

“A Cheerful Giver,” 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 14, 2019)

⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. ¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

PRAY

We are continuing our series on 2 Corinthians and chapters eight and nine in 2 Corinthians form one block in this book where the apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth on the subject of generous giving. Today’s sermon, in fact, is a follow up sermon to the one I preached two weeks ago on chapter eight.

I need to take just a minute and recap some of the main points from that sermon. We talked then about how Paul collected and offering for impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. He’d already collected money from the church in Macedonia, a very poor part of Greece, especially compared with the affluent Corinthian church.

Paul used the Macedonian generosity as an example for the Corinthians and said it was marked by three characteristics. First of all, **it was sacrificial**. That’s 2 Corinthians 8:3: “For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and *beyond their means*, of their own accord ...” The Macedonians skipped meals so they could give money away. That’s the only thing “beyond their means” could mean for people that poor.

Second, **it was entirely voluntary**, not compelled, not motivated at all by guilt. We just saw in verse 3 that the Macedonians’ giving was “of their own accord.” In 2 Corinthians 8:4 we read they were “begging [Paul] earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints ...” In other words, the Macedonians went to Paul and said, “Please, do us a favor – let us give so much money away to our poor brothers in Jerusalem that we have to go hungry in order to do it.” Not the kind of favor we are accustomed to asking for, but they did it in Macedonia.

Third, **this giving was not only sacrificial, not only voluntary, but joyful**. “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have

overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” 2 Corinthians 8:1-2. The Macedonians begged Paul for the chance to skip meals to help poor believers in another part of the world, *and in so doing they were overflowing with joy.*

That gets us to our text for today. In verses 6-7 Paul restates these three characteristics of Christian giving. He writes, “The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully [that’s giving sacrificially].⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion [that’s giving voluntarily], for God loves a cheerful giver [that’s giving joyfully].”

Now how can we do that? That’s what Paul focuses on in the rest of the passage, and I want to point out two things: first, if you want to practice this kind of giving you must understand what you really are. Second, you must understand what it is Christians are here to do. Finally, I’ll give some practical tips on giving.

First, we must understand what we really are. One of my favorite movies is *Sense and Sensibility*, based on the Jane Austen novel, the one with Hugh Grant, Emma Thompson, and Kate Winslet. In the opening scene of that movie, the patriarch of the Dashwood family is about to die, and he calls his son John to his bedside to tell him that he has left almost nothing in his will to his wife, who is John’s stepmother, and his daughters, who are John’s step-sisters. So Mr. Dashwood makes John promise that he’ll take care of them, to be generous with them, because under 19th century English law John will inherit just about everything Mr. Dashwood has. John says, “I promise, Father, I promise.” John really meant to take care of his step-mother and his three step-sisters ... until he got home and spoke to his wife, Fanny; Fanny who cared nothing at all for these women.

After talking with Fanny for just a few hours, John goes from being prepared to give his step-mother a huge and generous sum of money (3000 pounds, worth something like \$200,000 today) to giving his step-mother and step-sisters nothing except maybe 20 pounds every now and then.

But in her effort to whittle John’s generosity down Fanny says something very telling. John tries to make himself feel better by saying his step-sisters really can’t expect too much from him, and Fanny replies, “There is no knowing what they expect. The question is, what can you afford?”

To the extent we are not generous with our money, it’s because we are asking ourselves that question: “What can I afford?” You see, there is a premise behind that question. The premise is, “My life is my own, and it’s up to me to take care of myself. Therefore I must find out what I can afford before I can give my money away.”

But the Bible says that premise is absolutely mistaken. If you’re a Christian, the Bible says, your life does not belong to you at all. 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a: “You are not your own,²⁰ for you were bought with a price.” You do not belong to yourself anymore once you become a Christian. Therefore, the question “what can I afford” makes no sense if you are a Christian.

We live in an anxiety-riddled culture. One in ten Americans take anti-anxiety medication, one in four are on an anti-depressant, and just about all of the rest of us are constantly tempted to self-

medicate in some other way, with food, alcohol, exercise, or watching TV. We are all anxious about something. *But nothing will alleviate your anxiety like really believing you belong to the all-powerful God of the universe, and he will care for you.*

Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. Matthew 6:25-32.

We belong to God, and if we belong to him then in a real way *we are not responsible for how our lives turn out.* If you belong to God, your responsibilities include being faithful to him, giving him obedience, worshiping him, but it is not your responsibility to make sure you make enough money to live on. It’s not your life, so it’s not up to you to make the money. That’s his job, to care for his people. **That’s an incredibly liberating principle.**

When you know you belong to God, then you can view yourself as you really are – you’re not an owner (because God is the owner); you’re a steward. A steward, of course, is someone who cares for someone else’s resources. We are portfolio managers for the Lord. And if you see your stuff is not really yours then **it is so much easier to be generous with it.**

Friends, we are no good at possessing things, at viewing things as ours and belonging to no one else. We mess up when we start saying, “That’s mine; that belongs to me.”

But the more you see yourself as a steward, the less you will say, “That’s mine,” the less you will say, “What can I afford?”, and the more you daydream about how to take your resources and give them away because ultimately they belong to the Lord. **You must see what you are.**

Second, we must understand what we are here to do. Let’s read verses 11-14: “You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. ¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.”

What’s the recurring theme in these four verses? How through their generous giving the Corinthians will produce “thanksgiving to God” (verse 11), “many thanksgivings to God” (verse 12), the poor in Jerusalem will “glorify God” (verse 13) and see “the surpassing grace of God” in the lives of the Corinthians (verse 14).

Thanksgiving to God, praise to God, glorifying God. Friends, ultimately, why are we here? The Westminster Catechism puts it best: “What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

We exist to glorify, to magnify, to make much of God, and in our culture, our very materialistic, modern American culture, few things will display how worthy we think God is like being freely, sacrificially, and joyfully generous with our money.

You see everyone knows the power and allure of money. We don't call it the “almighty” dollar for nothing. But when people see Christians joyfully part with their money because of the work of the gospel of Jesus Christ in their lives, it has a powerful impact. It serves to authenticate the gospel to people; it makes it real to them because they say, “Oh my – they actually do love their God more than they love their money.”

There's a famous quote from church history often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel continually; use words if necessary.” From what I've gathered over the years, St. Francis probably didn't say that. It is impossible to really preach the gospel without words. Sooner or later you're going to have to open your mouth and talk about Jesus if you're going to share the gospel with someone. Certainly Francis believed in preaching. By all accounts he was an outstanding preacher.

But, boy, I think everyone can understand why that quote means so much to so many. We all know that at the end of the day, *while words are necessary, they aren't sufficient. Words are good, but they're also cheap.* According to the Bible, you can't just say you're a Christian; you must have a life that proves you are a Christian. And few things speak to the reality of the work of the Holy Spirit in someone's life than by being sacrificially, joyfully generous.

God wants to make it easy for us to do this. “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”⁹ As it is written, ‘He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way...” 2 Corinthians 9:8-11a.

You see what these verses are saying? They tell us that God will give us enough resources so that we can always be generous with our money. John Piper once said: “If we act as conduits for God's grace (instead of cul-de-sacs), then there will be an unending supply” from which we can give. Too many of us want to be cul-de-sacs for God's grace – just let the blessing bottle up inside of me. But we are called to be conduits, and if we generously pass on to others the grace God has shown us, then God promises he will make sure we always have enough to continue to give our money away.

Third, some practical tips for giving. A lot of people say, “Just give me a rule when it comes to giving. Just tell me how much of my income I need to give away to be sacrificial in my giving, and I'll do it.” But that is the one thing the New Testament never does. For example, when

Jesus spoke to the rich young ruler in Mark 10, Jesus told him to give all his money away. Later, though, when Jesus met Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus says he's given half his possessions away, Jesus says, "Today, salvation has come to this house." And then with still other people Jesus never brings money up at all, even some wealthy people like Nicodemus.

There is no *rule*, but I will say (**and here's the first practical tip**) that for most people, in most places, in most times in the world, giving away ten percent of your income is a good *goal* to shoot for to let you know when you are being sacrificial. Giving ten percent away would mean you can't do a whole lot of things you could otherwise do. That's not true of everyone – some high earners would have to give more to sacrifice, the poor or people with lots of kids to take care of might be able to give less. But in most places, most times, most people, ten percent will do.

But remember, this isn't what's commonly called the tithe. We talked about this two weeks ago. If you go to Grace, you do not have to give your entire ten percent to Grace. You could give some to Grace and the rest to a combination of other charities and ministries, or to the poor directly.

Now I've had people say, "Oh my. By talking like this, aren't you going to erode the financial support of the local church?" The answer to that question is, "No." The problem in Christian giving is not that people aren't tithing to their local church. ***The problem is enough people don't give in biblical proportions, out of biblical joy.***

If all Christians gave sacrificially, it would float all the boats. Grace would have all it could handle, and all of the other charities and institutions would too. I've had people come to me and say, "I give ten percent of my income away, but most of it goes to these missionaries, or most of it goes to world hunger relief. Should I change those giving priorities and give more to Grace Bible?" And I've said, "Absolutely not."

"Each one must give *as he has decided in his heart*, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." 2 Corinthians 9:7. My challenge to everyone, when it comes to generosity, is to give sacrificially, give voluntarily, give joyfully, and if you do those three things ***then you can follow your heart.*** What's God laying on your heart? I think, for example, the ministry of Grace Bible Church glorifies God. I think Grace Bible Church is a worthy recipient of the generosity of Christians. I hope God has laid our church on your heart. But I also think world hunger relief glorifies God. I think a lot of other ministries and missionaries and giving to the poor directly glorifies God. Therefore, I'm not going to tell you how you must give. You must decide in your own heart. My point is simply that if everyone gives in biblical proportions, no ministries, and certainly not the poor, will go without.

But what if you feel like you can't give that sacrificially? What if you are in too much debt right now to give ten percent or more? Or, what if you've never given regularly at all? Here's the second practical tip: ***get your heart right.***

Some of you may say, "J.D., I can't imagine giving sacrificially and cheerfully, because I feel like I need to spend basically all my discretionary income – everything not going to my bills and

paying off my debt – on me and my family to keep us happy. I know for a fact I don't want to give my money away as much as I want to have these certain things in my life.”

If that's you, here's what you do. First of all, just admit it, confess it to God. It's not like he doesn't already know that; just be honest with him. But then go to God and just tell him “thank you” for those things you do have. As you look at all the Bible you'll see that saying “thank you” to God a lot is the key for overcoming our selfishness and our materialism. Have you ever done that? Have you ever looked at your house and said, “Thank you, God, that I get to live here. It's not everything I want in a house, I'd like some new furnishings, it needs a new roof, but, still, thank you”? Have you ever looked at your car and said, “I'd rather have a newer car but, truly, thank you, God, that I don't have to walk everywhere”? Have you ever looked in your closet and said, “Thank you, God, for the clothes I have that I do like wearing”?

Go through your life and take an inventory of all the things you have and thank God for them, and as your heart starts to warm up to God, take the next step and pray like this: “God, I can't believe you want to be with somebody who thinks about and loves their possessions way more than you. Thank you for loving me.”

Do that, and your heart will be melted by God's love. Because it's true; we don't love God as much as our stuff, but he still loves us. Realizing that should get your heart right. **Then (and this is the third practical tip),** you can sit down with your budget, or with your budget and your spouse if you're married, and say, “OK, what item can we sacrifice in our lives so that we can start giving some money away and show God that we value him?” Just pick one thing, but then start doing it, and I'll be you will be able to do so cheerfully. Whether it amounts to one percent or two percent or three percent of your income, whether it's to the church or to the poor across the world or the poor down the street, start there and see if over time you don't find yourself wanting to give more and more away, to find yourself being joyfully sacrificial in your giving.

Paul caps his argument on giving with verse 15: “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” What's God's inexpressible gift? Jesus is God's inexpressible gift. Friends, where would you and I be if God did not give us His Son? We'd be in our sins, with the just and holy wrath of God hanging over our heads, without hope and instead having only the fearful expectation of the judgment to come. God gave us His Son, and in his death Jesus paid for our sins and reconciled us to God, so that we weren't just pardoned but adopted into God's family. In Christ, we went from being God's enemies to being his children. What a gift!

And, not to put too fine a point on it, when Jesus was on the cross, did he only tithe his blood? No. He gave it all, to cleanse you and make you holy. Jesus didn't die for us reluctantly or under compulsion. The Father didn't have to order Jesus to earth to redeem us. He cheerfully gave himself for us. *And friends, to the degree you see that Jesus was the ultimate cheerful giver, you can cheerfully give in greater and greater proportions, to the point to where when you give your money away you feel like you're spending it on yourself.*

Back in 1995, a woman named Oseola McCarty made headlines all over the country. She was an elderly woman in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who grew up in rural poverty, and from the time she was a teenager until she was 86 years old she worked as a washerwoman. For seventy years she

would pick up dirty clothes from people in Hattiesburg, wash them, fold them, iron them if need be, then take them back to people she worked for.

She lived very frugally, she never owned a car (she walked everywhere), she didn't have air-conditioning. She had a black-and-white television but she never got cable. She didn't even own a washer and dryer. She tried one in the 1960s, but she said, "the washing machine didn't rinse enough, and the dryer turned the whites yellow." After years of boiling clothes and then doing four fresh-water rinses, that wasn't good enough to meet her standards. The machine was retired, and she went back to her Maid Rite scrub board, water drawn from a nearby fire hydrant, and 100 feet of open-air clothesline.

With that lifestyle and work ethic, even as a washerwoman, she was able to save money. Every week or so, she'd go to one of three banks where she had accounts and she'd deposit her money.

When she retired in 1995 at 86, after washing clothes by hand for more than seventy years, she had \$280,000 in the bank. And what did she do with her money? She gave ten percent to her church, she set aside 30% to her relatives, and she gave the majority, \$150,000, to the University of Southern Mississippi to set up a scholarship fund for poor students.

When all this came out it was a huge story, so all kinds of news organizations wanted an interview with her. Someone from *People* magazine asked her, "Didn't you ever want to spend that money on yourself?" And she smiled and said, "Honey, *I am* spending it on myself."

Now, *that's a cheerful giver!* Don't you know she glorified God? Don't you know she was free from worry and anxiety? Don't you know she had been freed from selfishness and possessiveness, and from the need to impress others? Do you want to be free like that? Then start giving. "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." PRAY