

GUIDELINES ON GIVING

by Ray C. Stedman

Chapters 8 and 9 of Second Corinthians are all about Christian giving -- not tight-fisted, miserly, grudging giving, or wild, spendthrift, careless giving, but true, generous, gracious, abundant, what Paul calls "hilarious" giving. The amazing thing is that Paul does this all in two chapters without once mentioning money! So we are not going to talk about money, but we are going to talk about giving.

He begins Chapter 8 with an example of giving he ran into when he was in Macedonia.

We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints -- and this, not as we expected, but first they gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. {2 Cor 8:1-5}

The background to this is the great famine that struck in the land of Palestine (reported also in First Corinthians), in which many people were deprived of their livelihood. There was a great drought, much as we had in California a few years ago, resulting in a famine in which many of the Christians of Jerusalem suffered because they did not have enough to eat.

When word of this came to Paul, he determined to enlist the aid of all the Gentile churches for the relief of Jewish Christians. He thought it would be a marvelous way of expressing the oneness of the body of Christ and the breaking down of the middle wall of partition between the Jews and the Gentiles, so, wherever he went, he told them about the need in Jerusalem. When he mentioned it to these Macedonian churches (the churches of Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea), the response was tremendous, and he was greatly encouraged, as he tells the Corinthians.

In this Macedonian response we have a wonderful example of the true way to give. I am delighted that we have come to these two chapters in this letter because I find that most Christians today, and I mean most, do not understand how to give properly. Many of them are giving from wrong reasons, giving in wrong ways, or not giving at all, so we desperately need some teaching in this area. Here the apostle himself will instruct us.

Let us look at the example of the Macedonians in their giving:

Notice that the first note the apostle strikes is that true giving always originates with the grace of God. Look at Verse 1 again:

We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia, {2 Cor 8:1 RSV}

If I were to put that on a scale of one to ten I would say that it rates absolutely number one as a motive for giving. The only true motive for giving is the grace of God, the goodness of God to you. If God has not done anything for you, then, for goodness sake, do not give him a dime. But if he has, then pour it out according to the measure you have received. That is always the argument of Scripture.

In the New Testament giving is never legislated upon us. It is not laid on us as a duty that we have to do in order to pay expenses in the church. It is given to us, rather, as a privilege that we can partake of to express the gratitude of our hearts for the grace that God has already given.

There are a lot of reasons that move people to give. I know that some people, perhaps some of you right here,

are planning to give as a tax write-off so that you will not have to give it to the government. Thank you, that you prefer us to the government! We are glad for you to do that, but if that is your only motive for giving it is not a proper one. A tax write-off is just not enough. It is not that we will not receive the money -- we will, because God ought to have it and use it for his own purposes -- but that is not going to help you any. Giving is not something you do for others so much as it is something you do for yourself, because it has a tremendous effect upon your own life. A tax write-off does not accomplish that.

Some people give to gain a reputation for giving. It is striking that the very first death recorded in the church occurred when a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, decided they would gain a reputation for giving that they did not really deserve. In the fifth chapter of Acts we read that other people were giving property. This couple thought they would get in on the honor and prestige that was being heaped on those who generously gave, so they gave some property. But they pretended that they gave all of it when they really did not. When the Holy Spirit dealt with that hypocritical kind of giving he dealt very severely with it.

God is very concerned about motives. I know some people who have given because they were afraid of dying and they wanted to make Brownie points with God. I have known men to give hundreds of thousands of dollars because they felt it would help them in their standing before God at the judgment seat. But they were not giving to help the cause of God. They had no more use for the work of God than a hog has for hip pockets. They gave to gain a reputation for giving.

All these are wrong motives.

These Macedonians gave because their hearts were moved by the grace of God. The extent of their giving is highlighted by the apostle. They ignored all the possible excuses for not giving. According to Paul, they were going through "a severe test of affliction," that is, they were being persecuted. Of course, that would tend to make them try to hang onto their property or money, because they did not know what they might need.

At the same time they were suffering "extreme poverty," possibly because of the persecution. What an excuse they would have had to say to Paul, "Don't talk to us about the saints in Jerusalem, we are about to starve to death ourselves. We can't send anything." But they had been touched by the grace of God. Paul says that their severe test of affliction and their extreme poverty, instead of being a cause for not giving, actually became an additional cause for giving. They understood what people feel like who are going through severe poverty.

They had been so blessed that they wanted to give, and give abundantly. Paul goes on to point out they actually outdid themselves in their giving. They not only gave "according to their means," they gave "beyond their means," he says.

I heard of a man who was asked to give to an offering and he said, "Well, I think I could give \$10 and not feel it." The usher said, "Why don't you give \$20 and feel it?" It is only when you feel it that the blessing of giving comes.

The Macedonians gave beyond their means. They dug deep, and they asked for the privilege of doing so. That is the amazing example here. Evidently Paul was reluctant to tell them about this need in Jerusalem because he did not think they could respond. But, when they heard about it, they asked him if he would not let them take up a collection to give to these needy people in Jerusalem.

One of the greatest marks that a heart has truly been touched by the grace of God is that it counts giving as a privilege.

We had a woman in this church for many years who loved to give. In fact, the pews you are sitting in were contributed by her. She used to come to me and give me a check every now and then -- sometimes a very large check. Tears would come to her eyes as she would hand it to me, and she would say, "Oh, Mr. Stedman" (she called me that, she's the only one who ever did, I think!) "I was 62 years old before I ever understood the grace of the Lord Jesus, even though I had been a church member all my life. I count it a great privilege to give in his name." And she meant every word of it.

That was the way the Macedonians acted. They asked for the privilege of giving, and they had the right priority in doing so. Paul says, "they first gave themselves to the Lord." That is a tremendous key to a giving heart. How you think about your possessions is very revealing. These Macedonians understood that everything they had belonged to God. They first gave themselves -- and when you give yourself you have given everything you have as well.

Have you ever noticed that there is no tithe in the New Testament?

Never once in the epistles do you ever read of Christians being asked to tithe. A lot of Christians today are taught to tithe, but I am always sorry to hear that, because that is not New Testament teaching.

The tithe was a tax levied upon people for the purpose of supporting a priesthood, a separate body of people who did religious things. When you come into the New Testament you find the priesthood has, in a sense, been eliminated. Now every Christian is a priest. We are a royal kingdom of priests, the epistles tell us, and there is no special collection or tax to support it.

It is laid upon us to give voluntarily, as our hearts are stirred and moved by the grace of God. That is what these Macedonians did. They understood that once you have given yourself it is easy to give anything else. That is the key.

The proper Christian attitude towards possessions is reflected in the hymn which we sang:

We give Thee but Thine own,
What-e'er the gift may be:
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.

You do not take 10 per cent and give it to the Lord and the 90 per cent remains yours. That is not Christian giving. 100 per cent of it belongs to God. The true Christian attitude is, "It is all yours, Lord. You do what you want with it. Whatever you tell me to do with it, I'll do, because it belongs to you, not to me. I am merely a steward, a trustee of it, responsible to distribute it for your name's sake." That is what these Macedonians had seen, and, therefore, having given themselves, they freely followed up with everything they had.

This is also Jesus' teaching. Once he was asked whether people should pay taxes or not. He asked for a coin, and, holding it up, he said, "Whose image is on this coin?" They answered, "Caesar's." Jesus' words in answer have never been forgotten: "Give to Caesar the things that have Caesar's picture on them, the things of Caesar, but give to God the things that have the image of God upon them," {cf, Matt 22:20-21, Mark 12:16-17, Luke 20:24-25}.

Who bears the image of God? You do, don't you? You are made in his image; you bear the imprint of his image. Give that to God then. That is what he wants. When you give that, then everything else will follow. You hold things in trust to be used whenever he lets you know that a need exists for them. That is proper Christian giving.

So these Macedonians became a model for other churches, Paul goes on to say, in Verse 6:

On this basis we have urged Titus that as he had already made a beginning, he should also complete among you this gracious work. Now as you [Corinthians] excel in everything -- in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us -- see that you excel in the gracious work also.

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. {cf, 2 Cor 8:6-8 RSV}

Notice how carefully he avoids pressure. He is not putting the arm on these people. He does not say they have to give. He does not lay a guilt trip on them. He does not say, "Now see if you can't outdo the Macedonians. We are going to have two thermometers set up when I get to Corinth. One will show what the Macedonians

gave and the other will show what you give, and you had better try to do at least as well as they did."

No, there is nothing of this. There is no pressure. "I don't say this as a command," he says. His argument is this, "The Macedonians gave because their love was genuine. They were moved by the grace of God. If you give on that basis, you too can demonstrate that your love is as genuine as theirs." Without pressure, he exhorts them to consider what giving is -- a manifestation of a heart that has been touched by the love and grace of God.

That, of course, leads into the highest example of all, the supreme example of giving, in the giving of Jesus, Verse 9:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. {2 Cor 8:9 RSV}

This little gem of a verse almost defies exposition. It states the case so perfectly. Once again grace is at the heart of giving: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." We sing,

Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan,
Oh, the grace that brought it down to man.
Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span,
At Calvary.

That is what Paul holds up as an example of what it means to give.

There was a time where Jesus was rich. (You can search the Gospels but you will not find it there.) He was not rich on earth, though he sometimes stayed with rich people. He had friends and neighbors who were rich; some who followed him were rich, but he himself had nothing at all.

But once he was rich, according to this verse. When was that? Do you remember in the Upper Room Discourse, in the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17, he prays to the Father and says, "Glorify me with the glory which I had with you before the world was," {cf, John 17:5}?

I do not know if he remembered that or not, but that is a very wonderfully insightful verse indicating that he knew there was a time when he was rich, when everything in the universe belonged to him. All the hosts of heaven bowed down in continuous worship of his name, and hundreds of thousands were ready to run at his bidding. He owned it all, everything was his, but he gave it up voluntarily, he deliberately impoverished himself. As Paul put it in Philippians, "He humbled himself" {Phil 2:8}, and he became a man, just a poor man.

Remember how he constantly borrowed everything? He was the greatest scrounger of history; I say that reverently. He was always borrowing. He had nothing of his own. He borrowed food, he borrowed clothing, he borrowed a coin to give an illustration, he borrowed a donkey to enter into the city of Jerusalem, and he finally had to borrow a tomb in which to be laid. There was one occasion when it says the disciples all went to their own homes, but he went to the Mount of Olives. He had no home to go to, no place to lay his head. Isn't that amazing?

Why did he do this? Why did he become poor? Paul's reminder is, in order that we might be rich.

Have you been thinking about how rich the Lord has made you?

Just the other day, in the midst of all the tumult that we see reported in the international scene, I was thinking what a terrible thing it would be to have to live today without the Lord.

Would you like to do that, now that you have known him? Would you like to give up all the joy, all the peace, all the sense of forgiveness, all the lifting of the load of guilt, to give up the sense of his presence, of a source of power available to you for whatever you need to do, of a continual supply of joy and gladness and

restoration, all that enriching of your life?

I watched on television not long ago a tribute to Frank Sinatra, one of the wealthiest men of our generation and an idol of millions all over the world. As I watched, I said to myself, "I wouldn't trade places with that man for a thousand tributes like that." He is poverty stricken and he is heading to utter poverty, while I have nothing but increasing joy and riches awaiting me. I would not trade, would you?

How rich Jesus has made us. He became poor in order that we might be rich. When you think about that, how wrong it seems to withhold our gifts from those who are in need around us. How can we clutch our affluence to ourselves when our brothers and sisters are in need?

Perhaps this might be a good time to call your attention to the "Need Sheet" that is published every week here in the church bulletin. You do not have to go to Jerusalem to find needy saints. Here are some:

#5 Foster home desperately needed for 14-year-old boy.

Here is a chance to change the life of a young adolescent boy forever.

#8 Seeking someone to care for 4-year-old boy on Thursday evenings from 7 to 9:00 while mother attends a much needed Bible study. Can't afford to pay.

There is a need that a desperate young mother has. Surely our hearts ought to respond to needs like that.

#9 Needed: a ride on Mon., Wed., and Thurs., from Palo Alto to Valley Medical Center. I am spending four hours a day on busses.

Now perhaps you do not go that way; perhaps you only go one day of the week in that direction. But whatever we can do to meet these needs; is what manifests a heart that has been touched by the grace of God.

#12 Sally and Mitchell Sloan need dishes, and a trash can.

Did you ever think you could meet a need with a trash can?

Read through the list every week, and see what you can do to respond to the needs of brothers and sisters all around us here. That is a manifestation of the grace of God.

The apostle now turns to practical matters at Corinth and instructs these Corinthians on just what God expects of an awakened heart. In this passage we have some wonderful principles of giving. Verse 10:

And in this matter I give my advice: it is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began not only to do but to desire, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not. {2 Cor 8:10-12 RSV}

Evidently, when Titus first visited them there in Corinth he announced the need of the saints in Jerusalem, and many had promised to give to that need. They promised to take up a collection, but it was never actually taken, so now, a year later, Paul is reminding them of this.

There is a hint here that some Corinthians had indicated they were now unable to give the amount they promised before, so they are waiting until they get it all together before they give it. (They may have been troubled by the Law, which demanded that if you vow something to God you must pay it. The Law warns that, if you make a vow to God, do not ignore it because he heard that vow, and he expects you to fulfill it.)

But Paul says, "Don't delay. Give what you can, for (as he puts it in Verse 12) 'if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not.'" So when the need exists, give

what you can. That is his point. If it is not as much as you said you would give, God understands. He knows your heart and he is not requiring something that you do not have. He delights in one who gives all that he can. That is what pleases him.

Later on he will say, "God loves a cheerful giver," {2 Cor 9:7}. He means God loves one who feels that whatever the gift can do is far more important than the value of the gift. This is a great principle of giving. Give according to what you have. Do not worry if it is not as much as you would like it to be, or even as much as you said it would be.

Another principle emerges here in Verses 13-15:

I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack." {2 Cor 8:13-15 RSV}

Some have taken the mention of the word "equality" here as justification for a kind of Christian socialism, that some system has to be devised so that wealth is redistributed every now and then so that everyone has an "equality," everyone has the same amount.

But that is misreading it very severely. That is not what Paul says. He is not arguing for an equality of amount. He is arguing for an equality of response: "Now is your time to give because it may turn out very shortly that you may lose all you have and then it will be your turn to receive." That is equality.

He is not saying, I want to work so the other guy can play. "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened." Nor does he mean, "I want you to give to me, and I (like the government) will take 80 per cent of it for my expenses and deliver 20 per cent of it to Jerusalem." No, he is not saying that. As far as he was concerned the whole amount was going to go to Jerusalem.

What he is saying is, "Now, it turns out that you have more than you need, and they have less, and the reason you have more than you need is in order that you might give to those who have less." He supports that with this quotation from the book of Exodus {Exod 16:18}: "It is written, 'He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.'" That comes out of the story of the manna falling in the wilderness to feed this great crowd of almost 2,000,000 people. They did not know what it was so they called it "manna," which means "What is it?" (Can you imagine eating "What is it?" for forty years?) When they went out to gather it, some were able to gather more than others. Perhaps they had larger pots or they worked faster; for various reasons some gathered much and some gathered little. But, according to the story in Exodus, the amazing thing was that when they got it all together in the camp and started dishing it out, those who had more than they needed gave to those who had less so that it came out exactly even; everybody had exactly what he needed.

Paul holds that up as a parable. He says, "That's what God intends. God is behind what you have."

I hear people boasting about how they are self-made men, taking credit for the fact that they have so much because they were careful or that they were very astute in their investments. Well now, those things have a validity to them, I grant you, but that is not why they have a great deal. You and I know people who do not have any wisdom at all, who are very careless, yet they have all they can spend and a lot more besides.

Why are there inequalities in possessions? The answer is, God does it. God gives to some more than they need in order that they might have the joy of giving to somebody who has less. Perhaps, on another occasion, he will take it all away from them so that they can know what it feels like to receive as well. God determines it all.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, the great Bible expositor, for years was pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He used to have a kind of a forum after the message, much as we have here on Sunday mornings, when people could ask him questions. In one of these question hours one rather skeptical person

said, "Dr. Barnhouse, what explanation do you give for the fact that almost 2,000,000 people could live in a total desert for 40 years? How do you explain that kind of a thing?" Dr. Barnhouse answered with one word, "God. Next question please."

Yes, God. God gives you what you have. God gave you the opportunity to make money. You did not achieve that by your own smartness. There are people ten times smarter than you who have tried very hard but they could not put it together. God gives these opportunities in order that we might learn the joy of sharing with those who have needs around us. Paul brings these Corinthian Christians to a recognition of that.

He goes on to say a lot more about the responsibility in giving, the actual practice of it, etc., but we are going to leave that for next week.

Let us go with this thought in our minds and hearts:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. {2 Cor 8:9 RSV}

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the joy of giving. Thank you that you ask us to give not because you want needs met for others so much as you want something to happen to us. When we give, things begin to happen within us, we become more gracious, more generous, more relaxed, more open, more loving people. We know we desperately need that. Thank you for the generous giving of many in this congregation already. May we also, like them, learn to give, for it is more blessed to give than to receive. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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