "How Bout" conversation with God. Joan and I talk about what to do with our pledge card. We talk about our anticipated income and expenses and we plan what to give back to God. An a way it's as if we're saying, "God, how about this?" and God says "Walbolt, How about this?". Now I don't mean I hear voices from heaven rather God seems to get hold of my conscience.

And here's how I know I need a little more spiritual exercise when it comes to giving, I come up with all kinds of excuses "Lord, we've got some college expenses 12 of the last 13 years, Lord the vans got 250K miles on it, Lord we went to the financial planner and you know what he said, Lord, I'd really like to go

somewhere warm this winter, after all the kids just don't have that many more years at home we want to create some good memories, God you know how stretched we are right now and my list of reasons goes on and the reasons have been different at different stages of my life, but there's always reasons.

God always ends up saying something like this "Walbolt, you know those are excuses you know what you need to do" and I always end up saying "But God there's no way we can do this and God ALWAYS says "Just trust me, child I'll take care of you " and The Lord does. Here's what's so crazy: The joy of giving and stretching myself beyond what's leftover or what's comfortable far and I mean far outweighs anything I would have experienced by holding back from God.

It's a first commandment issue about putting my trust in money and stuff more than in God. That's why the giving and the growing in giving is such an important core spiritual exercise. Because the more money and stuff we get the more we want, the more we want the more we think we need, the more we think we need the less we think we need the Lord and the less we think we need the Lord the less spiritually fit we become. And it happens so subtly and often when we think everything is fine until it isn't.

Just like those blood numbers that I talked about earlier led to a medication that keeps things in check and healthy, and physical exercise keeps our heart and

weight and muscles healthy growing in giving keeps us spiritually healthy, it helps keep God first.

I know there are some who think that what the Scriptures have to say about giving is really great for somebody else, still others say stuff like all the church does is ask for \$, or when the conversation comes up about pledging to God's work through the church or growing their giving they just kind of shut down and figure somebody else will do it, or still some have just found a point at which giving is comfortable and the level doesn't really cause them to think about God much in their life, they think at some point down the road things will change and they can give more and the list reasons goes on forever.

Whether it's these reasons or all of the reasons I personally came up with through the years, when I was honest, I mean real honest, like a spiritual blood test about why I wouldn't grow my giving, it really came down to the fact that I wanted to keep the money more than I wanted to give it away I just wasn't being honest about that either with myself or God. I just couldn't admit that some of my goals or priorities were more important than the ones God had for me. Didn't want to admit that giving was part of being spiritually healthy.

Here is where the ongoing exercise comes in: When I actually struggle with my giving, when I actually grow in my giving I feel some freedom from having

money be my dictator—from having it dictate my values to me reclaiming this Biblical value of giving and using the money instead of having it use me. I still have a ways to go and still have these discussions with God, but on those days when I feel like I'm at least on the path, it's pretty darn fun working at getting spiritually healthy.

One of the many things I love about this Church is so many do want to follow Jesus and be spiritually fit. And if we're honest this spiritual core value of giving is a tough one because it causes us to really think about walking the talk. What I love about this core value like with anything that's tough in life it makes the small victories even sweeter. Imagine the freedom that comes when we really do let God become the master of our money rather than it being the master of us, imagine the freedom that comes knowing the giving has literally changed and saved lives across the world. Man what incredible joy because God cares more for 1 grain of faith or 1 changed heart than a ton of fake excitement.

I feel so privileged to be part of a church that as Pastor Kathryn Tiede said Last Sunday has given away over 1.4 million in the last 20 years—she said 15 but it's actually 20. I don't say that in a prideful kind of way (It's just a fact) but rather in a way that reminds us we're a church that has compassion, a church that not only cares but does stuff that touches people's lives, we get to be part of a church that hasn't lost its zeal, and concern and passion for the future.

I hope we'll all wrestle with this spiritual discipline and core value and become more spiritually fit as we trust in God above all other things. Wow, what more exciting path to be on in life both individually and together as a congregation—getting spiritually fit and changing lives. In Jesus name Amen!