

GIVING JOYFULLY

by Ray C. Stedman

We looked at some of the great examples of giving in Chapter 8 of Second Corinthians last week. There was the giving of those poverty-stricken Macedonians who gave beyond their means, out of their deep, desperate poverty. Then there was the incredibly rich giving of Jesus, who gave everything up and became poor that we might be rendered incredibly rich. What wonderful examples of giving from two ends of the scale -- from the poor who had nothing to give and yet gave, and from the very richest of all who gave all that he had that we might be rich.

Then we began to look at some of the principles of giving to guide us. I do not know any area of the church life that is more in need of teaching than this.

I read this week that the three biggest religious broadcasters of this country receive more than \$163,000,000 in contributions every year. The combined amount of Christian giving in the United States alone has been estimated at well over a half billion dollars a year.

That is a lot of money, and much of it is wasted. It is given to causes that ought not to be supported. It is given in ways that are foolish and spendthrift. A lot of it goes to line people's pockets, to be used for the enrichment of a few and the exploitation of many. We desperately need to be helped in our giving, to give responsibly and with intelligence and care, so that the money goes to the right purposes and is used in the right way.

Now, not all of this money is wasted, by any means. Giving is certainly a very right and proper Christian exercise. But the very purpose of these chapters is to help us in our understanding of how to give.

Last week we looked at some of the principles that the apostle brought out in this section here in Chapter 8.

We saw, first, that our motive is more important than the amount. God is not so interested in *how much* you give, but *why* you give. He reads the heart.

We have a number of passages from the Lord himself which underscore this. In one, he talked about the widow who cast two mites into the treasury. That was all she had, but she put it all in. Jesus, observing her, said, "She has given more than all the rest combined," {cf, Mark 12:42-44, Luke 21:2-4}. Her gift was more useful to God and more delightful to him than all the rest of the amounts that were given. So it is not the amount that is important, it is the heart. As Paul puts it here, if there is a "readiness" to give, "it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not," {2 Cor 8:12 RSV}. God looks at that, not at the amount of your income tax deduction, but on why you gave that money.

Then the second principle was that our opportunities to give are arranged by God. God gives more to some and less to others in order that those who have more might give to those who have less. It is not that we might spend it on our own self-indulgence, or that we might have an increasingly higher standard of living than others. Now it is not saying, as we saw last week, that we are to all seek the same level of living. That is never taught in Scripture. But we are taught that God does give to some certain excess, and the reason is that they might have to give to others. That can be reversed, too. What you have now in excess can all be taken away, overnight it can disappear, and you may be the one who needs to be given to. God himself determines that. Paul illustrated that by the manna in the wilderness which all came from God. Those who gathered much were expected to give to those who had less, thus there was an equality.

In Verse 16 of Chapter 8 we have a third principle concerning responsibility with our giving:

But thanks be to God who put the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his

own accord. With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel; and not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work which we are carrying on, for the glory of the Lord and to show our good will. {2 Cor 8:16-19 RSV}

Skip the next two verses, 20 and 21. We will come back to those. Let us see what else Paul says about the band of men who were coming to Corinth. Verse 22:

And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker in your service; and as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches [literally, apostles of the churches], the glory of Christ. So give proof, before the churches, of your love and of our boasting about you to these men. {2 Cor 8:22-24 RSV}

Here is a very important principle of giving. Giving requires that the control of a certain amount of money be vested in several individuals, not in merely one. Paul makes very clear that he has urged the churches to appoint other men to go with Titus to Corinth to take up this collection for the relief of the saints in famine-stricken Jerusalem. He is very careful to see that the control of this fund not be placed in any single hand.

And it was not just anyone who was appointed. These were men who were tested and proven. They were men of responsibility whom the churches themselves had selected to go along because they could be counted on.

There were three of them. Titus we know already. He has been very prominent in this letter. He is the one who went down to Corinth and brought word back to Paul. He travels back and forth as a courier and as an associate of the apostle, and now he has been asked to go back again and take up this collection before Paul arrives. And "with him," Paul says, "we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel." Everybody starts guessing immediately who this is. From these clues, most of the scholars have deduced that this is probably our old friend, Dr. Luke. Luke, the beloved physician, who was indeed a traveling companion of the apostle's. Since we have *The Gospel according to Luke*, it seems very likely that he was the one who was known for his preaching of the gospel, therefore, most of the scholars feel that Luke was the one sent along with Titus. With them was another brother, whose name is not given to us, whom Paul identifies as, "our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you."

It is almost impossible to identify who this is. Frankly, I think that Paul has now reached around the age of 60. He is suffering from some of the problems that those of us who have been young a long time suffer from, and that is a lapse of memory! He cannot think of the brother's name. Do you ever have any problems like that? That is a sign of old age. Paul is dictating this letter, and he cannot quite get it out: "What is that fellow's name?" So he describes him: "He's the one whom we've proven and tested." The Corinthians, of course, will know who he is when he arrives. So we will just call him, "Old what's-his-name." Titus, Luke, and What's-his-name went down to Corinth. The point, of course, is that they were to be welcomed because they were trustworthy and responsible men. So Paul is very careful to see that this responsibility is shared among several.

Let us now come back to the verses we skipped and see what Paul says about this. Verses 20-21:

We intend that no one should blame us about this liberal gift which we are administering, for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of men. {2 Cor 8:20-21 RSV}

What a tremendous thing to say, and how different it is from what we often hear today. In these days, if somebody who is given responsibility for funds is asked for an accounting, he says, "What's the matter? Don't you trust me?" It is very difficult to pursue something because it looks as though you are questioning his integrity. But Paul would never allow himself to get into that situation. He says, "We know in our own hearts that we are doing right, but that's not enough. It's got to be obvious to everybody that we are doing right. It

must also be open in the sight of men."

When I was a young Christian I was a member of a church where the pastor took all the offerings, which he deposited in a bank in an account in his name. He even owned the church building where the meetings were held. It was not surprising, though it was grievous to me as a young Christian, that after a couple of years of operation he became suspect in his handling of funds. It became apparent that he was appropriating a great deal of it for his own personal use. Eventually it split the church, and the congregation went several ways because of failure to handle responsibly the money that the people of God gave. Now this is an important principle.

Paul is careful to arrange for the sharing of control to avoid any criticism. This constitutes, therefore, a helpful guideline as to how and where we are to give our money.

Personally, I would never give to a Christian organization that is headed by a single individual, no matter how responsible he may seem to be. It is just not wise to trust an individual with the administration of sums of money.

I know of Christian organizations headed by a single person, which do not have a board, for instance. But one of the things we ought to check in our giving is that the organizations to which we give, or even the individuals to whom we give, are responsible to a group of men, a board. Most Christian organizations recognize that and do provide a board.

Furthermore, I would never give to an organization headed by a board on which there were several members of the same family. It is a common thing in Christian service to have a family group constitute the board -- the man who started it, his wife, and several of his children, perhaps. But that is no different than giving to the individual himself. It is not a responsible handling of funds. Paul would never have allowed that.

These three men were not related to him. In fact, he did not even choose them. He sent Titus, but the other two were chosen by the churches; he had nothing to do with who they were.

I personally think it is a good idea to give only to those groups which are willing to publish an audit or make their funds known in some way to people who want to know how they handled their money.

One of the things that has kept the Billy Graham Crusades money from being mishandled and misused through these 30 years has been the practice they adopted early of publishing a full page in the newspaper of the city where they held a crusade, giving an accounting of their funds. That has helped relieve the normal tendency of many to feel that funds have been misused.

Furthermore, in this regard, it is an excellent practice to require two signatures on every check disbursed from Christian funds. We do that here at Peninsula Bible Church. The other day, at our board meeting, somebody suggested that that was awkward because it meant that the one who wrote the checks had to run around and find people sometimes. It was suggested that we drop this two-signature system. But one of the elders spoke up, and said, "No, by no means. It is impossible in this church for any one person to write a check to his own name without somebody knowing about it, and it is well to preserve that." So the decision was made to continue that practice.

We need to be very careful about our giving. Money is given to us as a trust from God. We are responsible to see that it is handled rightly, and not just to commit it to people who use it in ways we have no knowledge of and have no accounting of.

Now, the apostle goes on, and points out another reason for sending these brothers, given in the opening verses of Chapter 9:

Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the offering for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia [that is Greece, where Corinth was capital] has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brethren so that our boasting

about you may not prove vain in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; lest if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we be humiliated -- to say nothing of you -- for being so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brethren to go on to you before me, and arrange in advance for this gift you have promised, so that it may be ready not as an exaction but as a willing gift. {2 Cor 9:1-5 RSV}

There is another very important principle in giving. Giving must not come from pressure. Paul says, "I sent these brothers to you so that you would not be embarrassed at the last minute because you had not had time to get this all together, so that the whole matter can be taken care of before I come," he says.

Second, as he tells us in First Corinthians, "I want it done before I come because I don't want my presence to be the reason why you give," {cf, 1 Cor 16:2}. What a contrast that is with many Christian leaders, evangelists and others today who insist that you wait until they come before any offering is taken. They want to put the squeeze on, to tell emotional stories of deathbed experiences, to hold up pictures of crying children to twist your heart, to use competitiveness and rivalry as a means of extracting more funds. This is a terrible thing. It does despite to the spirit of grace in a congregation. So this constitutes another helpful guideline. Do not give to organizations or groups or people who habitually rely on emotional appeals to get you to give.

I am sure you receive, as I do, dozens of letters every week appealing for funds. Oftentimes they are blatantly emotional. They include pictures of starving children and terrible stories of people suffering. Now that has a legitimacy about it. I am not wiping that out; we ought to be able to hear of needs. But I am talking about habitual appeals on that basis, because that is a wrong basis on which to give. The knowledge of the need is all right, but to try to use it as an emotional vise to extract more funds is absolutely wrong.

Some time ago the well known institution in Nebraska, "Boy's Town," was severely excoriated in the public press because it was discovered that they were making appeals for help for orphan boys when they actually had hundreds of millions of dollars in the bank which would have enabled them to carry on the work for years without any additional giving at all. Now that is an irresponsible appeal, and there are organizations that are making that kind of appeal today.

When Vic Whetzel and I were in Poland this last year, we heard of organizations that were actually stockpiling Bibles in warehouses because they could not get them into the Soviet Union. But they were still making appeals to people to give in order that they might purchase Bibles when they actually had warehouses full of them that they could not move. That is the wrong kind of giving. When we learn of something like that we should stop giving, because we are responsible for what we do.

Finally, the apostle turns now to the possibilities of giving. In Verse 6 of Chapter 9 he says:

The point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. {2 Cor 9:6 RSV}

What he is saying, basically, is that the closest analogy to giving that we have in life is the farmer going out to sow his crop. Giving is more than the giving away of your funds or resources, it is a process that will return something to you as well, like a farmer who sows seed in the spring. When he goes out to do this, it appears as though he is throwing it away. He scatters seed out upon the ground, and he cannot gather it up again. It looks as though it is lost to him, and it is. He actually has to give up control of it, and the use of it. He throws it away into the ground where it deteriorates, rots, and seemingly is lost.

But it is not lost, that is the point. Paul says it is not gone. Let it fulfill its appointed process and the farmer will have it back again and much more besides. That is what God designed. The return is proportionate to the sowing. If a farmer sows a little amount of seed, that is what he will get back, a small and niggardly harvest. If he sows bountifully and scatters prodigally, he will receive a prodigal harvest in return. The analogy is clear. If you give just a little bit, then what you get will be a little bit too. But if you give abundantly, then what you get will be abundant also.

Paul gives a brief summary of how to give in the words that follow.

First, he stresses again, giving must be voluntary. Verse 7:

Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. {2 Cor 9:7 RSV}

I do not know about you, but I always cringe at meetings where there is a tremendous emphasis put on the offering. Sometimes it turns into a kind of three-ring circus. People are stationed with an adding machine, the ushers are running up and down the aisle, the thermometers are up there, and people are being exhorted to give. A sense of competitiveness and rivalry obtains where people are trying to see how much they can out give others in order to drive the thermometer up; and if there is not enough, you just keep taking the offering until there is enough.

I think that is a shame, frankly, but I know a lot of money is given that way. That enables people to boast about the amount of it. They can feel very comfortable because they are such a missionary-minded church. But I deplore that kind of giving, and I think the Apostle Paul would also.

No, giving must come from a desire to give to meet the need, not a desire to gain a reputation as a church which gives a lot of money. Jesus warned about that. He said, "If you give to be seen of men, you've got your reward. You were seen of men. That's it; don't expect any more," {cf, Matt 6:3-5}. But if you give because you know that you have been given to and you want to share in the blessing that God is carrying out, then, "each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion [pressure], for God loves a cheerful giver."

Then the second principle which Paul summarizes is, true giving must be expectant giving. You are dealing with God, and he is able to give back. Many people get nervous about this. They say, well, that is giving in order to be given to. That is selfish giving. Now it is possible to turn it into a selfish style of giving, I grant you, but there is nothing wrong with recognizing that you will be benefited by your giving, because the Word everywhere tells us that. If you do not give, something happens to you. You become narrow, rigid; the boundaries of your experience are narrowed and reduced and you become a tight, stingy, Scrooge-like person.

But, on the other hand, those who learn to give and give for right reasons become generous, gracious, godly-minded people. That is what Paul is talking about here. God is able to give back. It is not wrong for you to give with that recognition in mind, for everything we have ultimately comes from him. When you eat a loaf of bread you ought to remember that back of the bread is the snowy flour, and back of the flour the mill, and back of the mill is the field of wheat, the rain, and the Father's will. Therefore, everything comes from his hand.

He is able to give, Paul tells us (Verse 8),

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. {2 Cor 9:8 RSV}

So give and it shall be given to you again, Jesus said. Men will pour into your treasury as you learn to give -- "pressed down and running over," {cf, Luke 6:38}. Verse 9:

As it is written,

**"He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures for ever."**

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. {2 Cor 9:9-10 RSV}

That is not wrong. If you give in order that you might have more to give, you are right in line with God's program. That is exactly what he wants. Now, that is not to spend on yourself. Here again the motive comes in to guide us. If you give in order to have more for you to enjoy, then you are giving for wrong reasons. A lot

of Christians are being taught that today.

After the service this morning a woman came up to me and told me about her brother, who is a graduate of a Christian university in this land. He was told by the leader of the school that, if he would give, God would give back to him, so he would never have a material lack in his life. The boy had asked God for \$50,000. He did not get it, and his faith was beginning to waver because of that. He felt, he had been taught, in fact, that it is wrong for a Christian to be poor, that if you keep giving, God will make you rich. This is a twisted and distorted application of this passage.

I have shared with you before that a friend of mine replied to a letter in which he was told, "You can't out give God. We have figured it out, therefore, if you and everybody else who hears our program send \$67 to us, we'll have all the money we want and God will give it back to you five times over." He wrote back and said, "I believe that. I believe you can't out give God. But I tell you what: You give me the \$67 and God will give it back to you five times over. Then you get the bigger amount!" For some reason they took him off the mailing list!

God delights to give, but his return is not always, by any means, material return. That is what the next verses goes on to show us. Verse 11:

You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God; for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God. Under the test of this service, you will glorify God by your obedience in acknowledging the gospel of Christ, and by the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others; while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God in you. {2 Cor 9:11-14 RSV}

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying that if you give according to the law of harvest, God will give back. And this is the form it will take:

First, it will awaken gratitude in those to whom you give. We have had the joy on many occasions with this congregation of having people stand up and publicly give thanks, sometimes with tears running down their faces, for the response that people in this body have made to a physical or material lack that they had. I want to tell you there have been many times when I have been proud of this congregation for your response to an appeal. I do not know any need that has ever been set before you but what some people, and a lot of people oftentimes, have responded very generously. I am delighted at that. It is a wonderful repayment for our giving, isn't it, to see people moved and touched and blessed and helped and giving thanks for that? We are richly repaid already when we see something like that.

But that is not all. According to the Apostle Paul, not only does it awaken gratitude in people's hearts, but, second, it stimulates them to pray for you. You who gave become the object of other people's prayers. That is what Paul says: "While they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God in you." And when people pray for you, you become the beneficiary of the blessing of God in ways that you, perhaps, will never fully know until you get to glory. But heaven begins to open up and pour out blessings in ways that you could never identify or even suspect because people are praying for you.

And third, it glorifies God with the thanksgivings of many. How it delights God to see his people generously respond to needs! "Pure religion and undefiled before ... the Father," says James, "is this, that you visit the widow and the orphans in their affliction," {cf, Jas 1:27 KJV}.

Paul winds this whole thing up on that note. He says in one brief sentence:

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift! {2 Cor 9:15 RSV}

Giving is godlike, and we are everywhere in Scripture reminded that we are to give because we have been given to. Therefore, we are encouraged by a passage like this to sow with a prodigal hand, to give generously, to realize we have affluence, we have additional money beyond our own needs for the very reason that we

might have something to give to those who have less. Take advantage of it. Jesus put it as beautifully and as simply as it could ever be put: "Freely you have received, freely give," {cf, Matt 10:8 KJV}. That is God's basis and motive for encouraging our Christian giving.

Prayer

Lord, indeed we have received very much at your hand. We did not deserve it, but it was given to us in Jesus Christ. When we remember that he spared not his own Son but freely delivered him up for us all, that inexpressible gift, we are also encouraged to expect that you will freely, with him, give us all things. May that free giving on your part stimulate us to meet needs around us. Help us to be observant, aware, looking for places to give, knowing that it increases our joy and delights your heart; that it does wonderful things to us as well when we give. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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