

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO GIVE”
(2 Corinthians 9:6-15)

Some churches, especially in the deep south, used to have – and some still do – a “talk back” style of preaching where the preacher would say something and the congregation would respond back. One Sunday a pastor was trying to get the people more enthusiastic about church, and said, “If this church is going to get anywhere, it has to learn to crawl.” The people said, “Let it crawl, preacher, let it crawl.” He said, “And after it learns to crawl, it has to learn to walk.” And the people said, “Let it walk, preacher, let it walk.” Seeing the response the preacher got excited and said, “After this church learns to walk, it has to learn to run.” And the people shouted back, “Let it run, preacher, let it run.” He said, “And if this church is going to run, it’s going to take money.” The congregation shouted back, “Let it crawl, preacher, let it crawl.”

I’ve never felt the need to rev you up about giving – our church has always been a very giving church – but I talk about it when it comes up in the course of our verse-by-verse study of the Bible – and for the past two weeks we’ve been in the most extended passage in the Bible on the subject of giving – and that is 2 Corinthians 8-9.

In these chapters the Apostle Paul is encouraging the Corinthian church to give to an offering being collected by several Gentile churches to give to the Jewish church back in Jerusalem. The Jewish believers in Jerusalem were living in extreme poverty because of a severe famine that hit their region. That, and intense persecution combined to put them in desperate straits. Paul saw this as a golden opportunity for Gentile believers to honor their fellow Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ by sending them a generous financial gift. This would go a long way to create unity in the body of Christ, and one day, if the roles were reversed and the Gentile churches needed help, the Jewish church could reciprocate and help the Gentiles.

When Paul first brought up the idea of collecting an offering, the church at Corinth was the first to say, “We’re all in – we would be glad to help.” But a year had gone by, and they had not followed through on their pledge to give. To spur them on to finish collecting their offering, in chapter 8 Paul uses the Macedonian churches to the north as an example of generosity. Even though they were experiencing poverty and persecution themselves, they gave generously and joyfully what they had to help their fellow Jewish believers. Compared to the Macedonians, the Corinthians enjoyed a good economy and were blessed with the resources to give, so Paul urges them to complete their offering. “And to help you out,” he says, “I am sending Titus and two other very trusted brothers to oversee the offering – to collect it and make sure it gets to its intended destination.”

We come today to Paul’s final exhortation about the offering in 9:6-15, and the emphasis in these verses is on the blessings that result from giving with a right attitude of the heart.

A week from tomorrow we’re going to give gifts and receive gifts, and both are fun. I love getting gifts, but isn’t it just as fun to hand someone a gift and have the joy of watching them open it? God is generous, giving God – and being made in His image He has instilled within us a sense of joy in giving – and since as Christians we have received such lavish grace from God, we should be the most generous givers in the world.

But in our fallen state, there’s also a pull within us to guard, protect, and hoard what we have. This week I looked up the latest statistics on Christian giving, and there’s some good news and some bad news. The good news is that born-again Christians who take their faith seriously are by far the most generous givers, and that is really good news. The not-so-good news is that on average Christians only give 2.5% of their income to the church or charity. In contrast, during the Great Depression, Christians gave 3.3%.

75-90% of church-goers do not tithe – in other words, they’re not in a regular, consistent habit of giving – they may give here or there, but there’s not a plan for giving. Experts say that if every church-going Christian tithed 10% of their income, faith-based institutions would have extra \$139 billion a year to serve their communities and spread the gospel. These statistics show pretty clearly that giving, the way the Bible describes it, is not widely practiced by professing Christians.

But when we understand what God’s Word teaches about giving – especially in our passage in 2 Corinthians 9 we’ll look at today – it inspires us to think much, much differently about giving and to see it not as a duty or obligation – which it is – but more than that, it is a divine privilege, an honor, a joy, and something that brings unbelievable blessing and good.

Verses 6-11 we see three attitudes of the heart God is looking for when we give, and the first is to **give with a generous heart**. To illustrate this, Paul uses the well-known metaphor of sowing and reaping. In verse 6 he says... “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.” The hope of every farmer, when he plows his field and plants seeds in the ground, is to get a bumper crop. But to do so he has to take a risk. He has to take his precious seed and bury it in the ground. The rest is up to God. But the only way he will get a crop is to plant the seeds.

Generally speaking, the less you sow, the less you reap – and the more you sow, the more you reap. Jesus put it like this... “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38). The principle of sowing and reaping applies to every area of life. The more time, energy, and attention you put into friendships generally results in having more friends. Conversely, if you put nothing into relationships, you will likely have few friends. The more time you put into reading your Bible, praying, and coming to church, the more you will grow spiritually. The less time put into these spiritual disciplines, the less you will grow. The same is true of financial giving – the more you give, the more you reap.

Last week we learned that everything we have belongs to God, and He’s entrusted us to be wise stewards of what He’s given us. God blesses some with good health, a good job, and a knack for making money – and they naturally have more to give. Others are given less, and they obviously have less to give. We also learned last week that God expects us to give in proportion to what He’s given us. The widow that dropped two small coins in the offering did not give much dollar-wise, but she sacrificially gave what she had and that’s what God is looking for – He’s looking at what you give in proportion to what you have. If God has given you much, then give much. If He has given you a little, then give what you can.

Paul moves on in verse 7 to second attitude of the heart – it’s important to **give with a cheerful heart**... “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” This little verse is packed. To start with, Paul says, “Each one of you should give.” Giving is not just for some in the church – it’s not just for the wealthy – God expects every believer He has blessed with His grace to be a giver.

It goes on to say, “Give what you have decided in your heart to give.” This speaks of planning and intentionality. Rather than giving sporadically or occasionally, determine through prayer how much you will give. Think through how much you have, what you need to live on, and then decide in your heart how much you will regularly give to the Lord. Before Sharla and I got married, we both were in a habit of tithing 10% to our church, so we had no problem continuing this once we were married. We both had the benefit of having this modeled to us by our parents and grandparents, who taught us with every paycheck to set aside 10% to give to the Lord.

It was a good thing I was taught this because generosity is not something I come by naturally – I’m Scottish and we Scots do not like to part with our money. But a transformation takes place when we’re born again and experience God’s grace in all its abundance – our hearts are changed so that we want to give back to God in gratitude for all He’s done for us – giving is not a duty, but a delight.

Sharla and I also decided early on that we didn’t want to limit out giving to 10%, but wanted – if possible – to give more, and over the years God has led us to monthly support a number of missionaries – I think we support four missionaries right now with a small gift each month. We also felt led to support a child in Ethiopia through Compassion International, and once she grew up, we now support a girl in Nicaragua. And when we started our building fund three years ago, we decided to give \$100 towards that each month.

I remember reading about John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, who became convicted early in his ministry that he was spending too much money on trivial things. He recorded that one year his income was £30, and his living expenses £28, so he had £2 to give away. The next year, his income doubled, but he decided to live on £28 and gave £32 away. In the third year, his income jumped to £90; again he lived on £28, and gave £62 away. The fourth year, he made £120, lived again on £28, and gave £92 away. He believed that with increasing income, his standard of giving should increase, not his standard of living. He continued this practice throughout his life, and when he died, the only money mentioned in his will was the miscellaneous coins to be found in his pockets and dresser drawers. Few of us will be as radical as Wesley in our giving, but he’s a great example of how predetermined planning can put you in a position to sow and reap a great harvest for the Lord.

Next, in verse 7 Paul says, “Do not give reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Giving financially is an obligation – it is something that marks us as genuine believers saved by grace – but God doesn’t want us to give reluctantly or feel pressured to do so – to give with a sigh and say, “Boy, I sure could have used that money – look at what my neighbors are able to buy – but it’s my duty to give, so that’s what I’ll do.” Part of living in such a blessed nation as we do is the constant temptation of materialism – even though we are the richest nation in the world, we find it hard to be content – and we’re tempted to feel like we’re losing something when we give. We do lose something, but as we’ll see in a bit, we gain far more in return.

Paul says, “Do not give reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” God loves it when we give with a happy heart that gives out of sheer delight. The Greek word for cheerful is *hiliron* from which we get the word “hilarious.” It doesn’t mean that we laugh hilariously each time we give our offering – it means that our heart is filled with joy and gratitude to God... “If God sent His only Son to die in my place and save me from hell, and if He has blessed me every spiritual blessing I can imagine, it is an honor and privilege, a joy and a delight, to cheerfully to sacrifice a small portion of what already belongs to Him.” Giving cheerfully is a major sign of spiritual maturity – it shows that we are not controlled by greed or materialism or worry – but are able to freely give just as we have been freely given.

In verses 8-11 we see a third attitude of the heart: **Give with a trusting heart.** This is really key. One of the reasons we’re sometimes reluctant to give – especially for us Scots – is worry. What if I have an emergency? What if I lose my job? What if I don’t have enough money to pay the bills or save up for retirement? Verse 8 says... “And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” God, who owns the whole world, promises to give you everything enough to take care of your daily needs, as well as be generous with others. We hear this and we say we believe it, but deep inside we’re not sure because if I release what I have to God, can I really be sure He’ll take care of me?

Yet over and over in scripture God promises that He will. Philippians 4:19 says... “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.” There are many, many examples of this in the Bible. When the Children of Israel were in Egypt, they cried out to God to deliver them, and He did. They left Egypt with very little in the way of provisions, but God said, “I will take care of you.” But very quickly into their journey they found themselves in the middle of a desert with no food. They said, “What are we going to do? We don’t have anything to eat.” God said, “Here you go,” and rained down from heaven all the bread they could eat. Not long after this, they ran out of water, and when they looked to God to meet their need, water came rushing out of a rock. Israel had to trust God each step they took, and as they did God faithfully provided all that they needed.

When Jesus sent a group of disciples out to preach the gospel, He said, “Don’t take any money with you, and don’t take an extra shirt or extra pair of sandals – just go and I will take care of you.” When they came back Jesus said, “Did you lack anything?” They looked at each other and said, “No, as a matter of fact, we lacked nothing.”

When Jesus spoke to the multitudes who were worried about how their needs were going to be met, He said, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or what you will wear... Look at the birds of the air – they don’t worry and God takes care of them... But seek first the kingdom of God and these things will be added unto you.”

The common denominator in all these stories is that faith preceded provision. God did not provide for the Children of Israel until they took a step of faith and went out into the desert, then God provided. God did not provide for His disciples until they left on their mission and trusted God to provide. Jesus told the multitudes that they must seek first the kingdom of God, then all these things will be added unto you. Trust God first, then He will provide.

Beginning in verse 9, Paul describes all the blessings that result from giving with a generous, cheerful, and trusting heart. While we lose something when we give, God sees to it that we reap a bumper crop of blessings, and sprinkled throughout verse 9-15 we see that the giver is blessed, the receiver is blessed, and God is blessed. Whatever we lose, we get back far more in return.

The giver is blessed in two ways. The first is eternal, spiritual reward. When you’re born again and experience God’s grace in your life, your perspective on life changes and you look beyond the money and possessions and things of this world, and like Jesus said... you desire to lay up treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy.

Paul draws out this point in verse 9 where he quotes from the book of Psalms... “As it is written: ‘They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.’” Just as a farmer has to scatter seed on the ground to reap a harvest, so Christians must scatter what they possess among the poor to reap God’s blessing. Giving to those less fortunate rewards us in a way that transcends material reward. The one who receives your gift will never forget you, and more importantly God will not forget your generosity – your deed will endure forever. Jesus told the rich young ruler, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”

All of us need a certain amount of money to meet the basic necessities of life and to save for the future, but it’s a bad investment to use the rest of our money for toys and trinkets, when we could be investing in the lives of people. A few years ago Kareem Abdul-Jabbar – the legendary basketball player who won six NBA championships – announced that he was going to auction off four of his championship rings and give the proceeds to his foundation to help children. He said, “When it comes to choosing between storing a championship ring or trophy in a room, or providing kids with an opportunity to change their lives, the choice is pretty simple – sell it all.”

Our goal as Christians transformed by the grace of God is to lay up eternal treasures in heaven, and we do that by pouring our money into the souls of people and that which will last for eternity.

Notice also that the giver is not only blessed by eternal spiritual reward, but by present material reward. These verses are often used by prosperity preachers to guarantee financial wealth to those who give, and that the more you give the more you will get back. That's partly true, but God does not bless us with material wealth to buy more things for ourselves, but so that we can reinvest it in God's kingdom. This is the point Paul brings out in verses 10-11... "Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."

God, who owns everything, provides both the seed – what we give away – and the bread – what we need to daily support our family. The resources He gives us are not to be hoarded or wasted on frivolous spending – they are to be used to take care of our daily needs and to invest in the Lord's work. So what God promises here is that if we give, we can trust Him to provide what we need to live, as well as supply what we have decided in our heart to give – and the more we give, the more we receive in order to give.

A great illustration of this is the poor widow in 2 Kings 4 who was so deep in debt that she was about to sell her two sons as slaves. The prophet Elisha said, "What can I do to help you? What do you have?" She said, "All I have is a small jar of oil." Elisha said, "Go around to all your neighbors and ask them for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few – get a lot of jars." She went out and soon her house was filled with empty jars. "Now," Elisha said, "Pour oil into all the jars, and when one is filled set it to the side and fill another one." Her sons kept bringing her jars and she kept pouring one after the other until she said, "Bring me another jar," and they said, "There's none left." Once the last jar was filled, the oil stopped flowing – and with all the jars filled, Elisha said, "Go and sell your oil and pay your debt."

The point of the story is: the more you give God to fill, the more you will get. He'll only give you back what you give to Him. If you bring God one jar, He'll fill one jar – if you bring Him 50 jars, He'll fill 50. God takes what you give Him and increases it, so that your daily needs are met and you have enough to generously give to others. It's a matter of trust. Giving doesn't mean that there will not be lean seasons financially. Job was a righteous man, yet he had everything taken away. But in the end, he got everything back, plus more. All God asks you to do is give, and trust Him to take care of you.

Not only are we blessed when we give, but others are blessed and God is blessed. Look with me at verses 12-15... "This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

One of the ways we are blessed through giving is to see others blessed by our gift. Paul says, "Your act of giving meets the real needs of your brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Because of you, they will have food to eat and clothes to wear." There's something very rewarding about helping others who have real needs. They say that giving actually releases chemicals into your body that come from the pleasure center of your brain. It gives you a high. When you help an elderly neighbor with a chore, when you take a meal over to the mom of a newborn baby, or you slip a \$20 bill in someone's hand to help pay for their groceries, it gives you a tremendous sense of satisfaction.

We are never more like God than when we give – when we give, we display the nature of our Heavenly Father who generously gives us all things we need – and we pass on that generosity to others in His name.

Verse 14 goes on to describe how giving forms a bond between the giver and the receiver... “And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.” When the Corinthians gave to help the poor saints in Jerusalem, it forever formed a bond of fellowship between them. By giving their heart to their Jewish brothers and sisters, the believers in Jerusalem gave their hearts to the Corinthians. Where there was tension due to cultural differences, there was now unity, and the Jews said, “We will pray for you and remember you in our hearts.”

One of the blessings I have as a pastor is to read thank you cards from people our church has helped through your giving. Giving creates a sense of goodwill between giver and receiver, and everyone is blessed.

Most importantly, God is blessed. Paul makes this point three different places. In verse 11 he says, “Your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.” In verse 12 he speaks of an “overflowing of many expressions of thanks to God.” And in verse 13 he says that because of their giving “others will praise God.” When you give in God’s name – when people know that you’re a Christian – it enhances God’s reputation. When Jesus said that when we are salt and light to the world, people will see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. They will say, “These people practice what they preach.”

A second century Christian writer named Aristides wrote a famous letter to the Roman Emperor Hadrian explaining the Christian religion and here’s in part what he says: “They love one another, and he who has gives to him who has not, without boasting... and if they here that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity... and if there is any among them that is poor and needy, and they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food... Such, O King is their manner of life, and truly there is something divine in the midst of them.” This is the spirit that grew the early church from small band of disciples into a global body of believers, and we are called to continue giving in this same spirit.

Paul ends chapter 9 the same way he began verse one of chapter 8, linking giving to God’s grace. He says, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” The reason we give – the reason we are generous – is because of God’s generous gift to us in sending His only begotten Son to die in our place on the cross and give us eternal life. Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe.

As we approach this season of giving and receiving gifts, remember the greatest gift of all, given to us on Christmas morning – that Jesus left the glory and splendor of heaven to come to a sinful, fallen world to redeem us.

And because we have received such an indescribable free gift of grace, we can give with a generous, cheerful, trusting heart – and reap all the blessings that come from giving – both now and in eternity – and glorify the name of God in the world. Start scattering seed and God will use your seed to produce a bumper crop.