
The Grace of Giving

A sermon on 2 Corinthians 8:1-8 by Coty Pinckney, Desiring God Community Church, Charlotte, NC, 1/11/2004

What is true Christian giving? Consider these three possibilities:

- True Christian giving is tithing – Ten percent of your income, off the top, set aside before you spend anything else.
- True Christian giving is self-denial: Choosing not to spend on yourself so that you can provide for others.
- True Christian giving is fundamentally an act of love toward your neighbor.

What is true Christian giving?

I contend that each of the three statements above is wrong.

Each statement contains a partial truth: The second statement contains more truth than the first, and the third more truth than the second. But even the third statement is wrong.

What is true Christian giving?

We are beginning a series on 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, what many call the longest section in the Bible on giving. So this section is intensely practical – and yet Paul does not here lay down a set of rules for how to give. He doesn't say, for example:

“OK, to be a Christian, you must give ten percent of your adjusted gross income to your local church, another five percent to individuals in great need, and another 3.2 percent to the ten best organizations that send you appeals via mail.”

He doesn't say that. He doesn't say anything *like* that. Instead, in addition to being intensely practical, Paul here is intensely theological. He grounds our giving in great truths about God and man, and therefore provides us with teaching about God as well as ways to test our own giving – and thus our relationship to God.

This is vitally important – and grossly misunderstood within the American church today. Furthermore this area is a profound test of our Christian walk. As Scott Hafemann writes, “We know who we are by how we spend our money” So we will spend five weeks on these two chapters.

Before we look at today's text, however, let me go back to the sermons on myths about money that we preached from 1 Timothy 6 last summer ([first](#), [second](#)). For much of this chapter addresses myths about money that we must understand if we are to have a proper perspective on giving.

Read with me 1 Timothy 6:5b-11:

[false teachers who] imagine that godliness is a means of gain.

⁶ Now godliness with contentment is a great means of gain! ⁷

For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. ⁹ But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

¹¹ But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness

We identified three money myths in these sermons:

Myth 1: Money leads to happiness

“If only I had X I would be happy!” Paul gives three arguments against this myth:

- 1) You are eternal and money is not. Therefore, whatever will lead to your greatest happiness must gain assets that will last for all eternity.

- 2) You don't need money for happiness now. Your joy is in Him! Therefore, you can be content with whatever He provides.
- 3) The desire for riches destroys us: It ruins us in this life, and destroys us eternally.

Myth 2: Whatever I have, I deserve

Even from a secular viewpoint, economists have been able to show that this is true only to a very small extent. But from a spiritual point of view, this is not true in the least, for even the ability to earn wealth comes from God.

Myth 3: Money leads to security

Even in this life, money and wealth can disappear overnight. But certainly all that we own in this world is lost to us upon death. And death can come at any moment. There is no security in riches.

So in verse 11, Paul tells us how should we live: Run away from the desire for riches, and run towards righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness. Fight the fight of faith to believe that true happiness, true joy lies in God. Take hold of our eternal life, and live in light of eternity.

With those thoughts in mind, let's now turn to today's passage.

Some background first: Paul has been collecting money in Greece, Macedonia, and in what is now Turkey for the church in Jerusalem. As 1 Corinthians 16 tells us, Paul encouraged these churches to put aside some money each week for an offering to be distributed to the poor, persecuted Christians in Judea. He had sent Titus to Corinth previously to help get this work underway.

Let's now read today's text:

1) We want to make known to you, brothers, the grace of God given among the churches in Macedonia, 2) for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their deep poverty abounded to the wealth of their sincere concern for others. 3) For they gave according to their ability - I bear witness, even beyond their ability - 4) of their own accord, with much appeal, pleading with us for the grace and partnership of service to the saints - 5) not even as we confidently expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

6) So we exhorted Titus, that as he began before so also he might bring to completion this grace by you. 7) But as you abound in all things - in faith and in the Word and in knowledge and in all earnestness and in love among you for each of us - also abound in this grace! 8) I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. (own translation)

We'll look at this text by seeing, first, what true Christian giving is *not*, and then look at five aspects of true Christian giving.

True Christian Giving is *Not*:

Tithing: Does Paul say anything here about tithing? Does Paul say, “I want you to tithe like the Macedonian churches did!” The Macedonian churches were doing much more than tithing!

The concept of tithing may have a role to play in helping non-givers take the first steps towards regular giving – we'll come back to that before the end of the series - but it is *not* the essence of Christian giving.

Self-denial: There is a type of self-denial going on here. The Macedonians experienced “deep poverty.” Giving away a substantial amount of money must have hurt; it must have required some sacrifice.

Yet self-denial is not the essence of true Christian giving. Consider what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:3:

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

I can give away *all* my possessions – and not be a model of Christian giving. Such giving would undoubtedly be a great sacrifice. Such giving would look good to others – but it is not necessarily Christian giving.

What then are the characteristics of true Christian giving?

1) True Christian Giving Begins with God

What leads us to give?

- Frequently, we realize we have some extra money, and think, “Maybe I should give some of it away.”
- Other times, we hear an emotional appeal for money and feel bad, so we respond.
- Other times, someone lays a guilt trip on us: “You really are a horrible person if you are not giving!”
- For many, giving is a duty: “I’m really supposed to do this, so I’d better follow the rules.”

But true Christian giving does not begin with abundance. It is not prompted by an emotional appeal or a guilt trip. Nor is it primarily a duty. As Paul writes in verse 1:

We want to make known to you, brothers, the grace of God given among the churches in Macedonia. (emphasis added)

Do you see? Giving is a grace of God! True Christian giving begins with God working in His people, making them like Him. And when we become like Christ, we, like Him, freely give of ourselves.

2) True Christian Giving Results from Joy in God

Paul continues speaking of the Macedonian Christians in verse 2:

for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their deep poverty abounded to the wealth of their sincere concern for others. For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their deep poverty abounded to the wealth of their sincere concern for others.

What overflowed or abounded? Not their money. They were poor!

What overflowed was their joy in God! They had so much joy in God that it had to be shared with others. That prompted them to show sincere concern to those far from them by giving materially.

Are you cultivating a joy in God. It doesn’t come automatically. You don’t just wake up in the morning and rejoice in God. We seek his face (Psalm 27:8) through the means He ordains. And He gives us this joy which overflows.

3) True Christian Giving does not begin by giving money to others, but begins by giving yourself to God

Look at verses 3-5:

For they gave according to their ability - I bear witness, even beyond their ability - of their own accord, with much appeal, pleading with us for the grace and partnership of service to the saints - not even as we confidently expected, but they . . .

What would you expect him to say next?

- Perhaps, “but they gave much more than we expected.”
- Or perhaps, “but they gave half their income.”
- Or perhaps, “but they sold their assets and gave all the proceeds to the offering”

But what does he actually say?

But they gave themselves first to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

Do you see what Paul is saying? Giving money is secondary. Of much greater importance is giving yourself to God. We are to say, “Lord, here I am! All I am, and all I have belongs to you! Use me, use my possessions, all for your glory! You have showered your grace on me; so use me as an agent of your grace!”

So Paul here says that giving of money is intimately related to the first and greatest commandment:

you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’
Mark 12:30

It is related as well to Romans 12:1:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

We are to love God with our entire being. We are to present our very lives to Him, for His use for His purposes. Our monetary giving is the logical outworking of our fulfilling these fundamental commands.

4) True Christian Giving flows from love and concern for the one receiving the gift

Look back at verse 2:

for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their deep poverty abounded to the wealth of their sincere concern for others.

Most English translations use the word “generosity” at the end of the verse instead of “sincere concern.” In English, we can say someone is generous without suggesting anything about his concern for others. For example, it is quite generous of Bill Gates to contribute \$2 billion to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. But does he have sincere concern for others? Does he truly care about those who will benefit from his largesse? Maybe, maybe not. Even if he does not, it is still correct to say that this is a generous gift.

But we would not use the Greek word translated “generous” for someone who gave a lot of money, but did not care about the recipients. The primary meaning of this Greek word is “sincerity,” or, in this context, “sincere concern.” Surely such sincere concern includes our idea of monetary generosity. But the main idea is concern, not the giving of money.

This idea becomes stronger as you come to understand the picture Paul paints here. He uses two images, and draws two contrasts. One the one hand, he contrasts wealth and poverty; on the other hand, he contrasts abounding, overflowing, with depth, emptiness. Their poverty “reaches the down to the depths.” It is like a deep hole - the opposite of overflowing. Yet when this deep poverty is combined with their overflowing joy in God, it results in a wealth of sincere concern.

So we can paraphrase what Paul is saying: “They seemed to us to have lost all their worldly goods in the tribulation facing them. But their abundance of joy in God filled up the hole of their poverty and resulted in an overflowing wealth of love for others.”

What overflowed from the Macedonians was not their money – there wasn’t enough of that to overflow! – but their love, their concern. Money accompanied that love – but the primary gift they gave was their love.

Paul emphasizes this point in verse 8 as he speaks directly to the Corinthians:

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.

Even as he speaks to the much richer Corinthians, his emphasis is not on giving money – “OK, now, we’ve got a goal of 6 millions dollars and we have to reach it, so open your wallets” – instead, the emphasis is on sincere love and concern that flows out of their joy in God.

5) A True Christian Giver is acting as God's agent in the world

To see this, look at verse 4:

of their own accord, with much appeal, pleading with us for the grace and partnership of service to the saints

Or we could translate this, "Of their own accord, with much appeal, pleading with us for the grace and fellowship of ministry to the saints."

The Macedonians are eager to be agents of God's grace, ministering to the saints in Jerusalem, so that they might have fellowship with them. As Paul says in chapter 1, they know that they have been comforted in their affliction by the God of all comfort, so that they can comfort those in any affliction with the comfort they themselves received from God. So they are eager to be God's agents of comfort to those in affliction.

As 2 Corinthians 2:15-16 says,

We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved . . . a fragrance from life to life.

We have the privilege of being the fragrance of Christ to our fellow believers. We can be agents of God's love to them. Jesus died for us so that we might live not for ourselves but for the one who died and was raised for us.

This is true Christian giving: When we give, not out of our abundance, not as a token percentage, but when we eagerly desire to be agents of God's love in the world.

Indeed, this is the definition of love. As John Piper writes when commenting on this passage:

Love is the overflow of joy – *in God!* It is not duty for duty's sake or right for right's sake. It is not a resolute abandoning of one's own good with a view solely to the good of the other person. It is first a deeply satisfying experience of the fullness of God's grace, and then a doubly satisfying experience of sharing that grace with another person.

And when we display that kind of love, we are acting as God's agent in the world.

Conclusion

Maybe some of you, when hearing that I was going to preach on money and finances, thought, "Oh, no, here's the annual appeal to increase our giving to the church."

But listen carefully: This chapter is not fundamentally about money. It is about what gives you joy.

God gave the Macedonians great grace: He opened up for them the vista of their joy in the fellowship of service unto the saints. They gave themselves to God and to the apostle; having done so, having entered into the joy of Christ, they could love with Christ's love and act like Him. It is no good trying to act like him – trying to give money - without first giving yourself to God and to those He gives to you. Giving yourself to God is prior.

Giving to others is not ultimate.

Loving others is more fundamental, but still not ultimate.

The ultimate is loving God.

Loving your neighbor and then giving to that neighbor are wonderful manifestations of that love for God. But love for God must be first.

So where are you, my friends?

- Are you still thinking that money will bring you happiness?
- Are you still thinking that money will bring you security?
- Are you still thinking that you deserve what you have?
- Are you giving out of duty but without joy and without any genuine concern or love for others?

Become a true Christian giver! Enter into the joy of your master! Become an agent of God's love in this world! Rejoice in God, and give yourself wholly to God!

Then let your joy in Him overflow into a hundred manifestations of love for each other, of love for all God's people, of love for the world. Then you will be a true Christian giver.

This sermon was preached at Desiring God Community Church in Charlotte, NC on 1/11/04. The Scott Hafemann quote is from *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Zondervan, 2000), p. 352. The John Piper is from *Desiring God* (Multnomah, 1996), p. 120.

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