

9. Blessing in giving

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What item would you say tells the story of your life? Your photo albums? Your journals? But there's one item you may not have thought about: your checkbook.

Our checkbooks display our lifestyles, our values, and our priorities. They're even a good gauge of our walk with God, because they reflect what our treasures are.

Jesus said a lot about treasure while He was on earth. In fact, one-third of His parables address principles of stewardship – how we handle the resources He has entrusted to us. His main concern wasn't money itself, but the condition and motivation of our hearts.

Matthew 6:21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The most detailed passage on giving in the New Testament is found in 2 Corinthians chapter 8 & 9. The primary reason that Paul addressed this topic here was that false teachers in Corinth were questioning Paul's motives for ministry. Evidently they were suggesting that Paul was pocketing contributions earmarked for the poor believers in Jerusalem. Consequently the Corinthians, despite their announced willingness to help, had not donated to the cause.

Taking pen in hand, Paul defended his integrity in chapter 1:12. Using the churches in Macedonia as his example, Paul gave the Corinthians a great summary of why and how believers ought to give.

A. GRACE GIVING IN SPITE OF DIFFICULT TIMES

2 Corinthians 8:1-5 Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: 2 that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. 3 For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, 4 imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. 5 And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.

The northern part of Greece was called Macedonia. The southern part was called Achaia, and the city of Corinth was in the region of Achaia. Paul is writing about the example he sees in the churches of Macedonia. The churches of Macedonia were in cities such as Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

Paul was raising money to help the Christians in Jerusalem, who were very poor. He had previously mentioned this effort in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4. The poverty of the Macedonians is confirmed by secular history.

When we read the Bible and get to know about these early Christian church stories sometimes, it really doesn't hit our nerves. I was thinking this very thing yesterday and the Lord gave me an illustration:

You all remember the Rodeo Fire a couple years ago that burned a lot of lands near the White Mountains. Let's say, it happened again somewhere in Arizona. So our church decided to help the wild fire victims in that region. For some reason, we got into a side track and forgot about the help we promised to them. But the brothers and sisters in New Creations Drug Rehabilitation Center in Nogales, Mexico haven't. They

made cookies, sold whatever little things they had and send the money to us, so that we can forward that money to the fire victims. How would you feel? That is the situation apostle Paul is talking about.

The Macedonians had not simply gone through "affliction". They had experienced a "great trial of affliction". They were in deep poverty, which means "dirt poor." Their difficult situation may have been caused in part by their Christian faith. They may have lost their jobs or been excluded from the trade guilds because they refused to have anything to do with idolatry.

But their circumstances did not hinder them from giving. In fact, they gave joyfully and liberally! No computer could analyze this amazing formula:
Great affliction + Deep poverty + Grace = Abundant joy and abounding liberality!

The Macedonians gave willingly, without prompting or pressure from Paul. In fact, they even pleaded with Paul and Titus to take their money. These believers didn't regard giving as an obligation, but a privilege. When was the last time you heard that the church congregation plead to their pastor to take offering? The Macedonian Christians understood the blessing in giving.

It wasn't the dollar amount. It was that they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God. Good stewards have willing hearts. When we give ourselves fully to the Lord, we want to heap our time, our talents, and our treasure at His feet. Nothing matters to us as much as His cause and His people. If we find ourselves clutching our possessions with a tight fist, the problem probably goes deeper than our wallets. That means that the money we think we own actually own us.

Money makes a wonderful servant of ours, when we use it for God's glory. But it makes a horrible master over us, when we are ruled by the money because of our selfishness.

B. FOLLOWING UP WITH OUR PROMISE

2 Corinthians 8:6-7 So we urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well. 7 But as you abound in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us--see that you abound in this grace also.

Unlike the Macedonian poverty stricken believers, the Corinthian believers were well to do. However, they forgot one very important principle of being blessed abundantly: *Luke 12:48 But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.*

Think about your own stewardship habits for a moment. Perhaps you are committed to Bible study. Maybe you devote yourself to prayer, evangelism, and serving others. Wonderful! The margins of your Bible may be crowded with notes, but if your check-book contains only notations to department stores and credit card companies without supporting God's work, it may be an indication that your spiritual life is out of balance.

When I hear people say, "I cannot afford to give to the Lord." I answer them back, "You cannot afford not to give it to the Lord." Just like those who don't serve in the body of Christ don't understand the blessing of serving, those who don't give don't understand the blessing of giving.

The bottom line is that we must understand that everything we have belongs to the Lord. We might say that with our lips, but when it comes to giving to the Lord, people react differently.

2 Corinthians 8:8-9 I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others. 9 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 become rich.

Paul is quick to point out that he is not demanding that the Corinthians should give. He simply reminds them that the grace and sacrificial love that Jesus showed them should motivate them to give to others.

Notice the subtle contrast. Though the Macedonians were poor, they gave as though they were rich. Though Jesus was rich, He lived as if He were poor and homeless.

Jesus left the throne to become a servant. He laid aside all His possessions so that He did not even have a place to lay His head. His ultimate experience of poverty was when He was made sin for us on the cross. Hell is eternal poverty, and on the cross Jesus Christ became the poorest of the poor.

Why did He do it? That we might become rich! This suggests that we were poor before we met Jesus Christ, and we were totally bankrupt spiritually.

C. FOUR HINDRANCES IN JOYFUL GIVING

1) Procrastination

2 Corinthians 8:10-11a And in this I give advice: It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; 11 but now you also must complete the doing of it;

The dictionary defines 'Procrastinate' as "to put off intentionally and habitually. The doing of something that should be done." Procrastination has also been called "the art of keeping up with Yesterday."

Do you know what the procrastinator's favorite word is? Tomorrow or later. But for the procrastinator, tomorrow never comes. The only way to break the cycle is "Do it now."

We must be careful here not to confuse willing with doing, because the two must go together. If the willing is sincere and in the will of God, then there must be a performance also. Paul did not say that willing was a substitute for doing, because it is not. But if our giving is motivated by grace, we will give willingly, and not because we have been forced to give.

2) Hesitation

2 Corinthians 8:11b-12 that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have. 12 For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.

Hesitation says, "I'm just not ready." But Paul knew the Corinthians were ready and willing, so he encouraged them to put their desire into action.

God will bless whatever we can afford to give. We don't need to feel ashamed if we cannot give as much as the next person.

3) Overreaction

2 Corinthians 8:12 For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.

This verse ties in with the last three words of verse 11: “what you have.” We all have the ability to give, but the person who overreacts says, “I don’t have much to give. It would hardly be a drop in the bucket. Might as well not do it at all.” However, Paul stresses that the amount we give is not as important as having an openhanded attitude toward giving.

Someone else will always be able to give more than we can. And the need will always be greater than our ability to give. But that’s not the issue. Paul reminds us here that God doesn’t evaluate our gifts by their amount, but by our motives. Remember the story of the poor widow in Mark 12:41-44? That’s a beautiful illustration of this point.

Mark 12:41-44 Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. 42 Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. 43 So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; 44 for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood.”

Jesus teaches His disciples an important lesson here. He emphasizes that the motivation for giving is more crucial than the amount. If we remember that all we have has come from God, and if we trust Him to supply our needs, our hands will be more ready to extend joyful generosity to others.

When the issue of giving is brought up, many ask “How much am I supposed to give?” Since the New Testament doesn’t emphasize tithing, some Christians do argue against tithing on the basis of self-interest. But since giving is to be proportional, we should be giving some percentage – and ten percent is a good benchmark. For some to give ten percent is nowhere near enough. For others, at their present time, five percent may be a massive step of faith.

4) Exception

2 Corinthians 8:13-15 For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; 14 but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack--that there may be equality. 15 As it is written, “He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.”

We know that God wants everyone to be involved in giving. But sometimes we think we might be the exception to His plan. After all, others have more than we do, or we may be going through a tough time. Does God want to impoverish us to make others rich?

God has a way of balancing out our possessions to meet needs. The church in Jerusalem needed assistance from the Corinthians, but there could come a time when the burden would shift and the Corinthians might need the help of other believers.

D. WHO HANDLES MONEY AND HOW

2 Corinthians 8:16-23 But thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus. 17 For he not only accepted the exhortation, but being more diligent, he went to you of his own accord. 18 And we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches,

19 and not only that, but who was also chosen by the churches to travel with us with this gift, which is administered by us to the glory of the Lord Himself and to show your ready mind, 20 avoiding this: that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us-- 21 providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. 22 And we have sent with them our brother whom we have often proved diligent in many things, but now much more diligent, because of the great confidence which we have in you. 23 If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. 24 Therefore show to them, and before the churches the proof of your love and of our boasting on your behalf.

Grace giving is not foolish giving. Even in a local church, the people who handle the funds must possess certain qualifications: They should have a God-given desire to serve, a burden for lost souls, a desire to honor God, a reputation for honesty and a cooperative spirit.

When people give their money to churches, ministries, and charities, they trust that their money will be used wisely and carefully. That trust is just as valuable as the money – maybe even more – so it must be guarded. We're accountable not only to God, but also to the people who contribute to His work. It's a matter of honor.

There are a couple things I'd like not to know within our church. The number of people who attend each services and who is giving how much. For last two and a half years, I have no idea who is giving, nor how much they give. I like it that way and it will stay that way.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) Walking in grace without giving our treasure is incomplete.

Everything we own has been given to us by God to be used for His purposes. God certainly does not need our financial help. But He allows us the privilege of participating in His work through our giving.

2) Until we trust God with our finances, we really don't trust our God.

We have a choice to serve God or serve our money as Jesus said. Not both.