

God's Missionary Program

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

Tonight study takes us back to 1 Corinthians 16 where Paul was writing to this church at Corinth as an encouragement for them to give to the offering that was being collected for the Christians at Jerusalem. I really don't know why Paul is dealing with this same subject again here in 2 Corinthians 8. Evidently, the Corinthian believers had not yet responded, and it is possible that Paul doubted the Corinthian commitment to the cause, or if he just wanted to ensure that he had not labored in vain in that field. He first told them about the Christians in northern Greece – a province called Macedonia. Those Christians were very, very poor – some of them had to beg for food. Despite their extreme poverty, they all begged Paul to let them be part of this special offering, as seen in verses 2-4, “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.” **Their love for Jesus and each other shined through their offerings.**

Using them as an example, Paul urged the people in southern Greece, the people in Corinth, to finish their offering. Listen to his statement in verse 8, “I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.” You know the cliché “Put your money where your mouth is.” Paul is saying the same thing. How we use the money God gives us shows how sincerely we love him. God's grace moved the Christians in Macedonia to be generous beyond their ability. And Paul is asking the believers at Corinth if they will do the same?

Therefore, Paul used this opportunity to remind the Corinthians of how the churches of Macedonia responded, and to

give them some guidelines in this matter of giving. I am convinced that these same guidelines work very well for us today.

First, Paul says that giving should be guided by grace. Verse 9 says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might be rich.” Paul says that our giving is about living our life for our Savior – showing him with our lives, including our wallet, how much we love him. Paul sees our giving as a way we participate with God in his Kingdom. **God gives us the means to give so that in our giving we might share his abundance with others.** The most amazing thing to me is to think that the God who created the universe, who holds the stars in place, and commands the waters of the oceans, has chosen in his infinite wisdom, to use *us* in his redemptive plan for creation. It is for us as it was for Abraham. God said, “I am blessing you to be a blessing to others.”

Notice that Paul nowhere mentions tithing. In the interest of time, I am going to operate off the assumption that we understand that tithing is the biblical standard that we should seek to meet as we contemplate our giving. Tithing is explicit in the Old Testament, and it is implied in the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament. **But we need to be careful that we do not allow the standard to steal away the joy of giving.** How does that happen? It happens when the *rule* of giving becomes more important than the *attitude* of giving.

I am reminded of the man who told his pastor, “Pastor, I just don’t see how I can give as much as a tenth. Would it be all right if I just gave a fourth?” **God will not condemn us for not tithing.** But to offer as a reason for not tithing because we are under grace is to miss the plain implication of grace, and we, in essence, make the grace of God the reason for our stinginess.

So here is the method of grace in giving. **First, we give because we have experienced God's grace in receiving.** Being moved by the abundance of blessing (no matter how small) causes us to give in response to the grace shown to us. If we are not giving much, it is because we have failed to acknowledge all that God has given for us. Our giving then blesses others, and they receive a measure of God's grace, and we experience more of God's grace as we see what God is able to do for others through our generosity.

You see, the hand that is open to give is also open to receive. The opposite is also true. The hand that is closed cannot receive the infinite treasure that God longs to give. **It is the law of sowing and reaping at work.** Paul mentions that law to these Corinthians in chapter 9 if we were to read ahead. Whatever we sow, that is what we reap.

God has chosen us to participate with him in his redemptive work. The grace of giving is one way we do that. Paul commended the Corinthians for their faith, their gifted speakers, their deep knowledge, the wonderful enthusiasm, and their great love. He now he says in 2 Corinthians 8:7, "Excel in this grace of giving as well." **Giving should flow out of grace because giving is a means of grace.** That is the first guideline for giving.

Second, our giving should flow out of what we have, not what we don't. That's exactly what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8:12, "If you are really eager to give, it isn't important how much you are able to give. God wants you to give what you have, not what you don't have." I have heard people make this statement (and I am included), "If I win the lottery, I'm gonna' give a tithe to the church." **That is wonderful if you are already tithing.** But it is no justification for not tithing what you already have. You see, the truth is that if we don't tithe with the little we have, we are not going to tithe if we ever have much. Our faithfulness is never measured by the size of the gift, but rather by the size of the sacrifice.

Remember the time when Jesus and his disciples were sitting outside the Temple watching the folks passing by to drop their collections in the collection box. Mark tells the story, many rich people placed in large sums of money. Then a poor widow came by and dropped in what would be the modern equivalent of a couple of pennies. Jesus said to his disciples, “This poor woman has put in more than all the rest have given. They gave out of their abundance, but she has given everything she had.” **Did you know that in general, the poor are much greater givers than the rich?** According to U.S. News and World Report, the poorest households in America gave 5.5% of their income to charity last year. The wealthiest households gave only 2.9%. **According to the magazine Confident Living, nearly half of all contributions to charity come from households with less than \$30,000 annual income.** I wonder why that is?

I wonder if there is something inherently self-defeating in being a self-made person. It seems the more self-made we are, the less we depend on God, and the more we shut ourselves off from God’s magnificent grace. The sacrifice we make in our giving becomes an exercise in trust whether we give out of our abundance or out of our poverty. **Giving grows our trust for God.** It is an exercise in spiritual growth, and our giving should flow out of what we have, not what we don’t.

Third, our giving should be an act of worship. There is nothing we can give God that he needs. And God certainly doesn’t need our money. But when we give an offering to God we are using our money as an act of worship.

Proverbs 3:9 says, “Honor the Lord by giving him the first part of all your income.” **We honor God when we tithe.** It is an act of worship.

Now listen very carefully, God want your heart more than anything else. He doesn't want your money, He wants what it represents. Therefore, Paul said to the Corinthians in verse 5 that the Macedonians "first action was to dedicate themselves to the Lord." Our giving will never be what it should be until we have first given ourselves completely to God.

Giving is an act of worship, and appropriate worship is to bring the best that we are and can be, and offer it in praise and sacrifice to God. Let me say that another way: To worship is to bring the *best* to God, not the *rest* to God. But too often, we bring the *rest*. **Leftovers are such small that we would not dare serve to a guest.** And yet we serve them to our Lord Who deserves our very best. We give to Him leftover *time*, stray minutes here and there. **We give Him our leftover money, whatever few coins or cash that we can spare.** We give Him our leftover *life*, while we give our best efforts, our best thoughts and ideas, and our deepest dedication to making sure that we are successful in the world.

Stewardship never begins with money. Stewardship always begins with God, and with the question, "What would God have me do?" Lifestyle stewardship acknowledges God's ownership of everything. In Psalm 50:10, the Psalmist reminds us that God "owns the cattle on a thousand hills." Therefore when we come to making the decision concerning this matter of giving, I agree with J. Oswald Sanders who said, "The basic question is not how much of our money should we give to God, but how much of God's money should we keep for ourselves." Giving should be an act of worship.

Fourth, our giving should given with the desire for ministry. When we give our money to God, it should be given with the idea that we are serving God through some area of ministry. You see, we serve God by serving others. **And when we give our money to the Lord, and that money goes to support some ministry: such as our Food Bank, or our Counseling Ministry, or to pay for teaching**

materials, or whatever this church does for the glory of God, you are actually becoming a vital part of that ministry. The truth of the matter is, you may never give out a bag of food to some needy family, and you may never counsel a couple whose marriage is in trouble, and you may never work on one of the church's air conditioning systems, but when you give your money, you have become a vital of this church's ministry.

The truth of the matter is there are a zillion ways to waste our money instead of using it to grow. But God wants to use our money to make us more like Him. **God is generous.** **Everything we have in life is because of God's generosity.** We wouldn't have anything, we wouldn't even be alive, if it were not for God's generosity. **And God wants us to be generous like He is.**

Listen, God did not put us on this earth just to live for ourselves, think only of ourselves, care only about ourselves, to be a selfish little clod. **God put us here to make this world a better place.** I believe Jesus is telling us to use some of our money to make sure that others might be saved, and that others might have some of their needs met.

Folks, we have a great church with a great ministry, but it cannot happen without your financial help.