

SERIES: Power through Weakness

SERMON: **Giving: What's In It For Me?**

SCRIPTURE: 2 Cor. 9:1–15

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DATE: February 5, 2006

My sermon title today, “Giving: What’s In It For Me?”, is a bit facetious, but not entirely. You are probably thinking, “Isn’t giving supposed to be about the recipient, about meeting needs, and about serving God?” Yes, but the fact is the Bible speaks often, including in our text today, about the various benefits in a life of generosity—not only for the recipient, but also for the giver. We’re going to read the entire ninth chapter of 2 Corinthians, but we’ll do so a section at a time. First, 2 Cor. 9:1-5:

There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints. For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia (i.e. southern Greece, where Corinth was located) were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.

Generous giving is contagious, though it shouldn’t be competitive. (1-5)

Now this first paragraph is strange in some respects. It seems almost as though Paul is playing the Macedonians off against the Corinthians—the northern Greeks against the southern Greeks. I remind you from several weeks ago that Paul had accepted the challenge he was given at the Jerusalem Council to help raise money for the starving, persecuted Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. That became one of the key purposes of his missionary journeys.

When the Corinthians first heard about the need in Jerusalem, they jumped all over it, making promises and commitments to raise funds for the believers there. Paul then took the news of the Corinthians’ generous faith-promises up to northern Greece, to the churches of Thessalonica and Berea and Philippi and used the example of the Corinthians to spur on the Macedonians to give. They, in turn, were so impressed and so stimulated by their brothers in Corinth that gave beyond Paul’s wildest imagination.

But now a major problem has developed. In the year that has passed, the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church has soured, due to false teachers who gained a foothold and badmouthed him to the church. One of the many negative results of this development is that the money has stopped coming in. Here’s the scenario: Paul initiated the fund; they are no longer happy with Paul; therefore, they have quit giving.

Paul is now having to come back to the Corinthians and say, “You and I are both going to be

embarrassed if you don't keep those commitments you made a year ago." Allow me to share how Eugene Peterson grasps the nuances of this paragraph with his colloquial expressions:

... I've been bragging about you all through Macedonia province, telling them, "Achaia province (Corinth) has been ready to go on this since last year." Your enthusiasm by now has spread to most of them.

Now I'm sending the brothers to make sure you're ready, as I said you would be, so my bragging won't turn out to be just so much hot air. If some Macedonians and I happened to drop in on you and found you weren't prepared, we'd all be pretty red-faced—you and us—for acting so sure of ourselves. (The Message)

On the surface this seems to smack a little of competition and even manipulation. And maybe that's what's going on. Let's face it, Paul was human (we sometimes forget that!). I don't think it undermines our theology to admit that Paul may have had occasional motives that were less than stellar—like the motive to avoid embarrassment after having bragged on the Corinthians. I think, however, that something else is operating here. Paul is recognizing the spiritual truth that generosity is contagious. When you're around generous people, you tend to be more generous yourself, just as when you're around stingy, materialistic people, you tend to become stingy and materialistic. The lesson is obvious: we should watch who we associate with, but also we should realize that we can impact others with our lifestyle. As far as Paul's use of the Macedonians and Corinthians as examples for one another, I would say it's OK if he's trying to motivate, so long as they aren't being manipulated.

Generous giving benefits the giver as well as the recipient. (6-11)

Look at the next paragraph, beginning with verse 6:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

*"He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever."*

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 made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

This paragraph raises some very interesting and even hotly debated issues relative to stewardship:

1. God rewards generous givers. (6, 8-11) You have heard me speak very critically of health/wealth theology. The view is that God wants you healthy and He wants you wealthy, and if you're not both, then you simply don't have as much faith as you should, or you simply haven't "invested" in the right ministries (please send your check immediately, thank you very

much!). In health/wealth theology God is obligated to deliver the goods; He becomes a utilitarian genie who grants every wish to the faithful. I think it is one of the most dangerous and damaging heresies of the 20th century.

And yet I want to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. You see, nearly every heresy is a legitimate truth taken too far, or a biblical idea that has been distorted. The reason the health/wealth advocates are able to dupe so many people is that they are actually quite close to the truth. The Scriptures do teach that God rewards faithful giving. So, how do we distinguish what Paul teaches here from the run-of-the-mill TV health/wealth con man?

Well, let's start by looking carefully at what Paul tells us: "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." The fact that a person reaps what he sows is a thoroughly biblical principle taught in both Testaments many times. In a parallel passage, Galatians 6:7, 8, Paul writes: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." This passage speaks of the Law of the Harvest as it applies to our moral lives, and three corollaries can be easily deduced from it. We spoke of these last May, but it will be good to review:

A. The principle of Identity: you reap *what* you sow. One thing you will never find is a farmer harvesting wheat when he planted corn! That which is harvested is that which is planted. And "God cannot be mocked," i.e. He cannot be hoodwinked; we can't slip anything by Him. Some people sow to the flesh every day and wonder why they reap corruption, moral decay, poverty, disease, broken relationships, loneliness, and depression. Others sow to the Spirit every day, and because they do so, their lives are characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We should not at all be surprised by the different results—they are inevitable. You reap *what* you sow.

B. The principle of Increase: you reap *more than* you sow. What farmer would plant a sack of grain in order to harvest a sack of grain? The return is always much greater than the initial investment. This is a beautiful thing to behold, of course, when we are sowing to the Spirit. However, it is a tragic truth when we are sowing to the flesh. Hosea 8:7 puts it this way: "for they sow the wind, and they reap the whirlwind."

C. The principle of Interval: you reap *after* you sow. No matter what a farmer plants, it takes time for the crops to grow and ripen. When we're sowing to the Spirit this fact can sometimes cause us to lose hope, forgetting that sometimes we have to wait a long time before we see the rewards of our efforts. But when we're sowing to the flesh the same principle can cause us to be careless, believing somehow that we will escape the harvest we have sown. We will not! There will be a payday someday.

Now Galatians 6 talks principally about our moral lives, but Paul uses the same Law of the Harvest in 2 Cor. 9 to speak to our stewardship lives. The Principle of Identity says that if we

sow a life of stinginess, and selfishness, and materialism, the harvest we experience will be perfectly in keeping with what we have planted. If, on the other hand, we sow a life of generosity and sharing, we will reap the same results in our own lives. The Principle of Increase tell us that we will reap more than we sow. If we are tight-fisted, we can expect that God will be even more tight-fisted with us, but if we are generous, He will be generous with us way beyond our imagination (remember Ephesians 6:20: “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine”). And the Principle of interval says that sometimes we have to wait for God’s blessing. If you give \$1,000 to the Lord today, you’d best not expect a \$2000 check in the mail tomorrow. That’s not how God operates. But He does promise that the Law of the Harvest is in operation—both in our moral lives and in our stewardship lives.

The question that arises in my mind is this: is it a hard and fast promise that a person who sows generously with his money will always reap financial benefits? And, I would answer with an unequivocal “yes and no.” Look at verse 8 again for part of the answer: “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” This verse contains the word “all” four times and “every” once: all grace, all things, all times, all that you need, every good work. That’s about as close to an absolute promise you can find. But notice too that he says, “God is *able* . . .” to do this, not “God *will* do this.” Whether He does so seems to depend upon the heart of the individual. Is the giver’s heart set to accumulate wealth and possessions, or is his heart to give more? If the latter, then I think the promise is reliable and absolute.

Notice that God’s purpose in blessing the generous person is that he “will abound in every good work,” not that he will become rich for selfish purposes. This is made even more explicit in verse 11: “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.” Again it does not say that your giving will be rewarded so that you can accumulate wealth you never dreamed of. It says your giving will be rewarded so that you can continue to be generous. And keeping that in perspective, there are a legion of Scriptures that promise God’s reward, even financial reward, to those who give generously:

Proverbs 3:9-10: Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Proverbs 22:24-25: One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

Proverbs 19:17: He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.

Proverbs 28:27: He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.

Mal. 3:10: *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.*

Luke 6:38: *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.*

The point of all of these passages seems to be this: the more you give, the more God gives back so that you can continue to give. But if it is true that God will make us rich in every way so that we can be generous on every occasion, why don't we see more of this? Well, I'd like to ask a different question: How many of us have really tried it? I've seen a few cases of people who have been exceptionally generous, and I have seen God give them an incredible amount of financial blessing, and they have just never quit passing it on. I think more of us would experience that kind of blessing if we truly practiced sacrificial giving.

Now there is another controversial point in this paragraph that I want to touch upon briefly:

2. God trusts His people to give as *they* decide. (7) "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion . . ." Is that really true? What about the tithe? What if I decide I want to give 1% instead of 10%? And, furthermore, is it not possible that the Corinthians had already tithed to their church and Paul is speaking here of gifts above and beyond the tithe and saying that those are the offerings that are ours to decide—the ones that are extra?

This is a highly debated issue among Bible students, and without being overly dogmatic I will share with you my own view. The tithe was mandatory in the OT but is never commanded in the NT. Jesus once told the Pharisees, who tithed but neglected the weightier matters of the law, "you should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matt. 23:23). That's as close as you can come to a command to tithe in the NT, but it's important to note that came before the death of Christ when the Jews were still under the Old Covenant. I find it little short of amazing that *if* tithing is still the foundational principle of NT giving, not one of the Apostles or writers of the NT epistles mentions it.

Tithing was part of the Mosaic Law, and when Jesus died on the cross, He nailed those ordinances to His cross, fulfilling them and freeing the believer from those laws. Nevertheless, it is instructive to me that the principle of tithing preceded the law. Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, you will recall from the book of Hebrews, and that was 600 years before Moses and the Law he delivered. So while the tithing laws of Moses are no longer an obligation on us, tithing does seem to be a principle that we should not just ignore.

In this, tithing is a lot like Sabbath-keeping. The Sabbath rules in the Mosaic Law were all done away with by the death of Jesus, and various passages in the NT, most notably Romans 14, gives freedom to the believer to worship any day he chooses. But the Sabbath *principle* (one day of rest out of seven) goes way back before the Mosaic Law—in fact it goes all the way back to

Creation week. So I would say that we don't have to obey the Sabbath laws of Moses, but if we ignore the Sabbath principle, we do so to our own detriment.

So how does all this work out practically in any individual's life? I'm not sure I can tell you—you need to deal with God on that matter. After all, the text says, “each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give.” It doesn't say the pastor should decide for him. Of course, there are other passages that tell the NT believer that his giving is to be proportional; i.e., he is to give as God has blessed him. I will tell you that with the level of wealth most of us here in the United States enjoy, I don't see how generous, sacrificial giving could mean anything *less* than a tithe for most of us. I can also tell you from personal experience that you can't out-give God. I have given at least a tithe since I was 14, usually a lot more, and God just continues to meet every need and then some.

Now the third point I want to make from this paragraph is not controversial, but at the same time it is perhaps not always understood fully.

3. God has a special love for cheerful givers. (7b) The rest of verse 7 says, “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” What does this mean? Does He not love those who are not cheerful givers? Well, of course He does. God loves the whole world, John 3:16. And God has an even deeper, more personal love for His own people, John 13:1. But in addition to all that, He has a special love for the cheerful giver.

What, then, is a cheerful giver? Most of you have heard before that the Greek word for “cheerful” is the word *hilaron* in Greek. We've carried that Greek word directly into English as *hilarious*. Unfortunately since the days of King James our English word hilarious has metamorphosed a bit and doesn't have the same connotation it used to have. The Greek term implies giving with abandon, giving with reckless pleasure. Sadly, a lot of people are far from that ideal. They think that when they give something away, they lose it and it is gone for good. For some it is like being an organ donor before they even die. But a cheerful giver never looks back, never mourns the loss, never stew about what they might have bought with the money. Friends, let's not let this concept of God's special love float by without really contemplating its depth. John MacArthur writes,

It is hard to imagine a more precious promise than to be the personal object of God's love. All the world's acclaim, honor, and rewards given to all philanthropists put together does not come close to this privilege of being loved by God. Yet that is what He promises the cheerful giver.¹

T. Boone Pickens was praised to high heaven for recently giving \$165 million to Oklahoma State University. How much better to be loved by almighty God!

Now our third main point today is this:

Generous giving produces other wide-ranging benefits. (12-15)

Let's read our last paragraph, beginning with verse 12:

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men 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!

I see here four exceptional benefits of generous giving, at least three of which we wouldn't normally think about. The first, though, is obvious:

1. It supplies the needs of God's people. (12) That's why we do most of our giving in the first place, isn't it? Most of us are need-oriented people. We have a need and we want it met. We see a need, and we try to meet it. The fact that Paul states this in the negative does not mean he is demeaning it as a benefit at all. He says, "This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also . . ." accomplishing something else. The "not only" part is a good benefit, and we never want to lose sight of the needs around us. But I warn you that "needs" cannot be the sole basis of our giving. You know why? Because the needs are too great. We can hardly scratch the surface of the needs around us. If that is the *only* reason we give, we will soon become discouraged and quit because it will seem that we are not making any difference.

One great way to avoid that discouragement is to look at needs one at a time. I'm sure many of you have heard the story of the man who was walking down the beach at sunset. He saw another man in the distance who kept picking up something and throwing it out into the water, again and again. As he approached he noticed that the man was picking up starfish that had been washed up on the beach and throwing them back into the water, one by one. Puzzled, he approached the man and asked him why he was doing it. He responded, "It's low tide and all these starfish have been washed up onto the shore. If I don't throw them back they'll die from lack of oxygen."

"But there must be thousands of starfish on this beach," the first man replied. "You can't possibly get to all of them. And don't you realize this is probably happening on hundreds of beaches all up and down this coast and thousands more around the world. Can't you see that you can't possibly make a difference?" The man bent down and picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the ocean. With a smile he replied, "Sure made a difference to that one!"

You can't cure the world's AIDS problem, but you may be able to make a difference in the life of one AIDS victim. You can't make a dent in the orphan problem in India, but you can make a difference in one or two orphans' lives through Compassion International. Giving is God's way of meeting the needs of people.

2. It awakens gratitude. (11b, 12b) This concept appears twice—once at the end of verse 11

and again at the end of verse 12. Verse 11: “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.” Then verse 12: “This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.” The human race is like an ungrateful child, and God is deeply grieved by those who “neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him,” (Rom. 1:21). On the other hand, when we show gratitude for His gifts and thank Him for His compassion through people, He is glorified. And that is the third benefit of generosity mentioned:

3. It glorifies God. (13) Verse 13: “Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men 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.” Men will praise God when they see your generosity. When I was at our Midwinter Ministerial meetings in Minneapolis a couple of weeks ago, I met the pastors of our Free Churches in New Orleans. Believe me, they were praising God for the millions of dollars and the hundreds of workers provided by their sister churches around the country.

But those who observe generous giving from the *outside* are also stimulated to praise God. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Some are drawn to the Savior when they observe the love evidenced through generous giving. Finally, . . .

4. It stimulates prayer. (14) “And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.” Perhaps we think that the poor have nothing to offer the rich who help them. But not so! The prayers of the poor are the reward of the rich. The poverty-stricken, persecuted believers in Jerusalem would repay the Corinthians’ generosity by offering prayer on their behalf.ⁱⁱ And friends, when people pray for you, you become the beneficiary of blessing from God in ways that you, perhaps, will never fully know until you get to glory.

Postscript: By the way, NT history reveals that the Corinthians took Paul’s exhortation in this chapter to heart and responded with generosity. Several years later as he penned the book of Romans, Paul wrote these words:

Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia (that’s Corinth) were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings (Romans 15:25-27).

Conclusion: I want you to look at the last sentence in our chapter: “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” This simple benediction is one of the most profound in all of Scripture. There is some debate about the identity of this gift, for Paul himself does not name it. Some have suggested that Paul has in mind the grace that God had given to the Macedonian churches, mentioned in 8:1. Others argue that the gift in question is the gift of the Gospel that brings about

reconciliation between Jew and Gentile.

However, the most natural way to understand the words here is to see the gift as a reference to God's gift of a Savior to a lost and dying world. That is the gift that is beyond all other gifts. That is the gift behind all other gifts, because God's indescribable generosity to us is what motivates all our own attempts to be generous.

Prayer. Father, thank you for the magnificent gift of Your Son. No words can describe it. Whole libraries could not begin to plumb the depths of Your marvelous generosity. The most gifted and articulate word smiths on earth could use the most exalted expressions of which human thought and language are capable and still fall far short of the glorious reality. And when Your people, whether in Corinth in the first century or Wichita in the 21st, begin to realize even a little of the vast scope of Your sovereign kindness, it opens our hearts and opens our resources to You.ⁱⁱⁱ

i. John MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, 314.

ii. MacArthur, 319.

iii. J. Philip Arthur, *Strength in Weakness*, 177.