

GIVING: AN EXPRESSION OF GOD'S GRACE**2 CORINTHIANS 8:7-9**

Years ago now, I remember chuckling at a cartoon I saw in a Christian magazine. A husband and wife were standing on their backyard deck at night enjoying the cool night air and the beautiful expanse of stars overhead. Obviously, it was one of those special moments in life that demanded a deep, meaningful observation of some kind. As they gazed up and into the sky above, the husband said to his wife in a tone full of awe, "Just think, dear, somewhere in the world at this very moment someone is adding our names to their fund-raising list."

Chances are that's not your reaction when you receive a request for financial help in your mailbox or in your email inbox. Most of us receive far more requests for our charitable gifts than we can possibly ever contribute. No doubt you've noticed that many groups or organizations focus on the needs that could be met if you and I would just give X dollars a month. Starving children would be fed good meals. Orphaned kids would receive loving care. People with little or no access to Bibles would receive them. More people would surrender their lives to Jesus as Savior and Lord. New churches would be established. Sometimes, we're promised a free book or some kind of religious trinket if we give a financial gift. That's not to suggest any of the groups that solicit you or me for money lack honesty or sincerity. There are many ministries and organizations doing noble, necessary work for the Lord. Many of them absolutely deserve your financial gifts and mine.

What is interesting, however, is the contrast between most requests for money from Christian churches and ministries today and what we find in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. I'm going to be teaching from those two chapters today and next Sunday. Now, Paul, the great Christian leader, founded the first gathering of followers of Jesus – the first church - in the Greek city of Corinth. After he left, he wrote at least two letters to the Christian community in Corinth which became part of the New Testament. Did you know that 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 has been called "the longest fund-raising appeal in the Bible"? But here's what's different about it. You will search those two chapters in vain to find out to what specifically Paul wanted the Corinthians to give! You have to read what he writes in another letter to the Roman Christians to get that information.

Paul writes there, "But before I come, I must go to Jerusalem to take a gift to the believers there. For you see, the believers in Macedonia and Achaia have eagerly taken up an offering for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem." (Rom 15:25-26 NLT) History tells us that famine had struck the region of Palestine. Everyone was struggling. Paul took it upon himself to raise money from among all the churches he had started to help starving fellow believers back in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. But here in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul never describes the need whatsoever or how their giving would benefit those in need. One kind of Roman currency in that day and time was a coin known as a denarius. Paul never says that a monthly gift of ten denarii would feed one Jerusalem believer for a month. He doesn't share heart wrenching stories about starving people. He doesn't even offer a personally

autographed copy of his latest epistle for a gift of 100 denarii! Frankly, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 just don't fit the model of how we typically experience fund raising today.

No, instead of focusing on the needs and how their giving would alleviate all kinds of suffering, Paul focuses entirely on the givers and their need to give. In other words, our need to give to the Lord and His work is far more important than any needs we meet through our giving. Giving to the Lord has far more value to us than the person or ministry which receives our gift. Paul prefers to focus his attention on the benefit and value of giving for the givers instead of for the receivers. Interesting! His approach to fund raising is exactly the opposite of so much current fund raising done today – even by churches or Christian ministries. As an example, let's consider today just three verses in 2 Corinthians 8. Those three verses reveal three important truths about giving. Here's the first one...

GIVING IS EVIDENCE OF SPIRITUAL BLESSING.

Did you ever think that your ability to give money to the Lord and His work is evidence that you've been blest spiritually? That's how Paul describes it there in v. 7, "Since you excel in so many ways—in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love from us—I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving." (2 Cor 8:7 NLT) You might already know that the church in Corinth was unusually blest in some wonderful ways. Oh, it had its share of problems, to be sure, but few churches in the first century had the kind of spiritual buzz around it that Corinth enjoyed. If we could go back in time today and attend a worship service in Corinth or sample something of their life and ministry for a week or two, I get the feeling we would come away really impressed.

You could just feel God's presence and power when the Corinthian believers got together for worship. The reference to their faith probably means they had some incredible prayer meetings where miracles occurred regularly. Apparently, the church had several very powerful, effective speakers or teachers. The depth of knowledge about spiritual truth was impressive. The congregation as a whole was full of zeal, full of enthusiasm, and full of love and compassion for each other and for the lost. Now everything Paul describes there is evidence of spiritual blessing. But Paul wanted them to add one more piece of evidence to the list: giving. Financial giving by individual believers and as an entire congregation. Generosity in financial giving was just as much an evidence of God's blessing on a church as wonderful miracles, powerful worship services, deep teaching, great enthusiasm, and genuine love one for another.

I have no idea how our church compares to the church at Corinth in the first century. What I do know is that God has blessed this church for over 110 years now. In what ways? God has given us wonderful leaders over those decades. God has given us wonderful people. God has given us wonderful facilities. Over the years, God has allowed us to impact many, many people spiritually in positive ways that only eternity will fully reveal. We're growing in our love for one another and for those God has yet to bring to us. No, we're not a large church numerically, but few churches possess the

kind of gifts, talents, abilities, and resources found among the members and friends of this congregation. God has placed us right in the middle of an incredibly diverse community where many people need Jesus. To use biblical imagery, doing ministry in this community is like standing by a field of tall, ripe Ohio corn that stretches toward the horizon just ready to be harvested.

But just like the Corinthians, we, too, need to excel in yet another area of spiritual blessing – our financial giving. One way to evaluate what God is doing in a church is to look at what its members and friends are actually doing in terms of financial giving. Now, as a church, I want to commend you for your giving. We're doing in ministry about everything we want to do right now. In the last fiscal year that ended in June, you gave more than we spent. Praise God and thank you! We're giving evidence of God's blessing as a congregation of His people. Then, why – if things are pretty good - am I preaching a message on giving? Because what's true of a church as a whole is not necessarily true of every member and friend of the church. You might be surprised to know I have no idea what anyone gives financially to the ministry of this church. I don't have access to that information and that's perfectly fine with me. But here's what I do know, because it's true of just about any and every church out there. A distinct minority of our members and friends give most of the money that keeps our church moving forward in serving the Lord. And it's not necessarily those with the highest income that give the most money. Not at all. The actual amount people give to the Lord's work has more to do with what you value than what you earn. Here's why I speak about giving. Without knowing anything about what you actually give, I know a whole lot of us here today are missing out on a kind of spiritual blessing that God wants you to experience.

I think some of our West African brothers and sisters in Christ understand something we don't. Scottish Presbyterians established churches in Ghana over a hundred years ago. Now Scottish Presbyterians are not known for exuberant, emotional worship services. Apparently, that's even true in the African version. But I understand that some traditional African expressions are now allowed in Scottish Presbyterians worship services. They now encourage and allow people to dance as they bring their offerings forward. The music plays and each individual worshipper joyfully dances down the aisle to the offering plate. Then everything returns to a very formal Scottish Presbyterian order of worship. Some even say it's the only time the people smile in the service. No doubt, God smiles as well!

The Bible makes it quite clear that every follower of Jesus should give at least a tithe of his or her income to the Lord's work. What's a tithe? A tithe is 10% of your income. You can do the math very easily. If you earn \$10,000 a year, you return \$1,000 to the Lord. If you earn \$50,000 a year, you give \$5,000 to the Lord's work. If you brought in \$1 million last year, a tithe would be \$100,000. Now, you don't need some kind of revelation, vision, or angelic visitation to give the tithe. The revelation is already right there in your Bible. Yes, all of our money and possessions belong to the Lord ultimately, but the tithe belongs to the Lord in a unique way. It needs to be given to the Lord literally and completely. It's the beginning point of our giving to Him. In fact, many of us should be giving beyond the tithe as the Holy Spirit enables and leads us to do so.

Not as a prideful statement in the least, but rather in an effort to be transparent, I will share with you that Cheryl and I give the full tithe of our income to this church and we give beyond the tithe to missionaries and other ministries. It doesn't make us any more acceptable to or loved by God than someone who doesn't tithe. We aren't going to get a bigger, better mansion in Heaven because we tithe or even give beyond it. Instead, it's our privilege and our joy to do so. One important way to evaluate what God is doing in your life personally is to look again at what's happening in your checkbook, or on your debit card, or in your bank account. Is Jesus your Lord right there? There's no acceptable excuse not to tithe. It's not an option for Jesus' disciples. It's a matter of obedience. Will you do what your Lord says you should do? Yes or no? Some of us here today are missing out on spiritual blessings God wants to give us because we're content to be disobedient. Giving is evidence of spiritual blessing. Here's another insight from 2 Corinthians 8.

GIVING IS A TEST OF GENUINE LOVE.

Verse eight says, "I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches." (2 Cor 8:8 NLT) If and when you ever make giving to the Lord and His work some kind of legalistic rule or demand, you lose its essence. Paul knew that. That's why he's careful to tell the Corinthian Christians that he wasn't issuing some kind of new command directly from the throne of God. By the same token, he also says that our financial giving proves if our love for God is genuine and real. Some people find that truth annoying. "Hey, I don't think giving money has anything to do with how much I love God." This isn't my teaching. It is, however, clearly taught in the Bible. If you have a problem with that logic, take it up with God. The fact is that God tests your love for Him all the time. God tests the genuineness of your faith in Him by allowing suffering, obstacles, and temptations to come into your life. God tests the reality of your love for Him by seeing if you actually obey Him when it comes to moral issues and lifestyle choices. Faithful financial giving to the Lord and His work is a test of the reality of our love for God. Warm feelings about God and saying we love Him are all well and good, but neither prove our love for God. Like it or not, faithful financial giving does provide proof.

Your relationship to this church is a bit like a parent's relationship to his or her child. When a baby is about to be born, Mom and Dad's excitement level is sky high. New parents are pretty generous – if not downright lavish – when it comes to buying all sorts of equipment to make their child's life as wonderful as possible. But Mom and Dad soon discover that the giving doesn't end in the first year of their child's life. The bills don't stop, do they? In fact, they just get bigger! It takes a lot of money to feed, clothe, house and meet all the needs of just one kid. After high school, many kids go off to college. Talk about bills. Talk about giving. But if they're able, most parents are only too glad to meet all or some of those educational needs. Why? Because meeting your child's needs is one important way of showing love. Over the years, the needs change, but a truly loving parent is going to make every effort to meet the legitimate needs of their child come what may even in their adult years. And, then, when it comes time for

those parents to leave this world, in most cases everything they own gets passed on to their child. None of that seems absurd or ridiculous to us. We shrug our shoulders and say, “Well, sure. No big deal. That’s what love is all about.” God agrees with you!

One way that we underline the reality and genuineness of our love for God is to support the ongoing ministry of this church year in and year out. With inflation and other factors, the simple fact is that the dollars needed will probably go up rather than down just like in your home with your child. Of course, we hope and pray for new additions to the church family who can share the costs of the Lord’s ministry here so that it doesn’t become an unreasonable burden on just a few. Be that as it may, giving is a faithful act of your love that’s going to continue until Jesus calls us home. It takes money to feed and clothe this “baby”, so to speak, and to give it the opportunity to keep on doing the Lord’s work here in Northland and beyond. No loving parent ever says, “I’m tired of buying food and clothing for little Johnny and Susie. I think I’ll just stop. I think I’ll give less.” We’d all question the sincerity of their love, wouldn’t we? Our giving to the Lord and His work through this church doesn’t end. The needs may change from year to year, but the needs will always be here. But let’s remember, your need and mine to give to the Lord and His work faithfully is even more important than any needs that are met. It’s a test of our love for Jesus. Is your love for Jesus real? Is it genuine? Faithful financial giving is a test of genuine love. It just is. Here’s a third and final truth about giving.

GIVING IS A REFLECTION OF JESUS’ SACRIFICE.

In verse 9, Paul writes, “You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.” (2 Cor 8:9 NLT) You and I never resemble Jesus more than when we give financially to the Lords’ work in a sacrificial way. We never reflect Jesus’ gracious character more than when we give financially in a meaningful, faithful way. “Though he was rich.” What does that mean? Paul is thinking of God the Son – the second Person of the Holy Trinity – before He took on human flesh and blood in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Talk about “wealth”! The word doesn’t really describe adequately the kind of glorious, unimaginable life the Son of God enjoyed with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He had everything. He was all powerful, all knowing, and able to be anywhere and everywhere in the universe at the same time. The Son of God had no needs, because He was completely self-sufficient.

“Yet for your sakes he became poor.” What does that mean? Paul is thinking now of the Incarnation. Jesus’ sacrifice was bigger than the cross. It began in Heaven even before His birth when God the Son laid down His glory and consented to come to Earth as a human being. It was a step down in every conceivable way. He accepted all the limitations of living out a human life. Jesus probably got sick from time to time. We know for a fact that He became physically weary because the Bible tells us that. We know, too, that He was repeatedly tempted to sin. We know He often experienced rejection, hatred, and hostility from other people. Then, of course, the Bible makes it only too clear that He suffered extreme physical and emotional torture at His crucifixion. But more terrible than any of that was His spiritual suffering when He took your sin and

mine upon Himself on the cross. We know that He was spiritually separated from God the Father for a period of time as He suffered and absorbed God judgment for our sin. That's what Paul means by Jesus' poverty in the verse – all the degradation and humiliation heaped upon Jesus as He died for you and me on the cross.

Why did Jesus do it? Why did He submit to it? Why did He allow it to happen? Was it because you and I were so worthy? No. Was it because we loved God so much already? No. There's one simple, but very true answer. He loves us. That's the only reason. "So that by his poverty he could make you rich." Jesus took upon Himself all the poverty of human experience generally, as well as all the humiliation of the cross specifically, so that you and I could possess all the eternal riches of a relationship with God. Sins forgiven. The Holy Spirit indwelling us. The opportunity to be involved in God's mission here on Earth. The invitation to help build Jesus' Kingdom. Eternal life with God Himself in the new Heaven and the new Earth. Heirs of God the Father and joint heirs with Jesus Himself. That's just a fraction of all we have yet to receive.

Do you see Paul's point here? With that kind of eternal example of generosity in our faces all the time, how can we hold back when it comes to financial giving? How can we balk at giving a tithe? How can we be anything but sacrificial? If the Corinthians were being asked to make themselves financially poorer for the benefit of God's suffering, starving people in Jerusalem, this only reflected what Jesus Himself did on a much bigger scale. And if the members and friends of this church are being asked to make themselves financially poorer so that God's work in this place can flourish, this only reflects what Jesus Himself did on a much more massive scale. Giving – just like loving – never diminishes us or makes us smaller. Instead, it has a way of enlarging us and making us bigger somehow. Giving, then, is a reflection of Jesus' sacrifice.

A woman by the name of Judy Keene tells about a time God taught her something about generosity. One summer she decided to bless the single moms in her church with a cookout for which she covered the cost entirely. The single moms, their children, and Judy enjoyed a glorious day at a local sunshine-drenched beach, enjoying one another, and stuffing themselves with burgers, chips, and all the trimmings. As the afternoon ended, Judy sat among the moms at the picnic table as they enthusiastically divided up the leftover hot dogs, sodas, and desserts. No one thought to offer Judy a thing. Although no one suspected it, Judy's feelings were a little bruised. No, she didn't need the food. It was simply the fact that most of the moms had given little thought if any to who provided the picnic spread. But the slight was significant enough that Judy could still recall it months later. It was only then – months later – that the bigger truth hit Judy! How much more slighted God must feel when, as recipients of His enormous, boundless generosity, we're reluctant to share a portion of our resources with Him. Just like Judy didn't need the leftover potato salad, God doesn't need our money. But He does want our gratitude - our acknowledgement that all we have is from Him. And He also does want our partnership – our sacrificial involvement in His work of making disciples for the Lord Jesus Christ. Are you good at giving? We can be. We should be for Jesus' sake.